

[Executive Summary of the Mental Health Survey, UNIBAS Report 2024](#)

avuba, 27 November 2025

Swiss Mental Health Survey (SWiMS) 2024

The Switzerland-wide Mental Health Survey (SWiMS) 2024 conducted by actionuni examines the mental health and well-being of mid-level academic staff in Switzerland, including doctoral students, postdocs and other research assistants without a professorship.

The national report contains responses from 2,518 people from 13 Swiss universities. The aim was to identify key stress factors and resources in order to create a data-based foundation for improving support structures and higher education policy measures.

[Results of the national Swiss-wide Mental Health survey 2024](#)

The following report presents the results of the University of Basel (UNIBAS) in comparison to all participating institutions. UNIBAS was the university with the most responses overall (564).

[UNIBAS Mental Health Survey 2024 Report](#)

Mental Health Report 2024 of the University of Basel

According to [the 2024 personnel statistics](#), the total number of employees at the University of Basel was 3,312.6 full-time equivalents. Of these, 1,275.4 were assistants, representing 38.5% of all employees and 61% of academic staff. Although this group makes a significant contribution to research, teaching and supervision, it faces particular challenges, including high work pressure, a "publish or perish" culture, fixed-term contracts and uncertain career prospects. These conditions can affect the mental health of early-career researchers and have consequences on their quality of life, professional development and the university as a whole.

The responses from assistants in this report should be understood within the relevant context. Statements on topics such as mental health or future expectations may also reflect general trends within this demographic group and do not necessarily relate to issues specific to UNIBAS. In contrast, responses on topics such as awareness of support services, supervision, leadership and questionable research practices can be directly attributed to the working environment at the University of Basel.

Participation and representativeness

Participation was voluntary, which may have resulted in a possible bias, as certain groups or opinions may be over- or underrepresented. Demographic comparisons are limited due to missing or incomplete basic data (e.g. gender categories, care responsibilities, departmental affiliations). For this reason, the results should be understood as a snapshot of the mental health of assistants at the University of Basel rather than a fully representative picture.

In autumn 2024, avuba had around 3,200 members (doctoral and postdoctoral researchers). Of the 564 participants, 530 identified themselves as either researchers aiming for a PhD or postdoctoral researchers. This represents a participation rate of 16.5% of all avuba members.

The report contains detailed data on each of the topics listed below, broken down by age, gender, research discipline, type of position, childcare responsibilities and source of funding.

Detailed formulations of the items, variables, etc. can be found in the codebook in the OSF repository for this project: <https://osf.io/kqdnm>.

Vulnerable group

The survey results show that assistants at the University of Basel are **under strain**, regardless of age, gender, research discipline or type of position.

The consequences of poor mental health among researchers for the academic system include:

- Loss of innovative strength
- Decline in research quality and productivity
- Increase in absenteeism due to illness
- Deterioration in teaching and supervision quality

The report therefore highlights areas where targeted measures could provide the greatest support.

Further information can be found here:

- Work organisation and mental health problems in PhD students, 2017, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0048733317300422?via%3Dihub> or
- Mental health of young researchers in academia, 2024, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2468171724000024>

Demographic information of participants in the 2024 SWiMS UNIBAS Report

- 54% of the respondents were women and 44% were men. 2% stated that they did not identify as either male or female.
- 49% come from the natural sciences and engineering, 19% from the social sciences (including psychology, economics, education and law), 18% from the humanities (including art, history, literature and theology) and 14% from medicine.
- 67% are doctoral researchers and 27% are postdocs (an additional 34 people completed the questionnaire. These fall into one of the following categories: researchers with a doctorate but without postdoctoral status, researchers with postdoctoral qualifications, lecturers, administrative staff or "I do not wish to specify").
- 54% hold the Swiss citizenship, a cross-border commuter permit or a C permit.
- 19% currently care for children, family members or other persons in addition to their academic work.
- 70% are employed full-time.
- 12% have an additional paid, non-academic job.

The results of the UNIBAS report show the following main areas with potential for improvement:

- **Mental health:** High levels of poor mental health, burnout and depressive symptoms indicate excessive stress and insufficient preventive measures.
 - 20% perceive their overall mental health to be poor.
 - 26% meet the criteria for problematic depressive symptoms.
 - 27% feel burnt out at least once a week.
 - 26% currently experience very high levels of stress, 51% experience fairly high levels of stress (symptoms include tension, restlessness, nervousness, anxiety or insomnia).
- **Awareness of resources and services:** Many assistants know little about the mental health services available or do not believe that these can help them – there is a need for better information and awareness.

