

Emily's examination

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A quiet and controlled sense of nervousness had set in, but I was ready. My viva voce examination was four days away and, although I'd read and re-read, flagged and underlined passages, and equipped myself as much as I could, nothing could have prepared me for the hell that was going to break loose the next day.

Three days to go, and I woke to find that my husband had attempted suicide. Six months' supply of sleeping tablets and a litre of vodka had rendered him unconscious and close to death. The next few days passed in a blur, dealing with GPs, paramedics, psychologists, psychiatrists and community mental health teams.

I discussed the situation with my director of studies. Should we postpone? Should we go ahead?

The external examiners (there were two, as I was an internal candidate) had been difficult to pin down for a viva date, and we feared that if we tried to rearrange, it could be months before that was feasible. Additionally, I was all geared up for the event. That, at least, was the theory.

Q: what would you have advised?

The consensus was that we should forge forward.

On the appointed day, I walked towards the room where the viva was to be held feeling strangely calm and detached. I was introduced by the chair to the panel, and my supervisor sat quietly behind me, letting me get on with answering the probing questions that were coming my way. Several times, my mind went completely blank. I was having trouble finding the right phrases and was dangerously emotional and close to tears. Criticisms were levelled at my work and, not having the energy or the concentration to defend my thesis as I should have, I accepted the criticism without properly defending my methods and decisions. I was in a weakened state and felt vulnerable and punch-drunk. The examination seemed to stretch out over several hours, but I was later told that it was just short of two hours in total.

The doctorate was awarded subject to minor amendments, but because of several further suicide attempts by my husband, I was not able to complete them within the originally specified period. It took me almost 18 months to be sufficiently confident to tackle the small list of corrections that in my mind, had grown to be of mammoth proportion.

Both examiners wanted to see my amended work partly because it was so closely aligned with their subject area. They stressed that this was mainly out of interest, rather than just to check that things had been done.

When I did get around to the amendments, I found that I had sufficiently recovered my confidence to defend the original decisions I had made, and my response to the examiners contained something of the defence that I should have supplied during the original viva voce. These retorts were accepted by the external examiners and the amendments were subsequently approved.

The stress of going through the original viva at that particular time was immense, and I should probably have requested a postponement. That said, everything worked out well in the end and on balance, I probably made the right decision.

Team task

What are the lessons here for

1. PhD candidates
 2. Supervisors, and
 3. Examiners?
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