

True Story: I Dropped Out of My PhD Program

Thinking about dropping out of your PhD? Not sure that graduate program is right for you? You're not alone! Today, my friend Erin is sharing the story of dropping out of her PhD.

Tell us a bit about yourself!

I grew up happy and reasonably well-adjusted in a suburb of Minneapolis, Minnesota, part of a fun, hilarious family who've always made me believe I could do anything.

I'm now 30, a huge comedy fan who enjoys lots of time with her friends and family, travels when possible and teaches ESL and Civics to immigrants for a non-profit organization.

When did you decide that you wanted to go to graduate school?

I was always a voracious reader and a very eager student, especially in literary and cultural studies. The first time I read a piece of literary criticism assigned by a high school English teacher, it was as though everything I'd always felt viscerally about what literary expression makes possible had been proven. That I had some sensibility for what I read gave me confidence as a teenager.

I knew that graduate study would be professionally advantageous and, y'know, I was a big nerd for school. But at that point it dawned on me that there was a whole field out there all about sharing insights into how we express our humanity with form and language and that I could be part of it.

I chose to pursue German rather than English hoping that the foreign language aspect would make my experience even richer.

Why were you interested in doing a Ph.D. as opposed to "just" an M.A.? Or self-study? Or working your way up?

I was planning to become a professor of German because that's pretty much what you can do if you're interested in teaching/working with literature as well as language. And for that, I needed a Ph.D.

I'm still struggling with why I saw no option other than this career to enjoy a lifelong relationship with books, why it seemed necessary to bind my professional efforts with this particular passion or I would be failing myself.

What did you imagine doing a Ph.D. would be like?

Arriving at this HUGE research university, I anticipated a liberal arts haven of critical thought and open mindedness, so I was crushed when I entered an atmosphere of self-serving negativity. My department had terrible, ongoing faculty collegiality problems that they chose to ignore, to the detriment of the graduate students.

I took fabulous classes in four other departments where I noticed grad students being properly trained to engage with various theories and methodologies; my profs didn't bother with this. I saw so many student colleagues, brilliant friends of

mine that I admired, transformed by faculty bullying into a shell of their former promising selves, and I was the same. **This** article covers the symptoms very well.

Unfortunately, the denigration seemed unconsciously targeted toward women in my department; it was sickening, very much along the lines of an abusive relationship. We were constantly made to feel that nothing we did was right, but were all convinced that we'd be left with nothing if we escaped the situation.

A few did; I stayed for four years past my Master's, hoping I could improve things from the inside, but it was a sick system. So much happened that I couldn't forgive, yet I gave them most of my 20s.

When did you begin to think that you were not the right fit for this PhD program?

I couldn't perform any academic work. I stayed on top of my teaching, but I lived in terror of my own anxiety, which lead to continual procrastination.

My candidacy exams had to be rescheduled several times and in the end, I never took them; I couldn't face the giant pile of books in my apartment, even though I was studying humor, my all-time favorite topic.

I slowly realized via counseling that I couldn't surrender this exploration of what I love most to the approval of a faculty who had hurt and screwed me and my friends over year after year. To complete exams and a dissertation according to their standards would compromise my integrity.

Plus, my avoidance tendencies were creeping into every area of my life. So my leaving was more or less mutually decided upon; I was not succeeding in their program and I didn't want to pursue it any longer if it meant risking my mental health.

How did the people in your life react to your decision?

I wasted so much energy worrying about this. I was sure my family and friends would be disappointed, that they wouldn't know how to see me afterward and would expect less of me for the rest of my life. More or less to a person, that hasn't been the case.

Virtually everyone gets it and virtually everyone's been supportive. Some people even seem impressed that I moved on from that toxic situation. It was *me* who wasn't sure what worth I'd have outside of grad school, without the prestige of a PhD.

I needed to have faith that other people can see who I am irrespective of my career choices. That's still tough to remember; I often feel the need to explain in great detail how crappy things got in order to justify leaving school after six years. Ultimately, though, I'm just explaining it to myself.

What have been the biggest struggles of your post-Ph.D. life? And the best things?

Oh, my already depleted self-esteem just plummeted. I was broke, unemployed and had to move back in with my folks at age 28. My depression and anxiety took over for a while.

Therapy, anti-depressants and the people I love have been good to me, but what's benefited me most was definitely finding a job doing something new that I'm good at, where people appreciate my contributions. I feel free now.

I love seeing my students and coworkers every day. I miss working with literature but engaging with it has become so fraught for me that I don't know if I'll ever want it to be my life again. There's also the sweet, sweet honesty of considering what I actually do want from here on out.

What advice would you give to other people in academic programs they don't like?

Trust your gut and value your abilities at all times, though insecurity is basically encouraged in academia. Grad school pressures tend to exacerbate our worst tendencies; if you're suffering for any reason or feel you've lost your bearings, seek counseling at the university.

Counseling helped me immeasurably, most of all giving me back the perspective that my overall well being should always be the primary goal of my lifestyle, rather than my ability to succeed by someone else's standard. At the risk of sounding Pollyanna-ish, it's hugely comforting to have learned that I don't just get a chance at one awesome version of my life—we can always change course.

