

spectra

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COMMUNICATION & MENTAL HEALTH on campus



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spectra ? DID YOU KNOW

A new NCA Mental Health and Communication Working Group is being developed through an initiative of NCA First Vice President David T. McMahan. The working group will generate an agenda for supporting and expanding mental health research in the Communication discipline and an agenda for providing increased mental health support for graduate students and faculty members.

GRADUATE STUDENTS: YOU ARE MORE THAN YOUR PH.D.

By Kathryn R. Wedemeyer-Strombel, Ph.D.



I am a soccer player, a nature lover, a dog mom, a wife, an Education Programs Manager, and a recent Ph.D. in environmental science. As a scientist, I integrate social and natural science methods to improve endangered species conservation. As a human being, I struggle with mental health issues that were exacerbated by graduate school: anxiety, depression, and ADHD. During graduate school, I worked until burnout and lost my identity to my Ph.D. I became one dimensional, a research robot: Katie, Ph.D. Candidate, full stop. Today, almost a year post-defense, I still struggle with these mental health issues, and I am working through the PTSD I suffer from having had abusive professors early on in my academic career. Every day, I rediscover more of myself, more of who I am in addition to a Ph.D., and with each re-discovery comes healing.

Mental health issues and the need to heal from graduate school are not unique to me; they affect many students. A quick Google Scholar search reveals at least one book, *Wellbeing in Doctoral Education*, which includes the chapter, “Intrapersonal Wellbeing and the Academic Mental Health Crisis.” The search also reveals several articles on this crisis, with at least two published in *Nature*: one from 2012, “Mental health: Under a cloud,” and 2018’s “Evidence for a mental health crisis in graduate education.” Others have covered the statistics on this important issue. I am going to share pieces of my own mental health journey, what I learned along the way, and advice I wish I’d had as a graduate student.

When I first started learning about my own mental health, I read Brene Brown’s *The Gifts of Imperfection*, in which the author writes, “We have to talk about things that get in the way – especially shame, fear, and vulnerability.” All three of these echoed strongly across my Ph.D. experience and negatively affected my mental health. I felt shame that my first advisers told me that I didn’t have it. That, if I would not make my Ph.D. my only priority, I would fail – that wanting to see my family was a childish excuse for a vacation. I felt fear every time I had to communicate with them. They had explicitly stated, “This is graduate school. We can talk to you however and whenever we want. Pull up your big-girl panties and deal

with it.” I was terrified to be vulnerable, to be seen as a human with flaws instead of a research robot – as it seemed that this somehow made me “less academic.”

Although I went to counseling after leaving my first advisers at the end of my second year, it took me several years to openly talk about my struggles, afraid that doing so would make me less than my peers, or prove my first advisers right – that I didn’t have what it takes, that I didn’t belong. I kept circling back to Brown’s finding that when we speak words to shame, we take away shame’s power. However, we need to be selective in who we share our stories with. Graduate student: you do not owe your story to anyone. Because I found myself in an environment where I felt comfortable, I started writing about changing labs, marital problems, toxic academia, self-care, and mental health, as they all related to graduate school. The more I shared my story, the more it resonated, and I discovered that the things that made me feel different, less than, or not enough – are the things where I have found the most compassion, support, and belonging.

