SUPPORTING GRADUATE STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Council of Graduate Schools

2025 Summer Institute

Portland, Oregon

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Tulane University

- Private, R1, AAU – founded in 1834
  - Tulane's purpose is to create, communicate and conserve knowledge in order to enrich the capacity of individuals, organizations and communities to think, to learn and to act and lead with integrity and wisdom.

- Total students N = 14,115 (36.25% - grad/professional)

- Decentralized graduate education
  - 9 Schools & 1 undergraduate college
  - PhD offered in School of Liberal Arts, School of Science & Engineering, Biomedical Sciences (Medicine), Celia Scott Weatherhead School of Public Health & Tropical Medicine, & AB Freeman School of Business
  - Professional graduate degrees in Architecture, Business, Law, Medicine, Public Health, Professional Advancement, & Social Work

- Increased and growing grad/professional student usage of Counseling Center & Goldman Center for Student Accessibility

Tulane University

- **Case Management & Victim Support Services (CMVSS) - Student Affairs**

  - **Pregnancy, parenting, and reproductive health**

  - **Student Affairs Emergency Aid request**

  - **Access Off Campus Mental Health Care**

  - **Crisis & After Hours Support**

  - **Swipe Out Hunger**

  - **Doxing Resources**

  - **CMVSS Personal Pantry**

- **Case Management**

  - Case Management does not solve student's problems for them but rather helps the student identify the issues and appropriate resources and works collaboratively with the student to develop an action plan.

    - We support and empower our students to take action and advocate on their own behalf. Case Management provides non-clinical services.

  - **Staff from Case Management also triage referrals and other reported information or concerns as it comes in, investigates and gathers additional information, prioritizes reports, and determines appropriate responses, sometimes in conjunction with Process of Care and/or the Behavioral Intervention Team.**

- **Case Managers are available to consult with students, faculty, staff, families, and community providers to determine the best approach to the student's current situation.**

Gallaudet University

- Unique History and Mission

- Congressional Support

- Graduate School Structure

- Graduate Programs

- Graduate Student Population

- Graduate Student Utilization of CAPS

University of Colorado Denver

- The University of Colorado Denver (CU Denver) is an urban, public research university designated as an R1 institution.

- CU Denver has 75+ graduate programs at the master's and doctoral level housed in 7 schools and colleges.

- Graduate School was dissolved in 2022, currently structure is decentralized; new Chancellor and Provost so Graduate Education is being restructured.

- Enrollment: 13,968 students

- 70% undergraduate, 30% graduate/professional

- 74% full-time students 82% from Colorado

- 13% nonresident students of which International students come from 135 different countries

- 43% male, 56% female

University of Colorado Denver

- Data on Graduate Student utilization of mental health counseling services on campus.

- 8/1/2024 – 8/1/2025 the CU Denver Counseling Center had 121 clients who were graduate level (3513 total appointments across all students in the last year)

- Across all students at the university, the top 5 client concerns (as identified by clients) were: Anxiety: Generalized 19%, Depression 15.9%, Stress 7.9% and Anxiety: Social 6.7%).

- The CU Denver Counseling Center does offer students in-person or virtual resources. For international or out of state, Telus health and mental health resources are offered to students, https://studentsupport.telushealth.com/us/home

