

## Reducing the stigma of academic mental health can save lives

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My academic mental health advocacy at my local campus has led me to meet students and staff from all academic levels who feel that they have to hide who they really are. To raise mental health and stigma awareness and support others, I started a personal blog to share my story and co-founded Flourish Maastricht to promote mental health at my own institution.



Mental health seems like a buzzword lately and a hot topic worldwide. Everywhere are new campaigns and all of a sudden everyone wants to raise awareness. I believe that the COVID-19 pandemic is one reason for this change, as it has brought many problems to the surface that are otherwise hidden. Many people became lonely, at times isolated and even depressed. However, that people struggle with their mental health or are diagnosed with a mental disorder is not new at all.

For me personally this has been a topic all my life. I have been affected and traumatized by my mother's bipolar disorder since early childhood. As a first-generation student I struggled during my studies and dealt with poverty, as my parents could not support me financially. This was a very difficult time and resulted in a suicide attempt at the age of 20. Today, I am beyond grateful to be alive and to work as a successful post-doctoral researcher at Maastricht University in the Netherlands on microscope development and novel 3D imaging of human prostate cancer and human brain samples as a VENI laureate, supported by the Dutch Research Council (NWO).

During my PhD at the Department of Urology, Maastricht University Medical Center, my father became very sick and, after several surgeries, he passed away. For the first time I disclosed something very personal to my colleagues and my supervisor. The reactions were nothing but supportive. A few years later, I grieved the loss of my baby during the post-doc and I am glad that I was able to take sick leave of a few weeks and that my supervisor was supportive throughout this time. All these experiences were painful, but now I know that rejection, failure and pain are part of life and will possibly happen in the future as well. For me, it is important to acknowledge my feelings, remember to never give up, to ask for help and to be a caring colleague, friend and mentor for those around me.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, I have met several students and colleagues at my university who have dealt with hardship and trauma in their life, such as the loss of a child or suicidality. It was heartbreaking

for me to see that my colleagues and friends were suffering in silence. Owing to my personal background I wanted to support others by sharing my story, to show them that they are not alone and that asking for help is not a sign of weakness. Thus, I created my [personal blog](#) in the beginning of 2021 and started sharing my own personal life story and the stories of others about academic mental health and various stigmata. People wrote about their depression, suicidality, autism, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, their experiences with therapy, and also how their chronic illness or eating disorder have affected their mental health. Very quickly, the blog became bigger than I expected and, to date, I have reached 10 million people worldwide. Many people from all academic levels — from the undergraduate student, to the PhD student, the post-doc, up to the assistant professor, the associate professor and the group leader — have reached out to me and shared their struggles with me, often for the first time.

I hear from many contributors that they cannot disclose their struggles and their mental illness to their colleagues or supervisor as they are afraid that they will no longer be taken seriously. The stigma around mental health and mental disorders is real and it is essential that this stigma is reduced and, ultimately, broken, especially in academia, so that students and staff feel safe and supported to speak up. Academics in a university work environment often fear consequences for speaking about, for example, their autism or their bipolar disorder diagnosis. Moreover, they think that they have to hide who they really are with regard to their sexuality, gender identity, chronic illness, religion, cultural background, tattoos and more. Receiving hundreds of thank you messages from colleagues and friends at my local campus and beyond, who now feel seen, heard and less alone, and to know that my blog enabled others to share their stories and feel that they can be truly themselves, no longer having to hide their identity and personality, is a wonderful feeling.

Suicide awareness and prevention are important topics close to my heart and, therefore, I would like to

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address them separately for emphasis. My godfather founded a suicide prevention foundation in Germany and, particularly owing to my own lived experience, I understand this topic and empathize with those who have also encountered suicidality. Through my mental health advocacy, I have spoken with students and colleagues who have dealt with or who are dealing with suicidality, who have shared stories with me about the profound effects of their own suicide attempt or that of a close relative or a colleague. I have noticed that international students, in particular, are often unaware of local suicide prevention and awareness organizations that offer support via chat or phone calls. All staff and students should have transparent and easy access to available resources and training in English language and possibly a variety of languages, according to the location. I believe that suicide workshops for both staff and students should be available at every university. In fact, group leaders tell me that they would like to know more about the topic to support their group. Reducing the stigma of suicide and increasing information about prevention and awareness can literally save lives.

Furthermore, knowledge of various mental health disorders is crucial to understand, support and care for each other in an academic work environment. Thus, education and increasing mental health literacy is essential and will also lead to a much-needed reduction in stigma within university communities. Support and counselling must be offered so that both staff and students can share their personal stories within a safe space. Ideally, all academics should be able to speak

with a person they trust or even receive therapeutic support from a psychologist without long waiting times of a few weeks or even several months. These measures will not only lead to a healthier work environment and reduce the stigma of mental health and mental disorders in academia but will also save lives of both students and staff.

With this in mind, at Maastricht University I co-founded Flourish Maastricht, together with my wonderful colleagues Dr Tiffany Leung and Dr Mark Kawakami. Since Flourish Maastricht launched in September 2021, we have been building a caring community of volunteers, educators and experts who are dedicated to promoting academic mental health. It is our aim to reduce stigma and to increase mental health literacy across all academic campuses and hospital communities at Maastricht University and Maastricht University Medical Centre. Our efforts will be in line with the non-profit organization [Dragonfly Mental Health](https://dragonflymentalhealth.org/), which works globally and has the mission to cultivate excellent mental health in academics worldwide.

Change in academia is possible and can be achieved as a team. I hope we will work together towards a stigma-free world, where everyone feels valued and can be truly who they are.

**Competing interests**

The author declares no competing interests.

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