

Notes for: Creating communities of care for all who work or study in academia – A critical, collective, and pragmatic approach

BCcampus: Research Speaker Series (December 2024), Petra Boynton

Pause for a moment to check in with yourself

This talk will address a range of topics relating to mental health, safety and wellbeing in academic spaces. Some issues raised will be sensitive. Please take a moment to pause and gather yourself and look after yourself accordingly. This talk is not a replacement for medical or therapeutic care or legal advice, but we will signpost to resources after the event.

The talk opens with images from the artists Shephard Fairey <https://obeygiant.com> and Ricardo Levins Morales <https://www.rlmartstudio.com/product/free-download-pandemic-animals> and two quotations.

“Hope is essential to any political struggle for radical change when the overall social climate promotes disillusionment and despair” bell hooks.

“To be truly radical is to make hope possible rather than despair convincing”. Raymond Williams.

These quotes encourage us all to have hope, particularly in moments when things feel difficult or distressing. You may have a similar favourite you draw upon for comfort and reassurance.

What is a ‘Community of Care’?

Definitions vary and may mean slightly different things within industry, education, activism, health and social care.

Networks and groups that are:

- Formal or informal
- On or offline
- Created in response to need
- Focused on turn-taking and mutual assistance
- Built on connectedness, reciprocity and flow
- Welcoming of diversity and difference
- A space where everyone can contribute
- Collectively organised

People, ideas and actions are linked together so support is mutually provided and seamlessly co-ordinated. Those who need help can ask for, access, and utilise it in a timely fashion, while also playing a role in assisting others as appropriate. Communities of Care allow for people across all ages and life stages, recognising there will be times of greater need than others. Some Communities of Care may be formalised and assessed (e.g. a mental health care pathway; transferring someone from hospital to home; wellbeing resources for students; or the work of a charity) while others are organised by neighbours, friends, families, faith groups, or other individuals with a particular interest or need. Such communities may be short or long lasting and may be in response to a particular incident, crisis, or any situation requiring a connected response.

An example of how one university has created a Community of Care can be found via Bowling Green State University in Ohio <https://www.bgsu.edu/bgsucares.html> but you may find smaller scale, informal activities in regular gatherings for tea, student support networks, or social events for International scholars and their families.

A brief discussion of the meaning of Communities of Care in on (and offline) educational spaces can be found in this blog post from Christopher Adamson <https://cadamson.net/education/a-pedagogy-of-care-for-our-online-neighbors>

When thinking about wellbeing advice for academia (and any other spaces) you're invited to take a critical perspective, asking:

“Who does this bring in?

Who does it leave out?

Who might it help?

Who might it harm?”

(From my book *The Research Companion: a practical guide to the social sciences, health and development*. 2nd Edition. Routledge). These questions can be used to highlight where interventions, advice, or other plans may be effective or may not work. Recognizing who may get support and who may not. For example, if we consider who is included or excluded from wellbeing advice and support in academic settings it is common that students and research staff are prioritized but administrators and other ancillary staff (cleaners, security etc.) are ignored. When we contemplate building communities of care, our focus is on ensuring advice, support and activities are suited to diverse need, but that nobody who is eligible to join is left out.

What's going on outside academia?

There are many reasons why those working or studying across research, education, health and social care, and development (to name a few) are struggling. Key areas mentioned whenever I offer training include:

- Climate change
- Historic harms and abuse
- Pandemic impact and legacy
- Widening inequalities
- War, conflict and displacement
- Poverty
- Political instability
- Barriers to accessing help

These factors may interact and influence each other. You may be directly impacted, support others that are, or are concerned about discussions of said issues within the news or on social media. There may be other issues not listed that also affect you.

Why do we feel the way we do?

Alongside the wider issues described above, those working or studying in academic spaces (including universities and healthcare, government and other public sectors) may be affected by sector-specific concerns. Again, these often interact with and influence each other – alongside being impacted by external problems.

