

# From enrolment to completion: An exploration of psychological wellbeing in doctoral students during the PhD journey

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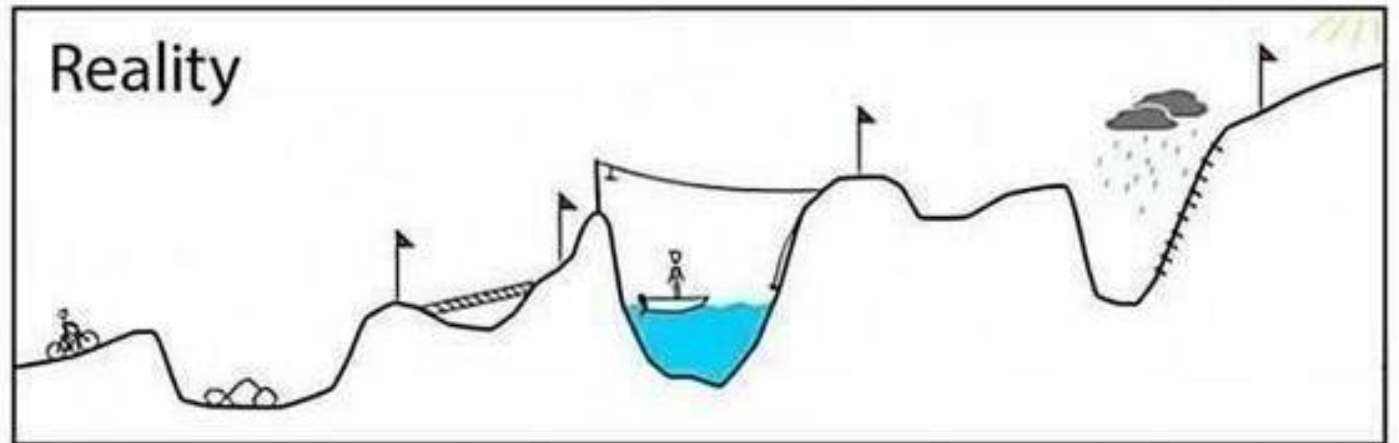
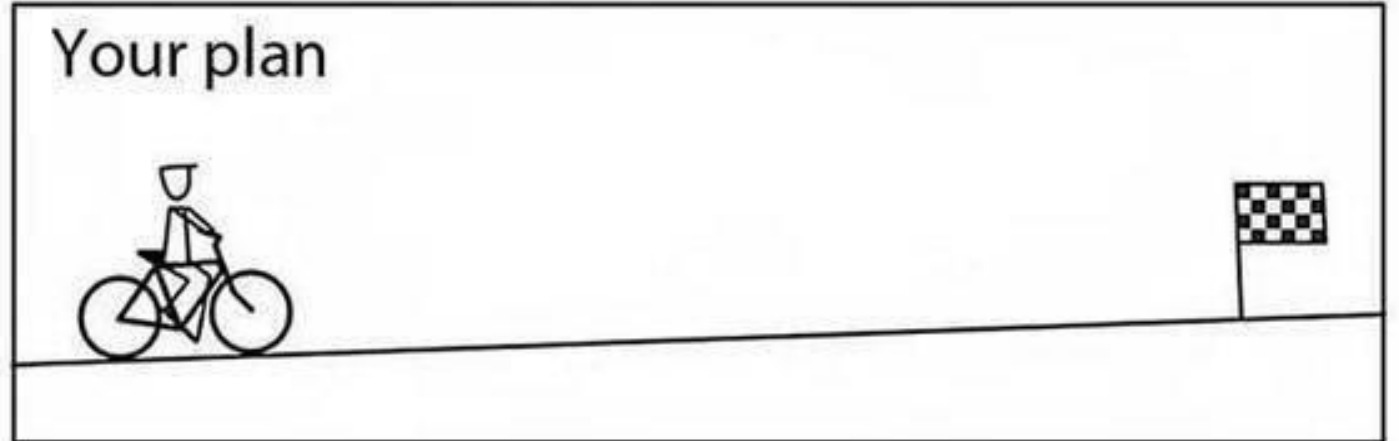


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# INTRODUCTION

- Recent research in Europe (Levecque et al., 2017) and Australia (Barry et al., 2018) has drawn significant attention to the increased prevalence of psychological distress in PhD students
- Psychological distress is a widely used indicator of the mental health of a population (Drapeau et al., 2012)
- Defined as a state of emotional suffering characterised by symptoms such as depression and anxiety (Mirowsky & Ross, 2002)
- Psychological wellbeing is “the combination of feeling good and functioning effectively” (Huppert, 2009, p. 137)

