Youth Co-research TOOLKIT

TOOLKIT RESOURCES

How to manage the challenges of being a young researcher

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There are so many benefits to being a young researcher! You have a wealth of knowledge and skills to bring to the world of research and gain many wonderful new experiences. But, along with all the exciting new opportunities of being a young researcher, there may also be challenges along the way. It can be daunting navigating the workplace as a young researcher, particularly when other researchers in your team are older than you and have more experience in the field. Recognising the potential challenges that this can present, this guide provides advice on how you can navigate common workplace challenges and feel more confident and empowered in your research role.

Communication issues and unclear responsibilities

It is not uncommon for miscommunications to arise between researchers. It might simply be that your supervisor has not been clear enough in setting out the parameters of a research task, or that they have been vague about how your contributions are to be used. This might leave you feeling unsure about the next step, or confused about what you should be working on. Nevertheless, it is imperative that these communication barriers are addressed promptly to prevent it from negatively impacting on your workplace experience and on your relationships with your co-workers.

Some things you can try to prevent miscommunications include:

> **Inform your team/ supervisor of your preferred communication channels.** You could say something along the lines of *"The best way for you to reach me is via... [email, Slack, Discord, mobile, Zoom, etc.]".* Check if these channels work well with the people you're working with, too.

> **Get into the routine of checking your emails regularly.**

> **Be upfront about your availability.** It is important that you let your supervisor/ team know what hours and days you can work (you can schedule these in a shared calendar, and include them on your email signature).

> **Be transparent with the research team, and ask for support or guidance when you need it.** Be open about anything that you are unsure about and flag any communication challenges that arise along the way.

Trust

Trust plays an important role in the efficient functioning of a research team. A research project will require roles to be delegated to each researcher, and your team will be relying on you to fulfill your contribution within a specified timeline. Building trust, like anything, can take some time.

Some things you can try to build trust amongst other researchers include:

> **Get to know your supervisor/research team better.** Building rapport will go a long way to building trust and improving your ability to work collaboratively.

> A good starting point is to **engage in casual conversations** with your colleagues. You could ask them about what they like, what their preferred research area is, their hobbies, etc.

> Make sure that you **embrace opportunities to participate in team-bonding activities and icebreakers**, whether they be online or face-to-face.

> **Regularly deliver on your commitments to demonstrate your reliability**.

> **Be honest and transparent.** This includes when you think you may not be able to finish a task on time. Letting your supervisor know this in advance (rather than waiting until the due date of a task) will make it easier to figure out ways to provide extra support and finish the task.

Managing competing commitments

Being fully immersed in a project team can be challenging if you've got to juggle other personal, work, and study commitments. You might find yourself overcommitting to your research role and falling behind on your other commitments. Over time, this can result in burnout, with some common signs being:

> Low energy and motivation;

> Decreased work satisfaction;

> Procrastination;

> Disengagement with activities you previously enjoyed/valued; and

> Feelings of irritability and exhaustion.

In order to avoid this, it is important that you are able manage your competing commitments effectively. Some tips to help prevent yourself from feeling overburdened with your work include:

> **Let your supervisor know how you are feeling.** If you are struggling to manage your workload or are finding it difficult to meet deadlines due to other commitments, and if you feel comfortable to do so, you should aim to communicate this to them. Your supervisor can then look into re-delegating some of your workload to other team members.

> **Create a structured timetable to ensure that you are allocating enough time for other commitments.** This will also help you keep track of deadlines, allowing you to prioritise the most urgent tasks. To-do lists are also great for this. (There are recommended apps such as **Todoist and Evernote** in the '**Recommended Resources**' section of this toolkit that might be helpful!)

> **Take breaks from work.** Working long, consecutive hours without having breaks could be a large part of why you might be feeling overwhelmed. Try to take a 5-10 minute break after working for an hour to give yourself time to stretch, grab a snack or go outside.

> **Seek advice from colleagues.** Don't be afraid to ask questions! Asking your colleagues questions about how to perform better at your job can help you develop professional relationships, while also providing you with valuable insight into ways you can improve.

> **Avoid the tendency to take on too much.** You should always carefully assess your capabilities and capacities before agreeing to take on additional work and refrain from saying 'yes' to everything.

Keep in mind that many of the challenges identified here are things that other research team members or even the lead investigator/your supervisor might also be experiencing! So if you're facing these challenges, you're probably not alone and you don't need to struggle by yourself. If things aren't working out, it's probably a challenge you need to address as a team. Plus, it's good to develop strategies to deal with these things early in your research journey - habits can form that you carry forward into your career!

Power imbalances

As you undertake co-research, it will often be the case that you will be working under the supervision and instruction of a senior researcher. However, this doesn't mean that you can't be involved in decision-making and influencing the direction of the research project. In fact, it is important that co-research reflects a democratic process that enables for your voice and insights to be fully heard. Whilst the responsibility of addressing power imbalances is definitely not all on you, here's some things to keep in mind.

> **Recognise the unique perspectives you bring to the team! As a young person, you can bring some valuable insights to research design.** Draw on your own experiences when you communicate your thoughts and opinions to your team. In doing so, you could potentially identify issues that were previously overlooked by senior researchers.

> **Make yourself heard.** Ensure that you are speaking up in meetings and inputting your ideas into the discussion. More often than not, senior researchers will be very appreciative of any fresh ideas you bring.

> **Ask for opportunities.** Sometimes, you might need to help senior researchers to create the space so that you can contribute to decision-making. This could be through asking for the opportunity to give feedback for project proposals and being involved in planning meetings.

> **Acknowledge power differences.** As a team, acknowledge any challenges that may impact your ability to engage in co-research, and brainstorm strategies to work through these together.