

Navigating Doctoral Studies: Supervision and Mentorship

Doctoral study can be challenging. These tips are written by healthcare professionals outside of medicine undertaking doctoral studies and by those with recent experience of successfully completing doctoral studies within clinical and non-clinical environments. This leaflet expands on the 'Top 10 tips' for navigating doctoral studies. These provide a more in depth 'Top 10 Tips' relating to supervision, advisors and mentorship

Tip 1 – Set expectations from the start

Your supervisory team is there to support you in your self-directed research journey. In order to do that, you need to know what you can expect from them. This also applies vice versa! Use initial meetings to work out your preferred ways of staying in contact, frequency of contact, exchanging written work, receiving feedback and how to reach out if you're having problems and need support.

This handy guide goes into more detail:

<https://www.findaphd.com/advice/doing/phd-supervisor-expectations.aspx>

In a mentoring relationship, it is also important to discuss staying in contact, how often you would like to meet, and what you hope your mentor can offer. Your mentor may not have the same background as you so it is important to know what their strengths are and how they feel they can best support you.

Tip 2 – Stay in touch

Both supervision and mentoring are two-way relationships, so communication is absolutely essential. It is harder for your supervisor or mentor to support you if they are not up to date on where you are, so even if you're doing just fine and don't need their input right now, a monthly communication of some sort helps them stay in the loop about your activities. That way, when you do need their support or input, they know what progress you have made and what the issues may be.

Tip 3 – Disagreements with your supervisor are normal

It is perfectly normal to have at least one disagreement or some form of difference of opinion with your supervisor at some point during your doctoral studies. Having independent thoughts is all part of your journey towards becoming an independent researcher. Maybe they told you something you didn't want to hear, or equally they may be expressing an alternative opinion and you feel like you could justify your point. It is just part of the process, and that's okay.

Tip 4 – Celebrate achievements

This is just as important for your supervisor or mentor as it is for you! When things are going great, celebrate and let your supervisor or mentor know if their advice and support has helped to get you there. They want to see you are doing well, and that the way they are supporting you is helpful and rewarding for you. Doing this is one of the things that contributes to a successful relationship with your supervisor or and mentor.

Tip 5 – Be proactive

Some supervisors and mentors are more passive than others, and sometimes to get the most out of your relationship with them you have to take the initiative. If they haven't been in touch, or you're waiting on feedback, check in with them. Sometimes they're just busy, and that's fine, but the check in is important because it shows you are engaged and motivated. This in turn demonstrates to them that they need to reciprocate. Informal corridor encounters can be good opportunities to chase things up between meetings.

Tip 6 – Engage with the feedback process

When you receive feedback from your supervisor or mentor, demonstrate to them that you are processing it and taking it on board in a timely way. This can be as simple as saying thank you for the feedback and that you are working on implementing it. However, some kind of indication that the feedback is helpful and being utilised is really valued by supervisors and mentors. Equally, when you send something for feedback your supervisor or mentor should give you an idea of when to expect the feedback and how long to wait before chasing it up.

Be clear if you have externally set deadlines or when you have competing work coming up where they need to particularly focus on certain elements of what you are doing (e.g. rapid exchange of paper drafts for a publication submission). This will help them prioritise accordingly and you are not waiting for extended periods for them to look at something.

Tip 7 – Speak to fellow postgrads

Sometimes it's hard to know whether your experience of supervision or being mentored is normal or not. While every experience is unique, chatting to other students with whom you share a supervisor or mentor can provide some valuable insight into your own experiences. Or sometimes a shared rant will just get you through a particularly trying day!

Tip 8 – Know what to do if a problem arises

Familiarise yourself right from the beginning of your supervisory relationship with the steps you need to take if a problem arises. Similarly with mentoring, know who you need to speak to if your mentoring relationship is not working out. Knowing these procedures gives you more confidence to make use of them if things are not going well, before the situation starts to dramatically affect your likelihood of completing.

Tip 9 – Seek mentorship outside your department or field

While mentoring within your department and field can be very helpful, often this kind of support is available through your supervisor or colleagues in your department anyway. You can never have too much mentoring, and if your University or place of work offer additional mentoring support outside your academic or professional area, this can often provide some really valuable insights through an outsider perspective from someone

who is not directly invested in your department or field. This can help to broaden your horizons as a researcher.

Tip 10 – Supervisory and mentoring relationships can last a lifetime

Relationships with your supervisor or mentor don't have to just be for the duration of your studies. Three or more years is a long time and it doesn't have to just end there. Even Professors have mentors! Chances are you will continue to see your supervisor or mentor long after you've finished your studies and successfully graduated – and that's great. Learning doesn't stop after a doctorate, and this kind of support and input will be valuable to you for your whole career.

For contact details about your local hub and for further information about **cahpr** please visit our website <https://cahpr.csp.org.uk>

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