

Chapter 8: Self-Care

In this last chapter, let us talk about self-care while doing the assistant professor job. This is a hard job for many reasons: the hours are long, there is a lot of ambiguity about what to do and how to do it, and you have to play many roles to do the job right. If you are not careful, the job can take over your life, eating into time with family and friends, leading to stress, depression, and burn out. We will talk about how to manage these aspects of the job.

8.1 Don't give up health for tenure

I think a temptation for many folks starting as professors is to focus on the job at the exclusion of everything else: "let me figure out the job, I'll take care of my health afterwards".

I would not recommend this approach. The professor job is more of a marathon than a sprint: there is always another paper to write, another grant proposal to put together, another collaboration to participate in. If you put off taking care of your health until you have some breathing space, it will never happen.

What I recommend instead is figuring out a stable, sustainable work rhythm that includes time for health, friends, and family. In Chapter 1.7, I talked about what my routine looked like: work begins at 9:30 - 10 am in the morning, goes until 5 pm, then time for gym, friends and family, then work again for an hour or two after 9:30 pm. I normally do not work on the weekends. Of course, nearer deadlines, things become more hectic, but that is usually limited to one week or so near the deadline (and only 3-4 such deadlines through the year).

Your goal is to stick to your routine regardless of how research or teaching is going. You want to get more efficient at using the work hours in your routine, without requiring to borrow time from friends or family or your health. This is something I saw even in grad school: the most productive folks do not depend on temporary "bursts" to get their work done. There is usually such a push near the deadline, but the majority of the work gets done at a steady pace.

The benefit of the routine approach is that it is low stress. Because you have predictable work hours, you can plan ahead and allocate time for research deadlines, teaching, and service. Work in time to get exercise, and to have enough time to eat healthy food (it is typically easier and quicker, but not healthy, to eat fast food).

Over the long run, your research career is going to depend much more on the body of work that you produce, rather than on any single result/paper. Thus, rather than producing one paper and burning out, it is more useful to figure out how to produce a series of work sustainably.

8.2 Making time for family and friends

There can be a temptation to work through evenings and weekends, especially at the beginning, to ensure you are in a good position for tenure. I would caution against this. I think working evenings and weekends during the occasional deadline is fine, but it should not be the common case.

The reason not to do this is *burnout*. Being a professor is a job that requires a lot of motivation. You don't have a boss – if you decide to slack off, there is no one to tell you not to do it (until it is too late). Being a professor means that you have to be internally driven to do the next project, to write the next paper, etc. Burnout makes you lose your motivation, and shortly thereafter your productivity falls off. Make sure you spend enough time with friends and family to recharge yourself every week.

This means zealously guarding your off-work hours from meetings (they tend to creep past 5 pm) and your weekends from any meetings or work. Be firm in declining meetings: “Sorry, I am not available at that time”. You don't need to provide excuses or explanations.

Similarly, decline any work folks try to schedule on the weekend. I vividly remember one meeting where a senior collaborator wanted us to do some work over the weekend; a junior collaborator on the team flatly declined, “Sorry, I will be spending that time with my kid”. That person was my hero, since the idea of declining hadn't even occurred to me. I have declined a lot of meetings and work since then!

A lot of folks will want your time, and they will *always* make it seem like it is urgent. You should use your own judgement in deciding if it is really urgent or not. What really happens if the work is done on the next weekday instead? Oftentimes nothing.

The prof job can seem all encompassing, but we have to remember it is, in the end, a job: a means to support yourself and your family. Make sure you don't lose out on other things as you pursue tenure.

8.3 Dealing with peer pressure and comparisons

One of the best things about academic life is that you are surrounded by amazing, smart, motivated colleagues; this is also one of the worst things about academic life, due to peer pressure and comparisons.

One of the things you might need to accept as you start your job: there will always be colleagues who are more successful than you. If you have a need to “be the best” (which can be a good thing, and part of what brought you to the job in the first place), you might struggle a bit. Every day, someone is winning an award, someone is receiving a grant, someone else is getting their paper featured in the New York Times.

Such comparisons can devour you if you let them. I typically try to focus on my own goals, my own research group, and what I can do to achieve my goals. This brings the focus back on things I can control, rather than making unhelpful comparisons. I try to remember that as long as I am doing research that I like and find interesting with my students, and I am able to publish and fund my students, that is all that matters at the end of the day. When I retire, it is unlikely that I will remember my awards; I will remember all the relationships that I built with my students and colleagues, and how much fun it was on a day-to-day basis.

8.4 Creating a support network

I would strongly recommend having a support group of other assistant professors, both at your own department/university and elsewhere. For me, this naturally turned out to be the folks who started as professors at the same time I did (my “cohort”). Among profs senior to me, Isil Dilig was an amazing mentor, always willing to listen and provide feedback.

