BEING WELL IN ACADEMIA
WAYS TO FEEL STRONGER, SAFER AND MORE CONNECTED

PETRA BOYNTON

INSIDER GUIDES TO SUCCESS IN ACADEMIA
Are you studying or working in academia and in need of support? Perhaps you’re finding your work, study or personal life challenging or overwhelming; are experiencing bullying, harassment or abuse; or find your progress is being blocked by unfair, exploitative or precarious systems? Or perhaps you want to support a friend or colleague who’s struggling? Whether your problems are big or small, "Being Well in Academia" provides a wealth of practical and workable solutions to help you feel stronger, safer and more connected in what has become an increasingly competitive and stressful environment.

This volume uses a realistic, pragmatic and – above all – understanding approach to offer support to a diverse audience. Covering a range of issues, it includes advice on:

- Ways to increase your support network, so you’re not alone.
- Reflections and actions that encourage you to evaluate your position.
- Guidance if you are in a stressful, precarious, dangerous or exploitative situation.
- Checklists and agreements to help you identify your specific needs and accommodations.
- Signposting to books, websites, networks and organisations that provide additional support.
- Ways to build your confidence and connections, particularly for Black, Indigenous or People of Colour;
LGBTQ+; disabled or chronically sick; or other marginalised groups.

- Reflections on your rights and the responsibilities academia should be meeting.
- Tips for being an active bystander and helping others in need of assistance.
- Ideas for resisting, challenging and coping with unfair or exploitative environments.
- Suggestions for bringing you happiness, inspiration, motivation, courage and hope.

This book is a must-read for anyone who wants to address the need to stay well in academia, and will be particularly useful to those in diverse or disadvantaged positions who currently lack institutional support or feel at risk from academia.

**Petra Boynton** is a social psychologist and Agony Aunt who teaches and researches in International Healthcare. She specialises in addressing the safety and wellbeing of students and staff in academic settings.
Insider Guides to Success in Academia
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The *Insider Guides to Success in Academia* address topics too small for a full-length book on their own, but too big to cover in a single chapter or article. These topics have often been the stuff of discussions on social media, or of questions in our workshops. We designed this series to answer these questions and to provide practical support for doctoral and early career researchers. It is geared to concerns that many people experience. Readers will find these books to be companions who provide advice and help to make sense of everyday life in the contemporary university.

We have therefore:

1. Invited scholars with deep and specific expertise to write. Our writers use their research and professional experience to provide well-grounded strategies to particular situations.
2. Asked writers to collaborate. Most of the books are produced by writers who live in different countries, or work in different disciplines, or both. While it is difficult for any book to cover all the diverse contexts in which potential readers live and work, the different perspectives and contexts of writers goes some way to address this problem.
We understand that the use of the term ‘academia’ might be read as meaning the university, but we take a broader view. Pat does indeed work in a university, but spent a long time working outside of one. Helen is an independent researcher and sometimes works with universities. Both of us understand academic – or scholarly – work as now being conducted in a range of sites, from museums and the public sector to industry research and development laboratories. Academic work is also often undertaken by networks which bring together scholars in various locations. All of our writers understand that this is the case, and use the term ‘academic’ in this wider sense.

These books are pocket sized so that they can be carried around and visited again and again. Most of the books have a mix of examples, stories and exercises as well as explanation and advice. They are written in a collegial tone, and from a position of care as well as knowledge.

Together with our writers, we hope that each book in the series can make a positive contribution to the work and life of readers, so that you too can become insiders in scholarship.

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‘Making it’ as a Contract Researcher
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Nerida Spina, Jess Harris, Simon Bailey and Mhorag Goff

**Being Well in Academia**
*Ways to Feel Stronger, Safer and More Connected*
Petra Boynton
Being Well in Academia

Ways to Feel Stronger, Safer and More Connected

Petra Boynton
I’ll never be able to thank these women in person, but they have inspired me for decades. Hopefully this book goes a little way to honour their legacies.

**Helen Boyle** *(1869–1957)* A remarkable woman of Sussex who changed the way we provide mental health care for those most in need, especially poor women.

**Josephine Baker** *(1906–1975)* An incredibly brave performer, activist, resistance agent and mother who was never afraid to speak up, even when it cost her dearly.
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Stay safe as you read: As this book covers a range of potentially sensitive and upsetting issues, I recommend using this contents page to identify what help you need and what to anticipate in the text.