Have any of you guys dropped out of something big? Any questions for Erin?

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53 Comments



Mark on 19 September 2011 at 12:14 pm

Mercy. I have been teaching high-level High school English courses. Newly 31 years-old. I resonate with this story on so many levels. I am applying to graduate school because I feel like I'd have a company of people in love with texts and conversation and teaching and relationship and the whole long conversation.

Thank you for sharing your harrying experience. I feel like I lost most of my 20s by deciding against a PhD program and beginning to work.

Lesson? I think most people feel they "gave away their 20s." It's a crisis of the age and the ambiguity of our times (perhaps, also, the "burden of choice").

You probably will not regret the good books and good moments, and rich study. It's probably hard to see through the haze of memories unmet by peace...but it's true. NPOs, civil workers--everyone with a heart for the human story--would benefit so much from literature.

Thanks for sharing Erin.

M

REPLY



Raquelita on 19 September 2011 at 12:26 pm

Thanks for sharing your story, Erin. I do have a PhD, but I had a number of friends who left my graduate program without finishing. While my PhD granting department is not without its issues, it was not a toxic environment. A lot of people just decided that the academic life was not for them. I think it takes a fair amount of courage to admit that, to leave, and to move on.

REPLY



AlsoErin on 19 September 2011 at 1:08 pm

I dropped out of a Master's program because the program was terrible, I had changed my mind about what I wanted to focus on, and my life was a mess. I thought everyone would hate me for it (wasting money! giving up halfway through!), but the important

people understood and no one else seemed very interested. I'm so much happier now!

REPLY



Michelle on 19 September 2011 at 2:10 pm

Erin,

I had the exact same experience at the exact same university (slightly different department though).

It was the hardest decision I've ever made – and one that I will occasionally get down on myself about (on bad days).

Joining the job market in the fall of 2008 didn't help either.

But I've never looked back – I was utterly miserable and I know I still would be today if I hadn't found the courage to "fail" and walk away.

It's nice to know I'm not alone. I wish you the very best.

REPLY



Ashley on 19 September 2011 at 5:09 pm

I resonate with this so much – I had once wrapped all my value with my music and music career and the conservatory I was at was such a toxic and competitive environment – I got really sick from it, too. I was so afraid that the world would be disappointed with me, and that music was my only 'talent'... It was so good for me to get out of that environment and realize, as you say, "I'm free!" That especially came with some volunteer experience and I saw that I didn't need to be a virtuoso (or a PhD, etc.) to do something I love and to be loved.

REPLY



Roxanne on 19 September 2011 at 6:11 pm

I honestly think it takes gigantic, enormous balls to drop out of a PhD program – especially when you are doing something you are so passionate about. It can be really hard to do what's best for you in that kind of situation – you don't want to look (or feel!) like a failure.

plus you need to go back out into the world with totally different goals.

This may not be super articulate but I am just super impressed with you – that's such a hard choice to make, but it was clearly the right decision. Congrats!

REPLY



Martina Lynne :: the life academic on 20 September 2011 at 12:53 am

I'm knee-deep in my own Literature PhD program and I have to say, I think it takes a lot of courage to say what you've said. While I love a lot of things about academia and feel very positive about my decisions, I do see a pretty toxic attitude amongst some departments that hurts a lot of bright students. I can't imagine leaving, not just because I love the work but because of the stigma and pressure. I would lose a whole community, a future, a direction. Terrifying! But worse, I imagine, would be continuing if I felt my integrity and joy was at stake, so bravo to you for pulling out when you did and taking control of your next steps.

REPLY



j.lowe on 20 September 2011 at 6:04 am

Hi! Thank you for writing this. I dropped out of law school after the first semester. It was both one of the toughest and most rewarding choices I'd ever made.

My situation was a little different, though. I had experienced a lot of parental pressure to go to law school, and my parents were definitely my strongest opponents of my decision to leave. To this day (2 years later) I think they still view me as kind of a failure who didn't live up to her potential. Pretty much everyone else has been very supportive, as you have experienced.

I actually left law school because I really wanted to pursue a Ph.D. and go into research. However, since I started working, I am not totally sure if I want to get a Ph.D. anymore. Ph.D. degrees are a huge commitment and no guarantee that it'll pay off. I'm also starting to understand the dark underbelly of academia, which you described

quite well in leading up to your decision to leave. As a result, I'm not totally sure what I'm doing with my life anymore.

I hope that it will become clearer...

REPLY



Jo on 20 September 2011 at 12:29 pm

I graduated with a photography degree last year and I was encouraged by all 3 of my final year lecturers to go on to an MA. That coupled with the fact that the university was able to pay my tuition fees meant it seemed to stupid to turn it down. My uni doesn't offer a photography MA so I applied for the Art & Design course. But I was told that photography students go on to Fine Art, not Art & Design. I just went along with it, accepted that they knew what was best.

Wrong. So Wrong. I hate my course. Fine Art is absolutely not the correct environment for me. Plus the course leader is a particularly foul breed of fine art snob who hates photography. But it's a free masters degree, so I stick with it. I'm literally only in it to have the letters after my name so I can get a better job in the future.

