



Mental Health Challenges in Academic Philosophy

Your early career as an academic philosopher raises some distinctive challenges for mental health. While establishing yourself may seem impossibly demanding, maintaining mental health should always be a priority.

This tipsheet offers strategies and general advice for confronting some of the mental health challenges commonly arising for academic philosophers in their early careers including precarity, imposter syndrome, work/life balance, and rejection.

Mental Health Resources:

The general strategies offered below are not intended to replace professional mental health advice.

If you need immediate assistance with a mental health crisis, call emergency services in your country.

In the UK: dial 111 for a mental health crisis.

Further professional mental health services are searchable and accessible through [the NHS website](https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/mental-health-services/):

<https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/mental-health-services/>

Your institution may provide support. To access, search online, or speak with your line manager or other trusted colleague.

Further resources are widely available online or through online directories, including:

- [A range of resources and support through the charity Mind.](#)
- [A range of international resources linked through the International Society of Psychiatric-Mental Health Nurses.](#)



- Numbers for confidential mental health support, searchable in [this international helpline directory](#) (and [this UK-specific directory](#)).

Precarity:

An early academic career can be a time of intense precarity. Employment may be temporary or probationary, with implications for residency. Wages may be low. You may be working towards goals which are not yet realised or renumeralated, in addition to a full workload.

Much of this precarity is arguably unjust. We all have a part to play in fighting for secure contracts, wages, support, and less precarity for academics and, especially, those in their early career.

As we advocate to change the structure problems, consider these tips for facing precarity:

- Recognise that your precarity is not a reflection on you; rather, it is a structural issue in academic. It is not an indication of your abilities, your likelihood of success, or your value.
- Establish supportive relationships with others who can commiserate and be compassionate—both with those in a similar situation to share resources and those outwith the academy who can share a different perspective.
- Establish a supportive relationship with a trusted mentor who can advise, guide, and encourage you through this time in a way that is tailored to your particular needs.
- Do not let anyone make you feel ashamed if you choose to take on additional or different work, pursue philosophy part-time, or make other choices which prioritise security.
- Advocate for yourself and others when you can, including participating in collective action.

Work/Life Balance:

The demands and aspirations of your career must be balanced against your priorities beyond your academic career. Achieving a sustainable balance which reflects your values can be difficult and poses a significant risk to mental health.



As with precarity, many structural problems exacerbate this challenge. The academy can be a hypercompetitive environment with problematic norms and unrealistic pressures and expectations.

Ultimately, you'll need a balance that is sustainable for you, reflecting your priorities and goals, but that is also realistic in the current environment—with all of its problems. Achieving this balance should be approached as a continual process, responsive to changes in your values, situation, and the academy.

Here are three broad generally applicable tips:

- *Don't wait to have a life!* It can be tempting to think that many, most, or even all aspects of your personal life can simply wait until you are well-established. Avoid putting the rest of your life on hold for a mythical time which may never arrive. There will always be another accomplishment you are earnestly seeking.
- *Prioritise!* Consider those things which are important to you beyond your career and how much time you will aim to devote to them in the immediate, medium, and longer term. Consider hobbies and other pursuits, along with your relationships with partners, friends, and family. Consider self-care: your body and mind both need time to rest.
- *Connect outside the academy!* Consider the social community you have or desire beyond philosophy or the academy broadly. Friends and relationships outwith your career can help you maintain a healthy perspective on the challenges, politics, and importance of your work and your institution.

More specifically:

- Remember that working longer doesn't mean you'll get more done. Taking time off makes you more productive.
- Have a realistic but *flexible* When you need time off, take it. When you're in the flow, go with it.
- Maintain boundaries. You will be more efficient if you are focused on work when you are at work. You will thrive in areas outside of work if you are not always focused on work.
- Avoid procrastination.
- Learn to say 'no.'



Imposter Syndrome:

The term 'imposter syndrome' is used to refer to a range of insecure feeling common in the academy and among philosophers. For example, that one is an intellectual or professional fraud who will be found out as an "imposter." Feelings like these can pose a significant challenge to mental health.

Feelings of imposter syndrome might be triggered by a range of common experiences. It can help to recognise these *as* common experiences. All academic philosophers should expect: being wrong or failing to understand something; missing a key reference; not knowing something; saying something mistaken; being disliked by someone; being ignored, undermined, or unappreciated; poor student evaluations; and rejection of all sorts. *None of these things mean you don't belong.* When these things happen, and they *will* happen, remember that they happen every academic.

It may be tempting to respond to your feelings of imposter syndrome by working harder. This is unlikely to succeed. You might expect that your feelings of imposter syndrome will go away after a particularly desired or difficult accomplishment and be surprised only to have them resurface. Self-doubts aren't often alleviated by accomplishments; on the contrary, the more you accomplish, the greater may be the concern that you will be "found out." Imposter syndrome is not a good reason to pursue unsustainable work schedules or abandon a developing work/life balance.

Many articles and tips for managing imposter syndrome are readily available online. For more about imposter syndrome and tips for managing it, you might consider [this article by Healthline](#) or [this article by Psychology Today](#).

Dealing with your particular version of imposter syndrome is likely to require a highly individual tailored response. If you experience imposter syndrome regularly, consider reaching out to your friends, mentors, or to a professional for support and advice.

Rejection:

Rejection is a ubiquitous feature of academic life. Publishing, grant funding, and jobs are all highly competitive, with low success rates. While repeated rejections



can sometimes make rejection easier to process, it can sometimes feel overwhelming. This accumulation, and any particularly difficult rejection, can pose a significant challenge to your mental health.

To help *prepare* yourself for rejection:

- Expect it. Not everything you seek will be granted. You will not always be immediately published, hired, promoted, or funded. No one is.
- Have many projects in development. When one is rejected, there is another to work on.
- Celebrate your successes. Let these become at least as much a part of your self-conception as the rejections.
- Remember that submissions themselves are often accomplishments worthy of celebration.
- Maintain relationships and meaningful activities beyond the academy.

When rejection happens:

- Give yourself time to process. It's okay to be upset. Feel your feelings.
- Take any feedback received as an opportunity to improve, but don't force yourself to plan your next steps until you are ready. This may take hours, days, weeks, or even months.
- Commiserate with a trusted friend or colleague. Every other academic will be able to relate.
- Remember there may be *many* reasons for rejection. Do not assume the worst. It does not define you.

Every successful academic has learned to persist despite repeated rejection. Rejection—even repeated rejection—is not a sufficient reason to give up on a paper, a job, a promotion, or philosophy. It is not a sufficient reason to doubt yourself or your abilities.

If you find that repeated rejection is becoming overwhelming, or you are becoming anxious or depressed, ask for help. Speak to a trusted mentor, experienced colleague, or a professional.



General tips and advice:

- Remember the basics, e.g. eating, sleeping, and exercise matter for mental health.
- Avoid comparing yourself to others. Be motivated by excellence without judging yourself or others harshly.
- Don't conflate structural problems with personal failings.
- Cultivate the ability to persist in the face of the misunderstanding, or even suspicion, that being innovative and original may prompt.
- Remember that it is not good for your work to be working all the time. *Even more importantly*, it is not good for you.
- Find at least one person to consistently support you with positive and encouraging words. You need and deserve a cheerleader.
- Remember that there will always be more to do and that you can only do so much.
- Be kind to yourself.