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For everyone using Target Medicine, my advice columns, safety and wellbeing workshops, and Listening Services, you make me feel humbled and very proud.

To Aayush, Lekdhen, Aashish, Jampa, Nidup, Rurami and Vela. You’re all over the world now, but an inspiration every day.

I promised Liam I’d dedicate this book to him. So I have.

In loving memory of Marcia Worrell and David Hannaford, both of whom died just before this book was completed. I know their values will live on within these pages.
Hello there!

I’m using the term ‘academia’ to cover a wide range of possibilities. You might be based in a university – an undergraduate, postgraduate or postdoctoral student; studying full or part time, with funding or paying your own way. You may be a cleaner, security guard, administrator, manager or other support staff; or working as a counselor, advisor, lecturer or professor. Your work may be full or part time, or sessional. Equally you could be based in the third sector, industry, health or social care, development; or self-employed as a consultant or tutor. You might be an Independent Researcher, Para-Academic or be working in an alternative academic #altac role. You may be at the start of your studies, an early career researcher or anticipating retirement. You might be a minority or marginalised scholar or staff member. You could be based in the place you grew up in or have since travelled far away. You might have moved several times and spent most of your working life speaking a second language, or you may be holding down several jobs to make ends meet. You might be worried about keeping your job, be on a zero hours contract or currently job seeking. Whoever you are and
Getting started, being well

however you found yourself in academia, or in the pages of this book, you are welcome.

A note about content

I’m guessing you are reading this book because you or someone you care about needs help. This book addresses a range of complex and frequently sensitive and difficult issues. We all react in different ways and I don’t want to presume what you might cope or struggle with, so I have not used trigger warnings for each potentially distressing topic. Instead, to help you feel in control while navigating this book, the contents (p. xi) and index (p. 255) show what is covered where, and there are clear subject headings and in-chapter descriptions of what’s ahead so you can anticipate or avoid sections if necessary. Each chapter includes links to trustworthy external sources of support, and all chapters are separated into smaller sections to help you avoid feeling overwhelmed. If you are in crisis currently you may find it more comforting to work through the book backwards from Chapter 7 and/or use this book in consultation with any support services you’re using.

Chapters and issues you may wish to approach with care

Racism, ableism, LGBTQ+ phobia and sexism are addressed throughout, with particular emphasis in Chapters 1, 3 and 5. Suicide is discussed at the end of Chapter 1, including a safety plan to help you address any suicidal thoughts and feelings. Chapter 1 also
describes numerous issues in academia including precarity, stress, abuse, prejudice, overwork and exclusion; and Chapter 4 lists what you may need to help navigate academia, which is designed to support you yet might still feel overwhelming. Bullying, conflict, death, poverty, racism and violence are presented in alphabetical order in Chapter 5. Mental and physical health symptoms and coping strategies are discussed in Chapter 6, including references to drugs, alcohol, eating disorders and self-harm, and with information about venting included at the end of that chapter.

**Run a diagnostic**

Take some time before you begin this book, and before each new chapter or activity, to ensure you’re feeling up to it, and also allow yourself space to decompress. Trust yourself and seek help now if you need it, or at any time while using the book. It’s fine to stop or leave things if they’re upsetting you.

**Don’t be discouraged**

If you’re new to academia or have never experienced problems within it you might find the descriptions presented here frightening or off-putting at times. Yes, bad things are happening, but that does not automatically mean they will happen to you. Please remember this if you are neurodiverse and/or anxious, and (like me) prone to fixating on negative events that have not yet happened. I work from a standpoint that it’s best to be prepared,
so if adverse events do happen you can try to cope while knowing where to go to get help if you need it. And I’ve deliberately included reassuring and uplifting ideas to ensure even if you can’t change things, you can feel stronger.

**Getting the best from Being Well in Academia**

The aim of this book is to help you feel stronger, safer and more connected. Not everything suggested here is going to work for you. Try being open to new ideas while also being flexible about whether and how you use them. I’d encourage you to ‘take it, break it and remake it’ (Boynton 2016, p. 18) – where you may accept any information that’s right for you; adapt it if it’s appealing but doesn’t quite match your situation; or change it to better suit your needs. Look for links! The interlinking circle icons in the margins direct you to related information elsewhere in the book.

