

Self-care for psychology students: Strategies for staying healthy & avoiding burn out

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It may appear rudimentary to comment that Psychology students need to pay adequate attention to their personal lives. However, attaining balance between academic and personal pursuits is easier said than done. Numerous books, websites, as well as an APA Monitor on Psychology "Special Issue Devoted to Self-Care" (July/August 2002, 33, 7) address the topic.

For undergrads, striving for and completing the grad school application process can be all consuming. If you are one of the lucky few to progress to graduate studies, the pressure is still on to obtain scholarships, complete coursework and "comps", defend theses and dissertations, as well as publish your research. If your program requires you to complete an internship, you will find demands are high during this training period as well. As a Psychology student, and eventually, a Psychologist, you will likely have a multitude of roles (e.g., intern/resident, students, researcher, administrator, teacher, parent, sibling, child, friend, significant other, partner, spouse etc.). You will have expectations of yourself and other will have expectations of you, and it is important to ensure that your expectations are realistic. Although we often hold on to the idea that our lives will ease up once we finish graduate school as a rationale for pushing ourselves beyond our limits, it is important to realize that the next stage (e.g. tenure-track positions, starting own practice, teaching) will likely be just as busy. So it is a good idea for you to start striving for a balanced life now.

If you are working 80 hours as an undergrad to land that top grad school spot, be prepared that the program will have high standards and you will likely have to maintain that pace. Similarly, tenure track professors' research publications do not write themselves.

There are numerous stressors related to Psychology graduate training, including:

- High workload & role demands ("I'm a student, teacher, researcher, clinician, & an administrator – I feel like I have 5 full-time jobs"),
- Performance anxiety and frequent evaluation by others ("Yikes, do I really sound like I do on audiotape?"),
- Lack of experience/mastery ("I'm happy my abstract was chosen for presentation at a conference but that also means I must deliver the goods"),
- Peer competition ("All my classmates are competing for the same awards, program spots etc."),
- Imposter syndrome ("I don't belong here"),
- Boundary issues ("Should I accept these homemade cookies from a client?"),
- Ethical quandaries ("My client wants to see her raw test scores"),
- Institutional demands ("I only have 3 sessions per client"),
- Dealing with criticism ("My manuscript based on my Master's thesis was rejected and ripped apart"),

- Secondary traumatic stress (“I’m hypervigilant and anxious after speaking to that traumatized client”),
- Compassion fatigue (“Geesh, this client thinks she’s got problems? If only she knew what the guy in the room next door is going through”),
- Countertransference (“This client is really annoying me. Perhaps it is because he reminds me of the bully that beat me up in high school”),
- Managing interpersonal and professional relationships (“My supervisor has unrealistic expectations” or “My partner feels I focus on works too much and don’t spend enough time with him/her”)

Any of these sound familiar???

The purpose of listing these here is not to freak you out, but only to raise your awareness of the things you will need to monitor and manage during your training as a Psychologist.

It is normal for students and trainees to push themselves hard to accomplish the many goals that have. The trick to staying healthy is ensuring you take care of yourself well enough to avoid burnout. “Burnout” is a stress condition brought on by being involved in an intense situation for a long period of time without adequate rest and recreation.

Warning signs of burnout include:

- Fatigue or exhaustion (emotional, physical, cognitive)
- Disengagement or withdrawal
- Frustration/irritability
- Helpless/hopeless feeling with patients or others
- Cynicism
- Excessive use of drugs or alcohol

Think your professional fire may be starting to fizzle? It may be time to seriously reflect on your current condition (see www.lessons4living.com/burnout_inventory2.htm for a free downloadable burnout questionnaire).

Self Care Tips:

- Avoid overwork (there is a reason most people work no more than 35 hours a week)
- Know your limits (just because the student next door can work 90 hours straight doesn’t mean you can or should) & accept your limitations
- Reward yourself when you reach your goals and schedule fun activities
- Take care of physical needs
- Exercise regularly
- Maintain a regular sleep schedule
- Maintain a healthy diet
- Ensure your cognitive style is health (develop realistic self expectations)
- Attend to your emotional needs
- Make personal connections with colleagues
- Talk about your fears and doubts (chances are you are not the only one with them)

- Seek personal therapy
- Remember your social needs
- Value family and friends
- Have relationships outside of health care
- Keep time for yourself (SERIOUSLY!)

Why bother? If personal health and sanity are not reasons enough, remember: “If you cannot take good care of yourself, you cannot provide optimal health care to others”. So if you won’t take care of yourself for yourself, do it for your patients/clients, colleagues, friends, relatives and neighbours!

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