Focus of Presentation
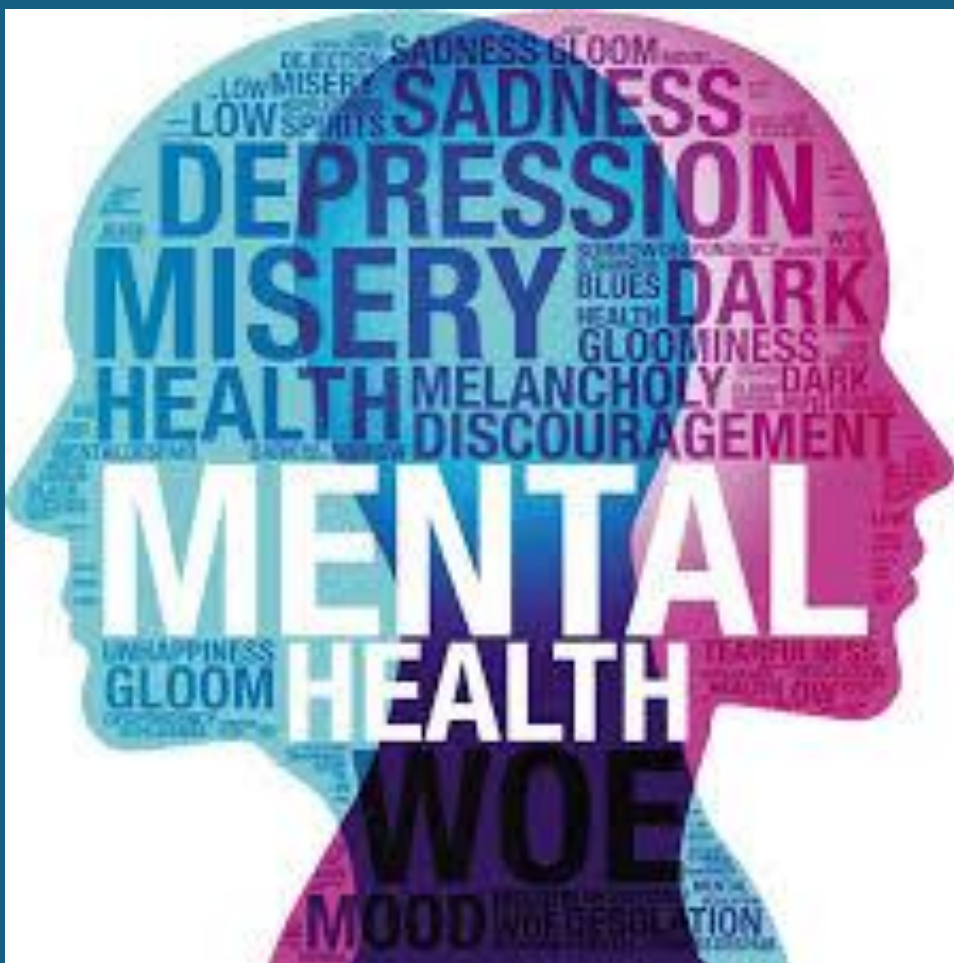
- This presentation will explore issues impacting the mental health and well-being of graduate students during these uncertain times.

- Panelists will provide strategies for helping graduate students navigate financial uncertainty, the loss or threatened loss of equity for specific identity groups, and uncertainty around issues related to immigration status.

- We will also talk about how graduate deans and graduate school staff can focus on their own well-being and mental health.

What are the main mental health challenges impacting graduate students at your institution?*

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT GRADUATE STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH

Common Mental Health Concerns for Graduate Students

- ❖ Depression
- ❖ Anxiety
- ❖ Perfectionism
- ❖ Guilt
- ❖ Imposter Syndrome
- ❖ Stressors from family/friends
- ❖ Stressors from faculty/advisors/chairs
- ❖ School/work/life balance
- ❖ Pre-existing mental health issues

STUDIES SHOW THAT UP TO 50% OF GRADUATE STUDENTS REPORT SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION, ANXIETY, OR BURNOUT DURING THEIR TRAINING, AND POOR MENTAL WELL-BEING IS A MAJOR CONTRIBUTOR TO STUDENTS' DECISION TO LEAVE ACADEMIA.
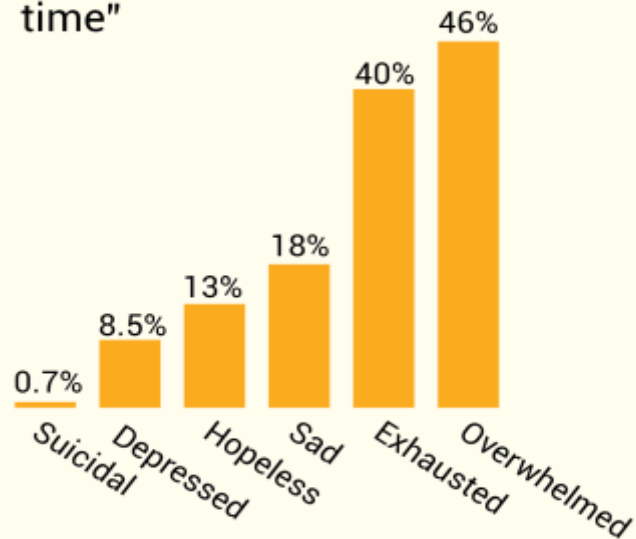
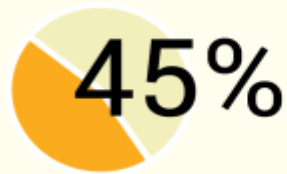Senthil Kumar, Matthieu, Freed, Sigmund, & Gutterman, 2023.

