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9 Ways To Manage And Overcome Academic Stress And Transition Into Industry

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Written by Cathy Sorbara, Ph.D.

The last year of graduate school was the hardest for me.

I had papers to complete, a thesis to write, and an unending list of experiments to run.

I felt overwhelmed.

I felt like each experiment should have been completed yesterday and like there were never enough hours in the day to catch up.

Inevitably, I cut back on sleep.

I said no to networking events and other social engagements.

Still, there was so much to do.

Was I ever going to get out of here?

The questions from my friends and family had become more frequent and more annoying than ever.

“When are you graduating?”

“How long have you been doing this for again?”

I just wanted to escape.

I wanted to pack my bags and move to the south of Italy and open a café where I could spend my days perfecting mochas rather than Western Blots.

Suck it up. Deal with it. Stop being weak.

Academia is stressful for everyone, not just you. This is what I would tell myself.

But my anxiety grew and grew.

The more I pretended to be strong for fear of being called weak, the more anxious I became.

Eventually I sunk into a deep depression.

I did my best to hide it but everything in my life started to sink with me.

Why Academic Stress Is Increasing

[A recent UC Berkley report](#) on graduate student mental health showed that 45% of graduate students have had emotional or stress-related problems in the past year.

The report also showed that 50% of self-reported suicide attempts in graduate school are made by STEM graduate students.

Can you believe that?

Again...

50% of self-reported suicide attempts are made by STEM PhD candidates.

Why is getting a PhD so stressful today?

The reason is simple—[academia is a dead-end](#).

STEM graduate students are very intelligent, hard-working, and ambitious individuals.

These individuals have given everything to academia and are only now realizing that academia has nothing to offer them in return.

Academia is no longer able to provide PhDs with jobs, funding, or even support.

[According to a report by the Atlantic](#), 60% of PhDs and 80% of Life Science PhDs will NOT have a paying job at graduation.

[Another report by the Royal Society](#) showed that less than 1% of PhDs will actually go on to be tenured professors.

[The book, Working With Problem Faculty](#), reports that working with difficult and often abusive faculty members is the number one concern in academia.

If this isn't depressing, I don't know what is.

PhDs are expected to give everything to a system that gives them nothing in return.

If this isn't depressing, I don't know what is.



9 Ways To Manage Academic Stress

Things may be depressing in academia, but you don't have to be depressed.

First and foremost, if you already have symptoms of depression, get diagnosed and treated right away.

[Here is a list of depression symptoms.](#)

If you're not clinically depressed but feel yourself becoming more and more stressed, don't wait to make a change.

Make a change now.

There are many things you can do to avoid academic stress.

You can make a decision to leave this broken system and transition into a profit or [non-profit industry position.](#)

This decision alone can make you feel better.

You can also work to develop a kind of immune system against the doom and gloom in academia.

The only way to develop this immune system is to set up some new positive habits for yourself.

Here are 9 habits that will help you manage and overcome the causes and effects of academic stress...

1. Incorporate more anticipation into your life.

Always have something to look forward to.

[Studies in the book, The Happiness Advantage,](#) show that simply setting a date for an enjoyable event raises endorphin levels in your brain by 27%.

The best part is this enjoyable event does not have to be big.

It can be a date to watch a movie, have coffee with a friend, or go for a walk somewhere new.

The book also showed that your happiness will increase every time you're reminded of this event.

No matter what you have going on in the lab, make sure you book something enjoyable into your schedule twice a week, preferably Wednesday and Saturday.

This will give you a sense of anticipation throughout the week and help you stave off academic stress.

2. Do regular exercise.

Advice on getting more exercise always sounds like a broken record.

But that's because it's very sound advice.

[A Harvard study](#) showed that a regular exercise routine has been shown to decrease symptoms of mild to moderate depression.

If you have trouble finding the motivation on your own, find an exercise buddy who will help you step away from the computer and lab bench to do something active outside.