- 41% express doubts that the mental health resources and services available at the University of Basel can help them.
 - 40% do not have a clear understanding of the mental health resources and services available at the University of Basel.
- **Working conditions and job satisfaction:** Stress, uncertainty, insufficient financial security and low salaries are major sources of stress. Fair and healthy working conditions are essential.
 - 60% are satisfied with their job.
 - 24% have frequently thought about quitting their current job in the past year due to their working environment.
 - 70% feel stressed due to uncertainty about their next career steps.
 - 38% feel stressed by uncertainty about the funding of their position.
 - 37% feel stressed due to low salaries.
 - 52% are stressed by an excessive research workload.
 - 22% feel stressed due to an excessive workload in other areas, such as administrative tasks.
 - 29% feel they do not have enough time for their own research.
- **Supervision and leadership:** While cooperation and fairness generally exist, many assistants experience stress due to insufficient support, unclear expectations and excessive demands from their supervisors – indicating a need to strengthen leadership and supervisory skills.
 - 66% agree that their supervisor promotes a collaborative culture.
 - 56% agree that their supervisor supports a good work-life balance.
 - 27% feel stressed due to high demands from their supervisor.
 - 31% feel stressed due to a lack of support from their supervisor.
 - 32% are stressed by unclear expectations on the part of the institution or their supervisor.
 - 65% are confident that their supervisor(s) would listen and take action if they raised a concern.
 - 72% say that their supervisor(s) prioritise quality over quantity of results.
 - 52% agree that their supervisor(s) offer them opportunities to strengthen their profile for future positions within or outside academia.
 - 45% agree that their supervisor(s) support them in navigating research funding application procedures.
- **Self-management and competence-related stressors:** A lack of self-confidence and training in professional and interdisciplinary skills reduces confidence in one's own abilities – targeted opportunities for professional and personal development should be expanded.
 - 53% lack confidence in their own professional skills (27% lack it completely).
 - 25% feel stressed due to insufficient training in professional skills (e.g. research techniques, working methods, grant applications).
 - 26% are stressed because they lack training in interdisciplinary skills (e.g. time and project management, mental health, leadership, communication).
- **Working relationships:** Difficult relationships with colleagues or supervisors have a negative impact on the working atmosphere – promoting team culture and conflict prevention are important.
 - 24% experience stress due to difficult relationships with colleagues or supervisors.

- **Private life and self-management:** Stress due to personal problems, procrastination and self-doubt highlight the need for mental health awareness and individual support services.
 - 36% experience stress due to problems in their private lives.
 - 43% put themselves under stress by procrastinating.

- **Experiences of discrimination and research culture:** Frequent reports of discrimination call for greater awareness, training and protective mechanisms.
 - 19% have been bullied, discriminated against or harassed (psychologically, physically, sexually or verbally) at least once last year.
 - 54% have heard of someone who has been bullied, discriminated against or harassed (psychologically, physically, sexually or verbally) at least once last year.
 - 28% have witnessed bullying, discrimination or harassment (psychological, physical, sexual or verbal) at least once last year.
 - 43% have experienced or witnessed unfair treatment at least once last year.
 - 31% have experienced or witnessed authorship not being attributed appropriately at least once last year.
 - 47% have experienced or witnessed subtle forms of aggression at least once last year.
 - 43% have experienced or observed supervisors pressuring researchers to work at night, on weekends or during their holidays at least once last year.

avuba's list of possible measures to be considered by the university in order to improve the situation

(the more cost-effective measures are written in italics)

The suggestions listed below are to be understood as a collection of ideas and, for resource reasons, do not reflect scientifically sound measures that would demonstrably lead to an improvement in the key figures surveyed; such an evidence-based concept development would require in-depth analysis and the involvement of psychological expertise. avuba is participating in the ongoing consultation on measures to reform employment and working conditions for doctoral and postdoctoral researchers and will incorporate the measures listed below into its feedback.

Mental health

- Raising awareness among supervisors of their duty of care towards their employees. According to the Swiss Code of Obligations, this refers to the general obligation to respect the personality of employees, protect them from harm and ensure working conditions that support their health and performance.
- Clearly communicate the importance of rest, sleep and social life for research success and raise awareness among supervisors of the costs incurred by their team, the university and society when people are absent due to burnout or depression.
- Raising awareness among researchers that their health is their most important asset.
- Integration of mental health and resilience tips into regular teaching and introductory events.
- *Mandatory and structured leadership onboarding programmes and introduction days that inform new employees about challenges and support services at an early stage (existing provision: partially available, expansion or minimal onboarding everywhere would be advisable – possibly organised through graduate schools).*
- *Promotion of mindful and health-promoting behavior, e.g. through posters or digital reminders ("Have you taken a break today?", "Rest is important").*
- *Low-threshold training courses and webinars on stress management (promotion of prevention).*
- *Promotion of peer experience reports and storytelling to remove the taboo surrounding mental health issues (for all university members).*

- *Establishment of an anonymous peer support channel where assistants can exchange ideas (<https://compass-mind.ch/services/> uses [Discord](#), for example).*