- Industrial action (across all sectors)
- Publish or perish culture
- Metrification
- Competition and glorifying overwork
- Precarity
- Funding cuts and deficits (resulting in an “I have to pay to work” situation)
- Bureaucracy
- “Suffering is a badge of honor” messaging
- Widening inequalities and reduced accessibility
- Inadequate, inaccessible, or culturally irrelevant or insensitive pastoral care
- Problems with pensions and pay, or low wages
- Bullying and sexual harassment
- Inadequate training, supervision, instruction and equipment
- Evidence and legacy work ignored or avoided
- Visa/access problems and the hostile environment
- Rapid transitions (e.g. the shift to online, hybrid, then in person)
- Extractive practices (including those aimed at communities – historically or recently)
- Students and staff histories, needs, and changing circumstances
- Relocation for work or study
- Loneliness and isolation
- Emphasis on research (but patchy tuition, impacting on ethics and quality)
- Safety and wellbeing issues (including studying sensitive topics and secondary data)
- Silo working
- Research waste

- Violence on campus; within the university system; enacted by academia
- Drop-outs and other leavers
- Legal changes and challenges
- Closures and redundancies
- Pandemic gaps and catch ups
- Employment prospects

Again, this is not a complete list. There may be other issues you are aware of. However, while having a list like this can be reassuring as it reminds us there are many systemic barriers and problems responsible for feelings of stress, unease and unhappiness. At the same time, it can also leave people feeling overwhelmed, especially if there are multiple problems occurring inside and outside their place of work or study.

It's difficult to build or maintain communities in systems that are broken. So, what do we do?

What we don't do is try to manage alone. The rest of the talk looks at ways to build community, receive help, and care for yourself.

Putting things in perspective

Before this, the talk will encourage us to reflect on the changing discussions around mental health and academia. Although there are multiple reasons for worsening mental health (see above), there are critical questions that should be asked. These include:

1. Is there a global mental health crisis across academia?
2. Are discussions about problems in academia making things worse?
3. Are we in danger of using mental health discourses when talking about difficult but understandable and normative issues?

These will be discussed during the presentation.

Identify barriers to getting help and building community

There are many reasons why seeking help for yourself or accessing it for other people, alongside building communities can be challenging. Commonly observed barriers include:

- Time
- Cost
- Trust
- Availability
- Rationing
- Eligibility
- Awareness
- Accessibility and inclusion
- Confidence

- Appropriateness
- Safety
- Negative past experiences
- Refusals and rejection

Students and staff who may be particularly vulnerable

When building communities, it's important to recognise particular groups may be more likely to be left out and less likely to ask for support. Even if support is requested it may not be available, or appropriate to diverse need. People in the following groups may need particular focus, care and tailored support, that may be partly governed by legal requirements or other important obligations.

- Low income
- Estranged
- Working class
- From an ethnic minority
- Disabled
- Have learning difficulties
- Physically or mentally ill
- Parents or carers
- Care experienced
- Self-funding
- Refugee or asylum seeker
- At risk of violence
- Of faith
- Part time
- LGBTQ+
- On placement or doing fieldwork
- International
- Older/mature
- Working or studying remotely
- Women
- Indigenous
- First-generation to go to university
- Bereaved
- Living with past or current trauma
- Have social and emotional problems

Ways to support the most vulnerable will be discussed during the presentation but will include suggestions such as joining (or forming) a union, drawing on appropriate legislation and being an active bystander.

Build your community! Places and spaces to get help

It's easy to feel alone and helpless and there are no places you can get advice or assistance or draw upon to build your community. It can help to break down places

within universities that could advise or assist – or that you can signpost others to, if needed.

- Supervisor/manager
- Graduate office (school or programme)
- Pastoral care, guidance, or welfare
- Counselling (on or offline)
- International Student Office
- Disabled Student Office
- Student Support Services
- Campus healthcare
- Chaplaincy
- Food bank
- Library
- Student/union
- Security
- Mentors and representatives
- Peer support
- Funders
- Ombuds
- Mediators
- Third party monitors
- Human Resources
- Occupational Health
- Proactive or Environmental Investigations
- Witnesses, allies and upstanders
- Societies and Hubs

Considering the needs of diverse and vulnerable people it is worth noting some of the above list will be highly suited to different people's needs while others may not always be suitable or safe. Noting who to utilise, and when, should be a key consideration. It may also be appropriate to double-check the different sources of advice, assistance, education and care above can assist the diverse needs of students and staff.