REPLY



caribbean princess on 20 September 2011 at 12:29 pm

Erin Thank you for sharing your experience. My first academic experience at one of the most prestigious universities in the UK (and the world) was a complete nightmare. It was a hugely toxic environment and people were afraid of standing up to the bullying.

I did stand up to it and as a result I was persecuted by the department head. Anyways thanks to the wonderful support of my college and my scholarship body I was able to wrap up that experience and to move on to something else. This experience was completely different and I regained my love of academia.

Still when I was ready to start my specialty training I made the decision to pursue it somewhere else although I was sad to say goodbye to those who supported me. I still needed to get away as the harassment and bullying was continuing from afar (although I was now in a different department). Anyways the decision to move

was one of the best in my life and I am now doing a fantastic PhD which best of all is completely funded in a great department. It takes a lot of courage to do what you did. And like you I felt like a failure and a disappointment for some time after I left. But remember that you stood up for yourself and didn't compromise your standards which is what matters most!!

REPLY



valentina.tara on 20 September 2011 at 6:33 pm

I cant stop reading and re-reading this. Leaving law school was one of the hardest decisions of my life and this reflects every obsessive and panicky thought that went through my mind. THANK YOU for this!

REPLY



katilda on 20 September 2011 at 11:45 pm

i needed to hear this in a bigfatway this afternoon. thank you for sharing this....i have a lot to think about.

REPLY



Leanna on 21 September 2011 at 12:08 am

Erin, thank you so much for sharing. My own grad school experience was pretty harrowing. It's much more emotional than I ever thought it would be. I'm glad you had the courage to do what was best for you.

REPLY



Lylim | Flyleaf on 21 September 2011 at 10:37 am

As someone who recently left a job that I felt was destroying my mental health hour by hour, day by day, I completely resonated with this:

"That helped me immeasurably, most of all giving me back the perspective that my overall well being should always be the primary goal of my lifestyle, rather than my ability to succeed by someone else's standard."

There's an odd sort of relief when someone puts into words something you've been feeling but never got round to saying.

REPLY



j.lowe on 21 September 2011 at 8:07 pm

Hey Valentina! Us law school drop-outs should form a support group.
😊

REPLY



Rachel on 22 September 2011 at 2:41 pm

Erin, I sympathize so much with your situation. I finished a PhD program, but it was so, SO hard to keep myself from quitting when I fully realized what an a-hole of an adviser I was stuck with. "I lived in terror of my own anxiety, which lead to continual procrastination," is exactly how I dealt with it, too. And now I'm trying to do something totally and completely unrelated to what I studied, partly because the whole field is connected to such negative emotions for me. Getting the degree at all feels like a huge waste now.

I'm so glad you shared your story, and I really like your conclusion, that "I don't just get a chance at one awesome version of my life—we can always change course." That's how I'm trying to look at it, too!

REPLY



Jill B on 22 September 2011 at 5:15 pm

I'm finishing up an M.A. program in Professional Communication (I am sure to include the "professional" because it sounds so much more... professional, and less like mass-comm). I ended up in grad school after I realized how completely difficult it is to advance or even gain entry in my region – so many over-educated people in need of a job and willing to take anything, I was always at the bottom of the list by default. I started in a Liberal Studies program but I switched programs after taking a hard look at what I wanted and needed. And it's been a ridiculously uphill war with a battle every year (6 years with a break, and many, many errs created by faculty misunderstandings). So I know I'm in my last semester because

there's a time limit, and I'm not sure if I'll get a degree because I'm having to take two classes to make up for the canceled thesis (yes, it's been that ridiculous), plus take comprehensive exams (which I never expected/planned for – see 'canceled thesis'), and I work full time. So I'd really love to have a degree after all the work to get here. I'm much less convinced that I need one, but after all the effort and being so close, it's partially to prove to myself and everyone, and partially because it feels like a waste to be so close and not finish. Bottom line – the world is changing shape daily and grad school is interesting – but rarely necessary. Know what you want/need before you start.

REPLY



Anonymous on 27 September 2011 at 5:40 am

Oh my goodness...this touched me so deeply. I'm a 23 year old who struggled with never feeling good enough, constantly over-committing and just floundering for four years at an ivy league institution. I'm still trying to finish my degree while back home with my parents. Sometimes I feel like I have wasted the past 4 or 5 years of my life. I certainly grew personally during my college years and intellectually but often feel like a failure. That weight is constantly with me. And even though I know I can recreate my life it's hard to break the cycle. I don't want to waste my 20s, these years I'll never be able to redo. Hard to reconcile what a happy, authentic life might look like with what a successful life for me "should" look like, according to my parents or others. But this post...oh, just thank you! 😊 It resonated. Truly.

REPLY



Anonymous on 17 March 2012 at 11:02 pm

Dear Erin,

I'm so proud of you for making the decision you did. You're totally right in saying that your health/well-being come first over school, which was clearly causing a detriment in your life.

I went through the same experience as I dropped out of my Ph.D program 1 yr. ago. And might I say after I did I experienced this depression I have never experienced before. I'm finally going for

counselling and hoping to bring some closure to this unfortunate experience. Like you, I found the academy to be very patriarchal, subjective and belittling. I suffered emotional/verbal abuse from my supervisor in addition getting in debt and having no job...it was awful.

