

Balance Sheet: Staying Healthy, and Even Happy, in Graduate School

By PIPER FOGG



A fulfilling life outside the library or lab can mitigate the typical stresses of graduate-student life. Mental-health experts advise students to try to adopt balanced, healthy lifestyles to avoid burnout and depression. That means making time for friends, exercise, and (gasp!) fun. Students who have been in the trenches say that getting professional help allowed them to succeed, whether that meant finishing a dissertation, getting a Ph.D., or simply staying sane. Following are some of the experts' recommendations.

- **Learn to recognize the signs of depression** and anxiety and don't be afraid to seek medical evaluation and treatment. Consider various options — such as therapy, medication, relaxation techniques, and other forms of alternative medicine. Familiarize yourself with the campus counseling center as well as off-campus options.
- **Follow your mother's advice:** Eat a balanced diet, try to get enough sleep, and exercise regularly.
- **Find and nurture a social-support network.** Make an effort to meet new people by getting involved in sports activities or a campus club. Friends outside academe can be especially helpful in giving a fresh perspective, while those on the inside can empathize and give practical advice.
- **Work on time management.** Make schedules, figure out your most productive times of day, turn off phones, and shun e-mail, if necessary, and find a place that is conducive to working. Take breaks to relax.
- **Find allies in your field.** They can help you navigate the world of publishing and help you make contacts to further your career. If you are unsure you want to stay in your field, contact scholars in related disciplines to see if a transfer might appeal.
- **Try to fix a problematic relationship** with an adviser or mentor. Switching advisers, when feasible, can make a world of difference for some, while simply communicating better can help in other cases.
- **Find a dissertation coach** or online support group if you are having trouble getting down to work. PhiniseD.com is one Web site where graduate students having trouble finishing their dissertations can find advice and support. *The Chronicle* has an online forum called "Grad-School Life" that includes a

discussion focusing on dissertation and thesis support. See <http://chronicle.com/forums/index.php>

- **Consider a break.** A temporary leave to seek counseling or reassess priorities does not brand you as a failure, and taking time off to work outside academe could reveal new possibilities. Leaving academe altogether may be the best choice for some. Talk to advisers, mentors, and others about whether sticking it out is the right decision.

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