Partnering for postgraduate research student mental health:

The Write Smarter: Feel Better experience
Rates of depression and anxiety reported by postgraduate students six times higher than the general population (Evans et al 2018)

Calls for “strong and validated interventions” (Evans et al 2018)
Did you seek help for anxiety or depression within your institution?

- Yes, it was helpful: 35%
- No, I sought help elsewhere: 32%
- Yes, but I didn’t feel supported: 18%
- I didn’t seek help: 7%
- I wanted to, but there was none available: 5%
- Other: 2%
- Rather not say: 1%

Some students who sought help from their university for anxiety or depression felt unsupported.

*n = 709, this question was put only to those who had sought help.
Cooperative Research Centre for Mental Health

• 20 Participating organisations, seek to discover & validate biomarkers for mental illnesses

• Student cohort of 30+ students
  • Enrolments at 4 universities
  • Multidisciplinary group – biochemistry, neuroscience, psychology etc

• Broad professional development program offered from 2011 – 2018
  • Annual workshop (in person)
  • Monthly professional development videoconferences
  • Consulting projects with not for profit organisations

• By 2016 when this program started, we had cohesive, collegiate group of students who trusted each other
Write Smarter: Feel Better

0 hr  |  0.5 hr  |  1 hr  |  1.5 hr  |  2 hr

- Writing Block – 20 mins
- Facilitated Discussion – 10 mins
Steps for setting up Write Smarter: Feel Better

• Identification of PhD students to act as facilitators
  • 1 facilitator for 6 – 10 students

• Training and development of resources for facilitators
  • Mental health first aid training
    • Signs & symptoms of common mental illnesses
    • How to have conversation if concerned about peer
  • Designated staff member to contact if needed
  • Customised facilitator pack with information on support services at university

• Launch of program and promotion
  • PhD student facilitators can do this step with limited support

• Write Smarter: Feel Better group runs for as long as students decide (typically we suggest 6 months)
Use of videoconferencing

• Started due to geographic distance
  • CRCMH students in Melbourne, Perth, Geelong, Sydney, sometimes off-campus

• Now consider it helpful equity measure
  • Parental lease, chronic illness, additional isolation due to geography etc

• Mixed delivery can work well with strong facilitator
  • Example CRCMH had 2 – 3 groups of students meeting at different locations, then connecting jointly to larger group of 6 – 8 by videoconference
## What gets discussed?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concern</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maintaining work-life balance</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career path</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial issues</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding difficulties</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of research jobs available</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertainty about value of PhD</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The high number of students with multiple postdocs</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political landscape</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impostor syndrome</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Respondents could choose more than one answer.*

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*Political upheaval in several nations was not a chief concern for most students.*
Impact of Write Smarter: Feel Better so far and what next ...
Being proactive about mental health during your PhD: a very short guide

Posted by Jack Leeming | Categories: Academia, Career paths, Communication, In the news, People Management, Perspectives, Relationships, Research

When I started out in my PhD I was excited about the challenges I would face. Two and a half years later I’m still excited about my research, but, like most PhD projects, it's not all been smooth sailing. Rather than let how I was feeling derail my progress, I decided to use my training as a psychologist to develop ways to be proactive about managing mental health during the course of a PhD. Read more

TAGS: awareness burn out health karra harrington mental health overworked perspective PhD research self development stress too busy week
‘Harness the power of groups’

Sample comments from twitter and students directly contacting CRCMH:

• “Thank you so much for doing this!!”
• “I struggled with isolation and difficulty”
• “What a cool idea. Meeting with my peers and discussing our projects helped so much when writing my thesis”
• “Sounds simple but I wish I had something like this to help me”
• “My writing group at the end of grad school was a lifesaver”
2 weeks after... 45 enquiries
How do we increase our reach?
PhD graduates per year...

- ~8,500 in Australia
- ~70,000 PhD students in USA
- ~28,000 in Germany
- ~25,000 in UK
- ~24,000 in India
Write Smarter: Feel Better
app development
write smarter
feel better

The productivity and wellbeing app designed for graduate researchers
**Improve your productivity**

Write Smarter: Feel Better uses the Pomodoro Technique, with writing blocks of 15 – 30mins duration to help boost your productivity.

**Tips to help your mental wellbeing**

Being a graduate researcher can be challenging. Wellbeing blocks focus on developing skills to support you through the process.

**Supported by research**

Write Smarter: Feel Better is based on scientific evidence about productivity and wellbeing – you can read more.
Reach out

Writer Smarter: Feel Better will also recommend a range of mental health services and resources if you feel you need to learn more about your wellbeing.