Under pressure:

Report on graduate student mental health at UC Berkeley

Stress, anxiety, and depression are the most common reasons graduate students seek mental health services

Percentage of graduate students expressing the following emotions "frequently" or "all the time"

Bar chart:
- Suicidal: 0.7%
- Depressed: 8.5%
- Hopeless: 13%
- Sad: 18%
- Exhausted: 40%
- Overwhelmed: 46%

Women are up to **2X** as likely as men to report these stressors

45% of graduate students report having an emotional or stress related problem over the past year

Graduate Students and Mental Health

41% of graduate students experience moderate-severe anxiety

Graduate students are **6x** more likely to have depressive and anxiety symptoms compared to the general population

50% of graduate students with anxiety/depression reported receiving inadequate mentorship from their advisor

Students that identify as female, transgender/gender-nonconforming are at risk for experiencing anxiety and depressive symptoms

Resources for Graduate Students

Seek out resources at your university. Many universities have support systems in place for students including student affairs, student counseling, fitness centers, multicultural affairs, and disability student resources.

Check out the National Alliance on Mental Health for local chapters on your campus or in your local area.

If you are in crisis contact the suicide crisis hotline at 1-800-273-8255.

Statistics from: Evans, T.M., Bira, L., Gastelum Beltran, J., Todd Weiss, L., Vanderford, N.L. (2018). Evidence for mental health crisis in graduate education. *Nature Biotechnology, 36*(3), 282-284. doi: 10.1038/nbt.4089

Challenges Faced By Graduate Students

Council of Graduate Schools & Jed Foundation report (2021) ; Ganguly (2020); Wildey, Fox, Machnik, & Ronk (2022)

- ❖ Poor mentorship
- ❖ Inability to access counseling services
- ❖ Lack of training for non-academic careers
- ❖ Isolation and Loneliness
- ❖ Perceived stigma and lack of awareness about mental health resources
- ❖ Limited access of resources (closed after 5pm and weekends)
- ❖ Structural problems in academia
- ❖ Inflexibility by lab leaders and faculty

Challenges Faced By Graduate Students

Council of Graduate Schools & Jed Foundation report (2021) ; Ganguly (2020); Wildey, Fox, Machnik, & Ronk, 2022)

- ❖ Lack of supportive leave policies for graduate students
- ❖ Hyper competitive environments
- ❖ Increased academic rigor in coursework
- ❖ Family responsibilities
- ❖ Financial stress and uncertainty
- ❖ Harassment and discrimination
- ❖ Stress related to year in graduate program
- ❖ Immigration issues & federal policies
- ❖ Loss of equity for identity groups

GRADUATE STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

CGS-JED Initiative

- Include training on graduate student mental health and well-being in **orientations held for new graduate faculty and directors of graduate programs.**

- In conjunction with the graduate faculty senate or other shared governance body, begin the review, and as appropriate, revision of **graduate student leave policies** that may negatively impact students. In particular, explore **flexible leave policy options** that allow students to remain partially engaged with their programs if they choose to do so.

- Investigate how **time-to-degree** or **funding limits** might be changed to promote both work/life balance and the highest levels of academic performance.