# THE DOCTORAL JOURNEY: PLAN VERSUS REALITY



# PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS IN DOCTORAL STUDENTS

- PhD students experience high levels of stress (Metcalfe et al., 2018) and psychological distress (Barry et al., 2018)
  - Higher perceived stress levels versus the general population and undergraduate students
  - Highest levels of psychological distress reported in the second year
- Psychological distress can increase:
  - Withdrawal rates (Hunter & Devine, 2016)
  - Completion times for PhD study (Barry et al., 2018),
  - The risk of long-term issues with wellbeing and effects on working life (Stubb et al., 2011)
- Almost one in three PGR students in a UK sample did not access advice and support services whilst experiencing psychological distress (Waight & Giordano, 2018)

# SOURCES OF STRESS/RISK FACTORS FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS IN DOCTORAL STUDENTS

- Challenges faced by PhD have been captured in a typology, first proposed by Pyhalto et al. (2012) and recently extended by Barry et al. (2018)
- The typology highlights six problem areas:
  - Supervisory problems
  - Resource issues
  - Domain specific knowledge
  - General work processes
  - External or personal challenges
  - Project-related challenges

# STUDY AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Aim: To explore the lived experience of doctoral study from enrolment to completion
- Research Questions
  1. How does psychological wellbeing change for PhD students during their doctoral journey?
  2. How do PhD graduates describe their experience of doctoral study?
  3. What threatens psychological wellbeing in the doctoral journey?
  4. What coping strategies do PhD students use to manage the challenges of doctoral study, and are these effective?
  5. What challenges are faced by PhD students in the UK during their studies? Do the challenges identified by Barry et al (2018) capture all challenges faced by UK students?

# METHOD

- Recruitment
  - Ethical approval granted by a University Research Ethics Committee
  - Recruitment posters on Twitter and advertisement boards at a university campus
  - Inclusion criteria
    - Confirmation of doctoral award on or after July 1<sup>st</sup> 2017 at a single, UK university
- Participants
  - Five participants (male  $n = 2$ , female  $n = 3$ ;  $M$  age = 35 years) have taken part in the study
  - Four full-time PhD students and one part-time PhD student ( $M$  length since completion = 16 months)

# METHOD

- Data collection
  1. Adapted lifegrid method
  2. Semi-structured interview (*M* length = 79 minutes)
- Piloting and bracketing
  - Each member of the research team interviewed one another
- Data analysis – preliminary stages
  - Lifegrid – visual within-case and cross-case analysis
  - Interview – thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)



# LIFEGRID

		Enrolment	Graduation
PhD Journey			
Personal Journey			
Psychological wellbeing	High		
	Neutral		
	Low		

## I. Key milestones

# LIFEGRID

		Enrolment	Graduation
PhD Journey			
Personal Journey			
Psychological wellbeing	High		
	Neutral		
	Low		

2. Key events/phases/challenges in the PhD journey

# LIFEGRID

		Enrolment	Graduation
PhD Journey			
Personal Journey			
Psychological wellbeing	High		
	Neutral		
	Low		

3. Personal life events/factors that might have affected them

# LIFEGRID

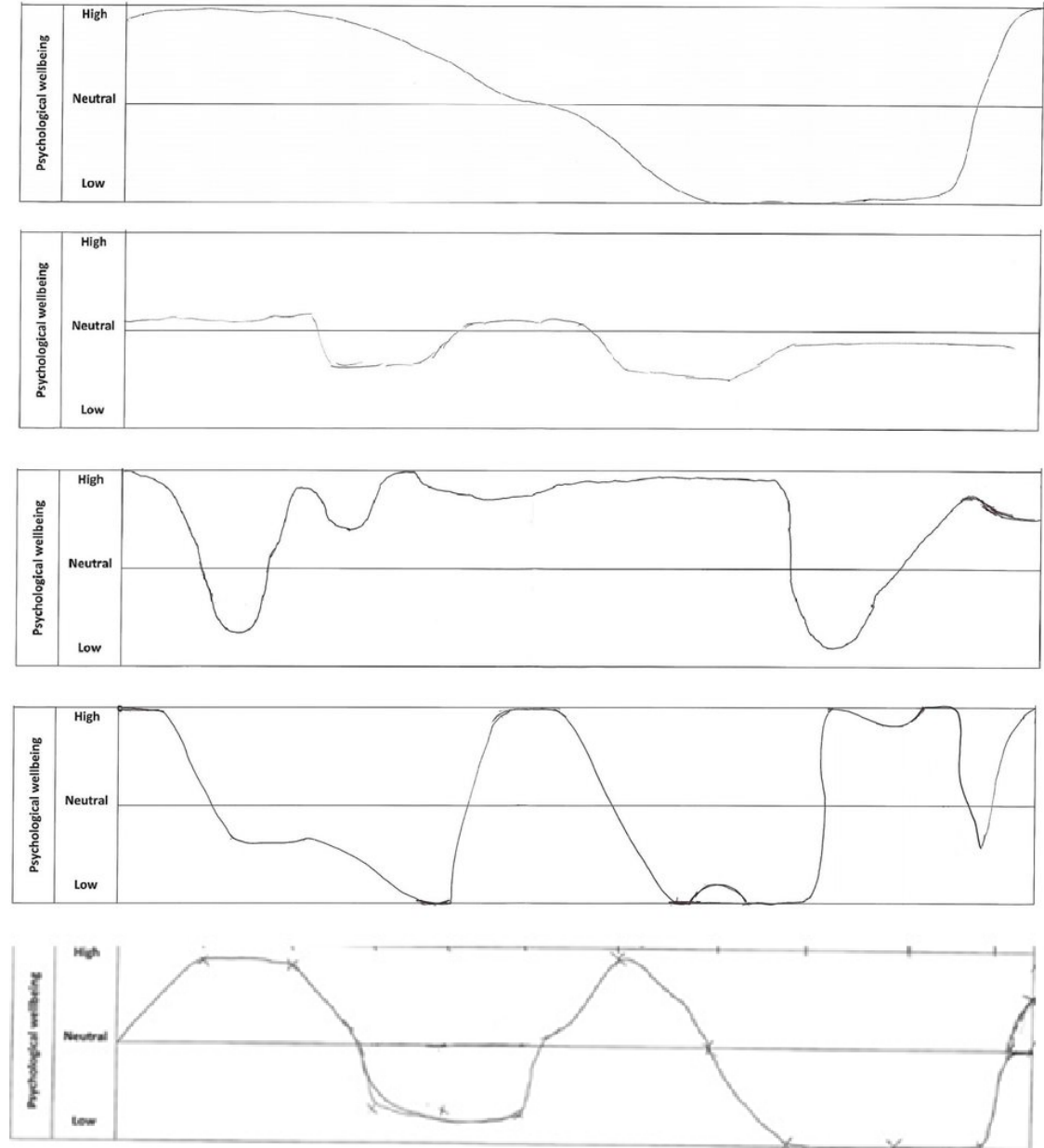
		Enrolment	Graduation
PhD Journey			
Personal Journey			
Psychological wellbeing	High		
	Neutral		
	Low		

