Science Societies

Navigating mental health in graduate school

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Graduate school can take a lot out of you. Between research, classes, and your personal life, it can be difficult to balance everything. Many students must also take on a job outside of academia, or they may have children to raise. The demands of graduate school can affect your mental health in a number of ways. Graduate students report struggling with mental health at a rate six times higher than the general public. If

you are struggling with mental health in graduate school, you are not alone. Below you will find some mental wellness tips as well as a number of resources available for graduate students to utilize.

Facts about Mental Health in Grad Students

Many factors contribute to a student's mental health, including work–life balance, supervisor relationships and leadership style, and academic commitments. Survey studies have found that more than 40% of graduate students deal with mental health issues. These can be things such as anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, eating disorders, and substance abuse. More than 50% of graduate students feel that their work–life balance is unhealthy and contributing to mental health struggles, and the same percentage feel as though their adviser/PI does not provide them with enough support or mentorship. Additionally, many students struggle to reach out for help due to the continued stigma around mental health, especially in academia.

Mental Wellness Strategies

Setting Boundaries

Boundaries are a tool that can be helpful in any relationship, but you may receive pushback depending on how the other parties involved with your boundaries react. Establishing boundaries around how you spend your time while at work, how you communicate, or your work–life balance may help you carve out time to implement strategies to maintain your mental health, even when life gets busy.

Here's an example of how you might maintain boundaries in your work life:

You consider Sundays non-working days, a boundary for you. You receive a text message from a colleague regarding a work matter at 10 am on a Sunday. The matter is not urgent. Here are two options to assert your boundary:

1. Text the colleague back with “I received your message—I’ll respond tomorrow.”
2. Wait to text the colleague back until the next working day. “Hi colleague! I received your message this weekend, but I take Sunday as a day for wellness and refrain from working on Sundays. If you have a question in the future for a non-urgent matter, please email me.” You may provide other means of contact or other solutions.

These interactions can be tough to navigate. You know your colleagues best, so use your best judgement. Keep in mind that if someone has previously benefited from you not having boundaries, they may not be interested in respecting your boundaries. You’re not responsible for their reaction, but you are responsible for deciding the boundary.

Balancing Obligations

Grad school is a different experience for students across the board. Students are at all different stages of life: some may be married, have children, be single, have aging parents, have health complications, or are halfway through a career. When considering how to best balance obligations, you will want to consider your priorities. These priorities may shift throughout your time in graduate school, and you may need to reevaluate on a frequent (even weekly) basis. Highlight times of your semester or year that are prone to being high stress, and make a plan for those periods in advance. If you have a child and are worried about studying for finals, perhaps ask your partner, a friend, or family member if they could lend a hand with childcare for an evening so you could study. If household chores become an overwhelming task while you’re busy in other areas of life, consider if it’s in your budget to hire a cleaning service or ask a trusted friend to come over for a movie and folding clothes. You may be surprised at who is willing to help and how much a little assistance can help you balance your obligations and thrive.



Group therapy is one option that is often overlooked but can be a great way to talk to peers sharing similar experiences and brainstorm on ways to handle situations in a positive manner. Photo courtesy of Adobe Stock/fizkes.

Utilizing Therapy

Therapy is one mental health tool that can carry a stigma. Some folks don't consider their problems "bad enough" for therapy. There is no specific level of distress, depression, anger, or any other emotion you need to pursue therapy. Therapy is for everyone.

Many universities and colleges offer free or reduced-cost therapy through a university counseling center, wellness center, or healthcare facility. Oftentimes, these options require you to go through a one-time evaluation to determine your needs. Group therapy, individual therapy, workshops, and on-campus meditation rooms are just a few tools that may be offered. Group therapy is one option that is often overlooked

but can be a great way to talk to peers sharing similar experiences and brainstorm on ways to handle situations in a positive manner.

Physical Health

Your physical well-being and mental health are connected and impact each other. Prioritize six to eight hours of sleep each night, so you have enough energy. Try to exercise four to five days per week even if it is just taking a leisurely walk to get some fresh air. Eating a balanced diet full of nutrient-dense foods can help your body perform at its best. Try to see a doctor once per year for an annual physical if you are able, and be sure to keep up with any prescribed medications as directed. By investing in your physical health, your mental health will also benefit.



On-campus gyms may be places to work not only on your physical health, but to try new options for exercise like yoga or boxing. Exploring new outlets may help you get more in tune with your physical and mental needs. Photo courtesy of Adobe Stock/wavebreak3.

Checking in with Yourself, Family, and Friends

It is important to check in with your family, friends, and also yourself when you aren't feeling your best. The people in your life outside of the academic world, such as your family, and friends who may not be in graduate school, may be able to offer you a safe space to go to that isn't influenced by academics. Having people to talk or vent to and gain perspectives from can help you feel supported. Be sure to check in with yourself, too, and be honest with how you are feeling. Practices such as journaling, breathing exercises, mindfulness, and affirmations can help you feel more in tune with yourself and your emotions, allowing you to handle stress and anxiety in a healthy way.

Resources

On Campus

A number of on-campus resources exist for all students to utilize. Student Health Centers employ counselors and therapists who work right on campus, and scheduling sessions through them may be a more affordable option. Some schools also have mental health centers or support groups where students can go to find help from their peers. If you feel your mental health may be interfering with your ability to take exams or fully participate in class, your campus disability center might be able to work with you to find accommodations that will help you feel comfortable.

On-campus gyms may be places to work not only on your physical health, but to try new options for exercise like yoga or boxing. Exploring new outlets may help you get more in tune with your physical and mental needs. You might even make a new friend or two!

Off Campus

There are also many off-campus resources available. In-person therapy sessions may work for some people, and many therapists are now offering telehealth services where you can have sessions via your phone or computer from the comfort of your home. Other online support systems are also available, such as Mental Health America, where you can seek support from people all over the country and post topics on discussion boards. The National Grad Crisis Line is a free phone line where you can speak to both staff and trained volunteers. Mobile apps aimed at helping people deal with stress and anxiety are becoming increasingly available, such as Calm and Headspace. Many of these apps offer guided breathing and meditation exercises, as well as mindfulness practices, at little to no cost.

Conclusion

Above all else, if you don't feel like yourself, reach out to someone. Be proactive if possible. Explore the resources listed in this article, or reach out to someone at your university for further resources. Finding ways to tackle stresses in your personal or professional life can be helpful as you transition into your career and beyond

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