

Philip Hyland: Human responses to extreme stress and trauma

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Professor Philip Hyland stands as a transformative figure in trauma psychology research, with his groundbreaking work on PTSD and Complex PTSD fundamentally reshaping global understanding of trauma-related disorders. As Professor of Psychology at Maynooth University and Chair of the International Trauma Consortium, Hyland has amassed an extraordinary 19,898 citations across over 340 publications, establishing himself as one of the world's leading authorities on posttraumatic stress. His pioneering research proved integral to the World Health Organization's landmark decision to include Complex PTSD as a distinct diagnosis in ICD-11, revolutionizing how clinicians worldwide assess and treat trauma survivors. The Genomic Press Interview reveals Hyland's remarkable journey from personal struggles with anxiety in his youth to becoming the 2023 Early Career Achievement Award winner at Maynooth University, showcasing how his innovative development of the International Trauma Questionnaire—now the gold standard measurement tool used globally—emerged from his commitment to improving trauma assessment accuracy. As Deputy Statistical Editor for the Journal of Traumatic Stress, Hyland champions revolutionary approaches to measuring psychological symptoms, challenging conventional clinical wisdom by prioritizing self-report measures over clinician judgments. His recent co-leadership of Ireland's first major sexual violence prevalence study since 2002 demonstrates his dedication to addressing critical societal issues, while his expansion into grief research, including validating prolonged grief disorder following pet loss, illustrates his compassionate approach to understanding human suffering. With research funded by prestigious organizations, including the European Commission, and published in elite journals, Hyland continues to advance trauma science through innovative theoretical models and measurement tools that directly improve lives globally.

Part 1: Philip Hyland – Life and Career

Where were you born, and where do you live now?

I was born in Dublin, Ireland, and continue to live in Dublin. I live in a wonderful town just outside the city called Raheny.

Could you give us a glimpse into your personal history, emphasizing the pivotal moments that first kindled your passion for science?

My interest in science started early. I was a child of the '90s, so I grew up watching 'The X-Files', and I always loved the character of Dana Scully, who was the scientist and sceptic (Gillian Anderson being the most beautiful woman in the world may have had something to do with that, too). Later in my teens, I discovered the work of the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, who taught me about how life evolved. I also loved the work of the sceptic and magician James Randi, who brilliantly debunked all kinds



Figure 1. Philip Hyland, PhD, Maynooth University, Ireland.

of quackery. I was also fascinated by astronomy and adored the public-facing work of Carl Sagan, Neil DeGrasse Tyson, and Brian Cox. I have always loved science and how it reveals what is true about the world, but I never thought I would work as a scientist.

Please share with us what initially piqued your interest in your favourite research or professional focus area.

It was personal, not academic. I went through a tough time personally in my late teens and early 20s. I had a wonderful life and experienced none of the usual risk factors for mental health problems, but I became profoundly anxious, depressed, and unhappy. I was lucky enough to want to figure out what was wrong with me, to understand why I had become so





unhappy, and how to fix it. That led me to psychology. I was fascinated by what I learned about the nature of the human mind, and I was excited by the idea that science could be applied to understanding how people think and feel. That was ultimately what led me to studying psychology. It also helped that you did not have to be brilliant at maths to be a psychologist, which ruled out studying physics and astronomy.

We would like to know more about your career trajectory leading up to your most relevant leadership role. What defining moments channelled you toward that leadership responsibility?

My story is one of extraordinary good luck. I lucked into a PhD programme. I had no idea what a PhD was or what it involved when I started it. I was incredibly fortunate to be supervised by Professor Mark Shevlin, who is the most intelligent and nicest person I have ever met, and one of the best researchers in the field of PTSD. I completed my PhD in late 2013, which was during a massive economic downturn when there were essentially no job opportunities in academia in the country. A small college in Dublin had recently started a psychology program and was seeking recently graduated psychologists. I lucked into that job and spent 5 years learning my trade as a teacher and a researcher before having the opportunity to move to Maynooth University. I was fortunate that Maynooth University turned out to be a fantastic place to work, filled with many wonderful people. I was also incredibly fortunate to meet and work with some of the best researchers in my field – Chris Brewin, Marylene Cloitre, Frédérique Vallières, Andrea Maercker, Thanos Karatzias, Menachem Ben-Ezra, Jamie Murphy, Ask Elklit, and Brigitte Lueger-Schuster. It was like winning the lottery over and over and over again—luck of the Irish.