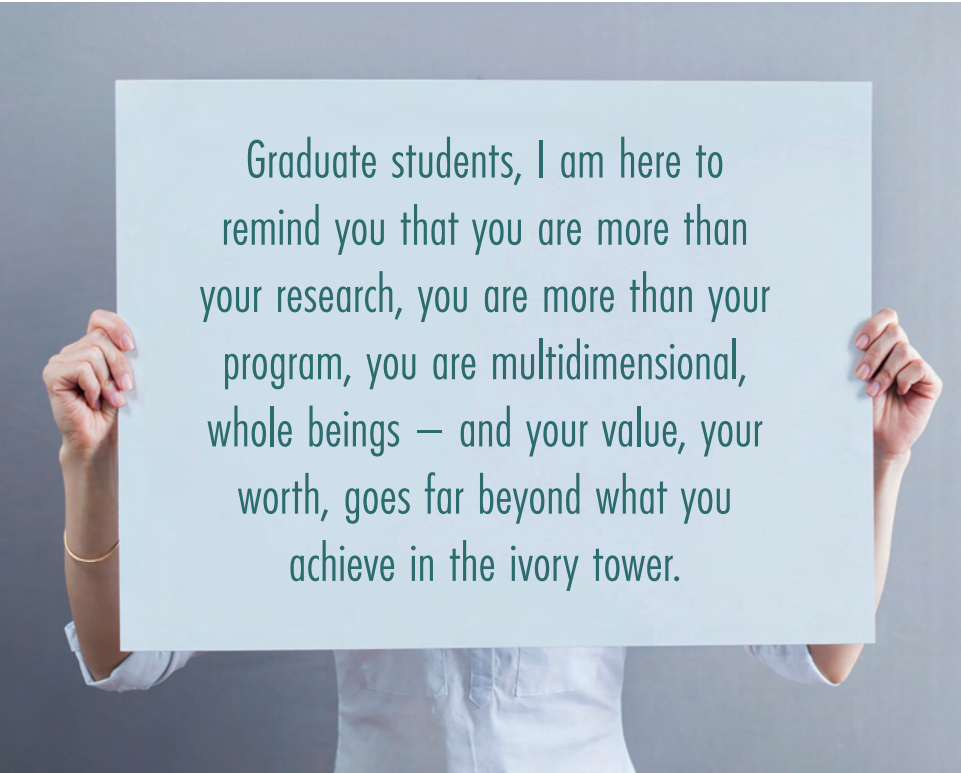
This helped me build up the courage to share my struggles with my new adviser, Tarla Rai Peterson, and her response is the most important thing I learned during my Ph.D. program. She said, “It seems to me all of us are healthier if we give ourselves permission to know each other as whole beings.” Hearing this from a mentor I trusted and respected, and who is successful in her field – this blew me away. I have taken these words to heart, and I share them any chance I get. But I also add that we must give *ourselves* permission to know *ourselves* as whole beings. In graduate school, it is so easy to lose ourselves to our programs, to lose our identity beyond “graduate student,” to fall into the trap of becoming research robots. I did that – I let my Ph.D. become everything, I stopped sleeping through the night, I didn’t spend time with loved ones, I didn’t talk with my cohort about anything other than our research and classes, and the goals set by my program, my advisers, and my granting agencies became how I measured my life. My own mental and physical health, my personal satisfaction and happiness – there wasn’t room for those in my graduate student world. I lost myself completely to it, and it was only when burnout forced me to take a step back, to pause, to

breathe, that I realized I didn't recognize myself. Yes, on paper I looked to be a successful NSF Graduate Research Fellow completing my Ph.D. – but I felt incredibly lost and broken.

Graduate students, I am here to remind you that you are more than your research, you are more than your program, you are multidimensional, whole beings – and your value, your worth, goes far beyond what you achieve in the ivory tower. So, enjoy your life that is happening now, and give yourself permission to know yourself and others as whole beings. Framing our graduate education in this way, as a piece of who we are, but not

all of who we are, is critical. It has taken me years of therapy and hard work to find myself again, to rediscover hobbies and interests beyond my Ph.D., to heal, and to calm what had become endless anxiety. I hope that you will be more proactive than I was, that from the beginning, your advisers support your research and your holistic well-being. Below, I provide some suggestions and encouragements that I hope will help you see yourself, and one another, as more than just graduate students. Please note that I am not a mental health professional, but a recent Ph.D. who began navigating my mental health while a graduate student. If you are struggling, I hope that your university offers affordable and accessible mental health care, and I encourage you to speak with a therapist.

Graduate student, you are more than your work. It is important that you set boundaries with school and prioritize your life in a way that works best for you. For your mental and physical health: take time off regularly, and take more when you need it – your work can wait. Burnout forced me to take a year off from my dissertation work, to slow down, to rest and find myself again. Do not wait for burnout. Take the time you need now. If you need to schedule time off in your calendar as a critical step in your research protocol, do it. Rest is not only a reward for hard work; it is a critical component of working hard. To help maintain a work-life balance, stay connected to your non-academic friends

A person's hands are visible holding a large, light blue rectangular sign against a grey background. The sign contains teal-colored text. The person is wearing a white shirt and a thin gold bracelet on their right wrist.