- Create a **source of funding** to support graduate student organizations planning **wellness days, mental health campaigns or events.**

Source: Andy Dean/Adobe Stock

Current Context

- Political Climate
  - Academic Freedom / Curriculum
  - Financial Uncertainty
  - Research Funding / Career Impacts
  - Equity for specific identity groups
  - Immigration status and travel restrictions
- Institutional Responses
  - Restructuring of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion units and programs
    - Belonging and Engagement
    - Access and Campus Engagement
    - Academic Excellence and Opportunity
  - Policies on Student Protests and Demonstrations

Intersectionality and Differential Impacts

- **International Students**

- **Undocumented Students**

- **Students of Color**

- **LGBTQA Students**

Source: Andy Dean/Adobe Stock

Questions for Breakout Group Discussion

BREAKOUT SESSION

Rising to the Challenges

- What resources does your institution provide to support the mental health and well-being of your graduate student population?

- Discuss 1 promising program or intervention that you are currently working on

Graduate Students & Mental Health Vignettes

Vignette #1. Anika is a first-year biochemistry international graduate student from India. About two months into her first semester of graduate school, Anika's beloved grandmother suddenly passed away. Due to religious customs, her grandmother was buried immediately after her death and Anika was unable to participate in the mourning rituals. Anika feels like she is shaming and dishonoring her grandmother because she was not there to participate in the cultural mourning practices. She is having difficulty focusing on her studies and is struggling with depression and deep sadness.

Graduate Students & Mental Health Vignettes

Vignette #2. Due to budget cuts in the English department, Marc received an email from his program coordinator that he will not have his graduate teaching assistantship for his second year. He does not know how he will pay for his tuition and fees for this coming academic year.

Graduate Students & Mental Health Vignettes

Vignette #3. Finley is a second-year master's MBA student. They identify as trans. The President of Finley's university, facing political pressure of potential significant funding cuts from the federal government which would have impacted faculty lines and student support services announced to the campus that they were shuttering the Pride Center, Gender and Women's Studies Center, and the Multicultural Affairs offices effective immediately. Finley has faced anti-trans comments from peers and instructors in their business school and relied on the Pride Center for support.

Graduate Students & Mental Health Vignettes

Vignette #4. Sarah is a 4th year doctoral engineering student. Sarah works in their research lab and feels intense pressure and competition among her lab peers. Sarah was just informed by her dissertation chair that he is taking on a new administrative role at a different university and can no longer serve as her dissertation chair, nor will he have time to serve on her committee due to his new responsibilities. Sarah is feeling overwhelmed and upset that her mentor is leaving.

GRADUATE STAFF WELL-BEING

What are the main challenges and stressors impacting graduate faculty and staff at your institution?

What are the biggest threats to your own well-being as a graduate leader at your institution?

Challenges Unique to Graduate Leaders

- Changes in leadership
- Restructuring and reorganization
- Elimination of centralized Graduate School

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Questions for Breakout Group Discussion

- 1. What are the most difficult issues around school/work/life balance?

- 2. What steps can you take to reduce burnout and promote wellbeing among graduate faculty and staff?

- 3. How can you improve your own work/life balance, including your approach to your administrative work in graduate studies?

REPORT OUT FROM BREAKOUT DISCUSSION

GROUP DISCUSSION

5 Stages of Burnout

The Honeymoon Phase
The feeling of satisfaction when you take on a new task/s. You experience expected stresses but have good coping skills to remain in this phase.

The Onset of Stress
Here is when you notice the first signs of stress that show up emotionally and physically such as anxiety, fatigue and distraction.

Chronic Stress
Now your stress levels rise and become more frequent. Fatigue is deeper, anxiety more pronounced, irritability, poor decision making, lower mood. Physical symptoms increase in severity. It's time to stop and rest.

Burnout
Your situation is now critical with all the symptoms of chronic stress plus behavioural changes, negative mindset, sense of isolation and depressive thoughts. Physical symptoms worsen.

Habitual Burnout
The symptoms of burnout are a constant presence in your life and additionally physical and emotional symptoms may become chronic and life threatening.

