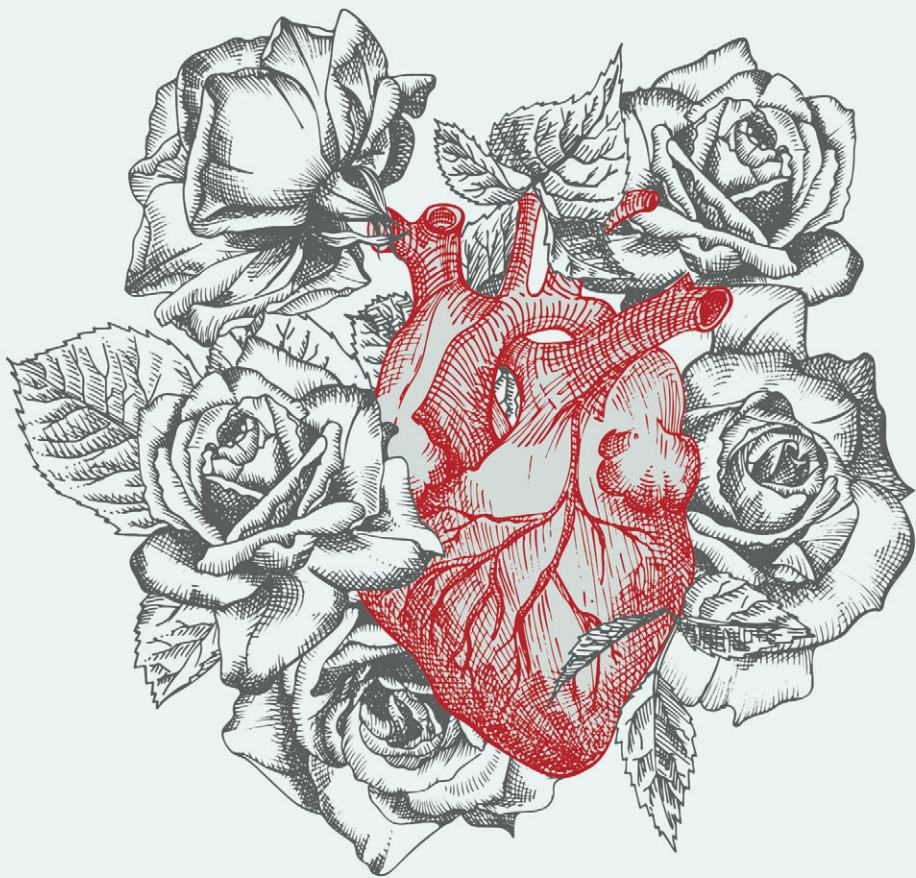


**SURVIVING** and  
**THRIVING**  
in **ACADEMIA**

# NURTURING WELLBEING IN ACADEMIA

HOW TO PRIORITISE YOUR MENTAL HEALTH



POPPY GIBSON

# NURTURING WELLBEING IN ACADEMIA

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# NURTURING WELLBEING IN ACADEMIA

How to Prioritise Your Mental  
Health

BY

**POPPY GIBSON**

*Anglia Ruskin University, UK*



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India  
Malaysia – China

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Dr Poppy Gibson** is a Senior Lecturer whose key interests involve children's psychological development and mental health and wellbeing. Additionally, Poppy holds an MSc in Mental Health Science, is a trained Samaritan and is passionate about supporting colleagues with their wellbeing.

Poppy moved into higher education after over a decade working in London primary schools.

Poppy's first degree was in Primary Education with Qualified Teacher Status from Edge Hill University, with a specialisation in Child Behaviour and Psychology of Learning. In addition, she has a Masters degree in Education, specialising in Leadership and Management in Education.

Poppy has worked in the education sector at a wide range of schools throughout London, both at independent schools and state schools. Poppy has worked as a class teacher within both Key Stages, and with various coordinator and management roles, and has a wide range of interests in the National Curriculum. Key posts held include Head of Modern Foreign Languages, Head of Computing, Coordinator of PSHE and Citizenship and Phase Leader of Year 3 and 4.