Throughout the book you’ll be asked to focus on different areas of your life, identify where you may need support, where you can help yourself and where to find other places to assist you. To that end, your phone and/or a recording device, a computer/laptop and/or pens and pencils, plus a notebook, may be useful. If you’re spending any significant time on the book, ensure you’ve refreshments available and take breaks to stretch and reflect.

The following features are designed to help you take forward the ideas in this book:

- *Reflections and actions* – you’ll find these in boxes scattered throughout the text.
– **Checklists and agreements** – these are designed to help you recognise your situation and follow up with additional training or assistance, or to prevent problems from worsening while giving others crucial information to keep you safe.

– **References within the text** – citing books or papers that provide evidence for problems and/or solutions within academia to improve your working environment and protect your rights.

– **Hashtags** – directing you to conversations, support networks, awareness and activism on social media.

– ‘If you found this challenging’ – not all suggestions will work for you so you will frequently be asked to consider why that might be and consider alternative ideas.

– **Find out more** – recommended books, websites, podcasts, videos, charitable organisations and other sources of assistance.

**Disclaimer**

This book isn’t a replacement for legal advice, organisational transformation, or medical or therapeutic care. Sources of help that can assist you further are linked throughout. All resources and links are correct at time of publication.

Before you go any further, take some time to affirm how you will care for yourself by using the following adaptable statement:
My wellbeing promise

I have the right to:

- Tell someone if I feel I can’t cope alone.
- Reach out for help should I need it.
- Treat myself as kindly as I would a good friend.
- Be alert to warning signs of hunger, tiredness, stress and ill health, and act on them swiftly.
- Give myself time and space to relax and recharge.
- Take all the breaks and holidays I’m entitled to.
- Avoid, where possible, people/situations that are negative or harmful to me.
- Permit myself to refuse to help others if I don’t have the energy to assist, and/or if they occupy a privileged position where they can find things out without my input.
- Accept compliments, care and kindness.
- Make informed decisions on what information to disclose when, and to whom.
- Nurture and nourish myself.
- Celebrate and enjoy all my achievements, big or small.
- Seek healthcare, claim benefits and accept all accommodations I’m entitled to.
- Protect my time.
- Maintain my boundaries and not feel responsible for other people’s actions, thoughts or behaviours.
- Assist others when I can.

Now add your own promises …

__________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________
You can update this promise regularly to suit your situation. You may also use it in teaching, research or support groups to help other people feel empowered.

This chapter sets the tone for the rest of the book, noting some of the current opportunities and threats that lie within academia while inviting you to consider your situation and needs.

‘Your fork goes in your left hand. When you go to university you’ll need to know this.’ That’s my parents trying to get me to use cutlery. I’m about five and I don’t like forks. But they’ve got ambitions for me and, as first-generation college students, they’re acutely aware of the barriers to accessing education. Unsurprisingly, I grew up seeing academia as a mannered, exclusive, special place where wonderful things can be learned and opportunities offered – so long as you held your fork correctly.

When I’ve asked other people what’s brought them to study or work in academia they’ve noted the following ideas. Circle or shade any that apply to you:

**I came to …**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>fulfill my love of learning</th>
<th>improve my job prospects</th>
<th>discover things about myself</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>build on my existing skills</td>
<td>prove to myself or others I am smart</td>
<td>travel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feel less alone</td>
<td>broaden my horizons</td>
<td>give me something to do now the kids have left home during retirement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>earn a wage</td>
<td>achieve something I always wished to do</td>
<td>stretch myself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>accept challenges</td>
<td>see the world differently</td>
<td>improve my situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>try new skills</td>
<td>discover new things</td>
<td>make friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>help other people</td>
<td>share knowledge</td>
<td>have fun</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Having reflected on why other people came into academia, how about you? Why are you here?

**Write a love letter to academia**

Building on the ideas given above, write or record a letter describing the things you believed about academia before you arrived; your hopes and dreams; what you expected from it; what academia has given you; and why you are grateful for those things.

Working or studying in academia can be exciting, demanding and stimulating. Learning new skills; living independently for the first time; managing your time and workload; studying for assessments; joining clubs or societies; and generating ideas. There is a lot going on and much of it is positive, even if it is challenging. If we’re struggling it can be easy to discount these positives, which is why I’ve encouraged you to begin with writing your love letter. It is also important to remember that it is *normal* to find aspects of academic study or work difficult, and you may need to practice, take tuition, learn to reflect and correct your work before key skills are acquired. Academia has the potential to be a space for exploration and growth, where different levels of effort and input will be needed.

