

Supporting PhD Students to Overcome Self-Doubt – a guide for PhD supervisors

Self-doubt is a common experience for PhD students, often intensifying during periods of isolation, uncertainty, or major milestones such as review points, publication submission, or viva preparation. Self-doubt is likely to change over the course of a PhD and it is easy to assume that students will become more confident as their studies progress. However, the progress they are making on their research and life events outside of their PhD studies will impact both positively and negatively on their self-doubt. In particular, if a student has had a period of absence from their research they are likely to require support to (re)develop their confidence.

As our [Value co-creation in PhD supervision](#) research suggests, the supervisor-supervisee relationship is inherently dyadic, shaped by mutual expectations, communication, and trust. For many PhD students, overcoming self-doubt is deeply connected to feeling supported, valued, and understood within that relationship. This resource sets out an approach to support students manage and overcome self-doubt based upon Bandura's theory of self-efficacy.

1. Enabling mastery experiences

- Help students set manageable goals to achieve intermediate smaller goals (e.g. finishing a literature review, development of methodology, submitting a paper abstract) within the broader overall plan for the PhD.
- When the student is making good progress, but are feeling like they are not progressing as quickly as they might, support the student see the bigger picture of their research (see the [SGSSS toolkit on planning milestones](#)).
- Encourage reflection on past successes and support them to reflect on how much they have developed. Ask questions such as:
 - **What's something you've done in the last 6 months that you couldn't have done at the start of your PhD?**
 - **What problem or challenge have you overcome recently? What did you learn from that?**
- Reframe research activities which have not yielded results as part of the learning and research process and support them identify learning from these setbacks. It can be helpful to talk about the setbacks that you have faced in your research to normalise challenges in research.
- Support students reflect on positive achievements rather than what they have not done yet.
- Support the student to attend appropriate training and take an interest and provide feedback on how they are applying the learning from the training.
- Use supervision meetings to highlight progress, not just discuss problems.
- Change the task: if the student is stuck or going in circles, encourage them to try to focus on some other way to advance the project (like starting fieldwork -if you feel that might reinvigorate their passion for the research).

2. [Vicarious Experiences](#) (Learning through Others)

- Connect students with peers, alumni or role models who may have navigated similar challenges - e.g. encourage attendance at cohort events
- Use case examples during supervision (e.g. "One of my previous students struggled with this too, and here's what they did...").
- It can be useful to share your experiences of the challenges that you faced in doing your PhD.

- Create a positive narrative about PhD completion. Too often the narrative students hear are about the worst-case scenarios.

3. Verbal Persuasion (Encouragement and Feedback)

- Consider engaging in [reflective dialogue](#) as a way to develop self-awareness and [reflective self-evaluation](#)
- Offer specific and sincere positive feedback on the progress that they are making with their work including “why” the work is good. Ensure an appropriate balance between developmental and positive feedback.
- Having multiple voices providing feedback on progress is helpful as it can help the student overcome doubts relating to trusting a single source of feedback. The use of effective team supervision (where there is consistency of feedback across the supervision team of the areas the student where the student is performing well) and peer cohorts can support feedback triangulation.
- Help students recognise “informal feedback” moments which they might not be framing as feedback. For example, being asked for their opinion on a research task can serve as implicit positive feedback.
- Support students recognise their strengths and unique contribution to the field. Asking them to write an abstract of their work to date can support this process.
- Challenge unhelpful narratives, e.g. “I can’t do this”, with evidence from their work and their career to date: ‘You completed your degree to a high standard’, ‘you have been awarded a studentship’, ‘you did well on X task’.

4. Supporting positive states

- Acknowledge and normalise emotional ups and downs of the PhD.
- When they are undertaking a new or challenging situation (e.g. attending a conference) remind them it is normal to feel a degree of self-doubt.
- Encourage strategies for wellbeing: breaks during the working day, holidays, exercise, and enabling them to establish and maintain social connections.
- Recognise that life-events may be limiting their ability to engage in their research with a positive state. Where possible signpost students to appropriate support available within the institution.
- Help students identify triggers of self-doubt (are there recurring situations requiring coping strategies?) and explore different ways to approach these.
- If a student is constantly struggling with self-doubt and is overly self-critical signpost them to appropriate support inside the institution.