Poppy also enjoyed working as a Learning Support Adviser at Birkbeck University of London from 2012 to 2018, supporting students on both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes.

Poppy holds a Doctorate in Education from Oxford Brookes University. Poppy's doctoral thesis was awarded the 'Most Downloaded' from EThOS databases in Autumn 2020. Her thesis explored young girls' experiences of using social media, online interaction and communication with others online in a 'third space', and how these interactions build up a social reality and impact upon identity formation.

Poppy now leads two Primary Education degrees at Anglia Ruskin University, Chelmsford. Poppy supervises students on both the MA and Doctoral programmes.

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# FOREWORD

Wellbeing is not a fad, neither is it fluffy, abstract nor new. The greatest minds, from Aristotle onwards, have put considerable thought into the science of happiness and eudaimonic wellbeing for millennia. It features on our 21st century agenda as a societal and global concern, pre-dating Covid-19 but perhaps given additional attention because of the long-term impacts the pandemic has had on us all.

In ‘Nurturing Wellbeing in Academia’ Dr Poppy Gibson considers wellbeing within Higher Education, a sector that a 2018 study forecast would lose two-thirds of its workforce to retirement, burnout and dissatisfaction. Mirroring the patterns in primary and secondary schools, the world of academia, into which many teachers have taken a career move, faces similar pressures and familiar stresses which will be recognised across all parts of our education services. Poppy combines the leading theme of wellbeing with the golden thread of emotional intelligence, which runs through this book. This emotional intelligence addresses the needs of individuals taking time and giving attention to their own mental health and wellbeing, but also to leaders and managers with a responsibility for the emotional health of their colleagues and the teams they support. Readers will very much appreciate the ‘critical questions’ in each chapter, ensuring that the wellbeing of all stakeholders is considered, thought

through and based on the context in which they work, rather than seeking an ‘off the shelf’ solution.

Based in part upon her own experience in making the transition from primary school teacher to Senior Lecturer in Higher Education, Poppy also draws upon the experiences of colleagues across the tertiary sector and how they seek not merely to survive but to thrive in the vital role that they play in the academic and pastoral experience of their students, emphasising in the first chapter the holistic nature that a culture of positive mental health and wellbeing can embrace and promote. There is a strong sense of ‘why’ in Chapter Two, with the ‘why’ enabling reflection on reasons for being in academia and how to sustain this role in the future. The third chapter debates imposter syndrome and fears that many colleagues might express, and the impactors that gender, ethnicity, age and experience may have upon staff members making the career change they may have engaged in.

The following chapters specifically support both early and mid-career researchers and the practicalities of balancing workload with their home lives and the challenges this brings. Poppy then goes on to raise the pressures of seeking promotion and how to take feedback from a job rejection in a positive way and not allow this to adversely impact the candidate. The subsequent chapter addresses some of the pressures that come with publishing including the meeting of deadlines and dealing with rejection of publishing and research proposals. Chapter Eight promotes how to use social media as a positive tool for promotion and networking. So often a ‘bearpit’ as Poppy has examined in previous research, social media is promoted as a way to be ‘out there’ and as a way to cascade key messages.

The final chapter, echoing the stresses of leaders from EYFS to Sixth Form, considers the needs of and pressures on those ‘Positive Professors’ and their sense of identity, balanced with

a sense of their values and purpose as their roles and levels of contact with their students and colleagues changes over time.

Poppy Gibson has presented wise, thoughtful and carefully researched words of advice for the wellbeing of the higher education sector, but her book needs also to be considered alongside others debating and discussing mental health and emotional wellbeing. Wellbeing isn't simply just for education; education has specific needs, but other workplaces do too. What we do in education though is grow the young people who will serve society in the future. I would highly recommend 'Nurturing Wellbeing in Academia' to anyone in academia with an authentic interest in wellbeing.