Stress and the Development of Burnout

Self-Care Strategies for Graduate Leaders

Creating a personal self-care action plan
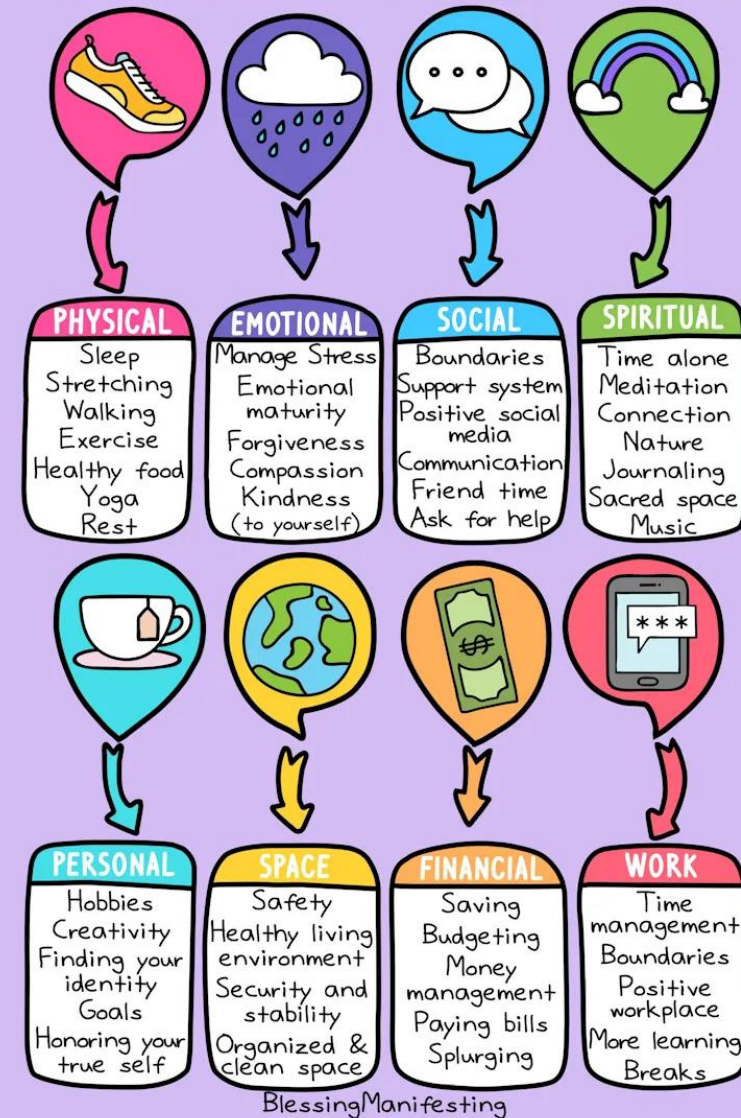
Importance of creating a self-care strategy

How to recognize your own burnout

How to approach a colleague or supervisor who is burned out

Balancing the role of caring for self vs. caring for others

Personal vs. professional self

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Resources

Graduate Student Mental Health and Well-being

Home / Graduate Student Mental Health and Well-being

A growing body of evidence indicates that mental health challenges are common among graduate students. Unfortunately, many barriers exist to effective support and care. Beginning in 2019, CGS and The JED Foundation undertook a project to create an evidence base to inform future policies, programs and resources. Below are the results of that project, including the report, "Supporting Graduate Student Mental Health and Well-being: Evidence-Informed Recommendations for the Graduate Community."

Report and Recommendations

- Executive Summary and Recommendations
- "Supporting Graduate Student Mental Health and Well-being: Evidence-Informed Recommendations for the Graduate Community" (Final Report)
- Communications Toolkit
- Call to Action and List of Signatories (Updated January 30th, 2024)
- Webinar: Supporting Graduate Student Mental Health and Well-being: Evidence and Recommendations to Catalyze Action (Recording and slides)

Consultant Papers

CGS and JED commissioned three essays on aspects of graduate student mental health and well-being. Authored by experts in their fields, these explore cultural and organizational issues surrounding graduate student mental health; issues specific to international students, and legal issues."