If you hate the idea of going for a run, try yoga.

[A report by the Telegraph](#) showed that yoga helps ward off depression and eases anxiety.

The more your body moves, the better you will feel so make sure you get up out of your chair as much as possible.

3. Surround yourself with supportive people.

Graduate school can feel like a Mecca of pessimistic people.

The conversations with colleagues over lunch or at coffee break are filled with complaints and gossip.

This negativity stays with you when you leave for home at the end of the day.

Over time, all of your thoughts become so negative that you even get annoyed when someone attempts to positively rationalize your situation.

The only way to prevent this is to remove yourself from [negative people in graduate school](#).

Instead, surround yourself with positive people.

Yes, there are positive PhDs out there. You just need to know where to look.

The best decision I made for myself was to [join the](#)

[Cheeky Scientist Association.](#)

The Association is a group of positive and supportive PhDs who helped me not only transition into industry but they also helped me stay positive during the process.

Getting a PhD is very hard.

The only way to stay positive is to embrace relationships that inspire and motivate you to be a better person while helping others be better too.

4. Stop comparing yourself with others.

It's easy to fall into the trap of measuring your success with the success of others.

Every PhD remembers the sting they felt when they learned that someone in their program graduated in three years.

Meanwhile, you're on your sixth year.

Every PhD remembers the confusion and guilt they felt when their lab mate managed to get published in a high impact factor journal in the first couple of years of graduate school.

Meanwhile, you're still sorting out which cell line to use in your initial experiments.

The problem is that comparing yourself to others is subjective.

You don't have the same background as someone else.

You don't have the same PI, the same resources, the same project, or the same personal situation.

It's foolish to only value your accomplishments based on how your accomplishments stack up to

others.

Instead of comparing yourself to others, compare yourself to your past self.

How much more do you know now than a year ago?

How much more do you know than five years ago?

Learn to celebrate your growth.

Learn to celebrate your successes and the successes of your colleagues, no matter how small.

This will lead to more success and a more positive and productive mindset.

5. Learn to be assertive and stand up for yourself.

In graduate school, no one will tell you that you're working too hard.

No one will ever tell you it's ok to complete a dataset on Monday rather than working through the weekend.

It is up to you to set strong boundaries and communicate those boundaries to your advisor.

Otherwise, everyone around you will start pushing you around.

If you don't set up your own boundaries, other people will.

They will wring you completely dry until everything you have inside of you is used up.

Do not allow yourself to be overpowered and intimidated.

You deserve a weekend off.

You deserve to go to daytime networking events.

You deserve to take an hour out of every day to prepare your [industry resume and job search strategy](#).

In fact, your career depends on these things.

6. Understand your working environment and your advisor's expectations.

Don't assume that your advisor works the way you do.

Don't assume that they think about you as much as you think about them.

Don't even assume they like you personally.

The hard truth is your advisor is the boss and you are the employee.

The more you understand how your boss thinks and acts, the less stressed you will be in graduate school.

Most importantly, find out as much about your advisor from former students and postdocs as you can.

Advisors have too much power in academia today and often go overboard in pressuring PhDs and PhD candidates to work overtime.

Be sure you know what you're getting yourself into.

At the same time, don't have unreasonable expectations.

It might take your advisor six months to read through the first draft of your paper or thesis.

Plan ahead.

Do your research on your advisor and your work environment and set your expectations accordingly.

7. Avoid isolation.

Academia is not an ivory tower, it's an isolation chamber.

Many experiments in graduate school involve long hours in dimly lit rooms where you can pass most of the day without any sunlight, let alone social interaction.

This isolation is a breeding ground for negative, self-limiting beliefs.

If you're not careful, these beliefs will fester and overcome you.

It's easy to feel helpless when you're alone.

At the same time, feeling helpless makes you want to be alone.

It's a vicious cycle that leads to more and more stress and eventually depression.

