

“My grief lies all within” — PhD students, depression & attrition

UA www.universityaffairs.ca/opinion/speculative-diction/my-grief-lies-all-within-phd-students-depression-attrition/

From November to March is prime time for academic burn-out in graduate programs — I’m convinced of that. Perhaps it’s a seasonal thing; it can be easy to sink into a trough of exhaustion and stress, and not climb out of it for months. But rather than just the seasonal doldrums, my sense is that clinical depression, extreme anxiety and other mental health issues are becoming more common in graduate programs as well as in undergraduate education.

I asked one fellow student her opinion of this, and she replied, “it seems like everyone I know in academia is depressed.” On another occasion when I was very unwell, I was told that “everyone” has some kind of breakdown during the PhD; my troubles were nothing to worry about!

Is this a serious structural (and *normalized*) issue rather than an anecdotal one, and if so, why is no one discussing it? When I sampled the Twitterverse, I [received many replies](#) reinforcing and elaborating the impression that yes, this is a problem — perhaps now more than ever — and that it can’t be reduced to students’ individual propensities and “weaknesses.”

In the current context, there are plenty of structural issues that contribute to the PhD as a time when students are vulnerable to stress.

Within their programs, students face a more intense workload than in their undergraduate degrees, and they may for the first time be around students with as much academic aptitude as themselves. These factors can contribute to “imposter syndrome,” the sense that one is about to be “found out” for not really being smart enough. As adults being placed in a subordinate position, some PhD students experience a sense of [infantilization](#) alongside the conflicting expectation that they develop a professional identity.

In terms of the student’s academic experience, the PhD emphasizes a transition to autonomous work that is often a new challenge. The lack of structure, and unclear boundaries about responsibilities, mean that some students are unsure what help they “can” ask for from supervisors. This is compounded by the lengthy [isolation from peers](#) that often occurs in the later stages of research (in the humanities and social sciences at least).

Career-related pressures in *academe* have intensified in the face of recession and long-term political economic changes that have affected the university and its governance. Graduate programs [in Canada](#) and elsewhere have [increased enrollments](#) often without proportional increases to the tenured faculty who provide supervision, or to non-repayable funding. The shortage of funding can lead to student debt and other financial difficulties as well as more intense competition for grants and teaching positions, and pressure to “complete” sooner. Fewer tenured faculty means that students may need to compete for academic mentorship and support as well. And all these changes have helped to feed further competition in the form of a tightened market for academic (i.e. tenure-track faculty) jobs; this kind of [competition can be depressing](#) and stressful.

While only a relatively small proportion of PhD graduates obtain permanent faculty positions, in many PhD programs there is still a deeply-held assumption that students can or should strive to engage in research-oriented academic careers. Thus the [definition of success](#) tends to be rather narrow, making it easier to feel like a “failure.”

The culture of academic replication — the inculcation of certain academic goals above all others, in spite the “reality” of the larger job market for PhDs — has been [roundly criticized](#), even compared [to a cult](#). Taking on an awkward double stance, many students are engaging in a process of translation and re-valuation of themselves and their work that continues until long after the degree is over; some must overcome a long-held sense of [exceptionalism](#) with regards to their academic chances.

And of course, alongside the professional pressures there are also the so-called “personal” issues and events that affect everyone, and which can throw one’s entire degree (and life) off-track if they occur — a break up or divorce, for example, which can itself result from relationship problems triggered by the academic lifestyle.

A larger problem is not only the context described above (and its effects), but also the thickly oppressive silence that surrounds it. Not coincidentally, I think, there is a parallel silence around the [issue of attrition](#). Considering the high rate of attrition from PhD programs and the cost of graduate education, you’d assume there would be a plenty of research on the reasons why students “drop out.” But according to Chris Golde (2000) we still don’t have much information on why students leave PhD programs, partly because PhD attrition “looks bad” for everyone involved (responsibility for this “failure” is usually transferred to the student). I wonder how many students simply leave due to mental health and related issues brought on or exacerbated by the psychological minefield of the PhD process — and how much of this is preventable.