4. Rating of psychological wellbeing during the PhD journey

# FINDINGS: CHANGES IN PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING DURING THE DOCTORAL JOURNEY

*“It was an intense journey. Some times were more intense than others.” (Participant 5)*

High  
Psychological wellbeing  
Low



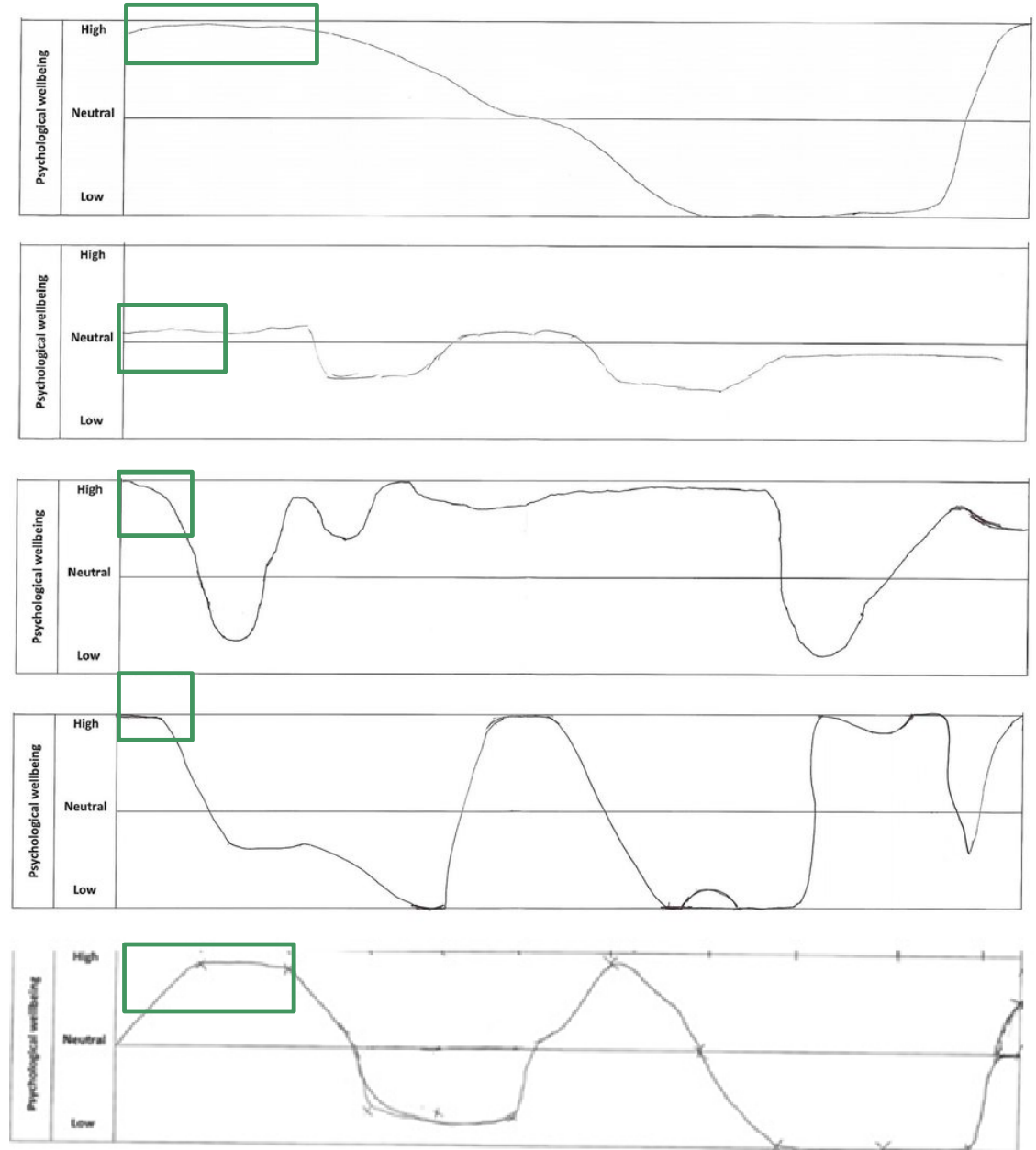
# FINDINGS: CHANGES IN PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING DURING THE DOCTORAL JOURNEY

