

# Navigating Stressful Life Events

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Our lives outside the academy never stop. Yet given the increasing demands on our time, particularly for scholars of color and others who are marginalized, how can we deal with stressful life events and not feel overwhelmed or overburdened?

This past spring quarter was one of the most stressful I've had to date. My spouse works for the government, and like many couples within and outside academe, we experience the two-body problem. This means that my spouse is living on the East Coast while I, our 4-year-old daughter and my grandmother are on the West Coast. In addition to living apart from my spouse, my mother recently passed away at the age of 50 from breast cancer, and just a few weeks ago I gave birth to my second child, who we knew had health difficulties even while he was in the womb. Unable to breathe on his own, he was immediately placed in the neonatal intensive care unit after birth. These past few months have weighed heavily on me, but I've navigated it by using the tips I provide below.

Note that in this essay, I do not emphasize the structural conditions that need to change to facilitate supportive academic environments. As a tenure-track faculty member, I have little power to institute the kind of structural changes that are needed, although I recognize that such changes would be more ideal interventions. Instead, more senior colleagues and administrators can implement better policies to support the faculty, staff members and students that make up the heart of colleges and universities, ensuring that when people ask for accommodations, they can receive the support they need.

Recognizing that structural issues are paramount, I write this essay to share strategies that I have found useful in navigating a sometime unforgiving structure, in the hopes that it may help others. As a sociologist, I study the interplay between social structures, culture and agency, and I've highlighted below what I do each day to survive during a particularly chaotic period in my life.

**First, be open about what's going on.** That doesn't mean you have to be totally transparent about specific personal issues you face. You are never obligated to reveal anything you don't want to reveal. Rather, it's helpful to alert your mentors and department chairs if something is going on in your personal life that may influence your work -- a step that [Manya Whitaker](#) has also suggested you take when you're a caregiver. As a result, I shared with my department co-chairs and my mentors, among others, some of the difficulties I faced.

Those of us who teach may have had students reach out to us after the term ends or grades are submitted to explain personal troubles they've had and why they need extensions. I always tell my students that it's better to loop in faculty members and others as soon as they know they need an extension, because it's easier to work with them as things occur rather than after the term ends. The same can be said of our work in academe after undergrad. You may be

surprised at the support you receive and the flexibility in deadlines people are willing to extend.

**Second, remember that you are your own best advocate.** You should take control of your life. No one else will be as invested in your own life and career as you are or should be. Know your rights. Know relevant federal and state laws as well as your university's and department's policies. Be prepared with this information, as well as next steps forward, when you ask for accommodations.

Take, for example, how I dealt with my second pregnancy. I took responsibility for knowing our university's policies and my rights. When I met with my department co-chairs to let them know the good news, I was also prepared for what that meant for the department, my teaching for the following year, my rights regarding parental leave versus "active modified duties" (reduced teaching and service responsibilities but with an expectation to remain on the campus and involved in department life), and what I was asking for. I also outlined my research moving forward to signal that I'd planned ahead about my career.

**Third, take it one day at a time.** This is a motto I live by. Otherwise, it's easy to get overwhelmed. Take for example, when my grandmother, who helps me with my daughter and household, left for Cincinnati for six weeks to take care of my mother. I was about seven or eight months pregnant, worried about my mother, taking care of my then almost 4-year-old, teaching a 562-person class and an honors section, revising my book and dealing with service commitments.

If I thought of everything all at once, I would break down and cry. So instead, I just dealt with things as they came, whether personal or professional, and focused on what I could do each day. That included trying to write daily, or at least regularly, as Kerry Ann Rockquemore suggests, even if it wasn't for very long. Taking things one day at a time allowed me to function through this time of personal crisis.

**Fourth, allow yourself to feel.** It's not helpful to stuff everything inside. Everyone needs someone to talk to and confide in, whether that be a family member, significant other, friend or professional. Sometimes my support system came from the most unlikely sources. My daughter's teachers, for example, proved to be invaluable members of my team. In trying to understand what was going on in her life, they provided not only individualized care for her but also for me, and I'll be forever grateful to them.

**Fifth, realize you can't do it all and that some things will fall through the cracks.** No matter how small we break down tasks, and how open we are with others about what's going on, sometimes stressful events mean that we just cannot do everything. Not being able to follow through with everything I committed to is difficult for someone like me to realize and be at peace with. Yet I just could not do it all.

I've found that after my mother passed away, people were accommodating with deadlines. Yet that also meant that those many deadlines were all moved to a similar deadline that was just a few weeks away. What I had to come to grips with was that it was OK to be late with some

things, and I had to prioritize where to put my energy. If my journal review wasn't turned in on time, or my honors students didn't get comments on their papers the day that I planned, that was all right. I needed to focus my limited time and energy elsewhere.

We all deal with stressful life events, although some are more stressful than others. Often the personal obstacles we face are invisible to others, as we all try to keep up with the fast-paced life of academe. I offer these tips that helped -- and have continued to help -- me deal with everything during one of the most stressful times in my life, in the hopes that they may help others.