No matter how much you feel like isolating yourself, don't.

It's the worst thing you can do.

Instead of closing off your lines of communication, open them up.

Talk to everyone about what you're going through.

Write about it. Share it.

You'll be surprised by how many other people are going through the same thing.

8. Put first things first.

You'll never get every experiment done before graduating.

There will always be more work to do in the lab.

You must understand this.

It's very important in the final years of graduate school to prioritize your schedule.

It's important to ensure you complete experiments and meet critical deadlines.

But it's equally important to realize that you'll never be *finished*.

As you get close to graduation, or close to [transitioning into industry from a postdoc](#), you must start putting lab work and publications second.

From now on, your job search must come first.

Taking the next step in your career must be your number one priority.

You'll never get an industry job, or advance your career in general, if you keep working like you're a peon in the lab.

9. Find an industry mentor.

An industry mentor is completely different than your academic advisor.

This kind of mentor can provide you with the wisdom you need to advance your career and leave academic stress behind forever.

The truth is many people in academia know nothing

about industry.

Many lifelong academics have no industry connections whatsoever.

Yet, many of these people will act like they know exactly what you should do to advance your career.

[Stop listening to these people.](#)

Someone who has never worked in industry cannot give you intelligent career advice in today's world.

A good industry mentor can help you create better expectations and help you manage any conflicts that come up for you in graduate school.

These mentors can also help you see things you may not be seeing on your own.

You don't know what you don't know.

By finding a good mentor, you can become aware of new things that will help you stay positive and get out of academia faster.

As difficult as it is to believe right now, the overwhelming feelings of academic stress and depression you are experiencing will pass. You will complete your PhD and move on to bigger and better things in industry or elsewhere. One way or another, you are nearing the end of graduate school. You have become THE expert in your field. No one understands your specific project better than you. You are intelligent, savvy, and nearly at your end point. A new beginning is right around the corner so surround yourself with the right people and finish strong.

To learn more about transitioning into industry, including instant access to our exclusive training videos, case studies, industry insider documents, transition plan, and private online network, get on the wait list for the [Cheeky Scientist Association.](#)



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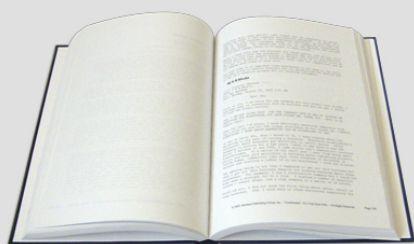
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Cathy Sorbara, Ph.D.

Cathy has a PhD in Medical Life Science and Technology and currently works as a publishing editor in Cambridge, England where she is involved in peer review of scientific literature as well as writing and public speaking. Cathy is passionate about science communication including translating science to lay audiences and allowing access of scientific research to the public. She is also a steering member in the Cambridge AWiSE, a regional network for women in science, engineering and technology in both industry and academia.



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**hello1204 1987** • a year ago

Hi Cathy,

Very nice article. I wish to know some tips on how to find an industry mentor when we have no connections ?

I am presently finishing my phd and wish that had all these things and advice been shared to me by some of my seniors i would have been able to finish my phd earlier and might have been employed today. Anyways. I am very positive these days. I am also joining the association.

Thanks.

 |  • Reply • Share ▸**Cathy Sorbara** → hello1204 1987 • a year ago

Happy to hear that you are joining the association! I think by doing so, you will see that you have already gained industry mentors in myself, Isaiah and the rest of the team :) I also wish I knew then what I know now but what is important is that we move forward and learn from the past. Welcome aboard and looking forward to seeing you in the group!

 |  • Reply • Share ▸**hello1204 1987** → Cathy Sorbara • a year ago

Hurray....I am in the CSA..... Happy with the positive and constructive suggestions provided by the group members in just 12 hours of my membership.....Very great experience....Yup I am looking forward to gaining mentorship from all of you....

My Name : Bharat Bhushan Sharma.

