

# As the Pandemic Erodes Grad Student Mental Health, Academics Sound the Alarm

September 17, 2020

As the academic year kicks into gear, Dagny Deutchman is navigating a new role. The second-year psychology graduate student is serving as one of Montana State University's first department-level "graduate student wellness champions"—a position in which she hopes to foster dialogue about mental health issues. "Academic culture can in some ways be pretty toxic," she says. "Change has to come from the top down, but it also has to come from within."

The new position comes at an opportune time, with mental health issues on the rise amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In a [survey](#) of roughly 4000 U.S.-based STEM Ph.D. students conducted from May to July, 40% reported symptoms consistent with generalized anxiety disorder and 37% with major depressive disorder—jumps of 13 and 19 percentage points, respectively, compared with 2019. "The results are very alarming," says Krista Soria, the director for student affairs assessment at the University of Minnesota and one of the researchers who conducted the survey. "It's really, really important for campuses to understand that their students are experiencing these things."

Another survey conducted in June and July showed similar results: Roughly one-third of more than 3000 U.S. graduate students reported suffering moderate to severe depression or anxiety. (The team has not yet released a final report, but they shared preliminary findings with *Science* Careers and [others](#).) One respondent wrote, "I have never felt so depressed, anxious, and inadequate. Each day I struggle to maintain any level of productivity."

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Students who are members of underrepresented groups, including people of color or those who come from lower income backgrounds, are especially at risk of declining to seek help, says Diane Gooding, a psychology professor at the University of Wisconsin, where she served on a university-wide task force in 2019 charged with improving the mental health resources available to students. "There's a lot of prejudices and stigma associated with not only mental illness, but with mental illness treatment," she says. On top of that, students who already suffer from feelings of marginalization may be even more hesitant to seek help. "There's expectations about what is normative, and certainly seeking mental health assistance would not be considered [normative]." Gooding believes that it's essential for the academic community to "destigmatize mental health challenges—to encourage people to recognize symptoms and problems before they escalate."

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