Having a support group like this, with whom you can talk about the job and rant about all its problems and things that don’t go well, is crucial to maintaining sanity as a professor. For creating a support group outside your university, use social media. Twitter was extremely useful in this regard, as I got to know professors at various universities who I had never met in real life, but nevertheless shared a lot with.

8.5 Dealing with rejection

Academic life is filled with rejection. We constantly submit papers and grant proposals, only to have them shot down. Most venues and funding opportunities are competitive, with a 10-25% success rate. This means that most of your efforts, especially early efforts in a new venue or funding opportunity, will fail.

Having a paper get rejected after a lot of work can be tough. Similarly, working hard on a proposal draft, only to see it getting rejected months later, can be devastating. It is important to handle these rejections well.

One of the things that helps me deal with rejection is that every researcher has to go through it. I’ve collaborated with amazing researchers, and they all get routinely rejected. It is simply a fact of academic life (at least, as we have constructed the system for now).

It is important to separate the rejection of the **submission**, from rejection of the **work**, and rejection of **you** as a researcher. Most rejections are just about the particular state of the draft submission; it has little to do with the core idea itself (and nothing to do with the authors). Many pathbreaking results that we now take for granted were rejected initially – even [Nobel-prize winning work has been initially rejected](#). So a rejection just means that the current draft is not good enough; perhaps the story has to be told differently, perhaps more experimental evidence is needed. This is something you get better with practice over time. “A draft I wrote wasn’t persuasive to reviewers” is much easier to take than “they rejected my work” or “they rejected

me". Be careful in how you think about rejections, even to yourself (perhaps especially to yourself). Once you start thinking about drafts being rejected, it becomes easier to take and to move forward.

Develop a rejection routine. I recommend developing a routine to handle rejection. For example, when I get the decision from a conference or grant agency, and it is "Unfortunately..", I just stop reading the email. Rejections almost never require you to take immediate action. I then go get an ice cream or coffee with my students (who will also be similarly bummed out) or a drink with my colleagues (if we are sharing rejections). It is super effective to get together with other colleagues who have also been rejected and just talk. I watch some of my favorite go-to happy movies to feel better.

After a couple of days, come back and read the reviews. With a clearer head and hopefully less emotional attachment, you can figure out if there is anything constructive in the reviews that you can use. Sometimes there is, and sometimes there is not. Note that in many cases the reviewers who rejected your paper are not the reviewers who will see the next version; you want to avoid overfitting to those particular reviewers. You should get together with your collaborators and figure out what is next for the paper or the grant proposal.

8.6 Having kids while on the tenure track

I started the professor job in 2016 (when I was 28). My wife and I had our first kid in 2018, and our second kid in 2022 (just before tenure). I know successful colleagues who had multiple kids when on the tenure track as well.

I think doing well academically after having a kid depends on two things: whether you have some family support to take care of the kids, and whether you are able to find good daycare. You would think finding daycare is a solved problem in this day and age, but it is sadly not. I'm lucky that daycare costs in Austin are reasonable (~\$1000 per kid per month); in places like Boston and Seattle, it is around \$2500-\$3000 per kid for each month. It is extremely hard to support a family on one academic salary.

Having a kid introduces a lot of additional constraints on your time. When my first kid came along, it altered my post 5pm working hours a bit, since I had to work while he slept. When he got older, I would have a hard stop at 5 pm, since I would need to go to pick him up at daycare. The days of parents are basically structured around their children, their daycare, and when they go to sleep.

Having kids made me more efficient. I learnt to do more within my work hours, and to ensure meetings got done on time. It also made work-life balance a bit easier, since you can say no to any meetings in non-work-times without feeling guilty.

8.7 Speaking truth to power

One of the unique benefits of being in academia is that, in some places in the US, you can directly and publicly criticize your employer without fear of being fired. Of course, this protection is much stronger once you have tenure, but in general, professors have much more leeway in what they can say publicly about their employers. For example, if you were disappointed with the way your university handled the pandemic, saying so publicly should not result in loss of employment.

As such, professors have a strong voice in their communities. This voice can be used to call out problems and bring attention to issues. You can use it to amplify others' voices. If you use it properly, it can be a significant aid to those without power in your community.

Of course, the safe course of action is not to say anything publicly. Taking a side on some issues will inevitably earn you enemies. For example, if you come out strongly in favor of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, there will be some who will take offense to that. But you will also gain allies that you would not otherwise. For example, Arun Kumar at UCSD was actually "[praised for his talent for being outspoken](#)".

Summary

Being a professor can be stressful and overwhelming. Make sure you make time for your health, for family, and friends. Create a support group of professors who you can chat candidly with. Have a routine for dealing with rejection. In the end, remember that it is just a job, meant to support you and your family!