Please remember that you are not alone and that I think you are a very resilient and strong person for doing what you did. It's a shame that we live in a society that measures our self-worth by how well we perform in school....I'm not going to comply with this belief system.

I wish there was a support group for graduate school drop outs...the post-trauma and mental health issues we experience are real.

All the best Erin, and thank you for sharing your story!!

REPLY



Failed PhD, Future MPhil on 6 March 2019 at 10:30 am

Thank you for your comments. I've recently left my program after 7 years. It's a great loss to my self worth. I was in political theory with a chair who has written several books on ethical behavior. It took me years of self loathing to realize that my chair was anything but ethical. They made sure I was well aware I was a "brown" woman. Pushed me to ethnic and gender studies making it clear that my only worth to them was my brown skin and my vagina. I brought in the most awards and grant money of my class (none of it having to do with topics about gender or race), and prominent scholars outside my university were interested in my work yet the very same papers getting picked up by publishers my own chair dismissed as "clumsy writing not worthy of grad school." I believed every negative word my chair had for me as he was a well respected "ethics" guy. Of course it was all my fault, he's too ethical to be abusive, racist, sexist, etc. During the last 7 years I was diagnosed as bipolar, institutionalized, got cancer twice, and was generally sick all the time. I never linked my health with grad school. I just wasn't good enough. I fought and clawed my way through my exams and found myself utterly paralyzed by my dissertation proposal. For two years I did not produce any work, granted I was being treated for cancer, and still teaching, but this was unacceptable and they have "forced" me to drop out in the passive aggressive way

academia functions sometimes. I have been so paralyzed by anxiety and shame for the last two years quitting doesn't feel much different. My therapist has suggested I'm suffering from a type of complex trauma (not to be confused with trauma associated with an event), I find this hard to believe and I continue to blame myself into a paralyzing shame everyday. My intellectual side knows that grad school trauma is very real but I still can't seem to give myself a break but I'm trying. I share this because many of you sound like your on the other side and I want others like me (if there are any), to know they aren't alone. I feel so much shame and guilt I am still short of functioning regularly. That's reality but I am hopeful that more distance and more time will help. I'd love to know how some of you managed to "forgive" yourself for what many perceive as failing. Thanks for sharing everyone.

REPLY



Anonymous on 24 July 2012 at 9:00 am

What a wonderful blog! Hats off to you Sarah for writing such an interesting piece and Erin for having the courage to stop doing something that was a waste of your time.

Growing up I have heard many times that you have to finish what you start; don't quit; you're not a failure if you fall; only if you don't try again you're a failure, etc, etc. But what is the rule of thumb for a PhD? It's not like finishing a BS, completing a challenging internship or leaving a relationship without evaluating it from different angles. You believe that finishing a PhD falls under the same category, but after four years of my PhD experience, I now have realized that it is and it isn't. Some things in life are just meant for the experience you gain, not from the completion. This is the second time I didn't complete something I started (one being my Peace Corps experience). So I was particularly hard on myself when I didn't see this out as well. Only until reading this blog did I realized that trying out things in life means that you are living. My PhD didn't work out but there are so many other things in my life that did (i.e. learned Mandarin after working so hard at it for 7 years, lived abroad successfully for 9 years, finished two masters, received my teacher's certification, etc). Now I understand that none of us can expect everything to work out when we start. That goes for relationships,

jobs, education programs, you name it. Just make sure that you are enjoying the process (at least most of the time), bless the universe for teaching you such valuable lessons and meeting great people along the way and move on.

Thanks again for posting this. Now I don't feel like such a loser for studying in a bad PhD program in a foreign country for the past four years. At almost 38 my life isn't over and I still have time to begin a new career.

REPLY



Tamara on 7 October 2015 at 5:39 pm

Thank you anonymous! I feel exactly same. I am currently 2.5 years into my PhD and it looks like I won't be finishing for at least another 12-18months. I am so fed up and desperately trying to find a job before I quit but am struggling which is making staying in the program even harder. I agree with your ideas about trying new things. I have started and not finished many things but I have also started and completed probably just as many. I would rather give something a try and have it not work out than not tried it in the first place- it's all about the experience and what it teaches you.

REPLY



Aimal on 28 July 2012 at 7:32 am

Thank you Erin for giving us some heart, I was a mess for 2 years after leaving a PhD program in ivy league university in USA. I was depressed, using heavy doses of anti-depressants; at some points I wondered that would I be a normal person again. I have learned Erin's lesson a hard way that our well being should be on top of everything else.

REPLY



Britt on 30 August 2012 at 7:21 pm

Thank you for this post. It's almost a year after you wrote this, but this rings true after just a week in graduate school for me. I got into a

fully paid PhD program in psychology, something I worked for years to attain. After putting so much pride and contentment with getting here, I am miserable. I have never felt this depressed in my life, and I know that something inside of me is screaming. Here's the mystery: I am not overly stressed or lonely. But for some reason, I feel I have made the biggest mistake of my life, and dragged my husband 3 states away to do so. I think it would actually be a lot easier if he hadn't come with me as he is refusing to even deal with my urge to leave and go for my master's back home. He already got a job and yet I already want to leave. It is so logically ridiculous that it freaks me out, and I have devoted myself to stay for at least a year; afterall, I am in a 15 month lease and I don't yet know what is wrong. I am scared, rethinking every possible thing I ever wanted or didn't want in life, and I don't know what to do about it.

