Time & Stress Management for “Dissertating” Students

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Overview

- Sources of stress
- Managing Advisor Stress
- Stress & Time management strategies
- Questions
“The grass is always greener on the other side of the thesis defense.”
Why Stress Management?

Increased stress improves productivity
Up until a point
Then there is a rapid deterioration
That manifests itself differently for everyone
Why Stress Management?

![Diagram showing stress levels]

- Performance, Happiness, Health
- Low Stress: Boredom, Depression
- High Stress: Anxiety

Area of Optimal Stress/Challenge

Stress/Challenge Level
Sources of Stress

What do you see as the primary sources of stress as you go through this process?

- Interpersonal dynamics
  - Advisor dynamics
- Low motivation
- Lack of structure
- Competing demands
- Absence of self-care
Other Sources of Stress

- Changing (new and ambiguous) demands
- Loss of support (re: cohort)
- Finances/debt
- “Otherness”:
  - e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, first-generation status
“Absence makes your lab grow stronger”
Helping Your Advisor Help You!
Stress Management – Interpersonal

- Student characteristics that foster a positive Advising relationship:
  - Shows initiative/takes responsibility
  - Works independently
  - Communicates with Advisor/committee
  - Remains motivated and invested
  - Appears open to feedback
  - Shares research interests
Stress Management - Interpersonal

**Advisor Communication:**
- Choose your Advisor and committee members thoughtfully
- Attempt to schedule meetings
- Prepare for meetings with anticipated timelines
- Follow-up meetings with emails confirming the goals that were agreed upon
- Attempt to increase accountability by developing relationships with your committee
- Talk to past Advisees who have successfully defended; ask for advice and look at dissertations that have been passed
- Connect your completion with appealing rewards for your Advisor/committee members
- Pick your battles and be strategic!
Stress Management – Interpersonal

• If the Advising relationship becomes overly stressful:
  – Familiarize yourself with departmental norms regarding problems with Advisors
  – Increase awareness of grievance procedures within the department and university
  – Be aware of department politics
  – Find “safe” people to talk to/consult with
  – Only consider switching thoughtfully and following consultation
Stress Management – Interpersonal

For unmet needs, seek:

– Cheerleaders:
  • Encouragement, time and access, trust

– Counselors:
  • Identifying/overcoming blocks, normalizing, focusing

– Coaches:
  • Identify small steps, build skills, connect to the “big picture”

– Critics:
  • Constructive criticism, critical thinking, foster ownership and voice
“When life gives you lemons, squeeze them until you get publishable results.”
Stress Management – Motivation

- “It’s a marathon, not a sprint”
- Internal vs. external motivators
- Differentiate between necessary breaks and avoidance behaviors
- Ask the following questions:
  - “When has working on the dissertation not been a problem for you?”
  - What would you recommend that someone else in the same situation do?”
  - What is one small step that you can take to move ahead?”
Stress Management

- General Strategies:
  - Prioritize EXERCISE, SLEEP, and EATING
  - Develop and maintain social support
    - Academic (peer-review for writing)
    - Non-academic
  - Identify your stress triggers, and
  - Learn to manage your environment
    - Use your 5 senses
    - “Healing bubble”
Stress Management

- Recognize early signs of stress:
  - Cognitive
    - Worrying, decision-making, concentration, pessimism, catastrophizing
  - Behavioral
    - Appetite, sleep, substance use, hygiene, fidgeting
  - Physiological
    - Chest pain, nausea, headache, GI, sweating, pain, flu
  - Emotional
    - Crying, irritability, overwhelmed, paranoid, anxious
Stress Management

- Identify relevant management strategies:
  - Cognitive:
    - Remember prior successes, focus on positives
  - Behavioral:
    - Eat, sleep, exercise, time management, humor
  - Physiological:
    - Meditation, relaxation skills, biofeedback
  - Emotional:
    - Journaling, social support, counseling, spiritual
Time Management

- What are your major time management challenges (related to the dissertation)?
  - Procrastination
  - Juggling multiple responsibilities
  - Lack of structure
  - Writing anxiety
Sources of Dissertation Procrastination

- Academic burnout
- Fear of failure
- Fear of (harsh) evaluation
- Unrealistic expectations
Time Management

- Juggling Multiple Responsibilities:
  - Identify your top responsibilities
  - Consider how much time per week you would like to spend on each item (life balance pie chart)
  - Use a weekly planner to plan ahead what you intend to accomplish for the week
  - If you use a task list, allow it to be informed by your daily planner
  - Post the list in a common space to increase communication and accountability
Time Management

- Increasing Structure:
  - Identify a broad timeline (e.g., “I want to propose/defend by …”)
  - Break the timeline down into smaller steps (e.g., My literature review must be completed by..., my first chapter must be written by..., I must submit a draft by...)
  - Work backwards to create weekly goals, and then daily goals (Google Calendar)
  - Make time for it each day
  - Be specific (e.g., “I will run these 3 experiments” vs. “I will work on my dissertation”)
Time Management

- Increasing Structure:
  - Structure your time (pretend you still have classes)
  - Choose your spaces and times to write thoughtfully
  - Spot “secret procrastination” (e.g., literature reviews)
  - Increase social support and accountability
  - Reward yourself

THE VICIOUS CYCLE:

- You stay up late because you didn’t do anything productive all day.
- You don’t do anything all day because you stayed up too late (and you goofed around a little).
- Aaaaaah!
- Pull all-nighter.
- Crash
- You stay up even later to make up for it.
- You get even less done.
- Reset

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Time Management

- Writing Anxiety:
  - Learn and practice anxiety reduction strategies
  - Ask for help and use resources EARLY
  - Develop a plan to limit distraction
  - Waiting does *not* make it better
  - Write now; edit later
  - Manage your self-talk (it impacts your anxiety):
    - Replace “I’ve gotta attain this degree in ___ years” with “When can I get started?”
    - Replace “I have no time to play” with “It is important to play for one hour”
    - Replace “This dissertation is too hard” with “Where is the best place to start?”
Questions

SIGNS YOU'RE CLOSE TO GRADUATING

You are not as defensive when relatives ask you about your research.

So how is my favorite grandson doing?

Geez, grandma, stop pressuring me! I'm going to get a thesis topic soon, ok? Ok??

Before

So the current paradigm in studies of robotic locomotion are based on the concept of symmetry in steady-state orbits...

After

... Bah, what's good about it? It's just another day stuck in this cramped cubicle working for meager wages...

Before

Your outlook on life improves significantly.

Good morning!

Yes, yes it is a beautiful morning.

After