

Mental Health In Academia or How to get a PhD without loosing your mind

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Why?

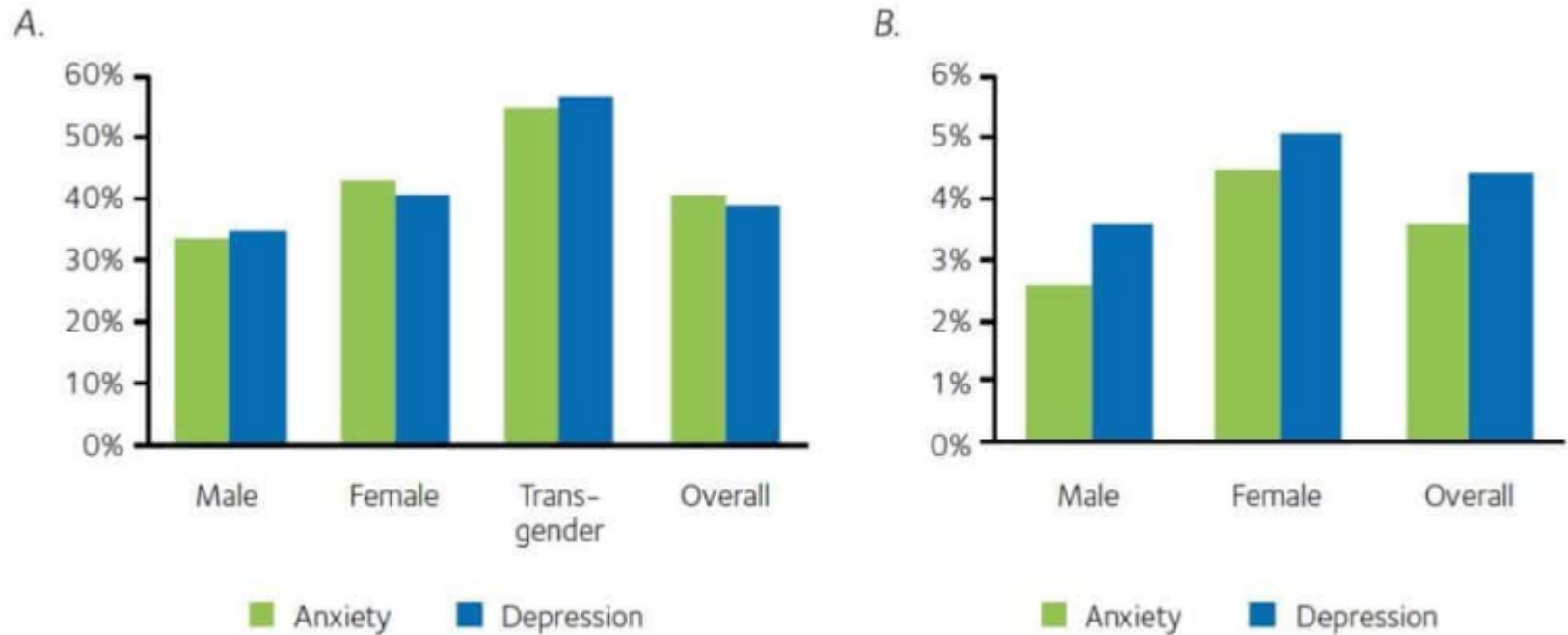


Figure 1. Prevalence of anxiety and depression in A. graduate trainees (Evans et al., 2018) and B. the global population (WHO, 2017).

<https://www.physoc.org/magazine-articles/mental-health-in-academia-an-invisible-crisis/>

Why?

If physical diseases were treated like mental illness...