The initial high

High

Psychological wellbeing

Low



# FINDINGS: DESCRIBING THE EXPERIENCE OF DOCTORAL STUDY

## ■ **The initial high**

### ■ Excitement

*“The starting area was full of excitement and hope, being optimistic, and thinking all good things” (Participant 1)*

### ■ Optimism

*“When I started the PhD I was really excited, looking forward to it and was in a really good place with everything. I would say it was high” (Participant 3)*

### ■ Happiness

### ■ Confidence

*“From a psychological point of view, it was up there. You were doing something that you wanted to do, you had chosen to do it, it’s in a topic that you’re passionate about and you throw yourself into that wholeheartedly” (Participant 5)*

### ■ Pride

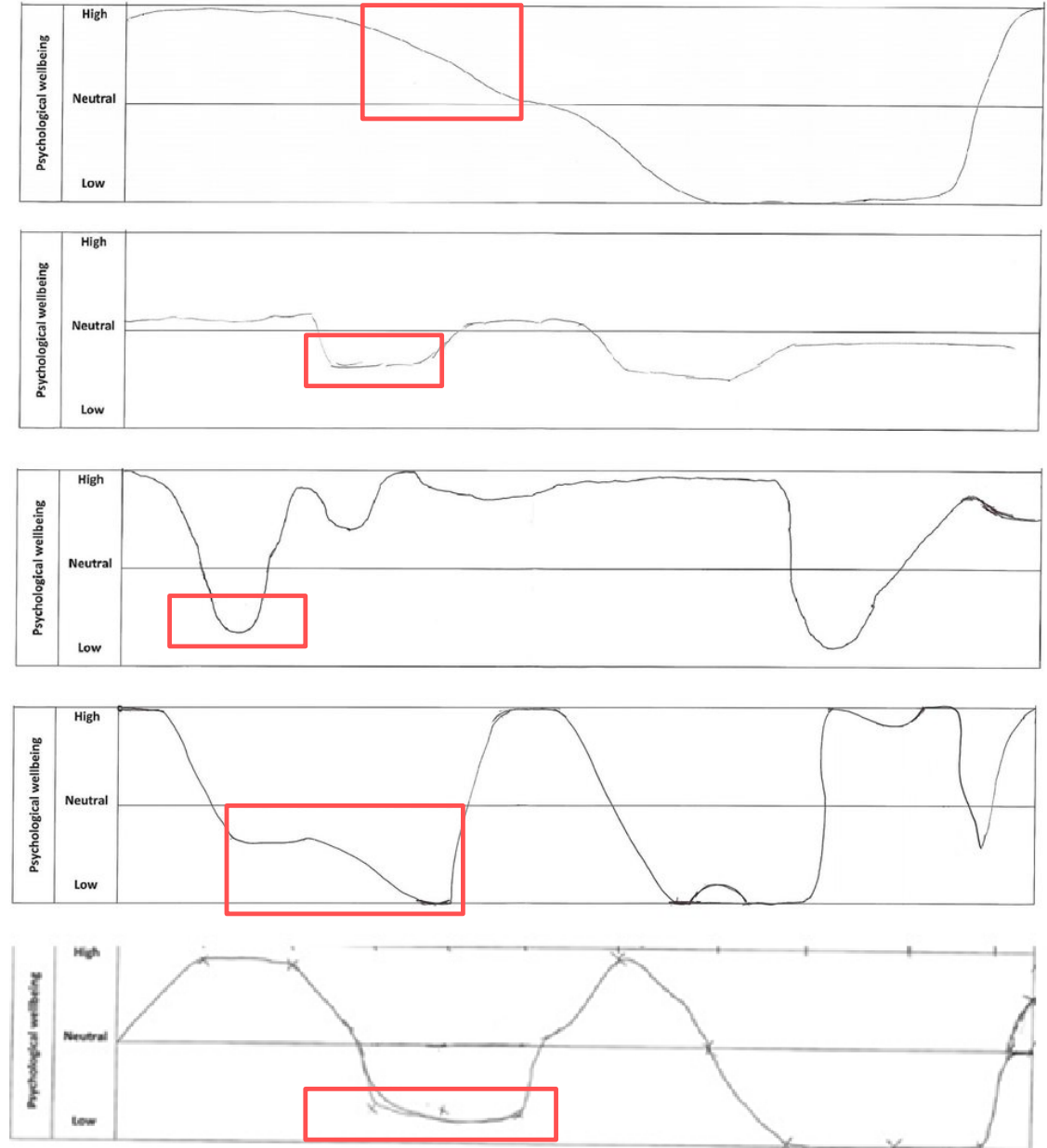
### ■ Motivation

*“I felt really proud and happy and like I’d done well, and I was excited to start it” (Participant 4)*