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and interests. Pursue hobbies that are unrelated to your field, something that brings you joy outside of work. Take a moment right now and think of the last non-academic related activity you did just for you. If that didn't happen in the last two weeks, schedule it now for next week. Similarly, if you have to formally schedule calls with friends and family outside of your program, do it, and keep those appointments as part of your research protocol. If you find yourself struggling, ask for help. We all need it at some point. Seeing a therapist is the best decision I made as a graduate student, and I would not have completed my Ph.D. without the support of my Student Counseling Center. As important as being proactive about your work-life balance is, it is equally important to surround yourself with people – peers and mentors – who honor your boundaries. As Rebecca Barnes says, “Science is a team sport; choose your team wisely.” Once you find your team, honor it. Support one another, share your stories and struggles with those who earn it, and remind one another that we are stronger when we realize we are whole beings, and we are in this together.

Graduate students: Know your peers for who they are, not what they study. I have met some of my best friends through graduate school. Members of my initial cohort lifted me up and kept me going when I felt I couldn't. They advocated

for me, supported me, and were a welcoming community when I needed it most. I was lucky to have their support. Not having that community adds to the stressors of school, and I know that for minority students, especially international students, finding these supportive communities can be even more difficult. We all need to do our part to build inclusive communities, to understand that we are on the same team, we are in this together – and we are all better when we support one another. I challenge you to get to know your peers as more than just research associates, to realize that your friend is more than the “internal rhetoric of scientists and engineers” researcher. Learn that they enjoy Taco Bell, bike riding, and seeing live music. Find out that they’ve never stood on top of a frozen lake and go do that together. Edit paper drafts together, cheer one another on, and encourage your peers to have fun through it all. To start, try new things with your cohort mates this week: find out their favorite colors, their favorite type of cake, their favorite movie – then bake and decorate some cupcakes together and have an alcohol-free movie night. Try to make these types of gatherings a weekly event, when you hang out together alcohol-free and you don’t talk about your research or school. I specify alcohol-free because so much of academic networking happens at happy hours, which can promote unhealthy habits, and is alienating to those who do not drink for a variety of reasons. I challenge you to find fun, new ways to bond and blow off steam. You all have so much to offer beyond your manuscripts; find out what that is and celebrate it!

Professors: Lead with kindness and have high expectations. Students can only do so much in a system that exacerbates mental health issues, and they need your help to promote an intellectually challenging experience, rather than a traumatic one. As a student, I lived both experiences, and the mentors made all the difference. You can help prevent

student burnout and promote a healthy lifestyle by encouraging regular, guilt-free time off. Students are in graduate school because they are hard workers. They will get the work done and we will all benefit from emotionally and physically healthier students. Support your students who pursue hobbies and interests outside of academia, talk about your own non-academic interests, and model a work-life balance yourself. Take care of your own mental health, and protect your life outside of academia, too. Advocate for students who need it, call out colleagues who are creating toxic work environments, and fight for your university to hold those colleagues accountable. Demand that your institution provides accessible and affordable mental and physical health care to your students, and that the university invests in the well-being of its students by providing an ombudsman, alt-ac career support, and a living wage. You can be one of the most positive aspects of your graduate students’ careers. You can help make or break their success, and you affect their mental health. I finished my Ph.D. because of the incredible professors who advocated for me, who demanded excellence, and who led with empathy. I am a better person and scientist because I worked with them, and every student deserves that kind of support.

Graduate school is a time for students to grow, to generate new knowledge, to celebrate publications, and to learn to cope with rejection. It should be challenging and it should celebrate students’ multidimensionality. Graduate students and professors: You are so much more than your publications, than your research progress. I encourage all of us to value one another for all that we have to offer. Let’s learn a new hobby, try new foods, rest often, share our stories with those who have earned them, and, most importantly, let’s give ourselves permission to know ourselves, and one another, as whole beings. ■



KATHRYN R. WEDEMEYER-STROMBEL is a Teacher and Program Manager at Kaplan Test Prep, freelance writer and speaker, and a volunteer with PhD Balance, which promotes graduate student well-being. In 2019, Wedemeyer-Strombel earned her Ph.D. in Environmental Science as a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellow. Her research integrated fishers’ ecological knowledge and stable isotope ecology to improve sea turtle conservation. Her Ph.D. spanned two institutions, two advisers, and Biology and Communication departments. Wedemeyer-Strombel believes that graduate school should be intellectually challenging, but not traumatic, and she hopes that we can work together across academic generations to drive systemic change in academia.