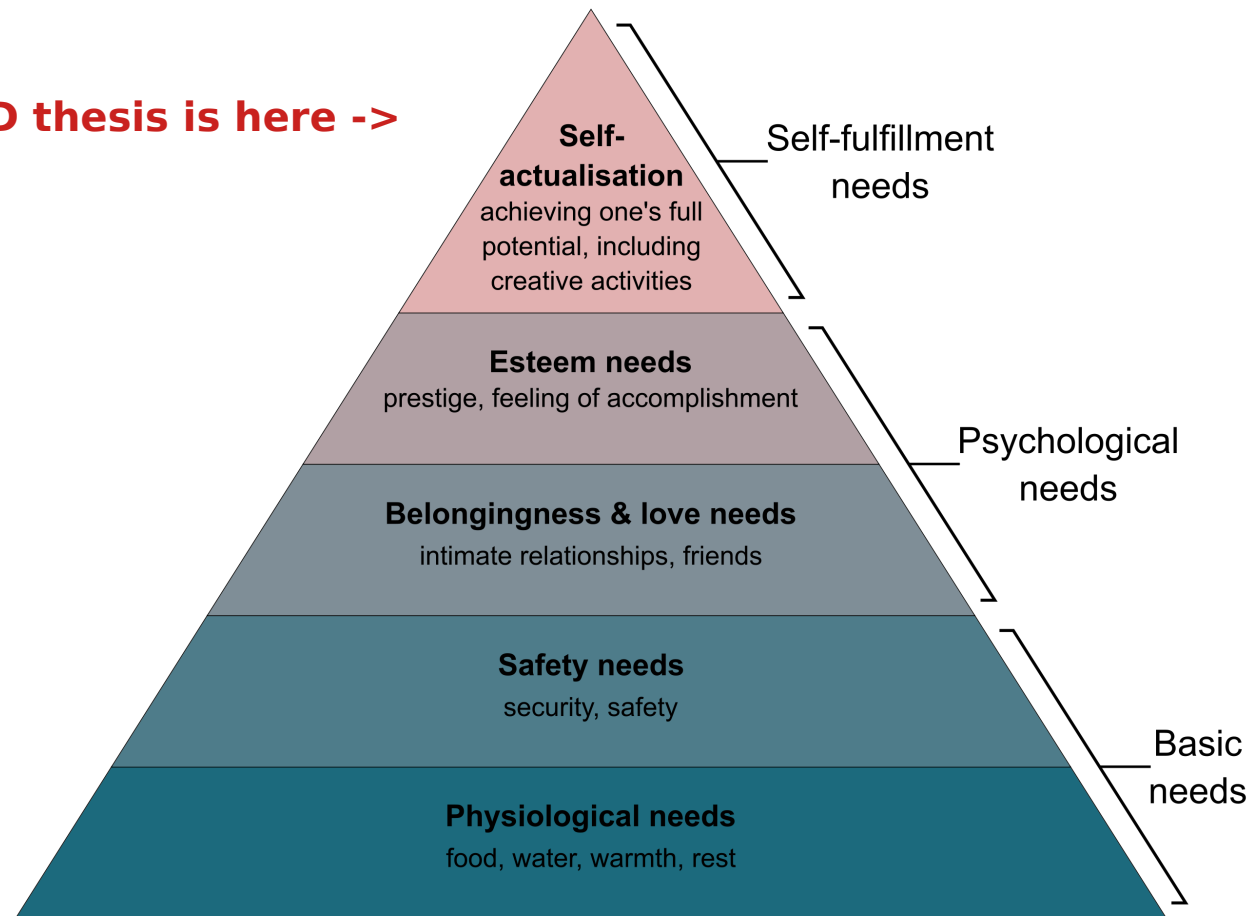


Why ?

Your mind is your
primary means of production,
the one tool
you can not do without...

We must
understand how it works,
how to take care of it,
perform maintenance and
repair when broken.

