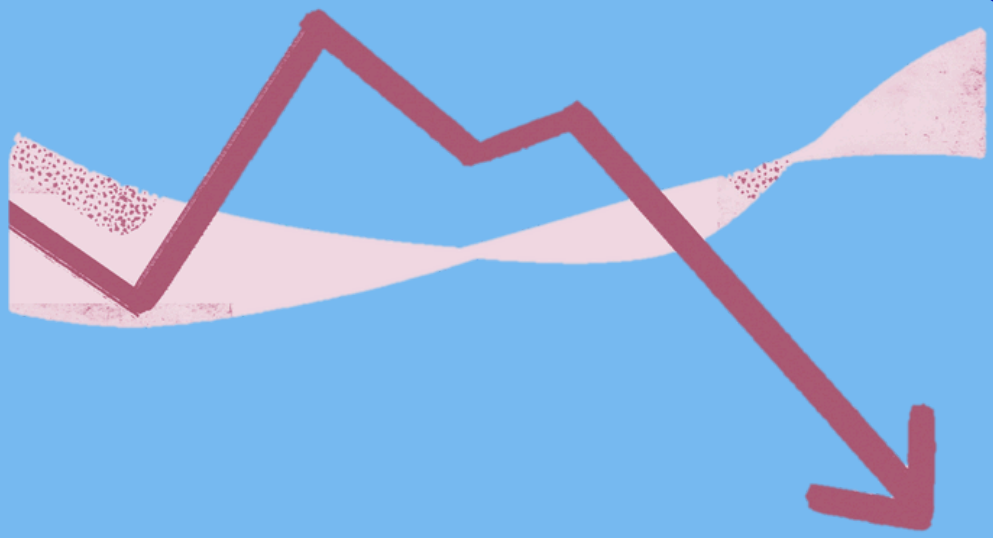
When Research Gets Hard



Understanding and supporting PhD students through setback, struggle and the emotional demands of research training

A practical guide for Supervisors

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The Pattern

PhD supervisors working with students today are reporting a consistent and concerning pattern. Students who are academically strong — selected precisely because of their ability and track record — are struggling in ways that go beyond the ordinary difficulties of research training.

They are not merely finding things hard.

They are withdrawing.

A failed experiment leads to days away from the lab.

Critical feedback on a written report is not addressed.

A challenging phase of the project is quietly replaced by something that feels safer.

When supervisors ask what is happening, students often describe the need to rest or feeling anger or overwhelm. But what is usually happening beneath the surface is something harder to shift: shame.

This guide is for supervisors who want to understand what is driving these behaviours and who need a practical repertoire of responses.

It does not ask supervisors to become therapists.
It asks something more bounded: to understand what they are likely looking at and to respond in ways that acknowledge the emotional reality without reinforcing the avoidance.

Support and challenge are not opposites!

What's Actually Happening

An identity problem, not a competency

Most doctoral students have spent twenty or more years in an educational system that rewarded getting things right. Hard work brought good results. Academic success has become inseparable from their sense of who they are.

When experiments fail or written work comes back heavily annotated, the experience does not register as a technical setback. It registers as a threat to identity.

The PhD is an identity transition — from student to researcher, from consumer of knowledge to producer of it. That transition is rarely smooth and the instability it creates leaves students vulnerable to exactly the kind of challenges that research routinely involves.

This is not unique to doctoral training. Many supervisors will recognise a version of it from their own move from researcher to PI: the disorientation of no longer being the person who does the science but the person who leads others. The situation may look different but the underlying dynamic — a self in transition, not yet secure in its new role — is the same.

When supervisors recall how unsettling their own identity transitions felt, they are often better equipped to recognise what their students are going through, even when the surface behaviour looks very different.

The growth mindset gap

Carol Dweck's distinction between a fixed mindset (ability is inherent) and a growth mindset (ability develops through effort) is widely known. Most researchers endorse the growth mindset position at the level of stated belief — of course failure is informative, iteration is how science works.