Raise awareness of resources

- Create a dedicated website on the topic of health and list all existing accessible resources and counselling centers, including:
 - Internal university services such as the Personal Integrity Office as a confidential point of contact, avuba as a point of contact, free psychological first aid support from the student advisory service for assistants and the Sickness and Accident Fund;
 - Free external services such as Carelink, Victim Support Basel-Stadt, UPK or Dargebotene Hand as important resources for mental health;
 - External services subject to a fee, such as specialist psychological counselling;
 - Swiss basic insurance covers the costs of psychotherapy if it is prescribed by a doctor.
- Regular reminders/awareness-raising about available support services. Assistants have fixed-term contracts and foreign (post)doctoral researchers in particular are not very familiar with the range of services available in Switzerland.
- *Expansion of psychosocial counselling, e.g. study counselling services (psychological counselling).*
- *Regular, mandatory training for employees to raise awareness of psychosocial stress, resilience and dealing with their own mental health and conflicts in the workplace (such as the Skill-Cast course on the prevention of sexual harassment).*
- *Provide training in mental-health first aid for non-psychological professionals who are in regular contact with assistants, such as graduate school coordinators or avuba staff. This could include programmes like Mental Health First Aid Light or ENSA courses.*
- *Appointing individuals with permanent contracts who are not professors as mental health contact persons in each department. Training these individuals accordingly.*
- *Provide additional resources on mental health topics that are accessible at all times.*
 - *How can I increase my resilience?*
 - *How can I reduce procrastination?*
 - *What can I do every day to stay physically, emotionally and mentally healthy (prevention)?*

Working conditions and job satisfaction

- Ensure that assistants effectively take their statutory holidays.
- Distribute teaching workload more fairly.
- Mandatory inclusion of questions about mental health in regular doctoral and postdoctoral surveys, discussion of measures with deans as part of Scientific Advisory Board meetings.
- Make working hours and locations more flexible where possible, especially for parents or carers.
- Incorporate measures to promote cooperation and team development into everyday life (e.g. short breaks together in the fresh air every Wednesday afternoon).
- *Find a solution to the following problem: if people drop out of a project (e.g. research stay of the supervisor or illness of a project member), the rest of the team must take on the pending work. It might be possible to organise an "insurance solution" within the university so that a single project does not have to bear the financial burden. In addition, it should be possible to compensate people who help out in such exceptional cases of from an internal university fund in order to compensate for the loss of resources.*
- *Mandatory management training on mental health and appreciative communication.*
- *Create structures to relieve researchers and prevent overload (e.g. create positions to support chairs/professors/research teams in the form of permanent, highly qualified staff without academic career aspirations).*
- *Establish career counselling services for doctoral and postdoctoral researchers seeking jobs outside academia, including free resources (see ETH [Application Guide 2025 EN v1.pdf](#)).*

Supervision and leadership

- Ensure (e.g. through HR) that, upon commencement of employment, the expectations of assistants, the scope of supervision and their roles are clearly communicated.
- Ensure (e.g. through HR) that regular structured feedback and mentoring meetings take place (not just annual meetings, but at least quarterly meetings) in which future prospects, financing and possible career paths are also discussed (See also [Nature](#) article of October 2025: "What makes PhD students happy? Good supervision".)
- Ensure (e.g. through HR) that assistants know by their second year at the latest what is expected of them by the end of their qualification period, and that this is recorded in writing and monitored.
- Supervisors regularly discuss mental health within the team and talk openly about stress management, relaxation and coping with stress. When feedback indicates overload, they flexibly adjust tasks, deadlines or responsibilities within the team.
- *Regular, mandatory training for supervisors on leadership skills.*

Competence development

- Establish peer support and exchange groups for assistants (possibly via avuba).
- *Conduct a survey on "In which areas do assistants lack skills?" and offer more transferable skills courses in these areas (this could include areas such as "writing research proposals", "support through AI", etc.).*
- *Offer free or discounted courses on resilience and self-management (e.g. via Transferable Skills or Leadership & Development).*
- *Expand the alumni mentoring programme.*

Working relationships

- Raise awareness and train supervisors on the importance of trust-building leadership behavior, which is characterised by appreciation, recognition of achievements and the involvement of all stakeholders in decision-making processes, thereby sustainably increasing the productivity of team members.
- Promoting a sense of community and team spirit through joint activities and team-building measures.
- Where appropriate, do not assign assistants to one supervisor only, in order to reduce the interdependence of employment/supervision/assessment and to minimise the potential for power and discrimination.
- A standardised exit survey – ideally conducted by HR – should determine why the person is leaving the university and how they rated their time at the university (positively or negatively). Specific questions about the team atmosphere can also be asked, as regular anonymous surveys to assess supervisors by all supervised persons, as is common in large companies, are hardly feasible anonymously.
- *Consider and implement measures that help supervisors and team members in internationally diverse research groups strengthen their intercultural skills. This will support better cooperation and help minimise conflicts.*

Private life and self-management

- Create and provide resources with tips and tricks for consciously recognising and documenting one's own strengths and achievements in order to boost self-confidence.
- *Expansion of free courses and workshops on self-management and resilience training as part of transferable skills.*

Discrimination and research culture

- Actively communicate the Code of Conduct and make it mandatory to sign.
- Incorporate health and mental health into the university strategy.
- Raise awareness that selecting future supervisors with strong team leadership and communication skills is financially beneficial for the entire organisation.
- Establish an anonymous reporting and whistleblower office.
- *Provide training on respectful, non-discriminatory communication.*
- *Develop concrete measures within the framework of DORA (Declaration on Research Assessment) that could improve mental health.*