PhD thesis is here ->



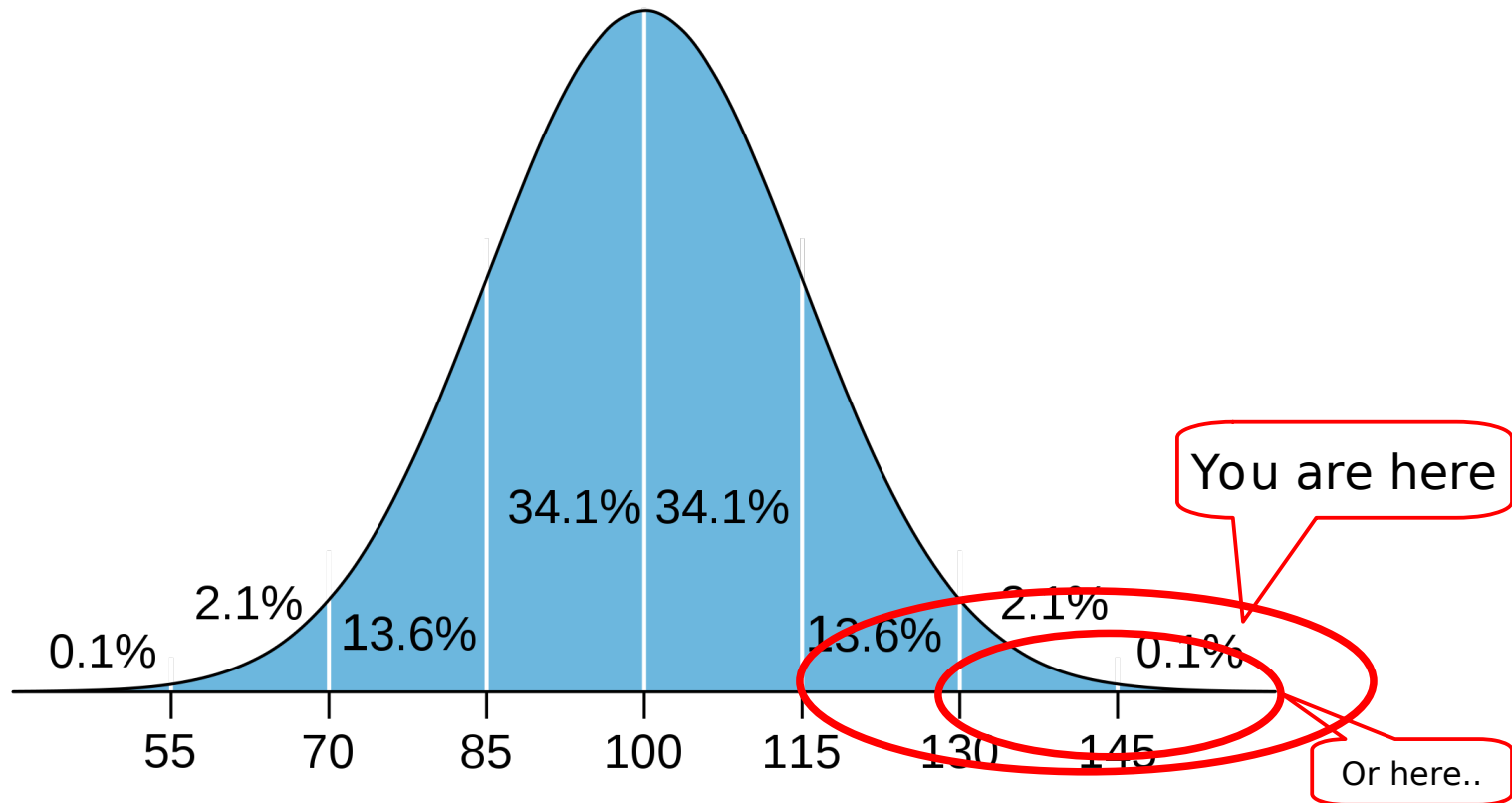
You can not think coherent, deep and abstract thoughts when you are hungry, scared, angry, sad or disillusioned

Who?