By *Andrew Cowley*

Coach, Author, School Governor and Former Teacher

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# INTRODUCTION

In order to thrive in academia, we must understand and nurture our wellbeing. This book offers practical advice for academics and members of the academic community when it comes to becoming more ‘intelligent’ when planning, teaching, collaborating and publishing.

A 2018 study predicted that higher education would lose half to two-thirds of its academic workforce to retirement, career burnout or job dissatisfaction within 5 years (Gewin, 2022). As we continue to feel the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on our academic practices, our networking behaviours and the needs of our students, the landscape of academia remains altered and uncertain. This new publication fills the gap with a modern and accessible text that can support Early Career Academics/Researchers with their wellbeing, reinspire Middle Career Academics/Researchers and revive those more experienced academics who are already professors, or working in their twilight years.

This book is designed to be educational as well as practical, scaffolding wellbeing activities and offering general guidance. We all appreciate that in order to thrive in academia, we firstly need the strong foundations of survival, of which our wellbeing and mental health are key for successful functioning. The nine chapters within this text encourage those in academia to reflect upon how they are functioning, both in

and out of the classroom, offering a range of suggestions for smarter ways of working. A deeper discussion threads through the book on the balance between job satisfaction and life satisfaction, calls educators and academics to remember why they entered academia in the first place and how to maintain these values in a way that continues to inspire and drive us.

Each chapter contains ‘critical questions’ that prompt these thoughtful moments of reflection for the reader, and then shares possible solutions, supported by literature and research where appropriate, to help us to ‘thrive’ rather than just ‘survive’ in the academic world. The purpose of this publication is to act as an aid for academics and their teams, to help them avoid burnout and to aid retention and promote positive output. This book, therefore, is also a valuable resource for leaders and those in management roles.

This book is also an ideal resource for those who may be considering transitioning into Higher Education, helping to prepare them for the challenges and cognitive load that academia can bring. Statistics show that now more than ever, teachers from the primary school and secondary sector are leaving the profession, and some of these are exploring moving into academia. This book caters for all.

# MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

We all talk about ‘mental health’ and ‘wellbeing’, and we know they are important, but what exactly do these concepts mean? Part of the issue with understanding and talking about our mental health is the division that came centuries ago with the binary of physical vs mental health. Now, we appreciate the two are intertwined and interlinked; however for decades, the focus has been on repairing ‘visible’ physical ailments as opposed to nurturing our emotions and feelings and identity. This first, and by far the longest, chapter explores key definitions in terms of ‘wellbeing’ and ‘mental health’. This chapter sets the tone for the whole book, encouraging the reader to consider which definitions of these terms they most relate to and to reflect upon how healthy their current mental health seems to be. Literature and research relevant to academia is shared along with an understanding of key issues that academics and their teams may face including burnout and job dissatisfaction and the relationship between being mentally healthy and thriving in academia. Importantly, this book is not a diagnostic tool, but a platform for

the reader to engage with to consider where they sit in relation to their own levels of mental health and wellbeing. Some appropriate signposting is provided for those who feel they may need additional support with their mental health and wellbeing.

## 1.2 THE USE OF 'CRITICAL QUESTIONS' WITHIN THIS BOOK

This book contains nine chapters in total that all flow with this similar structure; chapter introduction, a selection of questions and responses and then ending with a chapter summary. You will also see, as you move your way through this book, that the chapters contain several 'critical questions'. These have been inserted as reflection points for you to pause reading and look within to seek honest answers to these questions. If you are short on time and do not wish to read this book from cover to cover in a linear fashion, you could instead skim through the pages and find the critical questions that seem pertinent to your situation at that time and answer the critical question and then read the paragraphs that follow.

## 1.3 WELLBEING

Before we can unpick the concepts in the title of this book, it is important we begin by exploring what we understand these key terms of 'wellbeing' and 'mental health' to mean.

