69 Health and Well-Being in Graduate School: Counseling and Other Resources

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Introduction

In a 2019 Nature survey, over one-third of PhD students reported seeking help for anxiety or depression (Woolston 2019). Certain research topics in Political Science, such as those related to violence, death, or oppression, can traumatize researchers further, even on top of the baseline pressures of graduate school (Loyle and Simoni 2017). Preexisting anxiety and depression was exacerbated during the pandemic, especially for poor graduate students and underrepresented groups who must balance both academic and non-academic stressors. Those struggling with mental or physical health challenges such as these are not alone, but finding the right support can be difficult, time-consuming, and expensive. Moreover, what is in someone's best interest often seems to contradict the norms of academia, leading graduate students to neglect caring for themselves. In this chapter, we discuss the importance of mental healthcare and identify numerous resources and strategies you can use to meet your emotional and psychological needs.

Why Does Mental Healthcare Matter?

It is not uncommon for the stress of graduate school to cause pre-existing or undiagnosed *mental health issues* to (re)emerge (Siegal and Keeler 2020). Addressing one's mental health while in graduate school can feel like a lower priority—something to be pushed aside by a seemingly endless list of tasks and deadlines. Such a view, however, sets one up for a rocky if not impassible road through academia.

You cannot do your best work if you are ignoring your mental health. Graduate students struggling with mental health problems report disruptions in productivity and completion of their theses or dissertations (Wyatt and Oswalt 2013). Graduate students who teach their own courses or serve as teaching assistants may find themselves confronted with undergraduate students who are struggling with their own mental health. Graduate students who work with undergraduates are mandatory reporters under Title IX, and depending on the university, may be asked to report or intervene when their students display worrying behaviors. Taking care of your own mental health is essential to helping others.

Even if you could get through graduate school ignoring your mental health, you have a whole life after graduate school. It is likely that many of the stressors you encounter during graduate school (the pressure to publish, imposter syndrome and comparing yourself to others, work-life balance issues, etc.) will continue in your early career. Burnout, isolation, and imposter syndrome issues persist throughout and beyond grad school, further amplified by the ongoing pandemic (see chapter 50 on imposter syndrome, and chapter 64 on preventing burnout). More than half of faculty members surveyed by the

Chronical of Higher Education in 2020 said they were seriously considering changings careers or retiring early, a trend more prominent among women (Gewin 2021).

What Actions Can You Take?

So, you have decided you want to prioritize taking care of your mental health, but where do you start?

Find Affordable (Mental) Healthcare

As a graduate student, you should have access to your university's student health services. Large universities typically have both health services and counseling or psychological services. University counseling services often provide free or reduced-cost services (National Council on Disability 2017), making it an attractive choice for students. These same centers may offer group therapy, either geared towards specific diagnoses (anxiety, depression, eating disorders, etc.) or specific student populations. Group therapy sessions targeted towards graduate students may offer discussions and coping strategies based on problems unique to graduate students, such as the pressure to publish or being on the job market (see chapter 35 on mental health and the job market). At the same time, do not discount the value of meeting others, including undergraduates, who do not share an academic background with you but are experiencing similar challenges.

Due to the overwhelming demand for mental health services, on-campus *counseling centers* often have a limit on the number of sessions and serve as more as a triage system (Shaffer, et al. 2017). Centers with a triage system may ask students to fill out a questionnaire or participate in a short intake session to assess the level of concern. In a 2017 survey, 97% of four-year colleges reported having a waiting list for counseling services (National Council on Disability 2017), with wait times spanning from a couple days to over a month. Counseling services typically become busier later in the semester, so the earlier in the semester you can schedule an appointment, the easier it will be.

Furthermore, most counseling centers are open Monday through Friday during normal business hours. Depending on the flexibility of your class and research schedule, you may not be available during these times. The location of university counseling services, however, may make it easier to take an hour for therapy than traveling to visit a provider off-campus. If you are concerned about people within your department noticing your absence, you may want to schedule your therapy around lunch or at the beginning or end of the day to make your absence less conspicuous.

There may be other options available to you through the university. If you have an assistantship, you are also an employee of the university, so take advantage of any mental health services offered to employees. Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) offer a range of services, from meditation and stress management seminars to 24-hour hotlines. If your university has graduate programs in psychology, social work, or other counseling-related fields, there may be services offered through those programs. The Association of Psychology Training Clinics has a list of more than 150 member clinics available on their website.[1]

There may also be affordable mental health options available in your community. Community clinics may provide care at a reduced rate. These services may be offered through a religious organization, so if you are not religious, this may not be a good solution.

Before scheduling with a therapist, check to see whether they accept your health insurance. If that is the case, you should only be paying a co-pay for each visit. If the therapist does not accept your insurance, check with your insurance provider about their out-of-network benefits. You may have to pay the cost of an appointment up front, which is not ideal. But depending on your insurance plan's benefits, you may be eligible for reimbursement. Due to mental health parity laws, your insurance provider must provide equal benefits for mental health care as medical care. You can also ask your provider if they have a sliding pay scale, where the provider adjusts their rate depending on the income of the client.

Advocate for Yourself

The work you do advocating for yourself will be just as important to your mental health as the work you

do with a therapist or counselor. For many graduate students, the first place to start is by speaking with your advisor and/or dissertation committee. Supportive faculty can assist you in many ways, such as tailoring deadlines to accommodate your needs, structuring the advising relationship to fit your learning style, and helping you feel less alone.