What is a decision or choice that seemed like a mistake at the time but ended up being valuable or transformative for your career or life?

Probably my decision to pursue a PhD after completing my undergraduate degree. I had no idea what I was doing and believed it would be a disaster. It turned out pretty well.

What habits and values did you develop during your academic studies or subsequent postdoctoral experiences that you uphold within your research environment?

Work hard. Be nice - life's too short for assholes. Surround yourself with people who are better and wiser than you. And pursue the truth wherever it takes you.

Please tell us more about your current scholarly focal points within your chosen field of science.

I only ever know this looking backwards, because nothing is ever planned. I suppose I have three things I am currently focusing on. One is testing a theoretical model of Complex PTSD that I developed in conjunction with ENORMOUS help from Chris Brewin and Mark Shevlin. A second is developing new and better ways to measure internal experiences (like symptoms of PTSD). I have an idea that most people in my field think is crazy, which is that if you want to know what a person is experiencing, it is better to rely on a self-report from that person than on a clinician's judgement of what that person is experiencing. That is heretical stuff that would get you burnt at the stake at most conferences in my field. However, it is getting me to think about different, and hopefully better, ways of measuring symptoms of psychopathology. A third area concerns bereavement and grief. I have become increasingly interested in this topic lately. Just today, I finished writing a paper showing that people can develop prolonged grief disorder following the death of a pet, even though the diagnostic manuals do not allow for the disorder to be diagnosed in response to the loss of a pet. That irritated me, so I had to do some work on it.

What impact do you hope to achieve in your field by focusing on specific research topics?

I never think about that. I do the work that interests me and that is important. I do it and I write it up. I never expect my work to have any impact, or even to be read by anyone.



Figure 2. Philip with his girlfriend, Sinéad Howley, in Adeje, Tenerife, Canary Islands, Spain. They go there every January to escape the Irish winter and enjoy some beautiful warm weather.

What do you most enjoy in your capacity as an academic or research leader?

I am not a research leader, but I love the pursuit of truth that should define an academic life. I want to understand the world as it is. The freedom to pursue the truth is what I enjoy most about my job.

At Genomic Press, we prioritize fostering research endeavours based solely on their inherent merit, uninfluenced by geography or the researchers' personal or demographic traits. Are there particular cultural facets within the scientific community that warrant transformative scrutiny, or is there a cause within science that you feel strongly devoted to?

I love that mission statement. I am concerned about the influence of identity politics and social activism on science. It is so important that people trust science (with a healthy degree of scepticism, of course) and trust the process of science that gives us the best understanding we have of the way the world is. That trust is so hard won and so easily lost. When I see certain areas of science becoming so overtly political, or social activism taking hold of a field, I despair. I do not blame people for rejecting what science has to say when it becomes synonymous with a political ideology.

Outside professional confines, how do you prefer to allocate your leisure moments, or conversely, in what manner would you envision spending these moments given a choice?

I would say that 95% of my "work time" is not work; it is getting paid an excellent salary to do what I love. A career in academia gives you incredible freedom to engage in your pastimes, of which I have too many to list: playing golf, supporting Liverpool FC, exercising, watching TV and movies, reading, spending time with the people and animals I love, listening to music, listening to podcasts, and on and on (Figure 2).



Figure 3. Philip, having fun with friends.

Part 2: Philip Hyland – Selected questions from the Proust Questionnaire¹

What is your most marked characteristic?

No idea. That is a question for people who know me to answer.

Among your talents, which one(s) give(s) you a competitive edge?

Being not that smart. I find it hard to understand things that smarter people than I can understand pretty easily. That means I have to break things down to their simplest form to get some understanding of them. When I

do that, I can write about these things, and teach students about them, in a simple and clear manner.