REPLY



Should I Stay or Should I Go? on 21 September 2012 at 6:19 am

Britt,

Your response is strangely similar to what I have gone through. Two years ago I got into a fully paid PhD program in psychology. It was also something that I worked for years to get into, I even came in with a Master's to prove I could be a graduate student. However, after my first month I was so burned out that I went into a state of depression. Nonetheless my family and friends told me to brush it off, it was just anxiety, and try the program for a year. I have never experienced so much stress in my life and I have developed high blood pressure.

This month I was informed that I did not pass prelims. I am conflicted about having to make the decision regarding retaking my preliminary exams (with the risk of failing again) or withdrawing from the University. If I withdraw prior to scheduling a second attempt, my record will not reflect my unsuccessful attempt.

Again, my family and friends think this is just another hurdle I have to go through to get a Ph.D. But, I feel like this could be a positive thing. I finally have a reason to leave without being judged for leaving the program just because I feel I have made

the biggest mistake of my life. A Ph.D. is not the same as a bachelor's degree. It's not like dropping out of college. It's like quitting a job.

REPLY



Britt on 30 September 2012 at 3:44 pm

It is so nice to hear that I am not alone. In the last month, I have done so much soul searching, gone to a career adviser several times, gone to a psychologist to talk through everything, talked to everyone on the face of the planet, and I think I have found where I belong. I feel like I am not overly stressed, actually, and I am doing everything I have ever done in school, but for example, my first paper came back with a 72%, a girl who never gets Cs. My misery is killing something in me, and I feel no passion for the field I once felt passion for; actually, I am learning to hate it instead. For me, it's the idea of the science-based classes and all of the research that my degree depends on that turns me completely off. I hate nearly all of it, and I am realizing now that I haven't had an excitement for this in a long time. I am going to try to finish the semester, and at the end of the year, I think I will drop out and apply for my MSW degree instead. The hands-on field of social work really feels right, the social rights and society that we learn about (me being a feminist with strong beliefs), and the fact that I can do pretty much anything that I would want to do, including private practice in my home state, with that degree. I am working through the idea of never being the doctor I always thought I would be, and making a lot less money at least at first, but the idea excites me. I am also taking up my desire for writing. There are so many things we enjoy out there, and sometimes people like us need to realize it. I feel that me staying, I would end up failing my prelims as well. Because I am not meant to pass them or even get that far; somewhere down the line it would not work out. Because I have this overwhelming feeling that it isn't meant to. I hope that you find your way; I am starting to work through mine. You know in your heart what is right, forget everything else for a while. KIT.

REPLY



Should I Stay or Should I Go? on 18 October 2012 at 5:25 am

Thanks, Britt.

To update: I officially informed my advisor that I will not be retaking my prelims and withdraw at the end of the semester. Surprisingly my advisor was very supportive of my decision. My advisor has offered to be a positive reference, and even help me find a job. I still have funding this semester so that helps during the job search. I would suggest you do the same – make the decision to withdraw while you still have funding. That way you are looking for a job (or applying for a different degree) while you still have a job.

I think you are doing the right think by visiting a career advisor, counseling psychologist and just discussing your situation with whomever you feel comfortable with. I did the same thing, and it helped me feel confident that I was making the best decision for myself. Maybe in the future I might go back to get a PhD in a different program or get another Masters. I know I am capable of getting accepted and completing the coursework. But, right now I know that I don't WANT to be in a PhD program, nor do I WANT to work in academia.

I hope you figure out the best decision based on what you WANT to do too. Not what you should do.

REPLY



Britt on 19 October 2012 at 3:34 pm

Absolutely. I am sure that you made the right choice. Considering I am dropping out while I am still doing decently and noone else can physically see my reasons, it is going to be difficult for me to tell my adviser. I plan on telling him soon that I am very unhappy and I am reconsidering everything so that when I do tell him eventually, it isn't out of nowhere...I am going to finish the semester so I am funded, but I believe I would have to finish the spring semester too to continue to get funding after that and I am unwilling to do another semester of this hell. I will inform him that I am still happy to work for him (I am grant-funded not school-funded) but I have

a feeling they are not going to allow it. I'd rather get a job in the meantime than continue taking classes, doing research, etc. just to keep the job I have with him. I know for sure I am doing the right thing, and I doubt very much if the research involved in any PhD is ever something I will choose to do. Thank you for all your help.

REPLY



Anonymous on 31 December 2012 at 5:09 am

I dropped out of my PhD program officially. I begin a new job here soon, and I will move back home and begin my MSW next fall.

REPLY



Anonymous on 10 September 2012 at 11:16 pm

Thank you and well said..I'm doing my PhD in English Literature and I'm so sick of it for many reasons including inequity in the department where I'm doing it...

I wake up every morning wishing if I can drop out but fear of unemployment stops me and so passes another day of struggle with myself, my books and my writing.

