

# TOOL



## MANAGING STUDENTS' NEGATIVE EMOTIONS DURING THE SUPERVISORY RELATIONSHIP

For the individual Supervisor, this tool aims to

- Make you aware of the range of emotions, both positive and negative, a student is likely to experience.
- Enable you to be prepared to discuss these emotions with the student and suggest ways for dealing with them.
- Point the student towards strategies they can use to manage their own emotions.

### Emotional States

Research on PhD students (Morrison-Saunders et al., 2005) suggests that

- Emotional states experienced by dissertation students at particular stages of the dissertation process are common.
- The dissertation process can be seen as an 'emotional rollercoaster'.
- In the early phase of the dissertation, the student will potentially experience both positive and negative emotions – elation and enthusiasm, mixed with bewilderment, confusion and anxiety.
- In the middle phase of the dissertation process, the student may feel frustration, boredom, guilt and loneliness/isolation – due to realisation of the size of the project, the rigours of data collection, conflicts with employment and family and the essentially individual nature of the dissertation research.
- Positive emotions also occur in the middle stage – excitement (at data collection and making progress), but this can be tempered by fear, frustration, loneliness and a sense of feeling rushed/running out of time.
- A 'slump in productivity and procrastination' are likely during the middle period.
- At the end stage of the dissertation process, mixed emotions may include frustration, anxiety, boredom and panic, but also elation and satisfaction
- Frustrations and tensions can occur in the relationship between supervisor and student, e.g. due to concerns about receiving timely or critical feedback
- Submission of the dissertation and particularly the long wait for a result is likely to be 'anticlimactic rather than celebratory'.

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## Suggested strategies

There are no direct instructions for ideal implementation. Rather these strategies are provided to initiate questions and discussions about the emotional state of the student. This may include asking questions such as:

- How are you feeling about the dissertation?
- Have you had any emotional issues with the dissertation that you would like to talk about?

This will inform what emotional state or phase the student is in and provides an opportunity to implement the following suggested strategies (adapted from Morrison-Saunders et al., 2005). It is important to reassure the student that these emotional responses are normal and are likely to be experienced by many dissertation students.

- Encourage your student to participate in informal student networking with their peers (as they often experience similar emotional states and can support each other)
- Suggest the student avoid working at home, if isolation is a problem
- Help the student carefully plan a timetable for work
- Suggest the student builds regular breaks and holidays into their work plan
- Keep the communication pathway open about emotions
- Be aware of the possibility of conflict in the supervisory relationship

## Evaluating the Success of Strategies

At the following supervision meeting, reflect with the student on how the strategies worked to address emotional concerns. This can be repeated at subsequent meetings where emotions become apparent/important.

You could suggest the student keep a reflective journal of their emotions so that they can track and respond to them. Outcomes you should observe include:

- Greater commitment to and productivity with the dissertation project
- Student is happier and better able to cope with the dissertation
- Reduced signs of student 'giving up' or 'procrastinating'

**Reference:** Morrison-Saunders, A., Moore, S., Newsome, D. & Newsome, J. (2005). *Reflecting on the role of emotions in the PhD process*. Paper presented at Teaching and Learning Forum 2005, Murdoch University, WA, Australia.

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