*Critical question: How would you define the term 'well-being'? What does it mean to you?*

When defining mental health and wellbeing, wellbeing represents how happy and satisfied individuals feel and how they can function both personally and socially as a result of contentment with life (New Economics Foundation, 2012). Wellbeing is about feeling well in ourselves; and this wellness can be nurtured through actions and behaviours we undertake in both our work and home lives. Part of the complexity for the modern academic, however, comes from when the boundary between work and home blurs. Academia is not a 9 a.m.–5 p.m. job, and this is the crux of where wellbeing can suffer. One common outcome of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has been for many universities to switch many staff meetings to online platforms. ‘Agile working’ is a term used by many faculties as they free up office space with ‘hot desks’ and encourage staff to work from home where possible; although there can be seen to be several benefits from this agility, there are negative consequences too, such as isolation from colleagues, and indeed this blur between the end of the working day and the need for a break and balance with the non-work life. Wellbeing means feeling content and happy, and for many academics, this can come at the detriment of the desire to support our students, be actively researching and ensuring our academic work is done to its full potential. But the truth, as we shall explore within these pages, is that if we do not care for our wellbeing, we cannot be well, and we cannot be our best self. The tension between work and home, and the guilt for neglecting either of those realms in favour of the other, is an issue many academics face, particularly those with caring or parenting roles.

*Critical question: Honestly, how balanced do you feel your work/home life is? How could it be improved?*

It is important that we appreciate our wellbeing does not have to be something we nurture alone; part of the beauty of being

human is finding joy and connection in the time spent with others, and this does not mean just people! Although this book will focus on the majority of how you, as an academic, can take care of your wellbeing in the workplace, please remember there are many ways to prioritise your mental health, and this can come from time spent with animals or nature too. The two national lockdowns in the United Kingdom (UK) due to the pandemic (2020) saw vastly increased pet sales (Kantor & Evans, 2020), with key drivers behind this possibly being loneliness and as a method to reduce anxiety in adults. With many people being able to work remotely from home instead of commuting to the office, dog ownership, in particular, saw a significant rise (perhaps you were one of the pandemic puppy purchasers yourself?). We will discuss pets as a tool to support positive mental health more later on in this chapter.

## 1.4 MENTAL HEALTH

Let us now consider the term ‘mental health’ and how this varies slightly from the concept of ‘wellbeing’.

*Critical question: How would you define ‘mental health’?*

In this book, I take good mental health to mean that individuals can think, process emotions and react positively to experiences (Mind, 2021). When our mental health is poor, or unhealthy, or we are suffering from mental illness (and note these different terms), we cannot function fully and we are likely to find our level of wellbeing is low. We can think of mental health as being on a spectrum, just as our physical health is. Part of the issue we see in society today with older generations having a stronger regard for physical health than mental health comes with the initial division of the two when

hospitals and mental asylums were created; we now much better understand that physical and mental health are intertwined and linked, with each having an effect on the other. Our health in both domains can fluctuate daily, sometimes with clear factors behind the change in health, and at other times with the cause being a mystery. Especially when it comes to our mental health, it is natural that we cannot always pinpoint the reason for feeling ecstatic or low, and it is for this reason, it is especially valuable to communicate with others about how we are feeling. Sharing strategies to feel more mentally healthy is a great way to continue to reflect and improve our mental health levels.

## 1.5 ANXIETY IN ACADEMIA

Experiencing feelings of anxiousness is a normal human emotion. The World Health Organisation (WHO) define anxiety as feelings of ‘excessive fear or worry’ (WHO, 2023, p. 1). Anxiety, therefore, refers to a state of excessive worry, a state of worry being experienced by an individual, despite no immediate threat being present, or at levels of worry that may be regarded as being disproportionate to the identified risk (Glasofer, 2021). The National Health Service (NHS) in the UK provides this list of symptoms for those who wish to check anxiety disorder symptoms online via the NHS website:

- your worrying is uncontrollable and causes distress,
- your worrying affects your daily life, including school, your job and your social life,
- you cannot let go of your worries and

- you worry about all sorts of things, such as your job or health, and minor concerns, such as household chores  
NHS (2023, p. 1)

The WHO highlights that self-care ‘can play an important role’ in supporting treatment for anxiety and anxiety disorders (WHO, 2023, p. 1).

