

Using Positive Psychology to Survive and Thrive in Grad School

August 29, 2014

Graduate school is a very stressful period for developing professionals in the field of psychological science. In any given week, students may attend classes, conduct research, teach classes, conduct therapy, write up grant and research proposals, and/or do service learning or outreach work (e.g., reviewing grant applications or manuscripts). All of these responsibilities can wear down even the most resilient students, negatively impacting their physical and mental health. We all know about the advice that's commonly given to individuals when they feel stressed: exercise, eat right, maintain hobbies, have a social life, etc. These are all basic self-care practices that are certainly important for psychology graduate students to maintain their well-being. However, these practices alone may not be enough to fully buffer students against the day-to-day grind of graduate school. For example, a person who exercises regularly may be physically healthy but still vulnerable to feelings of self-doubt and insecurity. So what else beyond the common self-care practices can students do to maintain their physical and mental fitness?

I believe the answer lies within the theory and practice of positive psychology. In particular, my early research shows that self-compassion and savoring are two factors significantly associated with lower levels of emotional distress, above and beyond the stress caused by daily hassles and more severe negative life events. I will offer a brief explanation of self-compassion and savoring strategies and of how they may be able to enhance important positive emotions in managing the challenges students face in graduate school.

Self-compassion. Self-compassion is the extent to which individuals avoid over-identifying with problems, are self-kind, and understand that their problems are shared by other people (Neff, 2003). The popular adage "Love thyself" nicely summarizes the concept of being self-kind rather than self-critical. However, self-compassion also involves recognizing your feelings and acknowledging that many other people have those same feelings as well. Numerous researchers have found that individuals who engage in self-compassion experience a wide variety of positive benefits, such as increased psychological well-being and decreased rates of depression (e.g., Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007).

It is important to note that self-compassion is very different from more traditional and well-known concepts such as self-esteem and self-efficacy. The former involves individuals using empathy to understand and feel better about themselves, while the latter involve individuals using evaluative judgments about their own abilities and feelings. In other words, self-compassion requires people to appreciate their circumstances without using any harsh, overly self-critical judgments.

Savoring. Most of us have probably been told (or have even told others) to "enjoy life," "savor the moment," "appreciate the good things in life," etc. These adages refer to what is known as savoring, or the ability to attend to, appreciate, and maintain positive feelings and experiences (Bryant, 2003). In other words, savoring is our ability to take pleasure in positive feelings and events. Generally, our savoring beliefs fall into one of three categories: reminiscence of past events, savoring the present

moment, and anticipation of future events. Like self-compassion, engaging in savoring can provide a variety of positive benefits, including an increase in levels of positive mood (Bryant & Veroff, 2007), to individuals.

Savoring can improve the moods of graduate students in several ways. First, engaging in savoring practices can amplify, or enhance, the positive experiences that a person may already have. Second, savoring can serve as a form of emotion regulation, in that students can attend to, modify, and maintain positive experiences in order to sustain higher levels of positive mood. Finally, the simple act of paying attention to positive experiences can improve positive mood more than ruminating on negative experiences or just not paying attention to one's experiences at all (Bryant & Veroff, 2007). Overall, self-compassion and savoring both have documented benefits for health and positive mood. But how do these practices apply to grad school?

Building resilience. During their graduate education, students will often face setbacks, whether it's a poor grade on an exam, an experiment that fails to produce significant results, or a client who experiences a relapse. Self-compassion and savoring can help psychology students cope with these challenges by building up their levels of resilience, allowing them not only to "weather the storm" and bounce back from setbacks more quickly, but also to "bounce forward" and enhance their life satisfaction. For example, engaging in self-compassion can help a student realize that everyone experiences failure and thus become more self-forgiving, while savoring can help build resilience by minimizing the amount of attention given to negative experiences. A good way to build resilience and improve well-being is to take a few minutes every night to write about daily events in a journal. Writing can improve self-compassion by giving students an opportunity to objectively reflect on and accept any negative events that may have occurred. The self-kindness dimension of self-compassion can also improve if students write words of comfort and encouragement. Finally, keeping a daily journal can increase savoring practices, too, since writing about positive events gives students the chance to remember and enjoy past experiences.

Buffering against negative feelings about oneself. When facing rejection or other setbacks, it is normal for students to feel at times that they won't make good psychological scientists or that they're just not cut out for grad school. These feelings can be amplified when students perceive peers excelling where they are failing (e.g., seeing a colleague get an article accepted in *Psychological Science* when their own paper was not initially accepted). Psychology students may be especially vulnerable to negative feelings about themselves because they've learned about different cognitive biases and may therefore think that they should know better than to be self-critical. Self-compassion and savoring can help students succeed in grad school by combating and buffering against these feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness.

To combat self-criticism and improve self-compassion, Neff (2014) suggests the following method:

1. Whenever you have self-critical thoughts, stop and pay immediate attention to them;
2. Acknowledge the self-critical thoughts without judgment (e.g., don't feel guilty for having self-doubt); and
3. Rephrase the self-critical thoughts into something more positive (e.g., change "I'm a terrible

student” to “I’m a good student who is just feeling stressed”).

In essence, the goal of this exercise is to interrupt the negative thought process and replace it with a more positive, self-compassionate process. Because negative thoughts are persistent and hard to extinguish, it may take a good deal of practice before students start noticing improvements in self-compassion and well-being.

Appreciating positive experiences of grad school. So far, I have discussed only the stressful experiences related to psychology graduate programs, perhaps even giving the impression that it’s all doom and gloom. However, grad school can be a time of great rewards and pleasure, and self-compassion and savoring can help students better appreciate and enjoy these positive experiences. Savoring in particular allows students to recognize and maintain positive feelings and experiences (whether it’s the excitement of discussing research at a psychology conference or the joy of seeing a client making great strides in therapy). A good exercise that is easy to implement is to spend a few minutes each day savoring a positive experience. Pick a couple of times when you felt happy, excited, and proud, and imagine yourself reliving those moments as if they just happened yesterday. These practices can help grad students derive more pleasure from their education and can motivate them to succeed in their future endeavors.

Self-compassion and savoring go above and beyond basic self-care practices (e.g., exercise, socializing), not only helping to improve health and resilience but also enhancing the positive experiences of graduate education. I am not advising students to completely ignore any negative thoughts or experiences or to always be happy no matter what: Stressful events are an inevitable part of grad school, and chasing happiness often has the paradoxical effect of making us even unhappier. Rather, I am advocating the use of self-compassion and savoring as tools to help cope with stress by accepting and learning from negative experiences while attending to and maintaining positive experiences. As a result, students can become more resilient and learn how to rise above obstacles.æ

References and Further Reading

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