I need support now

Find help now

If you would like to talk to someone or find out more about getting support, please consider one of these services:

- Local GP
- University counselling service
- Lifeline
  - Phone (24hrs a day): 131114
  - Website (with Crisis Support Chat 7pm-4am): lifeline.org.au
- beyondblue
  - Phone: 1300 224636
  - Website: beyondblue.org.au
- headspace – for young people 12-25 and their families
  - Website: eheadspace.org.au
- If your life is in danger, call 000
Hey Rosh. What's on your mind?

- My work/life balance
- Time management
- Planning for my future
- I'm feeling stressed
- I'm feeling low
- My relationships
- None of the above - just write

I need support now

Write Smarter: Feel Better

Making a useful to-do list
- Dealing with procrastination
- Experimenting to beat procrastination
- Smarter scheduling

What task do you want to work on for the next writing block?
(Add new or select from the list)

Start the introduction

Let's go

CRC for Mental Health
Dealing with procrastination

Procrastinating isn’t something that people do all the time. It might be that you procrastinate more on a certain task, in a certain situation, or by doing particular things. Understanding how you procrastinate is an important step to finding new ways to work.

Let’s get started
Dealing with procrastination

Now you’ve identified the procrastination excuses, you can try changing these into more helpful phrases. For example, if you procrastinate by saying you didn’t know how to tackle a task, a more helpful phrase might be “I don’t know how to do this perfectly, but I can make a start and ask for help once I need it.”

My new phrase when I feel like procrastinating is:

- I’m tired, but I can make a small start now.

Let’s go

I need support now

Customisation possible
Timeline of key events (1)

~June 2016
Initial concept

Aug 2016 – May 2018
CRCMH Pilot group run

Jan 2017
Starting discussing article for Nature Careers
  Pitch Jul 2017
  Article published Jul 2018

May 2017
First presentation of idea in public forum CRC Association conference

Aug 2017
Melbourne Ideas
  Application Aug 2017
  Refinement Sept 2017
  Pitch delivered Oct 2017

Sept-Oct 2017
Visit to NIH funded Broadening Experiences in Scientific Training groups

Oct – Nov 2017
Discussions with University of Melbourne re delivery
  Facilitator pack developed Dec 2017
  Refinement Dec – Feb 2018

Feb 2018
University of Melbourne groups commence

Feb 2018
Edith Cowan University intention to adopt
## Timeline of key events (2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feb 2018</td>
<td>Edith Cowan University intention to adopt Teaching &amp; learning grant application March 2018 Grant announced April 2018 Ethics granted Aug 2018 Trial group running Aug – Dec 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2018</td>
<td>Nature article published ~50 universities approach CRCMH to view model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July – Nov 2018</td>
<td>Seven universities adopt program Australia: UoM, ECU, UWA, UTas International: Northwestern, East Anglia, Leipzig</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Next steps

• Universities to start running in-person model in 2019
  • U Western Australia, U Tasmania
  • Northwestern University (Chicago), U East Anglia (UK), U Leizpig (Germany)

• Publication on impact on student wellbeing
  • Last session run in December 2018
  • Analysis and publication to follow in early 2019

• Completing development of app
  • Soft launch in early 2019

• Continued development and refinement of model
What we’ve learnt

• Collaboration is key
  • Students as partners and sources of knowledge
  • Problems experienced by postgraduate students are not always discipline specific (e.g. neuroscience to law/humanities/sciences etc)
  • Understanding different priorities and perspectives
  • Getting the word out about program opens it to valuable critiques which make it better

• It takes time to get right
  • Concept ~June 2016, still refining now
  • Promotion efforts are good, but word of mouth matters for student uptake

• Good evaluations matter, but informal feedback incredibly valuable
What we still want to know

• Does it have an impact on collaboration between individual students?

• Does it have an impact on productivity?
  • Informal says yes, but we aren’t measuring this yet

• Can we adapt to better service higher risk groups?
  • International students of particular interest

• How do we help supervisors to support their students?

• Program is specifically designed to be able to address ‘local’ issues – how do we continue to support universities to adapt model to their institution / student base / existing support networks?
The team

• Co-developers: Karra Harrington (PhD student and practising psychologist), Melanie Carew (CEO, CRC for Mental Health)
• CRCMH students Dr Sabine Bird (inclusive design) and Ms Edith Drajkopyl (naming)
• Collaborators:
  • A/Prof Simon Laws, Dr Tenielle Porter & Michelle Tegg (Edith Cowan)
  • Megan Dench & peer programs group (University of Melbourne)
  • Dr Nina McCarthy (University of Western Australia)
  • Prof Ian Cooke (CRCMH)
• All CRCMH PhD students involved in the 2016 pilot and onward

Funding:

Australian Government
Department of Industry, Innovation and Science

Business
Cooperative Research Centres Programme

CRC for Mental Health