

# The Tough Get Going: A Ph.D. Student's Journey of Letting Go and Moving Forward

By **Monica Ella Harendita** - December 11, 2022



*Monica Ella Harendita is with her daughter in front of The University of Western Australia. Source: Personal Documentation*

***PhD journey has often been regarded as challenging especially for women who had become a wife and a mother. However, there is always a way to tackle issues and keep pursuing the study. In this article, Monica Ella Harendita shared her experience in dealing with geographical separation with her family. She highlighted strategies to cope with mental health issues during a doctoral study.***

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The days when I was doing my master's at **Monash University**, I had always imagined myself starting a Ph.D – Not alone, but with my family by my side. It was a dream I nurtured for many years. In a dream too sweet, I forgot that nightmares may await.

It's true that our visions may not always match reality. Now that I'm in my first year of my **Ph.D.**, alone, without the company of my family. As a mom and a wife, nothing may be more heartbreaking than being miles away from a family, for quite a long period of time. This is the kind of reality that has hit me hard. So, despite the extensive pre-departure training I had, I realised I did not quite anticipate one thing: being separated from my family.

Those with their family by their side may struggle with juggling multiple responsibilities. For those who are in the same boat as me, the struggle seems to be more on the mental and emotional dimensions. Here's how I continue to live my life despite the shattered plans I once had.



*The University of Western Australia, the campus where Monica Ella Harendita pursuing her PhD. Source: Personal Documentation*

## **Being Open**

Embracing our vulnerability does not imply that we are pathetic. Whenever I felt things were getting too distressing, I opened up to my supervisors. In return, I got encouragement and heart-warming responses from them. Having supervisors who care about my well-being as well as my research project makes me feel so fortunate. It is natural for some of us to be unsure whether we should contact our supervisors when we are having personal problems. In my opinion, it really is a case-by-case situation.

Then again, since Ph.D. research cannot be separated from personal life, it may be helpful to be open with supervisors so they can adjust their expectations based on our personal circumstances. Having my friends here as a support system and trusting them has also

been a huge help to me. Their presence reminds me that I'm never alone in this so-called long and lonely journey.



*Monica Ella Harendita is gatehring with her family at The University of Western Australia.  
Source: Personal Documentation*

### **Maximising The Role of Technology**

At times, I have to combat the guilty feelings for not being there for my daughter and my husband. So I have to think of ways to be present, especially for my daughter, although I'm away. Thanks to the internet, I can connect with her in a limitless number of ways. Although being present virtually for sure cannot substitute the physical presence, it does narrow the gap and ease the pain of **homesickness**. It also mediates the multiple video calls I have with them, synchronous Ludo games with voice chat, online quizzes for my daughter, and food delivery for my loved ones. Occasionally, I record myself reading a book to my daughter and upload it to YouTube. With the aid of technology, I can still continue to play my roles as a mother and a wife, which has made me feel much better.

### **Avoiding Self-blame**

People may judge, but I believe that everyone has their own circumstances. In my case, I did try to have my daughter here in Perth, but it just did not smoothly for her. My husband cannot join me due to some work commitments, either. Thus, one of the paramount strategies that I'm still trying to practise is to not self-blame for choosing to do a Ph.D. abroad. It was indeed a difficult decision to make as the guilt of not being present for my daughter is certainly hard to handle.

However, I recall this line from one of the TED talks I've watched: what makes a decision difficult is because neither is better than the other. So, although it's hard, I keep telling myself: "You aren't doing a Ph.D. for selfish reasons. You're doing it for your family. You want to set a good example for your daughter as well." Those affirmations help me to keep going. Furthermore, I am extremely grateful for the support of my family. My husband, I should say, has been my anchor and number one supporter who unconditionally supports me. He makes me feel rest assured that he is looking after our daughter really well. He convinced me that taking this path does not in any way diminish my value as a wife and mother.



*Monica Ella Harendita presents her thesis in a forum. Source: Personal Documentation*

## **Igniting the Flame**

In his book "**Everything is F\*cked: A Book About Hope**", Mark Manson says that the opposite of happiness is neither anger nor sadness. It's hopelessness. That truly resonates with the numb feeling I had for quite a while. I was once so hopeless that almost every morning, I had to drag my feet and talk to myself to get things done. At that moment, I knew I had to seek help. Luckily, at **The University of Western Australia**, we can easily access mental health and well-being support, including up to 3 free counseling sessions per academic year. Similar support is also provided by our insurance provider, which can be accessed 24/7 by phone. I personally found the services very useful for identifying some coping strategies I could take.



*The certificate of achievement in Three Minutes Thesis competition from AIPSSA. Source: Personal documentation*

Writing an article like this can ignite the light for me if it gives me a sense of achievement. It has been therapeutic and fulfilling for me to be able to share my ups and downs, which may be helpful for others as well. A few other opportunities I took, among others, were being a student ambassador, participating in a forum as a presenter and as a student committee member, [writing an article for theconversation.com](#), tutoring a unit, taking part in a 3 Minute Thesis (3MT) competition, and being involved in the [Association of Indonesian Postgraduate Students and Scholars \(AIPSSA\)](#). My sense of purpose in life is regained when I keep myself busy and have chunks of goals to work towards.

On a final note, it's true that doing a Ph.D. *per se* is hard. It may be then amplified by some other issues, which are sometimes beyond our control. Accepting what's beyond our control and moving on may sound effortless, but in fact, they are not. Having the courage to share my stories with you shows that I am working on it and will continue to do so. Lastly, I hope to better prepare those who are afraid of experiencing the same thing. And if you resonate with my story, I hope this can rekindle the flame within you.

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