Endorsing a principle intellectually is not the same as internalising it emotionally. Researchers are trained in methods, in literature, in experimental design. Very few are explicitly trained to view their own failure as useful data rather than as evidence of inadequacy.

The failed experiment or rejected paper is often experienced as a personal blow, even by experienced researchers who know better.

Guilt says 'I did something bad'. Shame says 'I am bad'.

Shame - deeper than an emotion

Brené Brown's distinction is the useful starting point:

Shame is not a feeling that passes.
It is better understood as a pre-existing core belief:
"I am not capable enough, I do not belong here.".

That failed experiment or annotated report then confirms the belief.

Telling students that failure is normal rarely shifts the underlying response, the deeper belief is not addressed by information.

Guilt:
event-based and motivating:
'I can learn from that mistake and do better'.

Shame:
identity-based, paralysing:
it produces concealment, withdrawal, disconnection.

Shame also strikes at something more fundamental than confidence: belonging. In an environment where belonging is already provisional — the student has not yet proven they deserve a place — this threat lands with particular force. A failed experiment is not just a setback. At the level of shame, it is evidence that the thing the student feared most is true.

This is why reassurance so often fails: it addresses the surface fear without touching the deeper (often unspoken) fear.

Avoidance in disguise

One of the more difficult aspects of this pattern is that avoidance often looks like productivity. The student who stops working on a difficult experiment does not disappear — they write a review paper that never materialises, or become intensely focused on a minor side project. They are busy.

The avoidance is sophisticated enough to be mistaken for legitimate redirection.

Similarly, the student who takes a week away after completing a demanding piece of writing is not obviously doing anything wrong. The problem is not any individual instance but the pattern that accumulates and the norm quietly established each time a supervisor says nothing.

What supervisors often miss:

When a student describes an emotion - a feeling -
shame is often underneath it.
A supervisor who responds to the stated emotion – anger or overwhelm - with sympathy,
may inadvertently reinforce the retreat.
The student feels heard but is not helped to move towards growth or developing a different belief.

What Supervisors Can Do

Acknowledge and redirect

Supervisors do not need counselling skills. They need a small repertoire of responses that acknowledge feeling briefly and redirect toward action. The goal is not to process the emotion at length — that is work for a counsellor or coach. The goal is to acknowledge the emotions sufficiently that the student feels heard and can then move forward.

There is a common assumption, shared by supervisors and students alike, that a student needs to feel ready before they can re-engage with difficult work. In most cases this gets the sequence the wrong way around. Readiness is rarely a precondition for return. It is more often the result of it — of taking one small step, surviving it and discovering that the thing was more manageable than it had grown to feel during avoidance.

A supervisor who waits for the student to feel ready may be waiting for something that will only arrive after they have already come back.

> **Example**: 'That sounds really hard. Feedback can feel very personal even when it isn't meant that way. When do you think you'll be ready to pick out two or three things to focus on first?'

This validates without dwelling,
gently reframes the feedback as non-personal,
and asks a forward-facing question that
assumes re-engagement as the next step,
not whether to re-engage but when and how.

Provide a concrete re-entry point

The longer something sits avoided the larger it grows in the student's mind. A specific, bounded first step interrupts this dynamic.

Rather than leaving timing entirely open — which hands the decision to the student at the moment they are least equipped to make it well — the supervisor offers a bounded choice: two specific options, both of which involve re-engagement, The student retains genuine agency but the choice is structured so that both options move things forward without feeling overwhelming.

> **Example**:'I completely understand this has felt like a lot. I don't want you to feel you have to face all of it at once. Would it help to meet tomorrow and just look at the structure comments together, nothing else, or would Thursday work better for you?'

Several things make this work. The opening validates without dwelling. The phrase "I don't want you to feel you have to face all of it at once" removes the most threatening version of the task before the student can catastrophise it. The offer is specific and small. And the choice between two concrete times makes "I'm not ready" a harder response to give, because it requires the student to actively reject both options rather than simply not filling in a blank.

