

3. SAY NO TO SHINY BALLS

The tube below represents one week in your life. 168 hours. The balls in the tube represent the commitments you have against that time – teaching, running experiments, writing, administration, family, hobbies, interests.



Let's say your tube is full. But then along comes another ball. You put that new one in and everything squeezes up a bit. But the balls don't all squeeze equally. Your teaching time doesn't reduce. Experiments don't take less time. So what usually gets squashed are your interests, your writing, your friends and family, your wellbeing. To feel better, you tell yourself that this is just a busy time. When things settle down a bit you'll start writing, seeing your friends, looking after yourself.



But then along comes a new shiny ball. And this is the best one ever. Perhaps it's an offer to join the editorial board of a prestigious journal, or join the organising committee for an international conference, or review an article in your favourite journal. At this moment you get emotionally ambushed. You no longer think clearly and the word YES tumbles out of your mouth.

But if your tube is full where is it going to go? Once again, the things that get squashed will be your interests, your writing, friends, wellbeing.

So what can you do? This leads us right up to the difficult issue of having to say NO to something. If you put the new ball in, then something has to go. That's when most people say, "But I can't give up any of them". If that's true then you have no choice. You have to say NO to the shiny ball.

Saying NO is hard. But there's an alternative. And that is learning how not to say yes to things.

For example:

- That sounds interesting. Let me look at my diary and get back to you.
- Take a bit of time before responding to that email invitation.
- Discuss the new shiny ball with a trusted mentor.

What you need to do is buy yourself a little time to think. You need to wait for your rational brain to come back, have a look at the tube and make a realistic decision. Perhaps you could negotiate a deadline, offer an alternative, or change an existing commitment.

**If you want to feel better,
learn how not to say YES to shiny balls.**

11. FUN THINGS – INTERESTS

Hopefully you like your research area. You might even love it. But sometimes the research can take over your whole life at the expense of other interests. You're just so busy that there's no time for anything else.

This might be OK when the research is going well. However, if the research is not going so well, then you might not be going so well. This is why it's good to have other interests. Something else to rely on, or something that will interest you, when the research isn't working out.

The time spent on your interests or hobbies is not wasted. Exercise and sport are good for you physically and mentally. Creative activities like painting or craft open up other parts of your brain.

Spending time with friends is enjoyable and helps you build a support network.

These fun things will be good for your research too. You'll come back refreshed and maybe even with some new ideas.

So, find some pleasurable activities and build them into your life. It's a good idea to schedule them in – gym every Thursday, catch up with friends on Friday. Otherwise it can seem too much effort and you drift out of the habit.



Here's a few ideas to get you started.

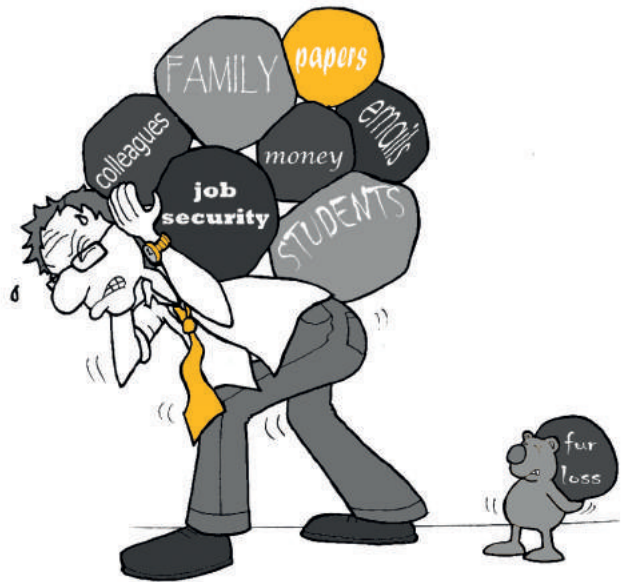


**Find something you enjoy doing - and do it.
It'll help you stay well.**

13. WORRY

If you're inclined to worry, in research you'll find lots of things to worry about. Some examples are:

- Am I producing enough research?
- Am I working hard enough?
- Will my paper be accepted?
- Will I get funding?
- Will my PhD student ever finish?
- Will I get/keep my job?
- What does my supervisor think of me?
- What do my colleagues think of me?
- Worrying!



A certain amount of worry is normal but it can get out of hand, e.g. if you spend a lot of time worrying or if you take your worries home with you at the end of the day.

