

# MENTAL HEALTH DURING YOUR PhD

## WORK/LIFE BALANCE

With over half of postgraduate students meeting criteria to classify them as depressed,<sup>1</sup> this poster series explores common causes that effect PhD students during their studies.

Part of the #mentalhealth Twitter poster series by @zjayres. Free to distribute.



### A NOTE ON WORK/LIFE BALANCE

With the intense competition for permanent academic positions, sometimes taking a break seems like the last thing we can do. However, staying mentally and physically healthy during the PhD process is incredibly important. We all want to be viewed as 'passionate' about our research, and often the time we put in is used as a metric of this, irrespective of our output. This should not be the case. Burnout (exhaustion of physical or emotional stress due to prolonged stress) can lead to serious issues such as depression. It is therefore imperative to establish a work/life balance.

### SO, WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?



#### PERSONAL GROWTH

Setting your own expectations for your PhD can be one of the toughest. Being self-motivated and wanting to change the world is great, but if you are only running at 70% because of stress you are not being efficient. By taking time for a lunch break, or a walk means your output will likely increase. Also be aware of 'fantasy hours' - so you are working 14 hours a day? Are you really? Could you be more efficient, then go home and have time to decompress? Also bare in mind- Rome wasn't built in a day.



#### PEER SUPPORT

The culture of a research group can really impact work/life balance. Building a sense of collegiality due to the competitive nature of a PhD can be tough. Checking in with colleagues when they are frequently working long hours, and making sure they are coping is important. Being open and honest about the fact you are leaving work, e.g. at 5pm on the dot, can set a good example for peers, and help them feel they can do the same. Understanding that others may have caring responsibilities, thus cannot attend a 7pm meeting is essential.



#### ROLE OF THE PI

Unfortunately, a large portion of PIs end up working weekends (which is a whole other issue), but this does not mean that same expectation should be placed on the student. PIs can do simple things like scheduling emails sent out of hours to arrive within work hours rather than in the evenings or at weekends. Understanding that an overburdened student is likely not productive is key. Being flexible for when students encounter life issues such as childcare challenges, medical appointments is also important.



#### THE INSTITUTION

Accountability is a huge part of a universities role. If a PI is abusing position and forcing students to work, reporting channels and ramifications for the PI need to exist. Focus also needs to be placed on flexible working, allowing students to feel that their schedules do not have to be rigidly 9 to 5. Metrics on what actually contributes success also need to be considered, with more focus on mentoring and helping build the next generation of scientists, over 'nose to the grindstone' for publications.

SELF-HARMING?  
SUICIDAL THOUGHTS?

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#### REFERENCES:

Reference: 1. Graduate Student Happiness & Well-Being Report, 2014, University of California, Berkeley.  
Reference: 2. Work-life Balance: Break or Burnout. *Nature*, 2017, volume 545, pages 375-377.