Thanks :-)

PS: Its very great that you are replying back to all the comments of readers of your article. This is very encouraging for the readers. It keeps their interest and encourages to associate in a more active manner. Bravo Cathy....

 |  • Reply • Share ▸

**Cathy Sorbara** → hello1204 1987

• a year ago

Thanks Bharat and let me officially welcome you to the crew!!! Looking forward to keeping in touch on the Facebook group and seeing you progress. :)

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**AndreaPD** • a year ago

Put first thing first will help you to prioritize your tasks and help you to complete them in deadline. It will also help you to manage your to-dos and cut the workload of pending items. I did one mistake during my postdoc that I gave first priority to my lab work and publications work, and never thought about a job or industry transition. And after completing my postdoc, I realize that I'm jobless. If I started working on the transition from first I'd have my industry job earlier. Thanks for sharing such great tips, many postdocs can get some help from it.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**Cathy Sorbara** → AndreaPD • a year ago

I did exactly the same thing, AndreaPD! Thank you for sharing your story. Unfortunately it is all too common! I hope you are finding some guidance through the cheeky scientists and that you will not be jobless for long! Best of luck !!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**Dr. Hershal** • a year ago

Hi Cathy, this is very helpful and life saving article for upcoming PhDs. I wish I had such thing back at my time. I know how much trouble you have to do to make a transition to industry from academia. Many people will be against your decision and try to stop you. After reading this, I want to say to upcoming guys that, remember the last point from this article. Find an industry mentor who can guide and give you proper direction on how to make the transition from academia to industry. Because in academia, you'll never find a guy who can motivate or inspires you to for an industry job.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**Cathy Sorbara** → Dr. Hershal • a year ago

Thank you Dr. Hershal for this comment!! I think being without a proper mentor can be such a limiting factor for phds. We are unfortunately bombarded with the idea

that continuing in academia is our only option and I think this can fuel our anxiety when experiments go wrong or papers get rejected.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Nicole Hood · a year ago

I would like to add music to this list. Music has an incredible power to change human emotions instantly. So It can be helpful in reducing a stress. Just create the playlist of your favorite songs and listen while you are in stress. You can also sing out loudly along with the song.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Cathy Sorbara → **Nicole Hood** · a year ago

I could not agree more! Music is incredibly therapeutic and I have been known to throw a solo dance party (.. or two) in my apartment when things get a little stressful :)

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Eric Mandez · a year ago

I would definitely suggest yoga. It has been a saviour to me for last 2 years. Being in a lab for at least 10-12 hours daily can literally kill your happiness and also social life. This ultimately affects your quality of life. Yoga does a great job at keeping your mental and physical health strong. One should also hang out with friends to keep his/her social life active. This can reduce your stress a lot.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Cathy Sorbara → **Eric Mandez** · a year ago

Again, I could not agree more. Anything that can place your focus and energy on something positive is an excellent idea. Luckily, yoga has become so popular that a class is normally just a stone's throw away. I even would download a few videos and give it a go in my living room first thing in the morning -- puts you in a calm mood before the madness of the lab.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Dr. Tucker · a year ago

In my opinion, being isolated in the lab is the main cause of this problem. When we go outside, meet people and exchange ideas and information, then stress automatically reduces because we widened our perspective. This is necessary to reduce stress, instead of focusing only on one thing. A little

distraction is helpful in the reduction of stress.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Cathy Sorbara → Dr.Tucker · a year ago

I could not agree more! Sometimes the lab can feel like a vortex and the more time you spend trapped inside the more overwhelming each situation feels.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Dr.Young · a year ago

Well, I'm about to say something controversial. From my experience, I think that, stress, limited to some extent, is useful in productivity. Of course I said limited stress, more stress will only do a harm. A mind without a stress can wander, but little stress can make you more focused. So, it's okay if you have a little stress, but if you've more than you can always come to this article and apply these fantastic methods.Thanks.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Cathy Sorbara → Dr.Young · a year ago

I think so too Dr. Young! Challenges are what drives us forward and keeps us motivated to succeed. It is all about balance which is something that I lacked when I was doing my PhD and caused stress to become so crippling. Thanks for the comment!