Too many of the following behaviours indicate you might be worrying a bit too much:

- Going over the same things again and again
- Checking with people to make sure you haven't upset them (often!)
- Going over things to make sure you didn't get anything wrong
- Not being mentally present when people talk to you because you're going over things in your head
- Not trusting your own decisions and checking them with people so that you can reassure yourself

Strategies for dealing with worry:

- If you think there are things you really should do, then do them. Ideally, do them as soon as you can, e.g. before you go home for the day.
- If you have concerns, check them out with a colleague.
- Write down your concerns. Writing is a good way of getting the ideas out of your head so you don't have to keep replaying them.
- If you really feel you have to worry, then set limits on how long you can worry for, e.g. say to yourself, "I'm worry about things for the next 20 minutes and then it's finished".
- Distract yourself – physical exercise that grabs your attention is good.
- Read a good book or listen to a talk show or podcast.
- Challenge the accuracy of your thoughts (see below).
- If you still can't stop worrying, get some help.

ANTs Automatic Negative Thoughts	MATHs More Accurate Thoughts
I haven't written enough papers.	How many do I need? I'll make a list of what I've got and a plan for new ones.
Maybe I'm not working hard enough?	Let's count up how many hours I've worked. Then I can decide what is a reasonable amount to work.
What if my paper gets rejected?	That might happen. It happens to every researcher. If it does happen then I will deal with it.
Will my contract be renewed?	All I can do is do the best I can. And I'll keep my eyes open for other opportunities.


32. TECHNOLOGY



Technology is embedded in our lives and opens up many possibilities. However it can also cause great stress and wear people down.

Technology means you're now available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. There is no off time. With smart phones and smart watches you're always on. And this "always on alert" state is not good for your mental health. You need some off time.

But the technology companies make this very hard for you. They use every psychological trick in the book to get your attention. Intermittent reinforcement, bright colours, noises, vibrations, lights. Applications like Netflix have removed the stopping cues. When you get to the end of an episode (a natural stopping point) the next episode begins in eight seconds without you having to do anything at all.



In fact, most people nowadays are psychologically addicted to their devices. You probably don't have an alarm clock any more. It's on your phone. This means that first thing in the morning you reach for your phone to turn off the alarm. And as you do that, you notice that there's a notification. So you open the app and then there's a link to a website. When you go there a video starts automatically. And you're hooked.

This "always on" state is not good for us. Firstly, it's hard to concentrate on one task if you're being regularly interrupted by notifications and alerts. And secondly, it's hard to wind down if you are constantly being wound up.

So to stay well you need to fight your technology addiction.

Here are some suggestions:

- Buy an alarm clock and use it instead of your phone to wake up in the morning.
- Charge your phone in another room, not in your bedroom.
- When you need to concentrate, put your phone on silent or Do Not Disturb.
- Put your phone in a drawer or in another room.
- Get blocking software that restricts your access to sites or the whole internet for periods of time.
- Don't have phones at the meal table.
- Set aside times when you will not check your phone.
- Remove apps that you're addicted to.
- Get apps off the home page of your phone. Put them in folders where it's a bit harder to get to them.
- Set specific times for checking emails, not all day long.

Make technology work for you, not you work for it. You'll feel better when you get technology under control.

41. EARLY WARNING SIGNS



The best time to deal with stress or burnout is before it becomes a crisis. This is where early warning signs are important. These are the little changes in behaviour or mood that tell you that you're on the way to being stressed or burnt out. Some examples are:

- Road rage
- Furniture rage
- Physical signs – headaches, tiredness, stomach aches
- Difficulty falling asleep or broken sleep
- Shortness of temper
- Sense of humour failure
- Clumsiness, dropping things, making mistakes on the keyboard
- Regular illness, e.g. colds, feeling run down

If you don't know your early warning signs, ask your family or friends. They will be well aware of them and probably very happy to describe them to you – in great detail.

When you do become aware of your early warning signs, what then? What most of us do, because we're feeling under pressure, is to keep on going or go even faster, making the situation worse. You're not at your best and things will start to go wrong.


It is more helpful to take some time out and do something to break the cycle.

For example:

- Take a few deep breaths.
- Walk around the block.
- Have a cup of tea or coffee.
- Get some exercise.
- Talk to someone.

In many cases it doesn't take too long to break the cycle and reset your stress counter. And then you'll be more effective when you resume.

My Early Warning Signs	
My early warning signs of stress are:	My action:



Sometimes these things resolve themselves with time. You might work your way through these yourself or with the support of family or friends. However, sometimes things don't get better. Anxiety can become debilitating. Depression becomes paralysing.

Then it's important to get professional help. If you broke your leg, I'd hope you'd get medical advice rather than think it will sort itself out. If you're experiencing emotional problems, anxiety, depression or other mental health issues then it's wise to seek professional support.

Unfortunately when things aren't going well, people often tend to isolate themselves and assume that there is nothing they can do. That no-one can help. But the good news is that there is a lot of support available. But you do have to ask for it. You have to reach out.