- "Unique Challenges and Opportunities for Supporting Mental Health and Promoting the Well-being of International Graduate Students" by Jenny J. Lee (University of Arizona)
- "Promoting Graduate Student Wellbeing: Cultural, Organizational, and Environmental Factors in the Academy" by Julie R. Posselt (University of Southern California)
- "Balancing Access and Safety for Graduate Students with Mental Health Issues" by Hannah S. Ross (Middlebury College)

Other Resources

- "CGS & JED Release Evidence-Informed Recommendations and Resources to Support Graduate Student Mental Health & Well-being" (Press Release)
- Webinar: "A Framework on Graduate Student Mental Health: CGS Members Share Ideas and Guidance" (3.16.2021)
- Hironao Okahana, "Pressing Issue: Mental Wellness of Graduate Students" (4.9.2018)

Resources

SELF-CARE WHEEL

Physical — Safe housing • Regular medical care • Eat Healthy • Exercise • Be sexual • Get enough sleep • Take vacations • Get time off • Massages • Acupuncture • Bubblebaths • Kiss • Ask for nurture • Take a walk • Turn off cell phone • Get "me" time

Psychological — Self-awareness • Self-reflection • Therapy • Journal • Aromatherapy • Sensory engagement • Paint • Go to symphony or ballet • Relax in the sun • Garden • Draw • Read a self-help book • Join a support group • Think about your positive qualities • Practice asking and receiving help

Emotional — Affirmations • Self-love • Self-compassion • Cry • Social justice engagement • Laugh • Say "I Love You" • Watch a funny movie • Find a hobby • Flirt • Buy yourself a present • Cuddle with your pet • Tell yourself "You are gorgeous!" • Practice Forgiveness

Spiritual — Self-reflection • Go into nature • Find spiritual community • Self-cherish • Meditate • Sing • Dance • Play • Be inspired • Take yoga • Play with children • Bathe in the ocean • Watch sunsets • Pray • Find spiritual mentor • Volunteer for a cause • Foster self-forgiveness

Personal — Learn who you are • Figure out what you want in life • Plan Short and Long-term Goals • Make a Vision Board • Foster friendships • Go on dates • Get coffee with a friend • Get out of debt • Just relax • Write a poem or a book • Spend time with your family • Cook out • Learn to play guitar

Professional — Take time for lunch • Do not work overtime • Set boundaries • Leave work at work • Do not work during your time off • Get regular supervision • Get support of colleagues • Take mental health days • Learn to say NO • Plan your next career move • Take a class • Take all vacation and sick days

LIFE BALANCE — SELF-CARE WHEEL

This Self-Care Wheel was inspired by and adapted from "Self-Care Assessment Worksheet" from *Transforming the Pain: A Workbook on Vicarious Traumatization* by Saakvitne, Pearlman & Staff of TSI/CAAP (Norton, 1996). Created by Olga Phoenix Project: Healing for Social Change (2013).

MENTAL HEALTH DURING YOUR PhD

47% — A study by the University of California, Berkeley, found nearly half of postgraduate students met criteria to classify them as depressed.[1]

AN OPINION PIECE BASED ON SOME RESEARCH I DID IN MY LUNCH HOURS AND MY ENTIRELY UNQUALIFED EXPERIENCE*

WHAT YOU MAY BE EXPERIENCING/FEELING (YOU ARE NOT ALONE, I PROMISE)

IMPOSTER SYNDROME
7 in 10 people experience imposter syndrome throughout their careers[2]. Someone is going to figure out you don't belong here soon. You look good on paper, but passing that exam was a fluke. I don't have what it takes to [do these experiments, write a thesis, succeed in academia]. These are all classic signs of imposter syndrome. **Tip: reframe your thinking. Aim for progress not perfection.**

NO MORE TICK BOXES
You got pretty good at doing essay and lab reports - they were all short term tasks. You also got good at figuring out what questions might be asked in exams. Now you have an open ended project, with the end no where in sight. You no longer have grades to tell you if you are doing a good job. Transitioning from this undergraduate mentality can be particularly tough. **Tip: break down your research into small, manageable goals.**

FIRST TIME FAILING
You've always been the best student at school, and you did pretty well at university too. Now your science isn't working and everyone around you seems to be getting on just fine. These feelings can come about as at undergraduate level, experiments (believe it or not) are designed to work. **Tip: remember, you are at the forefront of scientific research - if it was easy it would already have been done!**