Collaborative practice can mean those in roles of care and advice can educate others less experienced, while those who understand the staff/student body can ensure everyone is represented.

Further sources that could be drawn upon to enhance the advice and assistance from the above list include the infrastructure and guidance that underpins research, teaching and pastoral care.

- Research Integrity and Culture
- Ethics
- Engagement
- Research Concordats
- Stated aims from Research Councils

- Mental health manifestos, pathways and protocols
- Academic media
- Research evidence base
- Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging (EDIB)
- Health and workplace rights, safety and wellbeing guidelines and legislation
- UN General Assembly: Resolution on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (June 2023)

How can these be used effectively? By regular check-ins with each other and gathering on and offline. In addition, the following areas can be used and enhanced.

- Accessible instructions and guidelines (aka ‘what to expect, what to do, and how to do it’)
- Places and spaces to work and study
- Training and supervision
- Support and encouragement
- Reflection and feedback
- Opportunities for practice and making mistakes
- Strategies when things (inevitably) go wrong
- Managing expectations
- Multiple explanations in varied formats
- A focus beyond academics, the university, and STEM
- Mental Health First Aid/Psychological First Aid
- Trauma-informed approaches
- Better liaison between schools, colleges and universities; AND communities
- Effective signposting

What additional local support is available?

This is a question to be raised in the presentation, but to be continued after the talk with the opportunity to collate details of reputable local support both on campus and elsewhere within the community.

Your wellbeing ideas

The talk will draw to a close by collating some of your ideas for wellbeing and self-care. Other suggestions shared in previous training and talks that you may enjoy including:

- Rest periods and holidays
- Hobbies (e.g. sport, crafting, cooking)
- Bathing, hair washing or brushing
- Venting and righteous anger
- Catching up with friends and family
- Being in nature
- Gentle exercise
- Anxiety busting techniques
- Film or TV (favourite shows)
- Relaxation and meditation

- Reading or listening to stories
- Pick your own treats
- Care for yourself as well as you would your phone!

Before the end of the event, if time allows, we will play a quick game of ‘Academic Wellbeing Bingo’. This takes some of the commonly used buzzwords around mental health, research, teaching and pastoral care for you to identify. How many of these have you heard – or had recommended? Returning to the initial request to consider who is helped or harmed, brought in or left out, there’s an invitation to be alert to these ideas and to consider them critically when applied to wellbeing in academic settings.

- Resilience
- Wellness
Trauma informed
- Belonging
- Academic mental health
- ‘Just reach out’
- Positivity
- Empowerment
- Imposter syndrome
- ‘Time to talk’ (and a cup of tea)
- Exercise
- Burn out
- Self-care
- Mindset
- Healing
- Intentionality
- Recovery
Detox
- Readiness
- Decolonisation
- Mindfulness
- Buoyancy
- Authenticity (aka ‘whole self’)
- Therapy dogs

The presentation will end with a quote from Marianne Kaba - “*Hope is a discipline, we have to practice it every single day*” and the invitation to either find your own favourite quote about hope; or to commit to finding hope for yourself; and to think about ways you want to join, expand, or create a community of care.

Keep in touch!

There are plenty of ways you can connect with Petra, including:

Email – info@drpetra.co.uk

Bluesky <https://bsky.app/profile/petraboynton.bsky.social>

LinkedIn <https://www.linkedin.com/in/petra-boynton>

Ideas from this talk, with more suggestions on help seeking, help giving, self-care, accessibility, and building communities in academia can be found in Being Well in Academia: ways to feel stronger, safer and more connected.

<https://www.routledge.com/Being-Well-in-Academia-Ways-to-Feel-Stronger-Safer-and-More-Connected/Boynton/p/book/9780367186708>

Researcher Renew - starts in January 2025

Every January Petra hosts a month of free, supportive activities and ideas for those working or studying in research. Anyone can join and it's really easy to do. Simply visit <https://theresearchcompanion.com/blog> from the 2nd of January 2025 and every other day there will be a new topic, suggestion, or exercise for you to try. It helps you build confidence, increase your research skills, connect with others, and ease yourself gently into the New Year.