

Tactics to stay on course

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Self-sabotage is not the exclusive province of PhD students, but when it applies to them it can result in a failure to complete their projects, or at the very least, sharply increased levels of stress.

Studies have shown that people who undertake PhDs often self-handicap by procrastinating, being perfectionist and by overcommitting.

Yet while these behaviours are considered to be debilitating traits in the realm of clinical psychology, they are seldom taken seriously when it comes to so-called high-functioning people such as doctoral students.

The dearth of practical advice in this area led researchers Maria Gardiner and Hugh Kearns to pose the question, "What makes a PhD so hard to complete?" and to investigate and devise practical methods to assist PhD students in getting their research projects done.

Gardiner has Masters in clinical psychology and Kearns, who is head of Flinders University's staff development and training unit, has a Masters in both education and mental health.

"What we have done is combined those areas," says Kearns. "We're using the best [theories] in education and the best in psychology and applying them in a university. I guess you could say we're turning research back on the researchers."

The traits of the perfectionist are critical self-evaluation and the setting of high standards, which are exacerbated in the evaluative environment of academia, according to Kearns and Gardiner. So too is self-handicapping, which involves placing obstacles in one's path, so that a ready-made alibi exists if failure occurs.

Using the techniques of cognitive behavioural coaching, Kearns and Gardiner developed a range of workshops that the pair has taken to about 20 universities in Australia, the UK and Ireland.

Drawing on numerous psychological studies into the erroneous cognitive processes responsible for perfectionist and self-sabotaging behaviours, Gardiner's and Kearns's workshops provide strategies that enable doctoral researchers to change their self-handicapping behaviours and traits.

Courses in the program include: "Defeating Self Sabotage"; "The Seven secrets of highly successful PhD students"; "Your Higher Degree: The emotional roller coaster ride"; "Self sabotage: How we do it and what you can do about it"; and "Time for Research: Time management for PhD students."

PhD students are expected to carry out original research and to write at an extremely high standard.

"They are expected to do this with little structure and feedback over long periods of time," Kearns says.

While some candidates can take a relatively short three years to complete a PhD, others may take as long as seven although the pressure to complete projects in as short a time as possible is mounting.

In their research paper, "Innovation in PhD Completion", Gardiner and Kearns found that an evaluation of their workshop program indicated that it had great success in improving students' ability to manage their time, with an improved capability to complete the PhD. This in turn was associated with lower levels of stress.

Gardiner says, “There are a lot of people out there who can treat anxiety and depression. But there aren’t as many people who know how to help high-performing people who still have their own difficulties, and things that get in the way of them doing well.”

For more information visit www.phdinprogress.com

Box

Defeating self-sabotage

Be aware

Sometimes just being aware that you’re being perfectionistic or are overcommitting can be enough to stop you doing it. Think about your behavioural patterns and try to identify things that get in the way.

Take action

If you procrastinate, set yourself some deadlines. If you overcommit, try to get rid of some demands on your time.

Challenge your thinking

Our thinking determines our behaviour. If you’re finding it hard to change your behaviour, then you need to challenge some of the assumptions and thoughts you have.

Source: *Defeating Self-Sabotage: Getting Your PhD Finished*. Maria Gardiner and Hugh Kearns.