- Associate professor, trying to save the world from itself
- White, male, middle aged, cishetero Balkan immigrant
- Nerd, hacker, gamer, wannabe artist and dad
- Diagnosed with ADHD and seasonal depression in my early 40s, after two almost-burnouts



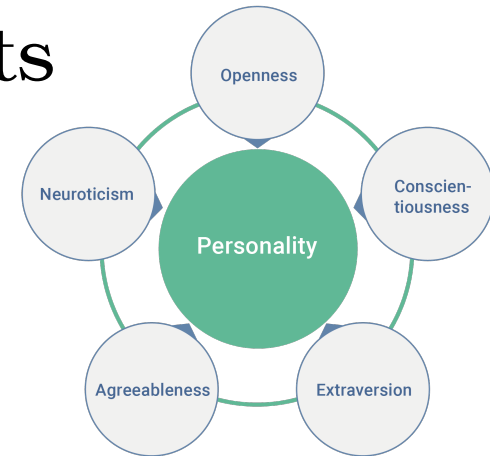
We are not “normal” ...



"IQ tests are valid measures of the kind of intelligence necessary to do well in academic work. But if the purpose is to assess intelligence in a broader sense, the validity of IQ tests is questionable."

Weiten W (2016). Psychology: Themes and Variations. Engage Learning. p. 281. ISBN 978-1305856127.

We are not “normal” : Academics tend to have certain personality traits



OCEAN model aka The Big 5

- students of
 - arts/humanities and psychology : high on Neuroticism and Openness;
 - political sc. : high on Openness;
 - economics, law, political sc., and medicine : high on Extraversion;
 - medicine, psychology, arts/humanities, and sciences : high on Agreeableness
 - arts/humanities : low on Conscientiousness.

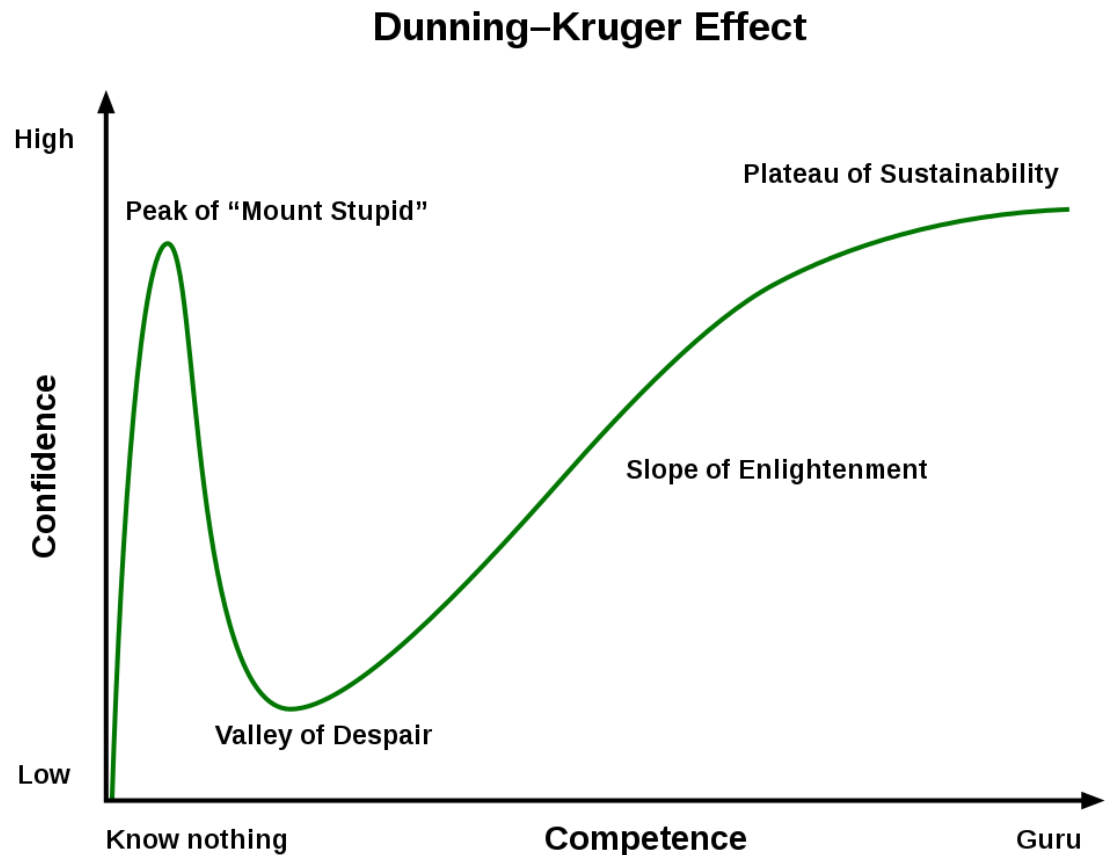
• Anna Vedel, Big Five personality group differences across academic majors: A systematic review, *Personality and Individual Differences*, Volume 92, 2016, Pages 1-10, ISSN 0191-8869, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2015.12.011>.