# FINDINGS: CHANGES IN PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING DURING THE DOCTORAL JOURNEY

## The first dip

High  
Psychological wellbeing  
Low





# FINDINGS: DESCRIBING THE EXPERIENCE OF DOCTORAL STUDY

## ■ **The first dip**

- Loss of confidence
- Worry
- Annoyance
- Stress
- Uncertainty
- Imposter syndrome
- Feeling of pressure

*“It was like ‘go and get data’ and this was exciting and “yes I want to collect data”. But now I don’t know what to do with that data” (Participant 5)*

*“I think there was generally time periods where I was feeling particularly uncertain about what it was I was supposed to be doing” (Participant 2)*

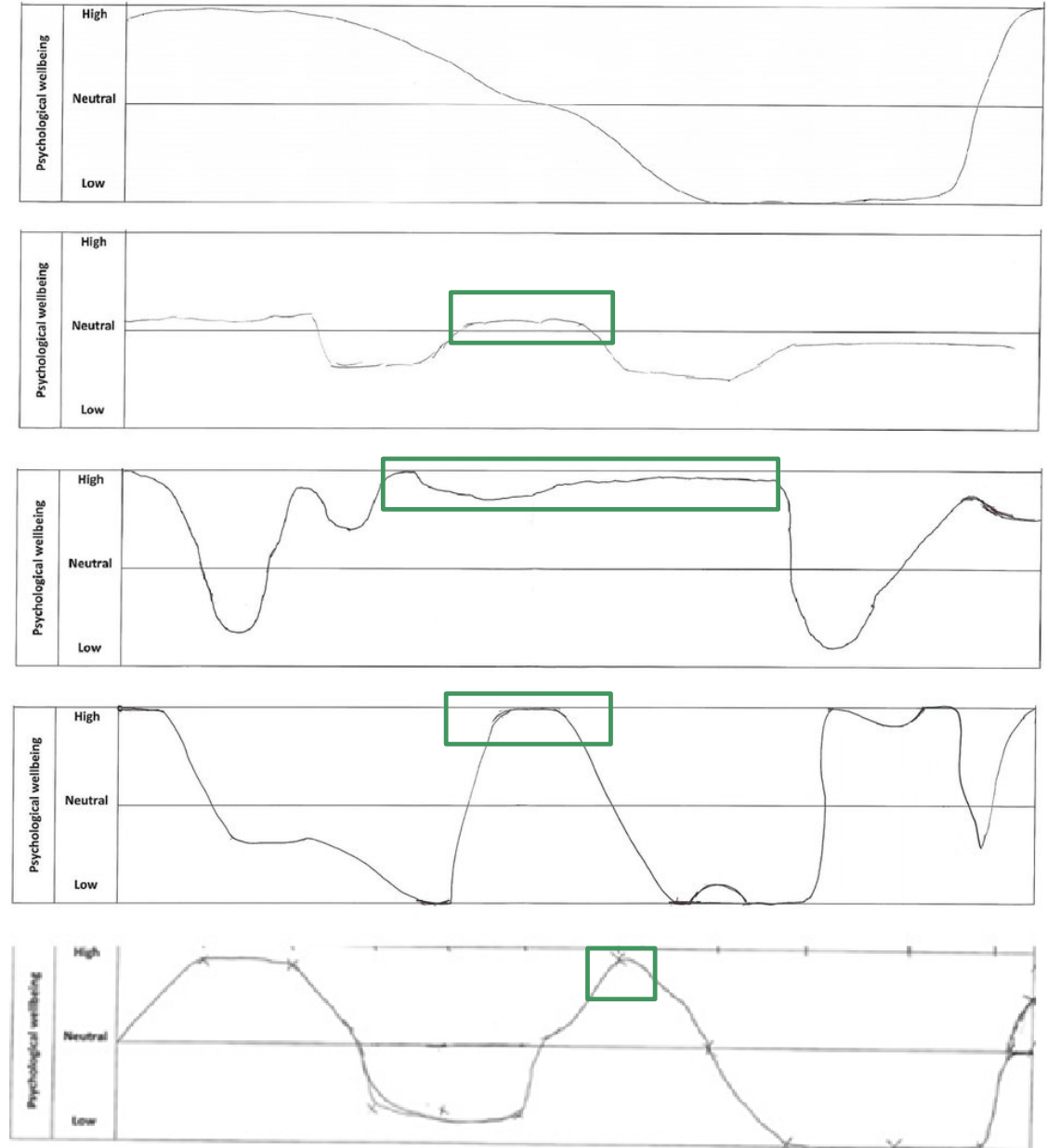
*“I was awaiting my MPhil transfer, so I think it’s the time where you have to start putting everything on paper and you realise you haven’t got anything - Well I had stuff to put down but I just felt like I couldn’t do it, so that was bad.” (Participant 4)*

