

Navigating Doctoral Studies: Personal development

Personal development is a voyage of discovery to improve your whole self, a lifelong process which complements and shapes your professional development. There is no single approach because everyone is different and has different needs. This Ten Top Tips is designed to guide you on your journey of personal development during the doctoral process.

Tip 1 – Set aside time

Raising your self-awareness is the first step in personal development. Get to know yourself better. Set aside time when you won't be interrupted so you can think. Why do you want to develop? What are your core values and beliefs? What really does matter to you? Reflection and self-assessment are skills that need time and practice to develop.

Tip 2 – Write it down

It isn't enough to just think about how you want to develop, try recording your thoughts in writing. It must work for you so either pen to paper, dictating into a document or typing onto a screen. We will forget our thoughts unless they are recorded immediately after moments of inspiration. Having a record of your progress can be motivating.

Tip 3 – Identify gaps

Identify your skills, knowledge, interests and values. Next identify skills and knowledge gaps using the Researcher Development Framework (www.vitae.ac.uk). Be curious and non-judgemental to identify the personal development areas where you need to grow or have the potential to develop.

Tip 4 – Plan it out

Plan out areas you wish to tackle and in which order. Personal development is not linear so adopt a flexible approach. Determine the priority areas and whether they should be tackled in the short, medium or long term. This will be partly based on when you are likely to need those particular skills and knowledge during your doctorate.

Tip 5 – Set S.M.A.R.T. goals

Set goals that are S.M.A.R.T goals (**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**elevant, and **T**ime-limited). Very clearly define the goal with a quantifiable end point that is within your reach. The goal needs to be aligned with your core values - what you want out of life.

Choose an exact end date for when you will complete that goal and record this somewhere visible.

Tip 6 – Identify resources

Find books, resources and courses to help you reach your goals. Talk to people, your supervisors, advisor, friends, a mentor, colleagues and family about how they developed in the areas you have identified for growth. Learning from others by identifying strategies that have worked for them will help you achieve success.

Tip 7 – Learn from failure

Personal development will not always be about success. In fact you may learn much more personally by reflecting after a failure. The key though is to ensure that you are able to keep the momentum and motivation to continue to work on an area without giving up on your goal. Be tenacious and persist.

Tip 8 – Check-in regularly

Daily or weekly check-ins are needed to ensure that you are staying on track. Allocate personal development time in your schedule to work towards your goals. Record your progress and reward yourself when you achieve your goal. Review your personal development plan every couple of months and move on to the next stage once you reach a goal.

Tip 9 – Be flexible

A flexible approach is needed during your doctorate. Priorities will change over time as you develop. During the check-in times assess and reflect if you need to alter your plan or adjust your goals. Your personal development is a lifelong process which will continue to evolve with scientific and technological advances.

Tip 10 – Maintain a balanced perspective

Remember it is important to consider your development holistically. Look beyond your doctoral goals to develop skills in other areas you may enjoy such as meditation, physical activities, creative hobbies. Your life needs balancing with nourishing activities to help you thrive and build resilience in order for you to achieve everything you set out to.

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