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# Cite Your Well-being First: What Happens When Personal Life, Mental Health, and HCI Research Become Entangled?

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## Abstract

Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) research often requires deep engagement with people and their environments, making the researcher's own well-being an integral, yet overlooked factor in the research process. Personal challenges, ranging from academic pressures to difficult life events, can influence how we conduct studies, interpret data, and relate to our work. Despite this, such experiences are rarely acknowledged in formal academic spaces, and there is limited discussion about their impact on research. Our workshop offers a space for HCI researchers to reflect on their well-being, share personal experiences, and examine how personal struggles intersect with their research practices. Together, we will foreground researchers' well-being as an essential concern and explore how these lived realities can be meaningfully integrated into our methodologies. In doing so, we invite the HCI community to not only centre the human in our research, but also recognise the researcher as human; one whose life is deeply entangled with the work they do.

## CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → **Human computer interaction (HCI)**; *HCI theory, concepts and models*.

## Keywords

mental health, well-being, personal life, researchers

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## 1 Introduction

Mental health and personal well-being are crucial for our day-to-day functioning. Yet, in many professional settings, they remain difficult to talk about openly [7, 36, 39]. The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that 15% of workers worldwide experience mental health challenges, which translates into around 12 billion working days lost every year to depression and anxiety.<sup>1</sup> Despite increasing public awareness, many individuals hesitate to seek help due to fear

<sup>1</sup><https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-at-work>



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of judgment, professional consequences, or social isolation [5, 17, 21]. Researchers are no exception. The pressure to publish, secure funding, teach, and progress along unpredictable career paths leaves little space for vulnerability [3, 16, 35]. For example, studies show that anxiety and depression are increasingly common in academia [8, 16, 31, 35, 38]. The expectation to remain constantly visible and continuously producing creates an environment where exhaustion becomes the norm and self-care an afterthought. With funding and professional stability often tied to an unbroken record of output, researchers feel pressured to prioritise short-term gains over long-term sustainability, ultimately at the cost of their mental health [3, 16, 35]. The rise of Generative AI may have further intensified this cycle as it is based on the promise of increasing productivity (e.g., expectations to produce more, as written language no longer becomes a barrier to entry) [12, 24, 33]. Personal hardships (e.g., family responsibilities, illness, emergencies, or grief) may further impact a researcher's ability to think clearly, work, and engage with their research. When a researcher's well-being deteriorates, it does more than delay papers or disrupt projects; it also affects how research is conducted, how data is interpreted, and how knowledge is produced. In a field where our primary task is to think [23], what happens when thinking becomes a challenge?

These challenges are particularly relevant in HCI and design research, where the very nature of our work relies on empathising with and understanding human experiences [43], and is often highly situated [1, 6, 20, 27]. Unlike disciplines that separate the researcher's positionality from the research, HCI often places researchers within the very systems we study and the people we design for or with. Whether engaging in participatory design, qualitative research, iterative design, ethnographic work, or co-creative methods, researchers are active participants, embedded within social, cultural, and emotional contexts [11, 13, 18, 30, 34, 37, 46]. This makes the researcher's own experience an integral, yet often invisible, part of the research process: *research impacts the researcher, but the researcher's well-being also inevitably influences the research* [4]. The decisions made during research, the way data is analysed, and even the framing of research questions are shaped by our lived experiences and perspectives [25]. Nevertheless, the empathy we often have toward our participants does not always extend to the researchers behind the work; discussions about how researchers' personal circumstances entangle with their work remain largely absent within the HCI community.

Conversations among this workshop's authors and colleagues across various institutions have further brought to the surface the personal toll this culture can take. We heard of individuals trying to analyse qualitative data while dealing with bereavement or rushing to meet looming conference deadlines while struggling with family illness. Official support structures within institutions are often inconsistent or insufficient; counselling services have long waiting lists, and peers or supervisors may lack the time and knowledge to help in meaningful ways. As a result, well-being struggles within our community, though widespread, are too often pushed underground and perceived as private burdens rather than acknowledged or even embraced as interconnected with our work. This is further exacerbated by the fact that researchers often feel that acknowledging personal circumstances would be seen as a

sign of weakness, diminishing the credibility of their research or jeopardising future career prospects.

While HCI has produced extensive work on designing for mental health and well-being [2, 14, 26, 29, 32, 40, 41], there has been far less focus on the well-being of HCI researchers themselves. Some studies have explored the emotional toll of working with sensitive topics [9, 19, 22, 42], but broader discussions about everyday mental strain in research are still missing. Given that research is shaped by those who conduct it, ignoring researchers' lived experiences limits our understanding of knowledge production in HCI. Moreover, if our field prides itself on examining the "human" behind the technology, supporting the humans behind the research is equally vital.

Our workshop seeks to bring together an interdisciplinary community of researchers, designers, and practitioners who will bring these realities to the surface and address the often-hidden impact of well-being and mental health struggles in HCI. Just as we design better systems and platforms for others, we can also design more empathetic frameworks within our own research community. Our objectives include:

- Create a safe space [15] for open discussion of how personal challenges, from academic pressures to life events, shape the ability to conduct and interpret research.
- Generate dialogue around institutional and community support gaps, and share approaches for addressing them.
- Promote culture change by challenging the stigma around vulnerability and encouraging more open and caring norms in research practice.
- Explore methodological implications by discussing how our lived experience can be recognised within HCI methodologies and accounted for in knowledge production.

