

Crash and burn (out): 5 stages of postdoctoral collapse

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Editor's note: Today we are very proud to share a personal story from one of our readers: Dr. Sabrina Zeddies has courageously come forward to share her own story on academic burnout in the hopes of inspiring others to recognize issues in their own circumstances and tackle such problems early and head on. Dr. Zeddies is a postdoctoral fellow at the University Medical Center Utrecht, The Netherlands. She works at the hospital pharmacy as head of QC and project manager for new advanced therapy medicinal product (ATMP) projects.

The number of postdoctoral researchers that burn out at an early stage of their career seems to be increasing, and mental health has been a hot topic at universities and institutes across the world. The scientist in me always wonders why it is this group that is particularly at risk? Funding struggles, job insecurity and pressure to perform are obvious contributors but do they explain the whole picture? In this post, I dare to suggest that dangerous habits of thinking commonly found amongst the scientific community may also play a role. Do any of the following seem familiar?

1. The enthusiasm trap

When I defended my PhD thesis, I felt on top of the world. With all my enthusiasm for science, I took on a postdoctoral position that was a career change from basic research to quality assurance and translational medicine. I was excited to learn something new and discover a new field and I had the training that positioned me well for success. My mentors and colleagues were supportive and I was surrounded by positive energy.

2. The more you put into it, the more you get out

Maybe I should mention that on my first day, I was five months pregnant. At the time I did not really think much about it. Sure, I did not sleep well at night because I had no idea how to sleep with a belly the size of a small European country. Never mind. Everyone is exhausted at times in science, right? Stop whining, it will surely get better at some point. I focused on learning as much as I could as quickly as I could. After all, I also had to start making big decisions in my new job. "Wait!", I hear you say, "you weren't yet fully trained and had no experience!" – but I had a PhD... surely I should be able to educate myself. Learning by doing, this is how my PhD went as well – if only I spend more hours studying, I would succeed.

3. This is how we roll in science

As time went on, more responsibilities were added to my job. I was given the opportunity to learn even more, how fantastic! However, I ignored the fact that I still hadn't been trained for the actual job. And I didn't have time to remember that that I was no longer a PhD student, single, with mostly other PhD students as friends. Work used to also be my social life and it certainly was not now. I was a mother who had not had a good night's sleep in months – mornings quickly became a routine exercise. Get up, get ready, get the baby to daycare, get to work. And in the evening, the same in reverse. No time for rest, no time to reflect and hardly even time to see my child. I was unable to not be busy and besides that – if you are not busy, you are lazy, right? And lazy people do not succeed in their careers. Other colleagues talked about workload, pressure to perform and not being able to see friends. I was just another one of them. We are used to it, PhD life was like this as well.

4. Try harder

Soon, I could not switch off my head at night. Thoughts started creeping up that no matter how hard I tried, I would never be able to succeed. I lacked experience and basic knowledge on the subject. But I was so relieved having secured a postdoctoral position that I held on to it as hard as I could. Better have this job than have no job at all. What to do? There was only one answer: I had to try harder! Did I enjoy what I was doing? Nope. Each morning, I would get up exhausted and go back to a job I was not good at. I dragged myself to work. At the end of the day, I had no idea what I had been busy with. I had accomplished nothing.

5. The sh!t hits the fan

You know what is strange about burnout? I was unaware of it. I was numb. Unable to see how bad things had become. I found no joy in what I was doing. My health was deteriorating. I made more and more mistakes. I had trouble remembering things. Still, I could not acknowledge how bad things were. And I could not stop. If only I tried harder, I would succeed... Until I was too exhausted to get up and leave the house. I called in sick. I rested. I reflected on the previous two years and asked myself: Do I like what I am doing? The answer was: No. While I am good at a lot of things, this job was not me and nobody (myself included) had bothered to notice.

So here I am, six months on. Able to think again. Positive about my future. And looking for a job that fits me better.