It could be:

- Your regular GP or local doctor.
- A counselling service. Most research organisations will have some form of confidential counselling service.
- Psychologists. Your organisation may have a scheme where you can access some psychological support. Or you may have to use external psychologists where a cost is involved.

Some people assume that you need to wait until you reach a crisis before you seek support. In reality, it is more sensible to seek support early, so that things don't reach a crisis point. I know of one PhD student who has a monthly meeting with the counselling service – regardless of how things are going. This is so he can discuss problems before they escalate.


There is support available. Use it to help yourself feel better.

47. EXERCISE



Research can be a sedentary affair. Some lucky researchers get to do exciting field work like diving with the dolphins or exploring the Antarctic, but even then, there is still lots of office work to be done.

Long hours sitting at a desk reading, looking at a computer screen analysing data, and hopefully lots of writing. Most of the work is happening above the neck with the result that the rest of the body gets ignored.



Long hours crouched over a laptop is bad for your posture, your back and your mental health. A whole day looking at a computer screen is bad for your eyes. And a day of nibbling on chocolate and other treats as you write, is bad for your body.

Incorporate some exercise into your routine.

- After an hour of sitting at your desk, get up and have a short stretch.
 - Set an alarm on your computer to remind you to move.
 - After you finish a piece of work go for a walk.
 - Look at the way your workstation is set up, and change it to be more ergonomically sound.
 - Engage in some regular physical activity. It could be sport, running, swimming or walking in the forest. If you can build exercise into your regular routine it's more likely you will keep it up.
- Join a group that goes for a regular walk, run or cycle. You're more likely to stay involved if there's company and you have a commitment to others.
 - Park your car a bit further away so that you have a walk to get to your office. This also means you get a few minutes to decompress at the end of the day as you walk back to your car.
 - If you live nearby, walk or cycle to work.
 - Take the stairs rather than the lift.
 - Don't eat your lunch at your desk. Get up and go for a walk outside.
 - Join a gym and go to it.

Get some exercise. Your body will appreciate it and so will your brain. You will come back refreshed and maybe even with a few new ideas.


50. YOGA, MEDITATION, RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

Researchers are always busy. There's lots to do. Proposals to write, experiments to set up, problems to deal with and of course writing. And that's just the research. No doubt there are other commitments as well, friends, family, community. It's easy to get stressed and a bit overwhelmed. That's when people will start telling you that you need to relax. Which is probably the last thing you want to hear. But they're probably right. So how do you relax?



There's no shortage of options. There are many relaxation techniques. You could try:

- Breathing exercises
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Yoga
- Meditation
- Mindfulness
- Tai chi
- Walking
- Running
- Swimming
- Cycling
- Massage
- And many more



They all work, but different techniques suit different people. Think about strategies that have worked for you in the past and that you've enjoyed. It's likely that they will work for you again.

Although there's no shortage of techniques, the issue is putting them into practice. Especially when you're feeling stressed and don't think you have time to relax.

So, find the technique or techniques that seem to work for you.

- Build this into your life, e.g. do some meditation first thing when you wake up, go to the gym at lunchtime or on the way home.
- Create a routine where it becomes automatic, e.g. every Tuesday after work go for a swim on the way home.

- Regular classes or groups can help because there's a schedule, e.g. yoga class every Saturday morning.
- Start now, when you're not feeling stressed, so that it becomes automatic when you do need it.
- Commit with a friend to do some relaxation together, e.g. go for a walk together on Wednesday evenings.

Find a relaxation technique that works for you and build it into your life. It will make you feel better.

SUPPORTING OTHERS

In many countries about one in five people is likely to be experiencing some sort of mental health issue, e.g. depression, anxiety. Unfortunately in academia the rate is higher. It can be hard to tell from a person's appearance. If someone has a broken leg it's pretty obvious. However, if someone is experiencing depression it might not be that clear. On the outside they may just seem a bit quiet or down but on the inside they may be struggling to get through the day.

Some signs that your colleagues may be finding things hard are:

- Changes in behaviour
- Not getting involved in social events, e.g. morning teas, Friday get-togethers
- Isolating themselves
- Changes in mood
- Teariness
- Over-reactions to minor incidents

So what can you do when you notice that one of your colleagues seems to be struggling?

The first thing is to ask, "Are You OK? Are things going OK?"

OK?

Once you've asked that question, then you need to listen. Just let the person reveal as much as they feel comfortable with. Try not to judge or fix, just listen.

If they do want to talk some more, you could suggest that you have a tea or coffee or go for a walk. You don't need to solve their problems. You don't have to fix anything. Listening on its own is very powerful.

Ask the person if they would like you to do something. You can ask them if they have sought help, e.g. a counsellor, psychologist, GP. You could offer to have another chat or coffee with them at some point. You could offer to accompany them to the morning tea or the meeting.

Small signs of caring can make a big difference to someone who is going through a tough time.