

Self-Care Tips for Graduate Students

During the first year of my doctoral program, I lived, breathed, and ate work, which is encouraged in most academic circles. I did well in my coursework and in my assistantship, but I found myself going through severe bouts of anxiety, despite the success I experienced on campus. Around the second year, I made a New Year's Resolution that I was going to take better care of myself. By following the tips I'm offering in this series, I was able to successfully complete my Ph.D. in the optimal four years and land a tenure-track position and keep my sanity at the same time. Here is the first set:

Tip #1 - Regular Sleep

Latin American cultures value the siesta, or the midday nap to set off the workday. In Europe, employees receive four and six weeks' paid vacation time by their employer (as of this writing). Now let's contrast this with what's expected in the United States. People talk about working on three hours of sleep, and they say this like it's a badge of honor. Grad school sentiment is like this. A couple of colleagues asked me how many hours of sleep I got each night. Personally, I can't function on more than seven hours. However, since I wish to avoid judgmental comments, I said "five." The response? "Wow. I wish I could sleep that much. I got like three!" I had the same conversation with a colleague in my new job, and I gave that same response.

According to the National Sleep Foundation, people vary in their sleep needs. I need at least seven hours of sleep per night, and I was never able to focus on reading, writing, or teaching without it. So don't buy into the socially accepted myth that the less sleep you get, the more productive you are. Get your hours; use your awake time to get your work done, and don't apologize for sleeping, and if people ask you how much sleep you got, you can lie. It's really not their business anyway.

Tip #2 - Eat Right

I'm always fascinated when I go to restaurants. I see people ordering healthy foods and leaving half of their platters, yet the obesity rate in this country is higher than it's ever been. When I get home from a long day of work, the first thing I want to do is attack my fridge, especially if it's housing pizza or cold pasta. Fortunately, I no longer keep the high-calorie items in a place where I can access them immediately. High-fat meals can lead one to feeling sluggish. Around the second semester of my second year, a couple of months after my panic attacks, I found out my blood sugar was borderline diabetic. I was eating a lot of carbs and a lot of sugar, and I knew I had to make a change. So I switched from nightly pasta intake to whole-wheat rice. I occasionally would indulge in pasta, but only whole-wheat. And whole-wheat bread. And sugar and dinner out were weekend treats. I found my weight dropping and my energy toward my work increasing. I just felt better, and it carried into my work.

Tip #3 - Exercise

Around the same time I started eating right, I added running into my exercise routine. I always hid behind “well, I work out, so it’s okay for me to eat whatever.” Not quite. Exercise burns less calories than food brings in. Cardio also burns fat; I wasn’t doing much of this. It was mostly weightlifting. However, I found running was helpful for my own mental state. I read an article in *Men’s Health* about an alternating walking/running plan. For about a week, I would be on the treadmill running for about 30 seconds and then walking for a minute. I would do this for about five minutes. Then, one Tuesday morning, I found myself running for two minutes without stopping. I just liked the feeling that went with it. So I started doing it three mornings a week, and I found all the stress I felt with work just went away. I’m not prescribing running for everybody, but I found it worked for me. There is an old adage that says “strong body, strong mind,” and studies do support this. According to Christian Anderson, wellness and fitness coordinator of the University of San Francisco, exercise helps people to think clearly. My experience is congruent with that, as I felt more excited to work when I began running on a regular basis.

Tip #4 - Journaling

My dissertation topic revolved around low-stakes writing as a bridge to high stakes writing. I also have an interest in writing as a healing process, and many of the studies I know show how journal writing has led to increased feelings of self-esteem. Another thing you might consider is journaling. I tell my students who struggle with writing, “Write in a journal just to practice. Nobody has to read what you write. You’re the only one who has to see it.” Writing can help people relieve stress, and low-stakes writing has helped lead to confidence in higher-stakes writing. If you’re interested in the latter, feel free to view my website.

Tip #5 - Communication

Most graduate students I know (myself included) are not prone to prolonged, consistent socializing. In fact, if I had my way, I’d keep my office door closed all day and read books. Unfortunately, the academic grapevine doesn’t work that way. If you’re in the sciences, you’re most likely forced into a lab setting with fellow students with the same interests, so socializing is easier, but it can be difficult if you don’t particularly like the people you work with. Nonetheless, you do have to coexist with them, so if you’re unable or unwilling to switch programs, practice the principles of humility and patience.

If you’re in the humanities, like I was, isolation is a lot easier to come by. Since I’m a classic introvert, I loved this about the last two years of my graduate school career, when I spent all those hours at the little table in my apartment, pounding out the words on my dissertation. In hindsight, however, I wish I would have spent more

time socializing with my classmates. At the minimum, we need to be in contact with our classmates about things like deadlines and conferences. You're also probably hearing the term "networking" with regards to job-searching, and your colleagues may be able to help you down the road. It can also be reassuring to know that they go through the same stresses and fears that we do, and the intellectual posturing that we all do is often just a front. So don't isolate.

Tip #6 - Avoid the Drama

As I'm telling you to communicate, I also offer the double-edged sword in that I strongly suggest avoiding the drama that comes with graduate school. Even though we're intelligent, some of us can be very negative and very petty. And quite a few of us LOVE to gossip. And it can spread if you're not careful, because as much as I hate gossip, if I'm angry at someone, I'll have to exercise my muscles of patience and tolerance not to start gossiping about that person or to join in when people are talking about him/her. So many times I would go into my seminars right when they began just to avoid having to hear my classmates complain about our professors and gossip about each other. When they weren't doing that, they were often stressing about the qualifying exam or some upcoming deadline. I found when I surrounded myself with that drama, I would become anxious too. So I avoided those feelings strategically by not being in a place where I would be exposed to them. And if I couldn't, I would just go somewhere else in my head. Negative feelings can be contagious, so it's important to stay positive and remember why you're in graduate school in the first place.

Tip #7 - Socialize with people NOT in academe and have non-academic interests

This actually saved my life. Friendships do develop in graduate school. I'm still in touch with some of the people I met, and any academic will tell you it's important to do that for the purposes of networking (see Tip #5). However, I found it to be healthy to socialize with people where the topic wasn't the latest scholarly book or a professor's new grant proposal. This is where having non-academic interests comes in handy. I have a large number of hobbies that revolve around physical fitness, particularly hiking, running, and playing tennis. I was part of a group that would hike in the lovely Franklin Mountains on the weekends. Topics that came up included football, movies, spirituality, but nothing about academics unless I got to talk about the positive aspects of my work. And I found that when I hung out with them, I would go back to work more refreshed and motivated to do my tasks, which I will discuss in my next chapter.

Tip #8 - One Self-Care Day a Week

And that's where I go into having a self-care day. One day where I don't check work e-mail, don't answer phone calls from co-workers, don't do anything academically related. When I worked seven days a week, I always ended up tired and resentful. I went through one period where I worked every day for six weeks, and then decided

to not work on one Sunday. I found one day a week was always therapeutic. Sunday was my favorite, as I would go back Monday recharged.

Such tips helped me to be successful in graduate school, while still having a life outside of academics. I finished my dissertation in four years, gained teaching experience at two schools, and obtained a tenure-track position soon after completing my doctorate. I apply the same principles and have been able to publish research, write successful grants, serve on multiple committees, receive overwhelmingly positive evaluations from my students in courses I teach innovatively, and establish harmonious relationships with my colleagues. And I still exercise six days a week and take Sundays off.

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