This work is not normal

- If you are not feeling stupid, you are not doing it right :(ul> - Only negative feedback & Popper
 - Schwartz, Martin A. "The importance of stupidity in scientific research." , Journal of Cell Science 121.11 (2008): 1771-1771.
[Paper](#)
- Hard to objectively value quality
 - How do I even know that I am doing my work well?
- Closure is rare
 - There is always future work, publication sometimes years after work is done
- Research is hard to plan, hard to manage deadlines
- Your peers are far from “normal” too...

Dunning-Kruger effect

- “Smart people think they are stupid, stupid people think they are smart”
- Also works as a timeline through out your phd.
Except you never really get past the valley of despair...



Imposter Syndrome

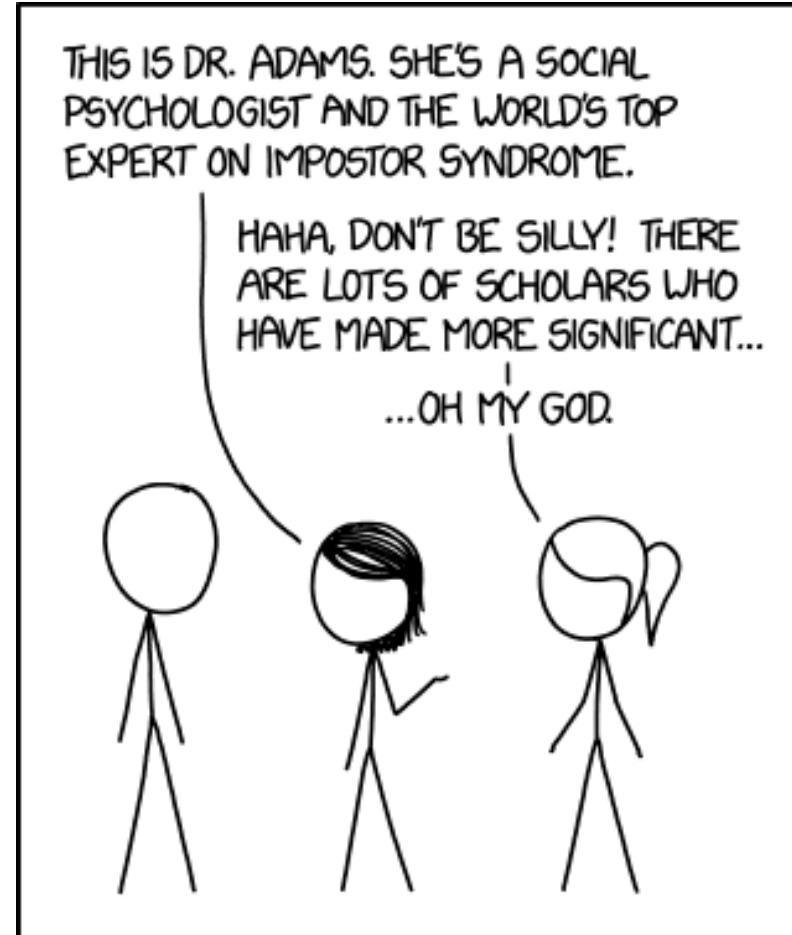
Neil Gaiman on Imposter Syndrome, which we all suffer from.

