

Dealing with anxiety as a professor

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Yes, the stress of work can be immense, but I've developed a few simple tricks to keep it under control.

I have been feeling bit down lately. Maybe this is to be expected. It's been a brutal winter and a stressful school year, my first as an assistant professor. I'm adapting to a new city, new job and new expectations.

But I'm not unique in feeling this way or facing these kinds of obstacles. All around me are students, colleagues, and staff who are dealing with the hurdles of work, life and mental health. And, if a recent [series of articles and surveys](#) by *The Guardian* are to be believed, then psychological distress is becoming a crisis on university campuses, and many students and academics are keeping their mental health problems hidden from colleagues.

As I write these words, it is the start of May and the Canadian Mental Health Association's [Mental Health Week](#) – an annual event promoting education and engagement on all issues related to mental illness. Thus, it's a good time for me to reflect on the past school year.

When I first took up a faculty position at Western University last July, I attended a series of orientation sessions, one of which gave detailed statistics about the number of undergraduates on campus that in the past year sought help for mental illness. Sadly, the numbers are high. The speaker made a point of reminding new faculty what it's like to be an undergraduate. Many are still teenagers, some only 17, when they arrive in September. Most are far from family and longtime friends and have swapped the protected, familiar home environment for the chaotic and intoxicating world of a university residence – a world where it is easy to lose the patterns and routines that keep one grounded, such as a healthy diet, regular exercise and a good night's sleep. Include immense pressure to succeed, financial burdens, experimentation with drugs and alcohol and possibly destructive relationships and you get an effective formula for emotional unbalance, even for the steadiest of students.

Over the fall and winter terms, I had the privilege of teaching and interacting with many very bright and motivated students. I watched some of them brought to a standstill by mental illness. I saw undergraduates unable to speak because they couldn't stop crying, unable to leave their dorm rooms because of depression. One of the most talented PhD candidates described his ongoing and at times debilitating depression. Another devoted graduate student had to take a leave of absence because of unrelenting anxiety. A week ago, a student I mentor asked for advice regarding a classmate who was having a psychotic episode, likely aggravated by exams and assignments. I have had many more encounters with students struggling with psychological distress.

Instructors, professors and university staff are on the front line for detecting and aiding students with mental health problems. Unfortunately, they too are at increased risk of psychological disorders. In March, *The Guardian's* Higher Education Network published an [online article](#) discussing the rise of mental illness among university faculty. In the United Kingdom, wrote Claire Shaw and Lucy Ward, "university counselling staff and workplace health experts have seen a steady increase in numbers seeking help for mental health problems over the past decade, with research indicating nearly half of academics show symptoms of psychological distress." The article lists higher workloads, constant demand for results, job insecurity, perfectionism, isolation and a "culture of acceptance" as potential reasons why mental illness is increasing among academics.

Since I apparently seem laid back in my work, I find myself fielding questions from students who want to know how I do it. I usually respond that I'm not nearly as relaxed as I may seem, and go on to relate some of my strategies for managing stress, such as reading widely, long-distance running and a love of cooking.

What I don't say is that I'm often battling anxiety and that I obsess over work and research. This year has been particularly bad; I've learned from colleagues that it isn't unusual for starting academics to feel this way. A former

supervisor said that his first year as an assistant professor was one of the hardest of his life.

As scholars, our brains are our most important tool. We depend on them for creativity, problem solving and effective communication. If we lose control of our thoughts or they betray us in some way, we can feel paralyzed, which is one reason why mental health awareness is critical within the university community.

I'd like to tell my students that once they make it through the next essay, next exam, next thesis defense, next obstacle, it gets easier. That is rarely the case. But even though things don't necessarily get easier, we can develop better strategies for coping with competitive and demanding work and classroom environments, and for detecting mental illness within the academic workplace and beyond.

A few of the most important things I learned this year are that listening to other people's problems puts your own in perspective, and helping those people with their problems can be the best medicine for treating your own. Knowing how and when to say "no" is crucial for maintaining a manageable workload combined with a healthy lifestyle to avoid unnecessary stress.

Educator Stephen R. Covey has said, no matter how busy and chaotic life becomes, "the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." Now, decide what the main thing is for you.

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