I admire your courage Erin.

REPLY



Anonymous on 15 October 2012 at 5:10 am

This was very healing to read. Very similar situation here (though still in the mess of trying to figure out if I can somehow make it through the program, or should just withdraw for my own sanity) (but oh, the mourning process. Like in your story, I'm already years into this program).

Thank you for writing this, and congrats for moving on.

REPLY

Anonymous on 29 December 2012 at 3:56 pm



Not particularly this kind but I have made a similar big decision. You say "Oh, my already depleted self-esteem just plummeted." This happened to me as well and I accused myself for not having the character for making a big decision like this. After a long while I can understand that this self-accusation is too harsh and all of us need to learn some lessons from Thoreau:

"So thoroughly and sincerely are we compelled to live, reverencing our life, and denying the possibility of change. This is the only way, we say; but there are as many ways as there can be drawn radii from one centre. All change is a miracle to contemplate; but it is a miracle which is taking place every instant."

"Of a life of luxury the fruit is luxury, whether in agriculture, or commerce, or literature, or art. There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live. To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust."

[REPLY](#)

Anonymous on 16 January 2013 at 12:37 am

Thank you for this.

[REPLY](#)

Anonymous on 16 January 2013 at 12:44 am

This is so encouraging to read. I dropped out of a PhD program last year and I've been struggling with this decision ever since. On one hand it is freeing, but there are days that it hurts like a fresh wound. My self-esteem took a big hit with this decision. It's especially painful to have to answer those dreaded questions from people who have not seen you in a while: "Where are you in the program now? Are you almost finished?" It's terrible to be reminded of this "failure" again and again, and also difficult to try to explain that it was not for lack of talent, skill, stamina, etc. but that the program/department was the wrong choice and absolutely toxic. Thanks for posting this, and good luck to you!

REPLY

Anonymous on 24 March 2016 at 6:12 pm

Hi Erin and all,

Thanks for your post. I dropped out of a doctoral program, too. Not only that it was the wrong choice, but the department was very toxic. Above all, favouritism was discouraging. Why continue this when I have no social life? When I am doing research 18-hours a day while there are students who come to class admitting they have not read anything for class. This was supposed to be a social work institution in a cowboy town, somewhere in Canada, not a circus with professors who do not know how or what to teach. I was too good to be there...I felt like I am a teacher to my professors. I questioned how they got their PhDs. Such a shame to look up a word in the dictionary. I understand that it was social work, no offence to the profession, but, overall, you are supposed to be a scholar. Getting into that program was the worst decision I made. When you are no longer happy, get out. You are not defined by the insecurities a professor displays into you (her mental health was questionable). You are not defined by the high standards you set up for yourself. I just wanted to be free, to break free from a very negative environment where more than 50 percent of professors and students were on anti-depressants.

Leaving was a wise decision. Leaving was one of the best things I have done. I did not learn anything in that program. I had this professor walking in socks while eating her celery and asking us to regurgitate what we read. She never taught anything. She barely knows how to spell. If you no longer enjoy life, it is time to leave. Do things that make you happy. There is more to life than books!
Take care of yourselves.

REPLY

Anonymous on 25 February 2013 at 11:28 pm



hi. thank you for your story . my story is a little similar although I have regrets. I entered a phd program for a language/literature last fall. I thought I would love it however in my first quarter I was always stressed because of the theoretical angle the classes took with literature and I didn't feel like my language was strong enough after being out of college for a while. I left the program after one quarter to teach middle school- somethig I was doing before the phd) however now, all I feel is regret for not trying the phd longer and giving up so easily. of course back then all I remember is wanting to quit and get a job but now I am so mad at myself. anyone else feel this regret over quitting? I'm seriously contemplating re-applying to various programs but now I'm 28 and feel like I wasted so much time when I could have already been close to half-way done. I thought over a year later i would be over it but I'm not and I still think back and wonder why I disnt just try harder??? any suggestions??

REPLY



Brittany Ann on 2 March 2013 at 4:43 am

Your best bet as far as regrets is to have faith, faith that everything happens for a reason and that if you were meant to be in that program, you still would be. Follow your heart.

REPLY



Brittany Ann on 2 March 2013 at 4:43 am

I have started a blog to provide support for grad school drop outs. I would love some people to participate and hep guide others still struggling with their decisions and the consequences.

<http://dropouthub.blogspot.com/>

REPLY



Anonymous on 13 June 2013 at 7:06 pm

Law school drop out here. I even moved across the country for my program, got an apartment and all the other trappings. I don't regret leaving, though.

I totally identify with your need to explain all the reasons why you made your decision to others, when it's actually explaining to yourself.