"... Some years ago, I was lucky enough invited to a gathering of great and good people: artists and scientists, writers and discoverers of things. And I felt that at any moment they would realise that I didn't qualify to be there, among these people who had really done things.

On my second or third night there, I was standing at the back of the hall, while a musical entertainment happened, and I started talking to a very nice, polite, elderly gentleman about several things, including our shared first name. And then he pointed to the hall of people, and said words to the effect of, "I just look at all these people, and I think, what the heck am I doing here? They've made amazing things. I just went where I was sent."

And I said, "Yes. But you were the first man on the moon. I think that counts for something."

And I felt a bit better. Because if Neil Armstrong felt like an imposter, maybe everyone did. Maybe there weren't any grown-ups, only people who had worked hard and also got lucky and were slightly out of their depth, all of us doing the best job we could, which is all we can really hope for."



<https://xkcd.com/1954/>

<https://neil-gaiman.tumblr.com/post/160603396711/hi-i-read-that-youve-dealt-with-with-impostor>

Imposter syndrome

- “ ... individual doubts their skills, talents or accomplishments and has a persistent internalized fear of being exposed as a "fraud".
- *Despite external evidence of their competence*, ... remain convinced that they are frauds, and do not deserve all they have achieved. ... attribute their success to luck, or ... result of deceiving others “ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Impostor_syndrome
- We all have it to some degree..
 - Especially prevalent in women and ethnic minorities
- Watch out for the “The impostor cycle” !

Illusion of control, smartness and perfectionism

- smart -> rationalize most things -> like to be in control
 - quick recognition of the errors
- not trained for good enough !
- PhD is a proof of ability to do independent research
 - (which you demonstrate by doing it)
 - NOT about producing your life's work and the perfect outcome
- seeking perfection often (always) leads to procrastination
 - > delaying and/or abandoning -> more frustration and sense of failure -> more need for doing it perfect

Gender based cognitive biases

- Job adverts
 - men : oh, I cover 50% of requirements, I can do this!
 - women : oh no, I only cover 80%, I wont apply
- Deeply ingrained sexism
 - “My teacher asked me: Why are you going to Delft, that is not for girls!?”
 - Actual quote from a female first year Bsc student
- You can't win :
 - family first : You are trowing your education away!
 - career first : You are a terrible mother!
- Very few leadership role models in academia
 - He is such a strong leader!
 - She is such a bitch!
- Selection criteria often expect 150 % or 200%, while you have to carry the majority of family tasks, bear children, etc, etc
- Men have little problem showing off / talking positively about their own achievements

Systemic biases

terrible in case of gender,
let alone for race / religion / sexuality ...

(sexual) intimidation, bullying, discrimination, stalking and violence

- #MeeToo made a terrifying number of cases of sexual harassment, intimidation and other toxic behaviour in academia
 - e.g. : Mechanisms of micro-terror? Early career CMS academics' experiences of 'targets and terror' in contemporary business schools. [Paper](#)
-
- PhD candidate is in a dependent position
 - highly vulnerable
 - hard to (re)act
- Seek help!
 - [Confidential advisor](#)

Dealing with FOMO and peer pressure

- more you know -> more aware of things going on - > more know that you are missing things
 - infinite number of things going on
 - social media are terrible for this
- you have to take part
 - (everybody) need to be visible for your career
 - savage competition of highly intelligent people within a very resource scarce environment
 - science is a global
 - if you don't publish that paper, someone, somewhere will...

Asymmetry of success

- you ONLY see the things that work out
- Image of “what I should be” is a composite of the best sides of many smart people
 - and rarely compare yourself to their bad sides
- We value success because it is so rare
 - academia is 99% failing,
 - typical EU / NWO proposal has 5-10% of failure
 - papers get rejected/criticized all the time
 - and again, Popper!

