Surviving a Research Thesis

While not directly related to writing a thesis, the following comments relate to time management and motivation and as such are extremely important to your success. Not all of the strategies mentioned will suit your method of working, hopefully however, there will be suggestions you find useful.

The Thesis…and The Rest of Your Life

Family and Friends
Enrolling for a PhD is a major commitment in terms of time and energy (now that's an understatement!). While it will form a major part of your life over the next few years, the rest of the world does have a habit of continuing. If you are going to focus successfully on your work, you may well find it necessary to reassess some of your priorities. There are advantages in recognising early, what sacrifices will be necessary. It's extremely important to discuss your decision to study with family and friends, or any others that will be affected by the change in your lifestyle. There may be potential problems in starting a thesis at the same time your wife has decided to return to work, or a child is in a crucial transition year (starting school or doing VCE for example). It may be useful to be aware, too, of the extra difficulties which confront a family moving to a new environment. If other family members are coping with making new friends and adjusting to a new school, there are increased stresses placed on the family as a whole.

This is not to imply such timing is to be avoided at all costs, rather I'm suggesting that it is important to discuss your decision to complete a PhD with those who are going to be directly affected. It may mean making a few compromises, perhaps agreeing to obtain outside help for tasks such as gardening or housework. It's also useful to plan ahead for time to be spent each week with family and friends. Some people find it useful tp plan a long weekend with the family every six weeks or so.

It's also important to have a space at home where you can work uninterrupted. Putting a heater in the garage may be a better option than a study which is next to the family room. Establishing clear guidelines with the family as to what 'uninterrupted' means can also be useful, otherwise you may find yourself answering phone calls, helping with maths homework, providing advice on the likely place for the car keys, or anticipating the next interruption.

It's important to talk about your work with your friends and family. Involve them in the highs and lows. This can play a big part in reducing the isolation felt by PhD students. It can be very frustrating when something, which is such an important part of your life, is not understood by others. Bev Thiele, a PhD student at Murdoch (Daniels, Neave and Thiele, 1990) commented,

"I had a 10 second, a 5 minute, and a 2 hour response to the question, "What's your thesis about?" Most people wanted the 10 second version and changed the subject rather than follow up with further questions. A few close friends wanted the 5 minute version, but that just about exhausted their interest. The 2 hour version was delivered to no-one, it was the account I gave myself in private flights of imagination."

It can sometimes be useful to take family/friends to visit your department so they get a better understanding of what your thesis involves.

The conflicts which can arise if you fail to take these aspects of your life into consideration can often quite seriously affect your ability to focus successfully on your study, While there

are difficulties in maintaining a relationship while continuing your commitment to study, if you are on your own, it can be very difficult to maintain motivation.