

‘I Can’t Do This’

August 31, 2017

It’s a little hard to tell what’s a failure and what’s just something that is shifting your life in a whole new direction. -Pema Chodron

“I can’t do this.” Almost every graduate student experiences that moment — or hour or week or month or year — when she questions her ability to succeed in graduate school and beyond. We are constantly reminded that rejection is the norm, and since many of us are over-achievers, this can sting and lead to the feeling that we just don’t “belong here.” Here’s the worst part: We don’t talk about it. Everyone is trying to make it seem like they have everything under control and never feel overwhelmed or defeated. This leads to even more feelings of inadequacy when you feel like a failure, because you think you are alone. Guess what? You are not! In this article, I will share several ways to combat the sense of impending doom and total failure that seems to be a hallmark of graduate school.

Surround yourself with your own personal cheerleaders and people who are honest about their own struggles.

We all need at least one person in our life who encourages us and at the same time is willing to be vulnerable about their own struggles and doubts. Here’s the best part: You can be competitive and supportive at the same time. Competition is healthy; it motivates us to reach higher and push ourselves to be the best researcher/clinician/teacher we can be. However, it is also important to remember that we are all in this together. You have to ask yourself the question: What’s more important, being the best or having a positive work environment?

A recent study found that psychology graduate students reported spending time with peers in their program, seeking support from advisors, and relaxing with friends or significant others as effective sources of support to manage stress levels. In addition, individuals who have strong social support networks report less overall stress and a higher quality of life compared with students who don’t. These results highlight the importance of creating a positive work environment in which you and your fellow students are comfortable sharing and supporting each other.

Another way to encourage camaraderie and support is to become part of a writing group. Many of us struggle with writing, so having a group that motivates us to write on a consistent basis can be very helpful. Often, universities have writing centers that provide graduate student writing groups (some even have ones specific to psychology), but you can also start your own. A great article about how to start your own graduate student writing group is [available here](#).

Take care of your physical and mental health, even if this means taking time off from school.

We all know that eating well and getting adequate amounts of sleep are important, but we aren’t always able to make that a reality. A recent study found that students who exercise regularly report lower stress

levels than students who do not. Additionally, burnout rates are lower among individuals who sleep and eat well and exercise regularly. Here's my advice: Do a case study. Make a questionnaire for yourself (or use an app such as Daylio) to track your mood, energy level, and other factors throughout the day. For the first 3 days, do your normal routine. For the next 3 days, make an effort to eat healthier meals and snacks throughout the day, and get however many hours of sleep are necessary for you to function at your highest capacity. For some people, that's 9 hours; for others, it's 7. Now compare your results; hopefully, you will see an improvement in your mood and energy level.

The average age of onset for numerous mental illnesses is in the early- to mid-20s, which is often the time when people attend graduate school. Many individuals will experience diagnosable mental illness at some point in their life, with some estimates as high as 18.5% to 20%. However, only approximately half of American adults with mental illness receive treatment. Many people feel ashamed because our society places illogical taboos on mental health issues, and the consequences can be deadly. In the United States, suicide is the second leading cause of death from the ages of 15 to 34 and the 10th leading cause of death across all age groups. Research suggests that the experience of thwarted belongingness is a critical component in predicting suicide. This only increases the importance of being open and honest with each other about our struggles and fears in graduate school. Many universities have support groups for graduate students through their counseling centers, so if you feel the need to talk to someone about your concerns, check to see if your university has one.

In closing, remember, you are not alone! You just might be amazed at the positive response you get from your peers if you are honest about your struggles and doubts. Let's start the dialogue. Ready? Go.

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