If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?

I really would like to be less anxious (and that my hair would stop falling out).

What is your current state of mind?

I really need to pee, but I must finish this interview.

What is your idea of perfect happiness?

Sitting on the couch with my girlfriend and my two cats, after a good game of golf, eating a pizza, watching a great movie or TV programme, and knowing my friends and family are happy and healthy (see [Figure 2](#)).

When and where were you happiest? And why were you so happy then?

Now. Because I am alive, I am healthy, and I have a wonderful life. I could not ask for anything more than I have.

What is your greatest fear?

Losing the people and the animals I love the most in life. However, I do not really fear it, because it is a natural part of life. I accept it and appreciate every moment I get to enjoy life. I always think of Richard Dawkins' opening paragraph to his amazing book 'Unweaving the Rainbow': "*We are going to die, and that makes us the lucky ones. Most people are never going to die because they are never going to be born. The potential people who could have been here in my place but who will in fact never see the*

¹In the late nineteenth century, various questionnaires were a popular diversion designed to discover new things about old friends. What is now known as the 35-question Proust Questionnaire became famous after Marcel Proust's answers to these questions were found and published posthumously. Proust answered the questions twice, at ages 14 and 20. In 2003, Proust's handwritten answers were auctioned off for \$130,000. Multiple other historical and contemporary figures have answered the Proust Questionnaire, including among others Karl Marx, Oscar Wilde, Arthur Conan Doyle, Fernando Pessoa, Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Cézanne, Vladimir Nabokov, Kazuo Ishiguro, Catherine Deneuve, Sophia Loren, Gina Lollobrigida, Gloria Steinem, Pelé, Valentino, Yoko Ono, Elton John, Martin Scorsese, Pedro Almodóvar, Richard Branson, Jimmy Carter, David Chang, Spike Lee, Hugh Jackman, and Zendaya. The Proust Questionnaire is often used to interview celebrities: the idea is that by answering these questions, an individual will reveal his or her true nature. We have condensed the Proust Questionnaire by reducing the number of questions and slightly rewording some. These curated questions provide insights into the individual's inner world, ranging from notions of happiness and fear to aspirations and inspirations.



light of day outnumber the sand grains of Arabia...We privileged few, who won the lottery of birth against all odds, how dare we whine at our inevitable return to that prior state from which the vast majority have never stirred?"

What is your greatest regret?

Waiting until I was 39 to adopt my cats.

What are you most proud of?

Most people who know me would say I am a nice and good person. That will do.

What do you consider your greatest achievement?

Answer to the last question.

What or who is your greatest passion?

Golf.

What is your favourite occupation (or activity)?

What I am doing (or playing golf).

What is your greatest extravagance?

My golf clubs.

What is your most treasured possession?

My two cats, Twig and Pinecone. However, I prefer not to think of them as possessions. They own me.

Where would you most like to live?

Dublin is alright. Ireland drives me crazy as a nation, but for better or worse, it is my home.

What is the quality you most admire in people?

Intellectual honesty.

What is the trait you most dislike in people?

Christopher Hitchens answered this question by saying, "*Stupidity, especially in its nastiest forms of racism and superstition.*" I cannot do better than that.

What do you consider the most overrated virtue?

Faith.

What do you most value in your friends?

That they are interested in being friends with me (see [Figure 3](#)).

Which living person do you most admire?

Sam Harris and Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Who are your heroes in real life?

I do not have heroes.

If you could have dinner with any historical figure, who would it be and why?

Christopher Hitchens. I would give anything to hear what he makes of the world right now.

Who are your favourite writers?

Non-fiction: Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, David Frum, Anne Applebaum. Fiction: Chris Carter, Vince Gilligan, Aaron Sorkin, John Swartzwelder, Jamie Murphy. Music: Bruce Springsteen, Jon Bon Jovi & Richie Sambora, Noel Gallagher, Damien Rice, Sam Cooke, John Fogerty.

Who are your heroes of fiction?

Homer Simpson.

What aphorism or motto best encapsulates your life philosophy?

"Beware the irrational, however seductive." — Christopher Hitchens

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