

7 Surprising, Unknown Reasons Why PhD Students Fail to Be Productive



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Hello PhD Friend,

If you're reading this, you're probably looking for ways to be more productive and use your time efficiently. Maybe you've even tried several productivity methods that didn't work...

I get it. I've been there too. To be honest, it took me a long time to realize that true productivity isn't just about goal setting, planning, scheduling, or even having a healthy routine.

There's so much more to becoming truly productive, and no one tells PhD students about it.

That's why, based on my own academic experience, as well as coaching over 5,000 PhD students from top universities, I want to share with you the reasons that can truly jeopardize your efficiency, no matter how hard you work.

Understanding these hidden reasons will save you a lot of time and frustration. It will unlock your path to true efficiency and make your PhD experience so much better

To your success,
Ewa



I'm Dr. Ewa Pluciennicka, a cognitive psychologist and the founder of PhD Success, a platform supporting PhD students' mental health and productivity.

With a PhD in Cognitive Psychology and over eight years of research experience in Cognitive Psychology and Human Neuroscience, I understand firsthand the pressures of academia.

I've had the privilege of working with more than 5000 PhD students and collaborating with top universities across Europe and the U.S. From individual consultations to workshops, I focus on helping PhD students overcome mental blocks and get ultra productive so they can reach their full potential.

My motto: **A PhD is a journey. Nobody goes through it and remains the same. Use it as a stepping stone to a better you** and with the right support, every PhD student can learn to thrive and achieve their goals without compromising their well-being.

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1 Negative Self-Talk

Have you ever told yourself, “I am stupid,” “I’m lazy,” “I’m not good enough,” “I don’t have enough knowledge or skills for this,” “I will never learn it,” or “I should have done it much earlier”? These negative thoughts undermine your confidence, cloud your judgment, and make you doubt your abilities, leading to procrastination, especially with difficult tasks. That’s why it’s crucial to identify this negative self-talk and learn to control it.

2 Neglecting Time for Learning

During your PhD research, you’ll often encounter tasks for the first time, such as conducting a literature review, using specific technologies for your experiments or data analysis, or writing and publishing a scientific paper. These tasks require new skills and, therefore, the necessary time to learn them. This learning time is often completely overlooked or reduced to the bare minimum based on the experiences of your supervisors or PhD colleagues who say, “Oh, that’s easy” or “That shouldn’t take you long,” leading to frustration and significant delays in your schedule. That’s why it’s important to first assess your own level of expertise in a given task and then allocate the necessary time for learning accordingly.

3 Ignoring Energy Levels

In academia, productivity is often reduced to time management, while energy management is completely dismissed. However, your energy levels fluctuate daily and even throughout the day, they influence your efficiency at work (e.g., are you slow in the morning, or do you feel like taking a siesta in the afternoon?). To make the most of every minute of your day, it’s essential to understand your energy levels and adapt your daily tasks accordingly, allowing you to build a schedule that enables you to work effectively throughout the day.

4

Guilt over taking a break

Have you ever spent hours in front of your computer and failed to accomplish anything? Or known that a break or a day off would really help you recover from past efforts, but the nagging thought “I should be working, there’s so much to do” and the accompanying guilt wouldn’t let you stop working—even though it’s not effective—and leads to wasting even more time? To work effectively, it’s crucial to accurately assess when you’re trying to escape from a challenging task and when you really need a break, and to be able to take that break without feeling guilty.

5

Lack of Satisfaction

Doing a PhD is a choice often driven by passion and interest in a particular field of science. However, due to the intense pace of research work and the high expectations in academia, there’s little time to actually “enjoy” the research process. Instead, every task becomes a race against time, and even our successes can feel like failures because they come too late (e.g., when your article is finally published, you might think, “Yeah, that should have happened six months ago” and move on). To stay motivated and engaged in your PhD work, it’s vital to restructure your thinking, learn to appreciate your successes, and acknowledge the daily research tasks that bring you satisfaction.

6

Exposure to long periods of stress

It’s well-known that the pressure in academia is high, and you’re often exposed to stressful events and challenges (e.g., presentations, deadlines, evaluations). However, even without these challenging events, you can still be very stressed for various reasons, such as feeling late or lost in your work, setting excessively high standards for yourself, or believing that you’re not doing well enough. Prolonged exposure to stress can lead to concentration problems, excessive tiredness, apathy, and physical issues such as headaches, back pain, and digestive problems. But that’s not all—if stress isn’t managed in time, it can lead to serious mental disorders such as burnout or depression. That’s why it’s absolutely essential to identify hidden sources of prolonged stress and learn to manage them.

7

Hidden Beliefs about the task

Often, before you even start a task, you have certain assumptions and beliefs about it, such as “Writing a PhD dissertation takes a long time,” “It takes ages to publish a paper,” or “Statistics never work the first time.” These negative expectations can prevent you from starting the task and lead to procrastination. Such beliefs are also a massive obstacle to completing tasks—for example, if you believe that writing a dissertation takes a long time, no matter how effectively you write, it will still feel long to you. These hidden beliefs are powerful and can significantly impact your academic experience and the outcomes of your PhD. Therefore, it’s extremely helpful to identify and address your hidden beliefs.

So what to do next?

I'm really curious—how many of these reasons do you see in yourself? Have you ever considered how these hidden factors impact your productivity?

The truth is, "knowing" doesn't mean "applying." Even if you're aware of these issues, it can be challenging to turn that awareness into real-life actions.

That's why **I'm developing a PhD Productivity Course** that focuses on the cognitive, emotional, and practical aspects of being efficient during your PhD. The program is designed to help you achieve more in less time, without unnecessary stress or rush.

In it, I'll share essential methods that have helped my clients transform their approach to work, cut their working hours in half, and gain tremendous peace of mind. They've either completed or are well on track to complete their PhDs—on time and with success.

If you're ready to take a big step toward unlocking your most efficient self, join the waitlist to be the first to know when my program launches

Yes, let me know!



The overall work together was an extremely boosting up which has made me confident and enthusiast about my PhD project again!

Magda, 2nd year Phd in Education
University of Strasbourg, France

Awesome workshop!
Clear and very helpful.
I'm ready to get back to work

Ahmed, 2nd year Phd in Mathematics
University of Madrid

Ewa's coaching programme was of a great help for my thesis writing. I can't thank her enough because it was a life-changing experience for me. She helped me to change my way of approaching any big project so that it's not all pain and suffering, but rather a pleasant journey that permits enjoying the process. After each session with Ewa I felt relieved, inspired for further work and much more self-conscious.

Giulia, 4th year Phd in Marine Biology
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