REPLY



Anonymous on 23 July 2013 at 11:59 am

Got to agree with the sentiments here. I am currently weighing up my options concerning dropping out over in the UK. After finishing my undergrad last year I applied for a PhD project involving mathematical modelling of point source pollution in glacial lakes (as maths and ecology are my main interests), and to do this I had to turn down a job offer. Two days after accepting the PhD and turning down the job offer I received an email stating that the funding had been withdrawn from the PhD, which left me up the creek. My supervisor (who was also my Honours supervisor at undergrad) managed to argue that pulling the funding at such short notice is unacceptable and blah blah blah. The same funding body (ERDF) offered another project that my supervisor had applied for, desperate to get hold of employment, considering I had turned down a good job offer and had moved into a new apartment, I accepted the PhD. Bad idea. The PhD is concerned with soil carbon, which is not difficult by any means but for me is the most boring subject I have ever come across. I literally can not bring myself to analyse one more soil sample in the lab. To add insult to injury, I conducted my own fieldwork in my own vehicle and stayed in said vehicle (a VW Campervan) in order to reduce costs, though the fieldwork costs still amount to more than £800/\$1200; I haven't been reimbursed for this fieldwork since November 2012. Worse than that, since February 2013 I have been working on an extra-curricular project that my supervisor has decided to take on, and one which has no bearing on my PhD. I know I can just tell him that I am not willing to do the work, but as I have always had a good working relationship with him I feel indebted, so out of a 3 year PhD I have spent six months working on something else. On top of that, the funding body set up monthly publicity events at which the grad students must attend and grin for the cameras and say how great it all is (I contracted food poisoning from a dodgy ricotta and spinach spring roll-like-object at the March event... which of course made me happy). I must admit, it is partly my fault; I am naive enough to believe that all science is about is

intellectual enquiry and answering questions concerning nature regardless of their application to the real world. I just want to research for the sake of research. So, yes, I had unrealistic goals in that respect, but to not be paid for a job that I didn't apply for in the first place and I am not allowed to work on for six months is madness. Worst decision I have made in my life! I am considering applying for alternative projects, but as my current supervisor is my primary reference from my undergrad years, and even though I have published 3 papers in decent journals, I think it will be difficult to get another PhD.

REPLY



Mandy on 27 August 2013 at 7:44 pm

Hi! I dropped out from a top 10 social sciences PhD in 2011 and spent two years re-building skills for employability. I'll graduate from my current Master's program this December. I started a blog that records my 99 days of job seeking before I graduate:

<http://99djs.blogspot.com/> I mainly focus on job seeking advice.

If you face the same situation (dropped out but cannot find a good job), I hope my experience and advice are helpful to you!

REPLY



Brittany Ann on 19 November 2013 at 3:15 pm

<http://dropouthub.blogspot.com/>

REPLY



Shelly on 10 December 2013 at 9:01 pm

Thanks for this.

REPLY



Anonymous on 20 February 2014 at 5:02 pm

Thank you so very much for this. I'm at a breaking point after 6 years in a graduate program, and you've helped me feel a little less

terrified and alienated about the decision toward which I'm leaning.
<3

REPLY



Manisha on 24 April 2014 at 1:02 am

Hello, Erin. It's been nearly three years since you wrote this and nearly seven years since I finally completed my Ph.D. Every word you wrote reminded me of why I walked away from that life choice. When I finally finished I was crushed, devastated, depressed and totally unable to deal with the world. I was working at the time that I defended and one night I just walked out of my job at the University. I walked into my office and packed up my things and never went back. I spent the next three years of my life in dark depression. To this day, I don't know how or why my husband stuck around. Despite the years of depression, I know with hard core certainty that leaving was the best thing I ever did for myself. I told very few people that I had a Ph.D. until 2013. Even though I had finished it I didn't feel I deserved it because the person I became was so small and insignificant and seemingly meaningless to this world.

Now I have a daughter and I do a lot of community work which brings me immense joy. I finally decided I wanted to be happy but I admit I still have nightmares of being back in that toxic place. But I no longer cringe when I talk about that experience and for that I am content.

Thank you for writing what you did. It was very affirming for me. I hope that you are well and are happy with that awesome life-altering decision.

REPLY



Erin Cary on 24 April 2014 at 6:27 am

Hey Manisha,

This is Erin, the original subject of Sarah's interview. She sent me your comment because we're friends, and I want you to know it really meant a lot to me that you shared all of this. Even when we know it was the right decision about 50 times over, it's still embarrassing and status-robbing to walk away from academia, isn't it?

I'm still convinced I made the right decision—like you, I suspect, I was sort of past the point of choosing, in some ways. I really went as far as I could go there and had to leave. Yet, even though there had been so much pain, self-hounding, and internal turmoil due to the culture that myself and all of my colleagues were subject to, I nevertheless grieved for years after leaving. I think I was grieving for so many things at once that I couldn't separate them and still can't—for starters, I had lost the person who had entered the program full of life and passion for my field of study; I had lost faith that people truly want to help other people achieve their dreams; I had lost the mental wherewithal to engage with literature the way I once had; I had lost years of my life in which I expected my potential to bloom and take shape.

I'm also doing community work, though, and it heals a lot of pain, doesn't it? I guess we should take from this the knowledge that we survived, are therefore way stronger than we thought, and we can still find happiness on our own terms. Your comment was very affirming for me, too—thank you. Take care —I truly wish you the best.

REPLY



Anonymous on 31 May 2014 at 11:24 pm

I would like to apply for a PhD program but after reading these comments. I feel disencouraged and scared of entering in such a trauma

REPLY

Freedom on 11 October 2017 at 1:18 am

If you are passionate about it, just do it. It was our luck due to certain circumstances, or a wrong choice.