*“That was where my confidence started to fall and I just felt as though it just won't work.” (Participant 1)*

# FINDINGS: CHANGES IN PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING DURING THE DOCTORAL JOURNEY

## The midway lift

High  
Psychological wellbeing  
Low



# FINDINGS: DESCRIBING THE EXPERIENCE OF DOCTORAL STUDY

## ■ **The midway high**

- Renewed excitement
- New perspective
- Making progress
- Things “click”
- Confidence returns

*“When you start to collect data, it's quite exciting” (Participant 1)*

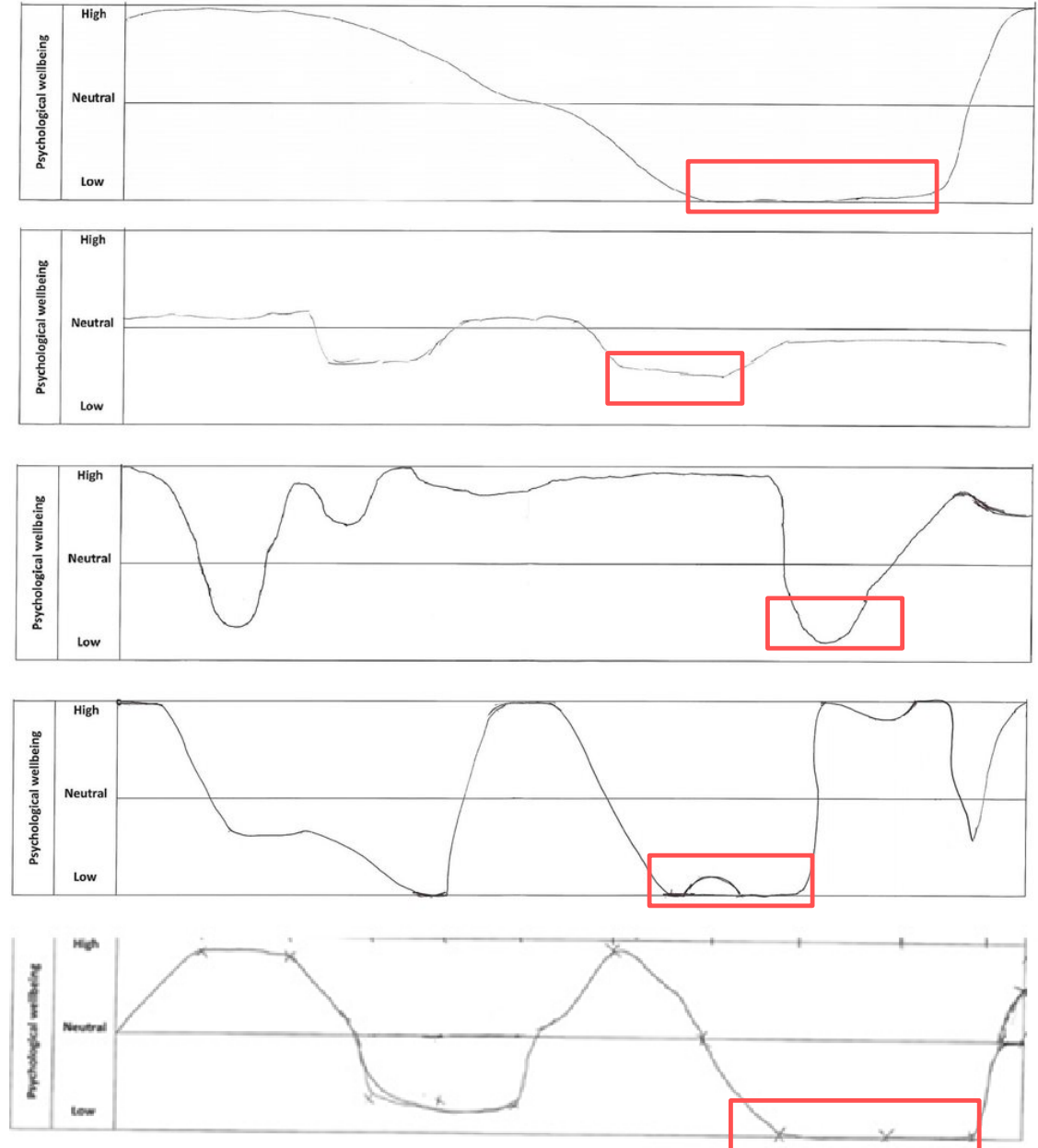
*“Coming up to my transfer viva, so it was good, looking forward to that. And then that was completed, so that was high” (Participant 3).*

