# Reflecting for Research

During the course of my PhD I was really conscious that researching an emotionally demanding topic would impact on me. It is useful to ask supervisors and your PGR convenor what provisions your department has in place to support researchers working on emotionally demanding topics. However, often there is very little available. To try and support myself therefore I engaged in a range of reflective tasks that I have tried to provide an overview of here.

How and why is your research important to you? What inspired it and what motivates you to keep working on it?

Whenever I'm asked how I am, my instinct is to say "I'm fine" without truly reflecting on how I am. So before I started under-taking my research interviews I decided to reflect on my life when I'm in a good place. This allowed me to have some concrete markers of my own wellbeing on which to reflect when I was under-taking research. These were used in a diary and included things like my eating, drinking, sleeping, care of my appearance, hobbies and social habits. Here reflect on what your life is like when you're in a good place.
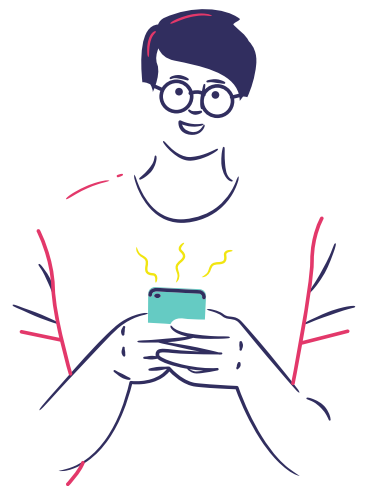
What's your non-negotiable?

So PhD's can be pretty tough, and during particularly intense times it can be hard to find time to recharge your batteries. But we all need to have something to look forward to. Here make a promise to yourself of something you find joyful that you will not give up during even the tough bits of the PhD.
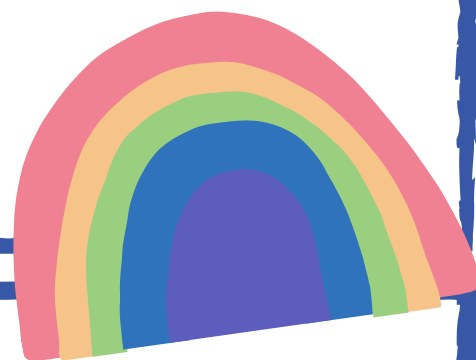
What can you put in place to support you in advance of times that will be particularly intense?

For me this was having an 'emergency freezer plan' (something you can just chuck in the oven when you get home after an interview and don't have the energy to cook), one of my peers to chat to (by text or call) after each interview and something scheduled to do after an interview to signal the end of the day (could be something nice to watch on TV, a craft project to do a bit of, or something social).

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What working practices feel supportive and sustainable? Is there anything you'd like to try and see if it helps? How can you implement these in your work? For me this was things like limiting myself to only doing one interview a day and (pre-pandemic) working from home when possible.

At the same times as reflecting on what I do when I feel good, I also spent some time reflecting on what indicates to me that I feel my wellbeing is slipping and I am becoming over-whelmed. Of course, recognising this does not mean that I am immediately and miraculously able to remedy those feelings, but it did give me some concrete, personal 'warning signs' to look out for that alerted to me to when I needed a change.

Here reflect on what happens when you are struggling. To begin you may want to think about how you interact with those close to you, your working habits, how you use your leisure time, as well as your eating, drinking and sleeping. Are there any coping mechanisms you use unconsciously or as a reflex when you are struggling?

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# What would partiularly signal to you that you need additional support or for something to change?
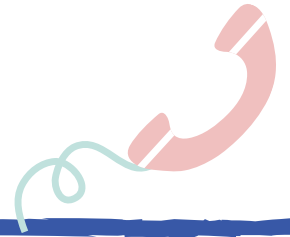
What support does your department provide?

Consider writing down email address or phone numbers if you would have to google them because it can feel like a lot of effort when you're not feeling great!
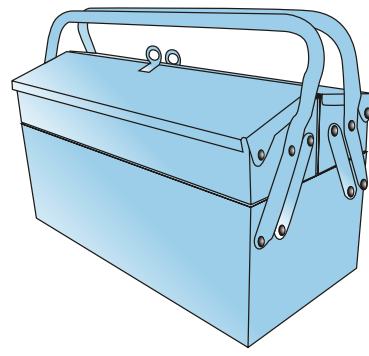
Who can you reach out to when times are tough?

I found it useful to think of both colleagues/peers and folks outside of the university to reach out to for support - depending on your topic it might be useful to have a conversation with them about whether its a topic they are comfortable discussing.

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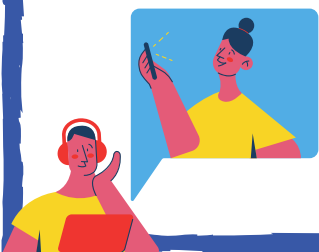
What tools or coping mechanisms will you use ? These might be methods of distraction or self-care, they could also be ways of reaching out to others, or promises that you make to yourself. Make it as specific and detailed to yourself as you can.

Your tool box