WHAT YOU MAY BE EXPERIENCING/FEELING (YOU ARE NOT ALONE, I PROMISE)

IMPOSTER SYNDROME

7 in 10 people experience imposter syndrome throughout their careers. Someone is going to figure out you don’t belong here soon. You look good on paper, but passing that exam was a fluke. I don’t have what it takes to do these experiments, write a thesis, succeed in academia. These are all classic signs of imposter syndrome. Tip: reframe your thinking. Aim for progress, not perfection.

FIRST TIME FAILING

You’ve always been the best student at school, and you pretty well at university too. Now your science isn’t working and everyone around you seems to be getting on just fine. These feelings can come about as at undergraduate level, experiments (believe it or not) are designed to work. Tip: remember, you are at the forefront of scientific research - if it was easy it would already have been done!

ISOLATION / GUILT

Writing your thesis can be a particularly lonely, isolating task. This can also be coupled with feelings of guilt when you go about your daily life as “you should be writing”. Tips to manage this include still attending research group meetings/departmental seminars whilst writing. This can also be coupled with ‘writer’s block’. Tip: when writing, start by making figures - it is far easier to write about what a figure means.

COMPETITIVE LANDSCAPE

Unfortunately, academia often fosters competition over collaboration, when it should be the other way around. This is made worse by the fact that often the only way to gauge how well you are doing is to compare yourself against others. Tip: no two PhD projects are the same, so avoid comparing them.

THE WORK / LIFE STRUGGLE

There is an inherent culture of acceptance in academia of long work hours. In fact, 40% of academics report working more than 50 hours a week. This is a fault with the system. Presenteeism is a common work life balance. Tips to manage this include setting boundaries, trying to break down your research into manageable tasks.

NO MORE TICK BOXES

You got pretty good at doing essay and lab reports - they were all short term tasks. You also got good at figuring out what questions might be asked in exams. Now you have an open ended project, with the end no where in sight. You no longer have grades to tell you if you are doing a good job. Transitioning from this undergraduate mentality observed in academia, try break down your research into small, manageable goals.

ARE THOSE AROUND YOU STRUGGLING? HERE ARE SOME POSSIBLE WARNING SIGNS

INCREASED DRINKING
INCREASED EATING
DECREASED EATING
WORKING LONG HOURS
BEING ABSENT
JOoking ABOUT SUICIDE
LOOKING DISHEVELLED

SOME WAYs TO HELP MANAGE YOUR MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

SEEK MEDICAL ADVICE
TALK TO YOUR SUPERVISOR
TALK TO YOUR PEERS / POSTDOCS
CREATE MANAGEABLE CHUNKS
READ LITERATURE

FOCUS ON YOU

As a final note, if your PhD heavily affects your mental health and wellbeing, there is absolutely no shame in finding and entering a new chapter in your life. There are plenty of successful people that got their PhD for this very reason - you might just as well be thinking about for a while, but you wouldn’t want to it in your head.

REFERENCES

1. Graduate Student Happiness & Well-Being Report, 2019, University of California, Berkeley.

Self-harming?

Suicidal thoughts? Need help?

Call CAPS at 1-919-966-3658 (24/7)

National Suicide Hotline at 1-800-273-8255 (TALK)