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



JJ · a year ago

Thanks a lot Cathy for this great post. I'm really going through this situation. And many points which you have mentioned is just about me, for example comparing my years of study with many others finished in less time and I'm still in my dissertation. Now I'm really a very stressful situation and pulling me from different directions of life. Really a very stressful situation. Also when my surrounded people ask "when you are finishing", "why taking so long etc" giving more stress sometimes I lose control on them. So much stressful, especially I'm a part time PhD student stress from family, job, other personal commitment, etc etc....

Anyways this post is give some relief. Please add more encouraging posts. God bless you.

JJ

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Cathy Sorbara → JJ · a year ago

Thank you JJ for sharing your story - I am happy to hear

that you were able to connect with the article. My PhD took over five years when I knew many others that completed it in three so it was a constant struggle to tell myself that it was not my fault it was taking so long. In the end, I had to make light of everyone's comments -- I knew they were trying to be supportive (or just trying to make small talk!). I hope you can take some time for yourself during this stressful time and be patient with yourself. There is light at the end of tunnel :)

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



JJ → Cathy Sorbara · a year ago

Dear Dr., Thanks a lot for your comment. Yes I truly believe the light ate the end of the tunnel. Sometimes the stress is overwhelming. Thanks again for your wonderful article. God bless you

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Chiu-An Lo · a year ago

Thanks for the post Cathy. I like all the points you shared especially No.3 " Surround yourself with supportive people". This reminds me of advices given by many entrepreneurs "surround yourself with optimistic people is one of the prerequisites to success". Personally, during weekly networking events I always try to stick to ambitious people like entrepreneurs, start-up founders, self-employed bloggers, etc. They are always positive and willing to share their success stories and hard experiences in their lives. This helps me maintain a positive mentality in my daily work and toward my future career rather than being stuck in the quick sand full of complaints and hopelessness.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Cathy Sorbara → Chiu-An Lo · a year ago

YES! Such a great idea Chiu-An - thanks for sharing! I definitely feel a renewed sense of motivation when I have returned from a networking event and have made meaningful, positive connections. Life is too short for all the negativity :)

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Grace · a year ago

I agree with the author here, comparing yourself with others is the foolish thing. It makes you depress and create guilt in you that you are useless compared to them. Compare yourself to

that you are useless compared to them. Compare yourself to younger yourself and you came to know that you gain much more knowledge and lessons compare to earlier. BTW, amazing tips for PhD grads.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Cathy Sorbara → Grace · a year ago

Thank you, Grace! That is an excellent point - looking back on how much you have learned during one's PhD studies is a great way to take pride in our accomplishments and all that we have learned along the way.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



TeresaDr · a year ago

During my PhD, I used to have 3 tips from this list. More anticipation in life, I used to meet my friends and family on every possible weekend. Every night before sleeping, I used to go for a small walk and it helped me to forget the stress of the whole day and refresh me up. And the last is to avoid isolation, this is the important one. Isolation can make you depressed and negative thinker. So go out and check some friends to avoid isolation.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Cathy Sorbara → TeresaDr · a year ago

Yes! I love the point of going for a walk at the end of the day to clear your head. I also find making a point of turning off your computer/phone an hour before bed helps too -- make some time to allow your body to relax and ensure you get a good night's sleep.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



PHDRashida · a year ago

I know the level of the stress during your PhD career. I've been through the same pain and stress, it is like do or die situation in your life. But you have some great alternatives to avoid this stress, I will recom'd them to other PhD students. The path I choose to avoid academic stress is to choose an industry transition and leave academia for ever. And I am very happy with my decision. I want to thank my industry mentor to help me with that

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