Realistic goal setting

- There is an infinite number of things that you can not do!
 - so , what CAN you do ?
- Wishfull thinking : It would be nice if I could...
 - peer pressure does not help
- Things ALWAYS take more time
 - How many pages can you really write in an hour?
 - my record : 2 solid ones in a day
 - How many pages can you read *and* comprehend in an hour?
 - my record : 10

PhD thesis = 1 page per day!



Shit Academics Say
@AcademicsSay



Yes, I've heard of work-life balance. I gave a workshop on it last week and am co-editing a related special issue to which I'm contributing.

4:11 PM · Sep 21, 2017 · Twitter for iPhone

983 Retweets **113** Quote Tweets **3.4K** Likes



Study/work-life balance

People on their dying bed never say, I wish I worked more...

- PhD and science feels like a calling, a higher mission but it is also “just a job”
- You are starting families, moving countries, etc
 - all major life events, that demand a lot from you
 - while trying to deliver top mental and intellectual performance

Often forgotten: Informal care-givers

- Feels so normal, of course you take care of a sick child/partner/parent/... but
 - time
 - physical effort
 - emotional load
- Ask for help , so that you can help!

Self-medication / Substance (ab)use

- Very common in academics
- For relaxation
 - nicotine, alcohol, marijuana, MDMA, etc
- For performance
 - caffeine, amphetamines, cocaine
- For “being somewhere else”
 - marijuana, psyclobine, mescaline, MDMA
- Can be helpful
 - relax, deal with stress, put things into perspective
 - as self medication for ADHD, anxiety, sleeplessness
- Can become a problem
 - physical & psychological dependence
 - social impact on people around you
- If you wonder whether you need [help](#) , you probably do.

Neurodiversity

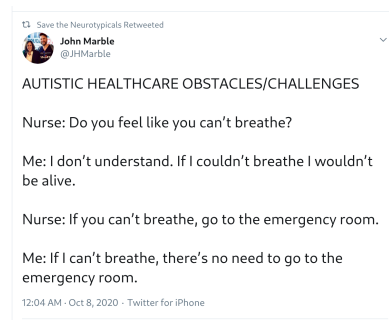
- Neurodiversity = variation in the human brain regarding sociability, learning, attention, mood and other mental functions <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neurodiversity>
- Neurodiversity \neq Mental Disorder
 - but mental disorder very often accompanies neurodiverse minds
- Academia , specially STEM has high incidence of
 - ADHD
 - Autism spectrum disorders
 - Dyslexia
 - Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
 - ...

ADHD



- 3 conversations in your head at the same time
- Hyperfocus for hours, everything else disappears
- So many things I need to do, I end up doing nothing
- Things get boring very quickly
- have 42 hobbies, and 1337 things you want still to do
- Can never sit still and always fidget
- Silently daydream in the corner with a blizzard of TV static in your mind

Autism spectrum disorder



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MywN9_53AKI

- Sounds, smells and touch can physically hurt
- Why do people say things when they do not mean them?
- What, look people in the eyes?!
- Emotions can swing wildly in a moment
- Deep and very specific interests
- Repetitive, restrictive behaviors
- Love systems, structures, order and predictability

And it is not just you

- Your advisors, promoters and colleagues might suffer from any of these
- If my promotor rude and super critical, or maybe unable to communicate well?
- Do they not care about my thesis chapter, or are they overwhelmed and distracted ?
- Talk to the GS Neurodiversity mentor (me) about it!

We need your help!

- Please help us improve this material and overall mental help awareness and care!
- email :
 - Igor Nikolic : I.nikolic@tudelft.nl
 - Janna van Grunsven : J.B.vanGrunsvan@tudelft.nl

Resources

- Neurodiversity mentor TPM Graduate School
 - i.nikolic@tudelft.nl
- Diversity officer, [Prof. Keyson](#)
- [Psychologists office](#)
 - In [case of emergencies](#)
- Neurodiversity [student association “Student Onbeperkt”](#)
- Municipal mental health care PsyQ
 - [For expats PsyQ](#)
 - [In Dutch](#)
 - [Self tests](#), meant to decide whether to talk to professionals
- Substance addiction [help](#)