Through this workshop, we aim to support ongoing community efforts in HCI to acknowledge and care for the people behind the research. From peer networks to new methods, from cultural change to reflective practice, we hope to contribute to a field that not only centres the human in technology but also acknowledges the complex lives of those who shape it. Over time, we hope this work will strengthen recognition of how personal experiences influence research practices and decisions. By embracing the entanglements between personal life, mental health, and HCI research – rather than hiding them – we can move toward a research culture that is more open, transparent, supportive, and sustainable. If HCI prides itself on centring the human experience, then it must also care for the people who make the field what it is.

## 2 Workshop themes

This workshop explores how personal experiences, researcher well-being, and personal life intertwine with the research we do in HCI. Drawing on the Designing Interactive Systems (DIS) community's investment in reflexive, situated, and creative practices, our workshop will offer a space to reflect on how lived realities shape research processes, outputs, relationships, and academic cultures. We invite participants to share stories, methods, and approaches that examine not only how researchers are affected by challenges, but also how their life circumstances become part of the research itself. Our discussions will investigate some of the following questions:

**(1) Entanglements between life and research.**

How do personal events – such as illness, grief, or burnout – affect how we do research or make decisions about our work? In what ways do our identities, emotions, and life stages influence research topics, collaborations, or ethical positions? What happens when our own challenges impact those we work with (participants, collaborators, or students) and how can we navigate this with care? How can we recognise our vulnerability and lived experience as valuable sources of insight in research? What personal strategies have helped researchers cope, and how can we share them more openly?

**(2) Navigating institutional structures and expectations.**

How do major conference cycles, publication pressures, and funding demands affect our well-being, and how might these structures be rethought? What tensions arise when personal needs conflict with institutional norms or timelines? How can institutions integrate researcher well-being considerations into policy and daily practices, such as supervision and workload management? How can institutions, supervisors, and peers support researchers facing life disruptions, uncertainty, or care responsibilities? What successful support models exist, and how can they be adapted within HCI? How can supervisors support students facing personal struggles, and how can they manage their own challenges too? What examples exist of alternative or more flexible models of supervision, workload planning, or research time?

**(3) Tools, approaches, and interventions.**

How can HCI methodologies better acknowledge our lived experiences, integrating personal struggles as part of knowledge production rather than treating them as external factors? How can creative or reflective approaches help show how research is shaped by personal life? How can technology, including AI, help support more caring or flexible research environments? What kinds of alternative research outcomes [44, 47] (e.g., exhibitions [10], interactive demos [28], or documentaries [45]) allow space for personal experience to be acknowledged?

**(4) Building a caring community.**

How can we create safe spaces, both online and in-person, where we can discuss mental health and personal struggles without fear of stigma or judgment? What community-led initiatives (e.g., peer networks or mentoring schemes) have been successful, and how can they be sustained long-term? What role can the HCI community play in shifting academic culture to be more open, caring, and sustainable? How can conferences and research labs encourage open conversations on personal struggles without compromising professional credibility?

### 3 Workshop format

Before the workshop, we will circulate an anonymous survey inviting researchers to share their lived experiences and thoughts on well-being challenges in HCI. The responses will inform workshop discussions and ensure diverse perspectives are represented. The workshop will begin with activities that allow participants to reflect on and share personal experiences of navigating emotional, mental, or situational challenges during research. This stage will help build trust and create a sense of connection across varied contexts.

From there, we will introduce a collective activity: the creation of a shared story canvas. Using the collected stories as a starting point, participants will collaborate to add different layers to this canvas: grouping experiences, identifying how these challenges affect us as researchers, how they impact those around us, and how they shape the research we do. The layered canvas will evolve throughout the session as a collaborative documentation of the entanglements between life and research. The final canvas will act as both a visual and conceptual record of the workshop, representing the stories shared by attendees and the wider HCI community, as well as the insights, emotions, and patterns that emerged from reflecting on them. The workshop will close with a group discussion focused on translating reflection into action. We will explore concrete steps the HCI community can take to better support researchers and shift towards more caring, transparent, and sustainable research cultures. Participation in all activities will be voluntary, with clear guidelines on confidentiality and the option to step back at any time. Creative exercises will allow non-verbal engagement for those who prefer not to share personal experiences directly. Facilitators will be trained to handle sensitive discussions, and mental health resources will be available throughout. A short debriefing session will be held after the workshop concludes to ensure all participants feel comfortable and supported before leaving.

### 4 Beyond the workshop

One of the key outcomes of this workshop will be the creation of an online library of stories, offering a space for researchers to share personal reflections on how their lives and work are entangled. These stories (gathered through the workshop and earlier contributions) will form a growing resource to help others feel seen, supported, and less alone. Depending on individual preference, contributions may take the form of written reflections, audio recordings, or short video testimonies. The library will serve as a lasting space for recognising the human realities behind research.

Alongside the library, we will draft a Manifesto of Care, outlining practical ways the HCI community can better support researchers facing personal challenges. The manifesto will be shared with the wider community and submitted to the SIGCHI CARES<sup>2</sup> committee, with recommendations to expand their scope to include researcher well-being. If needed, and based on insights from the workshop, we will also suggest updates to the code of conduct to help create more inclusive and supportive research environments.

Participants will also be invited to collaborate on an academic publication featuring anonymised accounts of researchers managing work during personal or emotional struggles and how those are entangled with the work. This piece will highlight how personal lives affect every stage of research, from shaping questions to interpreting findings. To sustain momentum, we will support continued conversations through online groups, virtual meetups, and future collaborations. Our aim is to support lasting shifts in how the HCI community understands, talks about, and responds to researchers' well-being as part of the research practice.

<sup>2</sup><https://sigchi.org/about/sigchi-cares/>

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