*“It was this lightbulb, eureka moment of going “that makes sense”. It was like this renewed enthusiasm had returned and thinking “yes, this is the sort of thing that I wanted to do and to find out and help others with it”. It ignited a real flame for me in returning to that research and brought me back on board...I was gaining so much momentum..” (Participant 5)*

# FINDINGS: CHANGES IN PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING DURING THE DOCTORAL JOURNEY

## The final dip

High  
Psychological wellbeing  
Low



# FINDINGS: DESCRIBING THE EXPERIENCE OF DOCTORAL STUDY

## ■ The final dip

- Stress
- Fatigue and insomnia
- Emotionally sensitive
- Depression
- Worry
- Questioning ability

*“I felt like I wasn’t going to get finished in time...I felt very stressed with it and then I got really worked up and that’s when I ended up going into hospital for five days” (Participant 4)*

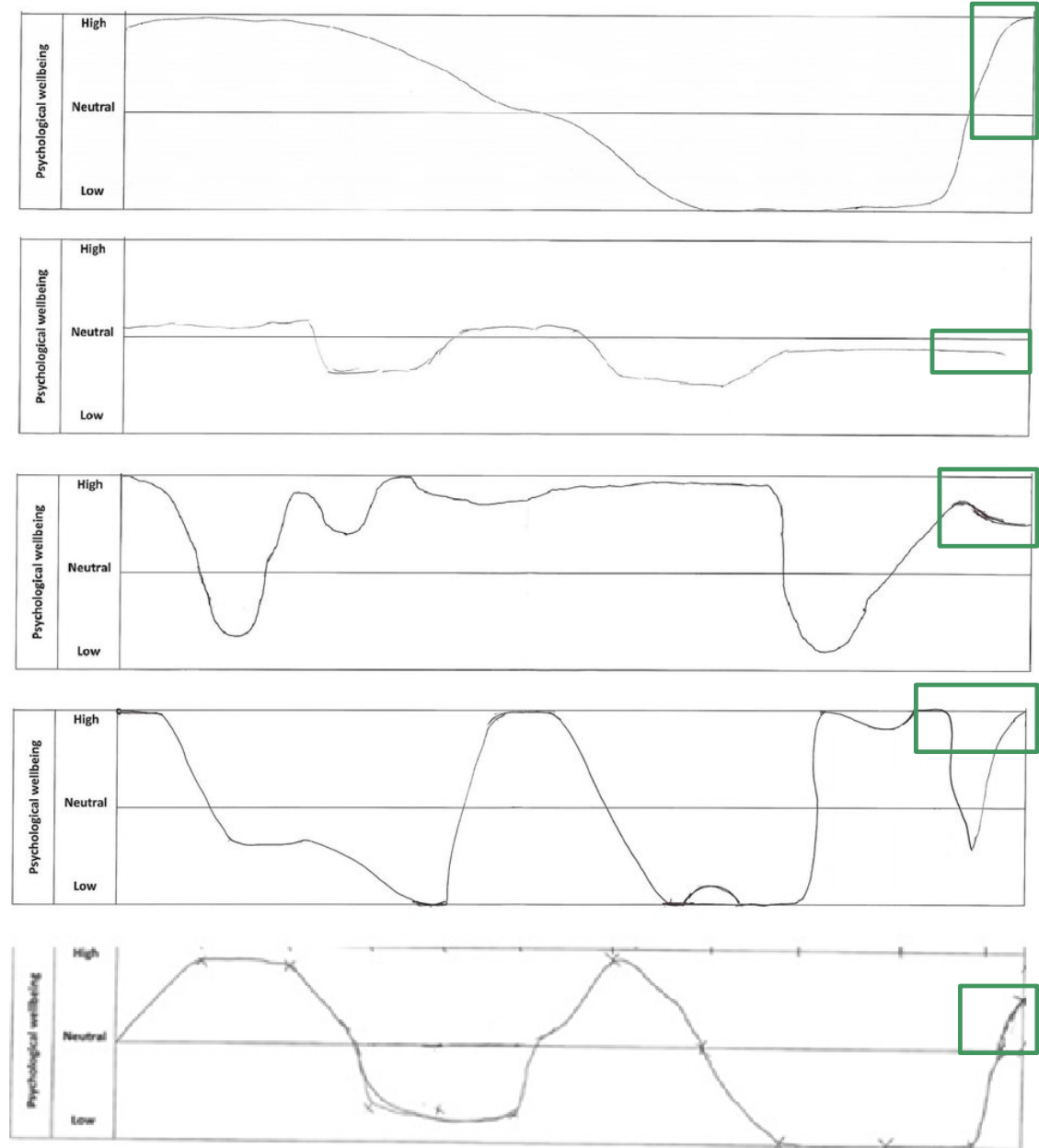
*“I hit a real patch of second-guessing myself. What was I doing? Why am I doing this? I am not good enough. Why did you ever think you could do a PhD in the first place? You are not cut out for this. I really questioned my own ability” (Participant 5)*