*Critical questions: Do you ever feel anxious? At what times is your anxiety most heightened? What is your preferred coping strategy when managing feelings of anxiety?*

Essentially, anxiety disorders are ‘characterised by unrealistic, unfounded fear and anxiety’ (Carlson & Birkett, 2017, p. 582). Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD) can be diagnosed after six months of persistent and excessive anxiety and worry and often has no ‘specific object’ or specific threat that is causing the anxiety and worry (Open University, 2019, p. 21).

Anxiety in academia can be heightened through workload, responsibilities, pressures through funding or publication as well as imposter syndrome, discussed further later in this book, where we may feel we are not good enough in our role. Part of the issue with support is that often each academic has such a different role to those around them; even lecturers within the same school and the same faculty will teach on different modules, to different students and have different expectations from the institution in terms of research and publication. Academia can offer a world of professional autonomy, but with this comes heavy independence which can create pressure in itself, leading us to feel guilty if we are doing enough and to compare ourselves to others around us. The nature of academia is one of freedom, yet also one of great burden as we battle to be the best academics we can be, often

with little guidance, support or vision apart from those we create for ourselves.

## 1.6 RATE YOUR ANXIETY FROM 1 TO 10

The start of a new academic year can naturally bring with it anxiety, trepidation and stress. This is normal. This morning as I started preparing to-do lists ready for the start of the new term, I was reflecting on managing anxiety, and how useful it can be to use mindfulness and grounding techniques to help calm ourselves in times of anxiety and stress.

*Critical question: How often do you feel anxious? Look at the scales in Fig. 1.*

Sometimes I use a 0–10 scale, a ‘Likert’ scale or ‘rating’ scale, and think ‘how urgent is this task?’ but also ‘how anxious am I feeling about this?’. If anxiety levels feel higher, I know I need to take steps to help reduce that feeling, either through creating a timeline or taking action to resolve the issue at hand.

I remember a time when I was very ill with sepsis, a critical illness, and a doctor in Intensive Care was asking me about the level of my pain, on a sliding scale from 0 to 10, with 0 being no pain and 10[. . .]well my own interpretation was that to be at 10, I would probably have to be on the point of

Place	Not anxious at all	Extremely anxious
Home	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	
Getting ready for work	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	
At work	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	

**Fig. 1. Anxiety Reflection Activity.**

expiry. And I contemplated how this scale is not only open to an individual's interpretation but also that a better way to understand how someone is feeling is to share words, and verbal descriptions, rather than a number. When it comes to talking about our wellbeing and mental health, we are dealing with qualitative, emotional experiences and perceptions; therefore, notably it is through verbal detail, rather than often just a statistic, that we can better begin to understand the impact of phenomena. And if the phenomenon is anxiety, perhaps a sliding scale of 0–10 is not adequate. If a doctor or medical consultant has a different idea of the meanings on the scale, or if an individual is choosing to be stoic and play down their pain, saying it is less painful than it feels, then the wrong advice or even medication might be given.

Talking about our feelings, whether mental or physical symptoms, can be beneficial, especially when the levels on a scale may be open to individuals' own interpretations. Talking to people, whether it is family, friends or colleagues when you are anxious can help to put things in perspective and also help find solutions to tricky problems. Thinking back to Likert scales, we want each new academic year to be 9 out of 10 (well, because nothing's ever perfect is it[. . .]) and to achieve that it needs to begin with organisation, planning, determination and – most importantly of all – drawing upon our own support networks to manage our mental health too.

## 1.7 THE MENTAL HEALTH OF ACADEMIC STAFF

Morrish (2019) highlights some of the factors which may weigh on the mental health of academic staff.