**What’s the problem, academia?**

Academia is presented as something precious, mystical and exclusive. We can all get caught up in the magic
(Afonso 2018) and overlook how it is also a place of exploitation, inequalities, inaccessibility, precarity, prejudice and abuse (Ahmed 2012; English and Fenby-Hulse 2019; Sian 2019). The narrative of specialness traps us into overwork, uncertainty, unhappiness and anxiety. We blame ourselves for not trying hard enough, not being good enough, not having what it takes to make it. We hang on because we had a reason for being here, but perhaps now we’ve forgotten what that was, or we have become so jaded and cynical we no longer care. Possibly we’re just stuck and have no idea whether or how to escape. Maybe academia isn’t a special place but simply pays the bills. Confusingly, it might be many of these things at any one time.

Stressors and problems with mental and physical well-being have always been part of academic life, particularly for those in low income and isolated countries (Newson and Polster 2010). However, more recently noted problems include:

- A marked increase in reports of deteriorating mental and physical ill-health among students and staff (Morrish 2019; Morrish and Priaulx 2020).
- Rapidly increasing numbers of students and staff seeking counseling or other therapies (UCU 2019).
- Reduced community mental health provision, austerity policies and disability sanctions (TUC 2016; McRuer 2018; Ryan 2019), contrasted by the World Health Organisation recognising ‘burnout’ as an occupational disorder.
- Fewer services offering study skills or other student support in or outside academia, leaving students struggling to cope – particularly minority and marginalised ones (Auerbach et al. 2018; Lipson et al. 2018).
• Competition over grades (Chang 2017), student workload, increased fees and a culture of perfectionism (Koch 2018; Flynn et al. 2019; Kiziela et al. 2019).

• Minority students are still less likely to enter university (The Pell Institute 2016; Harrison 2017; Busby 2018a; D’Evelyn et al. 2018; NEON 2019); more likely to encounter discrimination over grading (NSC Research Centre 2017); and experience prejudice about sexuality, race, disability or gender from other staff and students (NUS 2014; Busby 2018b; Stonewall 2018; English and Fenby-Hulse 2019; Marsh 2019). They are also less likely to graduate (Hirsch and Lagnado 2010; Casselman 2014; NSC Research Centre 2019) or progress to senior levels (Rollock 2019).

• Job insecurity, availability and competition increase concerns for those leaving university with undergraduate degrees (Mok and Jiang 2018).

• Greater numbers of doctoral students are encouraged towards a decreasing range of university-based roles (Afonso 2018; Rasmussen and Andreasen 2018; Larson et al. 2014), with rising global unemployment levels for individuals with PhDs (FRED 2019). These individuals may lack additional training on skills that might gain them employment elsewhere (Passaretta et al. 2019), or lack an awareness of what talents they do have that might assist them with job seeking.

• Issues around sexual harassment, violence, drugs and alcohol, alongside loneliness or other life issues, can make studying complex, with mental health problems appearing to be on the increase within staff and student populations (Hunt and Eisenberg 2010; Brown 2016; Flynn et al. 2019).
• International students may be poorly supported and experience high levels of loneliness while facing unaddressed racism (Chow 2013).
• Work-based pressure on tutors and supervisors alongside departmental cuts mean fewer people are available to confidently offer pastoral care (Newson and Polster 2010).

Meanwhile, over the past two decades, greater pressure has been placed on academics with the following consequences that create a culture of:

• Glorifying overwork (Newson and Polster 2010) and perfectionism.
• Increasing pressure to publish and bring in funding alongside short-term and precarious contracts (Smyth 2017; Bottrell and Manathunga 2019; Manathunga and Bottrell 2019).
• Rising student numbers and heavier workloads (Smyth 2017; Bottrell and Manathunga 2019) that place enormous pressure on academic staff, especially those from minorities (Brown and Leigh 2018; Estera and Shahjahan 2018).
• Teaching and leadership programmes that are neither designed to represent nor include diverse communities, yet may still claim to be making radical changes around inclusivity and decolonisation (Tuck and Yang 2012; Bhopal 2018, 2019; Brown and Leigh 2018; Prescod-Weinstein 2020).
• Neoliberal policies and practices, deliberately and strategically applied, have established an individualised, comparative, competitive atmosphere inflamed by university rankings (Fontinha et al. 2018) and student satisfaction surveys (Sanders-McDonagh and