*“From submission to viva, my mental health was pretty dreadful...At that stage there was nothing else I could do. There was the kind of sense that it was being judged, that I had to wait three months to find out what was going to happen” (Participant 2)*

# FINDINGS: CHANGES IN PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING DURING THE DOCTORAL JOURNEY

## The final high

High  
Psychological wellbeing  
Low



# FINDINGS: DESCRIBING THE EXPERIENCE OF DOCTORAL STUDY

## ■ **The final high**

- Confident

*“Between my hand in and my viva I think I thought, ‘I can do it’, because I’ve written it” (Participant 4)*

- Motivated

*“When I went for the second viva and I passed. All those things disappeared and I was now on a high, looking forward to the graduation day” (Participant 1)*

- Happiness

- Indifference

*“I certainly didn’t celebrate having completed the viva or anything like that.... It just felt like, you know, something was done and at least it was done” (Participant 2)*

- Pride

- Relief

*“I don’t think I’ve felt as awful as I did at times on that PhD. But then equally, coming out the other side, how good it felt. I’m still not completely sure if it felt so good because it was over, or because I got it” (Participant 5)*

# FINDINGS: THREATS TO PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING

- The uncontrollables
- Negative emotions
- Stagnation
- Lack of connectivity
- Uncertainty
- Lack of clarity

*“I was depressed because it was slow. I thought it was too slow”*  
(Participant 1)

*“There were generally time periods when I was feeling particularly uncertain about what I was supposed to be doing really. And quite often that was, sort of, around paperwork and what documents I was supposed to be submitting, what I was supposed to have written up, what the, kind of, expectations were, what the standards were, those kind of things”* (Participant 2)

*“I was the odd one out. And some people didn’t see the value of my discipline, which was difficult”* (Participant 3)



# FINDINGS: COPING STRATEGIES USED BY PHD STUDENTS TO MANAGE THE CHALLENGES OF DOCTORAL STUDY

- Planning
- Believing you can do it
- Making connections
- Acceptance of circumstances
- Drawing on past experience
- Focusing on the end goal
- Support

*“I think friends and family are the most important thing to get you through because if you're having a bad day or a good day or any type of day, they're the people that you go to tell whatever the news is”*  
(Participant 4)

*“I think that the point at which I made contact with peers doing similar research at other institutions, that was really helpful”* (Participant 2)

*“They [supervisors] supported me all the way through with my work and with the ideas that I came up with. And sometimes I'd have crazy ideas and so I had to be pulled back a little bit, but then sometimes they'd let me run with my ideas and try new things, so that was really good”* (Participant 3)

# FINDINGS: CHALLENGES FACED BY DOCTORAL STUDENTS IN THE UK DURING THEIR STUDIES

- The field of work
- Recruitment
- Write up
- Cultural differences in expectation
- Ethics
- Finances/funding
- Balancing work and PhD
- Working with supervisors
- Managing psychological wellbeing
- External life challenges

*That was another point when I said ‘where and when am I going to get this data and get this PhD?’ And, again, I started to worry around here (Participant 1)*

*“My first supervisor left maybe as I was started to be pretty much getting better,...And my first one had left before that....But it wasn’t until nearer the end it felt like it had an impact because when my second supervisor left, I still had my first one and I could still Skype him. But then like it would never be a Skype between both supervisors and me it was always just the second supervisor or just a meeting with the first supervisor. So it was quite frustrating because you either had to relay or get conflicting advice” (Participant 4)*

# DISCUSSION

1. Clear fluctuations in psychological wellbeing throughout the PhD for all participants
2. The PhD journey elicits a myriad of emotional responses, which differ depending on the stage of the journey and the specific challenges faced
3. Threats to psychological wellbeing stem from periods of perceived uncertainty, stagnation, and isolation
4. A range of strategies were employed to address challenges faced, ranging from actively seeking support to accepting the situation
5. Challenges faced by PhD students in the UK are similar to those outlined by Barry et al. (2018), but further refinement of this typology could be required to account for the challenge of managing psychological wellbeing

# LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Limitations
  - Challenging to recruit PhD graduates from one institution
  - Small, self-selecting sample from a single institution
  - Retrospective recall
- Future directions
  - Recruit participants across the UK and non-completers
  - Further development of the visual methods
  - Capture real-time longitudinal data

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**THANK YOU FOR LISTENING**

ANY QUESTIONS?



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