That said, you should prepare yourself for the possibility that your advisor may not recognize the importance of mental health; graduate students often report feeling a stigma or culture of silence around mental health in their programs (Forrester 2021, Siegal and Keeler 2020). Do not let this deter you. In the long run, you will be better served by putting your mental health above the latest revision of a dissertation chapter, a conference paper, or job market materials. Your advisor may be demanding, but this is ultimately your life. If your advisor or committee members do not recognize the importance of mental health, you may wish to seek support or accommodations from other sources (e.g., campus support groups, other faculty, or fellow grad students).

Advocating for yourself can also take the form of meeting with someone from your university's student disability services (or the equivalent office) to make sure that you receive appropriate accommodations. This is particularly helpful in cases of formally diagnosed learning disabilities (such as attention deficit disorder or dyslexia) and psychological disabilities (such as depression or bipolar disorder). Accommodations achieved through such offices can include additional writing time for comprehensive exams, altered deadlines, alternative exam locations, or other changes to help facilitate your success. These accommodations do not mean that you are less capable of the rigors of graduate school – rather they are just modifications to allow you to complete the same work as your peers in a way that works for you.

Build Community

Caring for your mental health is more complex than just deadlines and counselors. Given that graduate school is difficult, stressful, and often isolating, everyone eventually finds themselves feeling broken down to some extent. Building community can help you maintain balance and provide support when you are feeling vulnerable (see chapter 63 on overcoming academic isolation).

For many graduate students, their cohort mates—or the other graduate students who entered the program at the same time—serve as the initial members of their academic community. Through orientation and shared first-year classes, your cohort mates are likely to understand and sympathize with what you are experiencing. Likewise, senior graduate students within your department can help provide guidance and support from the perspective of someone who recently experienced the same thing. Fellow political scientists are also more likely to understand emotional distress specifically related to your research interests.

You should not feel compelled to build close relationships with other graduate students in your department, however. You may experience heightened anxiety or feelings of imposter syndrome from being surrounded by other political scientists, especially if you are competing within your department for resources. It is not worth putting your mental health at risk to build ties within political science. Over time, you may realize that what you need most in community is not a shared academic interest.

There are benefits to including people outside of your department, and outside of academia, to your support network. Having a support system within academia provides you with a space to talk about issues specific to academia without having to provide additional context. Building a support network of people outside your department provides the solidarity of a common graduate school experience without feeling like you are in direct competition with your support network. It can also provide valuable perspective that what may be happening in your department is not the norm (and therefore warrants further action) or is typical of higher education (in which case you can commiserate together).

Building community with people outside of academia is equally important. You need time to stop working, and that includes time that you are not talking about political science or academia in general. You need interests outside of your research to create that fabled work-life balance. Community organizations (e.g., community orchestra), religious institutions, and volunteer services are great structured outlets to meet people outside of academia.

Students who come from traditionally underrepresented populations may wish to seek out those who share their identity. For example, queer graduate students can benefit from including other queer

students or faculty in their support system. LGBTQ+ resource centers are a common fixture on campuses and often host graduate student events to help facilitate these connections. Likewise, non-American students may seek out co-nationals who share their culture, language, or experiences. Regardless of identity, those with a shared experience can help you feel understood and give you advice on how to navigate difficult situations.

Develop a Plan

It is difficult to address your mental health when you are in crisis, so try to plan ahead. When you are in a good head space, develop a plan to help yourself cope with negative emotions and feelings. These plans can take a variety of forms, but may include the following:

- What are the warning signs? This may include physical signs or symptoms, behaviors that you notice in yourself, or triggers that are likely to set you off.
- How can you take care of yourself at this stage? You need a list of coping strategies. These coping strategies will likely not solve your problems but will help you tolerate distress.
- Who can you reach out to for help at this stage? Identify people in your support system who you can contact and provide them with concrete actions they can take to help you. These people can range from mental health professionals to friends and colleagues to members of your family.

There can be various stages of your plan to help you recover from a range of challenges, from "having a bad day" to "full blown meltdown." The more detailed you can be in your plan, the easier it will be for you to put the plan in place when you are struggling. By thinking this through in advance, you may also be better equipped to communicate your needs to members of your support system (Hummel and El Kurd 2021).

Identify the Root Problem

The source of your mental health struggles may predate your graduate school experience, but the nature of political science research can cause emotional distress and trauma (Hummel and El Kurd 2021; Loyle and Simoni 2017). Graduate students conducting fieldwork, for example, may feel particularly isolated, and those studying topics related to violence and oppression may experience secondary traumatic stress or vicarious trauma (Coles, et al. 2014). Be cognizant of your research subject and take regular breaks.

Additionally, the environment of your department or college can exacerbate the stress of graduate school (Mackie and Bates 2019). While these issues cannot be addressed alone, graduate student associations, graduate unions, or other collective entities on your campus may be able to intervene on your behalf (see chapter 33 on graduate school unions).

Conclusion

The pressures of graduate school can create mental health challenges and exacerbate pre-existing conditions. Feelings of anxiety and depression are common among graduate students across disciplines; depending on your area of research and the environment within your graduate program, you may find yourself even more emotionally vulnerable. Preparation and prevention are essential in managing your mental health. With a combination of trained medical professionals, a strong support network, and self-advocacy, you can create a plan to succeed academically without compromising your mental health.

Endnotes

1 http://www.aptc.org

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