If the student does push back, the supervisor can acknowledge it and narrow gently rather than conceding entirely:

> **Example**: Student: 'I really need a bit longer than that.'
>
> Supervisor: 'That's fine. What feels manageable by the end of the week? I'm not asking you to have done the revisions — just to look at it with fresh eyes so we can talk.'

This accepts the student's self-knowledge without accepting an open-ended deferral. It redefines the task as contained and manageable and reinstates the relationship as the context for the work — which is often what shame-activated students have lost sight of.

Name patterns early

Every time a retreat goes unremarked it becomes more normal. Raising it gently, early and without accusation is more supportive than waiting until the pattern is entrenched.

> **Example**: 'I've noticed that after intensive stretches you tend to step back for a while — which I understand. I want to make sure we're building in a sustainable rhythm. What would a lower-gear few days look like instead of a full stop?'

Make Troubleshooting a Taught Skill

Students who have no framework for what to do when an experiment fails are left alone with an unpleasant feeling and no next step. Progress is replaced by rumination. A brief '**failed experiment protocol**' — what are the three questions you ask, what sources do you consult, what is the decision tree — gives students agency and a cognitive task to do. It also implicitly normalises failure by treating it as something with a known, learnable response.

Build lab culture, not just conversations

The most powerful normalising influence is social.

Seeing senior researchers discuss failed experiments without drama, week after week, does more than any individual conversation.

Research teams that have a standing agenda item for '***What didn't work this week***' — discussed without drama, with genuine engagement about what to try next — create a shared culture in which failure is neither hidden nor catastrophised.

Support and challenge are not opposites

Supervisors who hesitate to name withdrawal patterns often frame it as a desire to be supportive, to avoid confrontation. But repeatedly accommodating retreat teaches students that retreat is the appropriate response to difficulty.

The most supportive response is usually to hold the expectation around progression, editing or trouble-shooting while softening the approach.

To acknowledge the difficulty in the situation while assuming stepwise re-engagement with the work as the default response.

Know when to refer

Some students need more than supervisory support — genuine anxiety, depression or identity distress that requires professional help.
Signs to watch for include inability to function sustained over weeks rather than days; significant changes in behaviour or presentation; explicit statements of distress or hopelessness; patterns that don't respond to the kinds of interventions described here.

Making a referral does not need to feel like a reprimand, nor be a first response.

Framed as 'I want to make sure you have access to all the support available to you', it is part of a genuinely caring supervisory response. The key is to refer early, and to remain engaged as a supervisor rather than treating referral as a handover.

In Summary

These students are not failing because they lack ability.

They are struggling because the transition into research challenges their identity in ways they were not prepared for. Supervisors have more influence than they sometimes realise, through relationship, culture, expectation and conversation.

- Understand what is likely happening beneath the behaviour — identity threat, shame, avoidance in disguise
- Use a small repertoire of responses that acknowledge feeling and redirect toward action
- Name patterns gently and early rather than accommodating them until they are entrenched
- Build group cultures that normalise struggle through exposure and modelling
- Refer when needed — early and as part of continued supervisory engagement.

My notes

Want more?

Supporting PhD students through the emotional demands of research training is one of the less visible parts of supervision and one of the least supported. Most supervisors navigate it alone, working from instinct, with little training and no script.

This guide offers a starting point: a way of understanding what is likely happening beneath the surface, and a small repertoire of responses that can make a real difference without asking supervisors to be something they are not.

If it has resonated — whether you are a supervisor navigating this with a student right now or a researcher developer thinking about how to support your supervisory community — I would love to hear from you.

I also have case studies designed for use in supervisor training workshops. Each brings these dynamics to life in a recognisable scenario, with discussion questions and facilitation guidance. If you'd like to see them, do get in touch. I'd love to hear from you.

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MargaretCollins.com/

Resources

Feel free to explore the other resources on my website.

Let me know how you get on!

Margaret

