The Dark Side of Academia: Common Negative Experiences No One Talks About

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Academic life is not just about discovery and excitement. In a recent article in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, Lisa M. Jaremka (University of Delaware) and colleagues share [a collection of personal stories about their experiences with repeated rejection, impostor syndrome, and burnout.](#)

Repeated Rejection

From submitted manuscripts to grant proposals and job applications, these scholars have learned that "rejection is not failure," writes APS Fellow **Kate Sweeny** (University of California Riverside). Sweeny recommends taking a break before moving on to the next step, not dwelling on rejection, not being afraid or ashamed to seek help if the stress of rejection becomes overwhelming, and discussing one's experiences with trusted colleagues.

APS Fellow **Josh Ackerman** (University of Michigan) writes about creating a shadow CV that includes every rejection. This can be disheartening, he acknowledges, but it can also help scholars recognize the progress they have made. Moreover, sharing a shadow CV with others might help to "break the silence

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Ludwin Molina (University of Kansas) emphasizes the importance of understanding that [rejection is aimed at ideas and not individuals](). Besides not taking rejection personally, he also recommends trying to find the "positives" in a rejection and writes about the need to "pump the brakes on the 'publish-or-perish' approach in our field."

Impostor Syndrome

[Impostor syndrome refers to the feeling that one is pretending to be something they are not](). Nick Rule (University of Toronto), believes that academic culture pushes scholars to "trudge forward to the edge of perfectionism's mirage," and how the costs of these efforts, combined with constant rejection, can compound to make scholars feel that their rare successes are exceptions rather than evidence of their ability. "Others help feed our impostor-syndrome beast," he adds, noting that when he was admitted to Dartmouth as an undergraduate, his neighbors and boss told him he was not smart enough to survive an Ivy League school. He suggests that overcoming impostor syndrome may require each of us to recognize the myth that an academic acts or sounds a certain way instead of internalizing those messages to the point that we ascribe to them ourselves.

Linda R. Tropp (University of Massachusetts Amherst) comments on her impostor syndrome experiences as a full professor. She says she often feels grateful for her achievements instead of feeling she deserved them and has been surprised when people show interest in her work. She recommends that scholars "feel the fear and do it anyway" and remember that others are not likely to see them as impostors.

> *Diversifying "examples of 'successful' career paths to include faculty positions at liberal-arts colleges, community colleges, and nonprofit and private-industry organizations" can help to reduce impostor syndrome in academia.*
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> Brooke Vick (Muhlenberg College)

Brooke Vick (Muhlenberg College) believes her impostor syndrome derives from holding herself to high standards and, as a result, being prone to paralyzing perfectionism. She says it may also reflect her sensitivity to social cues and comparison to others. These personal characteristics may be exacerbated by social factors, such as being a woman of color working in predominantly White institutions in higher education. She suggests, among other strategies, diversifying "examples of 'successful' career paths to include faculty positions at liberal-arts colleges, community colleges, and nonprofit and private-industry organizations."

Burnout

Bertram Gawronski (University of Texas at Austin) writes that "the experience of burnout is different from simply feeling fatigued or exhausted; it typically stems from a lack of perceived control that leads people to feel overwhelmed and 'at the end of their rope.'" He experienced serious burnout when he was a graduate student and his research was not going well. From conversations with other academics, he gathered that this is a common experience, especially toward the end of graduate school when students are getting ready to apply to jobs in a competitive market. He found that it was helpful to know he was not the only one feeling burnout and also to have a physical space that did not remind him of work.

Jaremka attributes lack of sleep as a major contributor to her burnout, along with an intense pressure to succeed that led to work-life imbalance. After graduating, she started a postdoctoral position, where the 9-to-5 work schedule suggested by her postdoctoral mentor helped her regain a healthy relationship with her work and academia. However, Jaremka experienced a second bout of burnout as an assistant professor. "Academic culture needs to change … to make these experiences less common," she writes, suggesting that mentors acknowledge the importance of taking time off and that employers focus on quality over quantity of work when hiring or promoting employees.

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> Molly Metz and William Ryan (University of Toronto)

Molly Metz and William Ryan (University of Toronto), married early-career psychologists with teaching-focused positions, discuss their experiences with burnout, informed by their training, relationship, and identities. They suggest engaging in introspection, minimizing social comparison, distancing oneself from the sources of burnout, seeking help from a therapist, and finding meaning in helping others. They also recommend that academia should "redefine 'achievement,'" provide funding for graduate students to guarantee a living wage, emphasize collaboration over competition, and provide training in professional skills, such as grant writing and teaching.

The scholars hope that sharing their personal stories in this article "will be an impetus for additional research on these topics, specifically focused on the experiences of academics." They also hope to encourage fellow academics to share their negative experiences in academia.