ISOLATION / GUILT
Writing your thesis can be a particularly lonely, isolating task. This can also be coupled with feelings of guilt when going about your daily life as "you should be writing". Tips to manage this include still attending research group meetings/departmental seminars whilst writing. This can also be coupled with 'writer's block'. **Tip: when writing, start by making figures - it is far easier to write about what a figure means.**

COMPETITIVE LANDSCAPE
Unfortunately, academia often fosters competition over collaboration, when it should be the other way around. This is made worse by the fact that often the only way to gauge how well you are doing is to compare yourself against others. **Tip: no two PhD projects are the same. so avoid comparing them.**

THE WORK | LIFE STRUGGLE
55% of PhD students are concerned about work-life balance[3]. There is an inherent culture of acceptance in academia of long work hours. In fact, 40% of academics report working more than 50 hours a week.[4] This is a fault with the system. Presenteeism is a common trait observed in academia, where peole work long hours due to anxiety/stress, but are not being efficient in these long hours. **Tip: aim to be efficient inside normal working hours then focus on "you" time.**

A hard truth is only 7 in 200 PhD graduates become full professors.[5] During your PhD, make sure to work on other "soft skills" as well as doing your research. Like making a poster for an online Twitter competition for example...

ARE THOSE AROUND YOU STRUGGLING? HERE ARE SOME POSSIBLE WARNING SIGNS

INCREASED DRINKING • INCREASED EATING • DECREASED EATING • WORKING LONG HOURS • BEING ABSENT • JOKING ABOUT SUICIDE • LOOKING DISHEVELLED

SELF-HARMING? SUICIDAL THOUGHTS? CALL SAMARITANS NOW ON 116-123 OR EMAIL JO@SAMARITANS.ORG

SOME WAYS TO HELP MANAGE YOUR MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

SEEK MEDICAL ADVICE — Speak to a medical professional about how you are feeling. This may lead to intervention such as medication or counselling to help you manage your mental health.

TAKE SOME TIME OUT — Taking a break can actually improve efficiency when you return to work. If you cannot justify taking a couple of weeks off, take a series of long weekends to get some time away.

FOCUS ON YOU — It is a proven fact that lack of sleep can add to feelings of stress. Exercise can also work to alleviate stress. It may feel like you don't have time, but going for a walk at lunchtime (for example) may be a positive change you can make.

REQUEST COUNSELLING — Universities have counselling services that are available for you to use. This can be useful to help talk through your problems and also make sure appropriate coping strategies are in place.

TALK TO YOUR SUPERVISOR — It is not always possible, but if you feel you can approach your supervisor, discuss your mental health concerns with them. Other options include discussions to reduce workload temporarily or take time out.

TALK TO YOUR PEERS / POSTDOCS — It is highly likely that people around you have also experienced the stressful nature of a PhD. Reach out, if you feel able. Remember, postdocs have survived their PhD so may have some useful tips / coping strategies.

CREATE MANAGEABLE CHUNKS — If everything is overwhelming, try to break down your research into manageable tasks. It may help to do this in consultation with your supervisor. A good tip is to aim to get into the lab first thing in your day, before looking at other tasks like emails.

READ LITERATURE — There are a large amount of online resources available to help manage mental health and wellbeing. For example, the charity Mind, have a range of booklets available, from how to manage stress, to how to support others with mental health problems.

As a final note if your PhD is heavily affecting your mental health and wellbeing, there is absolutely no shame in quitting and starting a new chapter in your life. There are plenty of successful people that quit their PhD Put it this way - you might got up with an ill fitting t-shirt for a while, but you wouldn't wear it for 4 years!

REFERENCES — 1. Graduate Student Happiness & Well-Being Report, 2014, University of California, Berkeley. 2. Sakulku, J. The Impostor Phenomenon. The Journal of Behavioral Science, 6(1), 75-97. 3. Graduate survey: A time-hurt relationship. Nature 550, 549-652. 4. Guthrie, Susan, et al. Understanding mental health in the research environment: A Rapid Evidence Assessment. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017. 5. The Scientific Century: Securing our future prosperity, The Royal Society, 2010.

#TIMETOTALK #RSCPOSTER

*ALTHOUGH I DID SURVIVE A PhD

A poster by Dr Zoe Ayres (not a medical professional). Free to distribute.