Keep swimming

REPLY



Karen on 2 December 2014 at 9:51 pm

I could just say ditto to your article—to almost every detail, down to the therapy and depleted self-esteem. It was indeed a "sick system"

at my university as well and nearly killed my love for music (my area.)
Comes close to being the worst experience of my life to date.

REPLY

sam on 24 December 2015 at 9:35 am

I dropped out in 2013 from my PHD after a year and half for the same reasons but it was more chaotic situation in our faculty i don't even wanna talk about it ,so the problem is i'm jobless now after 3 years and extremely depressed i taught about ending my life several times (i think i still do) ,unlike my relatives judgements i am really passionate about research i've always been curious about anything especially computer science even though i'm a female i was doing well among my males colleagues ,this 2 years of PHd it's a drawback for me to start out my carer or even for applying to another university .

My advice to any student embarked on the PHd journey is to NEVER STOP if you think that you are struggling or feeling that your thesis is an endless project you should try quitting to know how a negligible life you gonna have without a "respectful" degree thus hold on no matter what at least it can't be worse than our faculty,that's my advice.

PS: sorry for my English i'm not a native-speaker :P.

REPLY



Alexia on 13 January 2016 at 5:03 pm

This really spoke to me. I'm struggling so much right now in my Master's program. I'm in my second semester of my first year of it. My focus is Literary Studies. I've always loved literature, and I thought this is what I wanted to do, but I'm honestly coming to resent it. I'm having trouble teaching as well. It's my first semester teaching, and this is how I'm paying for everything basically. It's a funded program so I don't pay anything, which is really nice. I just now know that I don't want to be in academia or a professor either. I know it isn't as rigorous as a PhD program, but I just am so burnt out from my Master's already. I'm planning on quitting after I finish up this semester. I'm still trying to come to terms with that I'm not a failure or well never do anything with my life if I leave the program. I just am

so depressed in anxious that it's hard for me to do my own work or teach at all. Thank you for sharing your story. I needed to hear it.

REPLY

James on 5 September 2016 at 6:48 am

I spent the last 7 years of my life preparing for my PhD. Throughout all that time, I never doubted my belief that I wanted to do my PhD and become a professor one day. I was so convinced that it was what I wanted to do that I sacrificed internships and coops that would have made me employable or that would have given me a comfortable government job. It was satisfying enough for me that I was achieving excellent marks and racking up scholarships, awards and TAs and that it was certain I would do my PhD. I was accepted to a PhD program and I was supposed to start this week. However, 4 weeks ago, something unexpected happened. I started to have second thoughts, which forced me to consult with friends, family, my landlord, my professors, and the dean of the program. Everyone chipped in but it was the dean of the program who gave me the most eye-opening and well-informed feedback. He said a PhD is a labour of love. It is something that you do because you love to do it not because it has any rewards. He also said that it will not improve my job prospects; I will be giving up 4 – 5 years of my life (time I could be using to work and gain relevant work experience); I will become overqualified for many positions; and, the academic job market is dismal. After walking out of his office, I began to cry uncontrollably. It suddenly occurred to me that I want to do my PhD but I do not want to have such an outcome. I kept on crying for the next 5 days. I only slept 1 out of 5 days. I could not eat that I lost 6 kgs in 5 days. My mind was full of thoughts of suicide and how I had ruined my life. I called my family apologizing for being a failure. Depression is probably where I am at and I have no idea when it will end. It occurred to me immediately afterwards what a mess my life had become. Some of my old behaviour patterns are gone. The first thing in my hand for the last years was a book and the last thing in my hand before falling asleep was a book. Now, it has been 4 weeks since I touched a book. My old optimism is gone and replaced with negativity and pessimism. I have been struggling to organize my thoughts and my life. Plus, I have been drowning in self-pity as I work a 12.50 per hour job at a car manufacturing plant, while I

volunteer to gain relevant work experience. It kills me that my classmates during my Masters degree are now working in the government or in the private sector with well-paid jobs and that I am stuck in my situation. It has all gone so wrong. 😞

REPLY

Prefer to go anon on 3 March 2019 at 12:00 pm

Hi!... I don't know if anyone would be in my situation out there. I joined the PhD program at my university with great interest and enthusiasm. I am truly passionate about research.

I'm in the second year of study, cleared the exams I was supposed to and yet I haven't been able to get a head start into the topic of my future thesis. The issue stems from my supervisor and direct senior.

So this senior of mine is used to having post grad students doing the work for his thesis. Now that we don't have good post grad students in our lab, my supervisor has decided to throw me in to complete my senior's thesis, which includes writing his research articles too. I'm at this juncture where I keep clearing all his work dumped on my table, and yet more of his work keeps piling up on me. The only thing that my supervisor has to say is just this -" You have to do it. It's part of the learning process."

I don't understand why on earth I should be doing the work for my senior's thesis when I should be working in my thesis. I'm married with kids too, while he's still unmarried!

I've tried my best to deal with it. Now I'm beginning to feel like there's no better option than to leave. feel mentally exhausted already. Please help!!

REPLY

