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# Supporting student success requires looking out for their mental health

Research has shown that student mental wellness is a growing concern, but what can we do about it?

BY CALVIN CHAN & LISA PURDY | DEC 04 2019

Graduate students are adults with an array of life responsibilities including: financial commitments, work, parental, and family demands. But as students, they also balance coursework, teaching, exams, research, and thesis writing, many of which are not bound by workplace hours.

The rising costs of living places [financial stress on graduate students](#). University stipends and awards may not always cover living expenses, and many students depend on part-time jobs outside of school to make ends meet.

The [growth in the number of students](#) completing graduate degrees, coupled with a decline in academic positions has altered the employment landscape, leading to higher levels of job insecurity amongst young academics. The feeling of inadequacy, “[imposter syndrome](#),” can easily take hold, as most students are just starting out in their careers and are often surrounded by much more experienced professionals.

The [competitive nature of publishing](#) adds additional complexity. The pressure researchers feel to produce high-impact data to secure grant funding, may be inadvertently placed on graduate students whose job it is to produce that data. This can translate into self-doubt regarding their abilities as researchers, academics, or graduation prospects.

Academic culture places a premium on productivity, and personal issues that impede it, including mental health concerns, are rarely openly shared. Addressing mental health issues within a diverse graduate student demographic will require a multidimensional approach. The suggestions below are not exhaustive, but is a practical list created from the reflections of the authors.

## Ways to tackle mental health on campus



### As an institution

- **Teach supervisors to be strong mentors:** Students will often seek financial, academic, and career guidance from [supervisors](#). [Research](#) has shown that a strong supervisor/trainee relationship is critical to student success. Mentorship programs or handbooks can be introduced to teach supervisors how to become strong mentors:
- **Foster more safe spaces for students:** In situations where students may not feel comfortable seeking support from their supervisors, [alternatives](#) are needed. Accessibility is increased by integrating counselling services into existing graduate student spaces. Counselling hours need to be flexible to accommodate graduate students' work schedules, and counsellors should be familiar with graduate students' unique concerns and challenges.
- **Create administrative positions to address student mental health:** Academic culture and measures of success vary between faculties, and the problems students face in each one will differ. Creating administrative positions focused on well-being in major faculties will allow for the development of more tailored and effective mental health strategic plans.

For instance, the University of Alberta's faculty of medicine and dentistry has added an assistant dean for graduate student affairs. This provides a safe and confidential place for students to seek out support for personal or academic concerns.

- **Establish student-oriented career support programs:** [Research](#) has shown that career prospects and financial confidence are two of the biggest predictors of graduate student life satisfaction. Establishing graduate student specific career centres, resources, mentorship programs, or professional development programs could help strengthen student confidence and alleviate career anxiety.
- **Train faculty and staff on mental health:** Faculty and staff should never be expected to diagnose or treat mental health problems, but should be well versed to notice changes in students and refer them to other support or mental health services. The Mental Health Commission of Canada offers [Mental Health First Aid](#) training across Canada.
- **Promote a culture of support:** Academic culture's over emphasis on productivity often pushes students beyond their limits. The philosophy of using stress as a way to "test student ability" or "prepare them for academic careers" can breed insecurity and fear of failure. The ability to endure excess stress should never be used as a marker of success. Building an empathetic, compassionate, and friendly community will only work to enrich an institution.

### As a student

- **There is no reason too small:** Even if you're just stressed about an experiment, exam, or an assignment, don't be afraid to talk to someone about it, anyone. Not addressing early symptoms of stress and anxiety can make you feel more isolated.
- **Seek help from anyone:** It can be hard to let go of the stigma surrounding mental health, and you may not always feel comfortable seeking help from your supervisor. Seek help from a friend, family member, staff member or another faculty you feel safe with. Most campuses have some form of student wellness program that offers free and confidential counselling. Each province also has confidential 24-hour mental health [hotlines](#).



- **Protect your “me” time:** When it’s busy, personal time is often sacrificed to boost work productivity. But once you’ve become comfortable giving it away, it can become hard to reclaim. Always set aside time in your week to spend with friends and family, or pursue personal hobbies and interests.
- **Find a self-care routine that works for you:** Get in the habit of building simple daily routines that help you destress and relax but also take care of yourself. Find activities you enjoy, make time, and stick to it. Self-care also means looking after ourselves through regular dental, eye, and medical checkups.
- **Avoid bringing too much work home:** Set boundaries to limit how much work you’re bringing into spaces that are an escape from work. Graduate studies is a big part of your life, but it shouldn’t define you completely. Trying to stay productive all the time will only hinder your long term focus.

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