A mental makeover for the graduate student

SHANNON DUVALL

As a graduate student in computer science, I found myself tired, depressed, and unmotivated. I sat through meetings with my advisor with my heart pounding, afraid of what he would say about my work that week. I withdrew from family and friends not associated with school to avoid the dreaded questions, “How’s your research coming? When will you be done?” I found myself wondering who I had become. What happened to the straight-A undergraduate who loved to program? How had I lost my passion and drive? Where did my confidence go?

Little did I realize that my experience was common. Luckily, I found a wonderful resource that not only helped me to successfully finish my degree but also to reconnect with myself during the process. Students can use valuable survival skills for graduate school, helping with advisor relations, finding motivation, and finding balance in life.

You may already know that being a graduate student is stressful. Graduate students deal with low motivation, a lack of sleep, and little pay, often at the expense of extracurricular activities or a social life. What many do not realize, however, is the toll that the stress takes on the mental health of graduate students.

The 2004 Berkeley Graduate Student Mental Health Survey indicates that almost half of graduate students at Berkeley report having emotional or stress-related problems that seriously affect their well-being. Almost 10% have seriously considered suicide, and approximately one in 200 students have attempted suicide. It is essential that graduate students equip themselves with the skills to handle the life changes of graduate school, yet there are few resources for gaining these skills.

Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), created by Dr. Marsha Linehan, offers such practical coping skills that have been shown to be effective in lowering stress, anxiety, and depression. These skills have been taught nationwide through workshops and group sessions, and skills manuals and worksheets are available. DBT skills can be directly applied to situations that graduate students face every day. Using DBT skills, there are practical ways to manage the advisor/student relationship, overcome times of low motivation, and find a balance between research and a personal life. These are three of the factors that can aid in being successful and mentally healthy during graduate school.
Advisor relations

The relationship between a student and a thesis advisor is unique and ever changing. In the beginning, it is a power relationship, but by graduation it is more similar to a peer relationship. Not only is it always evolving, but it is also a very important relationship; an advisor’s feelings about the relationship and the research have a direct impact on the student’s success. Here are some tips for maintaining a positive relationship with your advisor.

Keep the relationship professional. While many student/advisor relationships can eventually grow into a personal friendship, making this assumption too early can be disastrous. It is part of the student’s job to convince the advisor that he or she is a professional worthy of a higher degree. Too often, being overly friendly or overly emotional with an advisor taints the advisor’s image of the student, hindering the progress from student to peer.

To maintain a professional advisor/student relationship, be prepared for each meeting with written goals and an agenda. You should take good notes during the meeting and make sure to be attentive and listen. Finally, before leaving the meeting, both the student and the advisor should have clear goals for the student to achieve for the next meeting. This model ensures that there is clear communication in the relationship and that progress is being made with each meeting toward the ultimate goal of completing the degree.

Set personal and professional goals for your meetings. While it is important to keep your relationship professional, you can and should have relational goals in mind for the meeting as well. What are your relationship goals? How do you want your advisor to feel about you as a result of the meeting? Remember to add goals of respect, honesty, and open communication to your more tangible goals. Finally, think about your personal goals for the meeting. How do you want to feel about yourself after the meeting? Maintaining self-respect and staying consistent with your core values are important goals for each meeting as well. Keeping a full picture of professional, relational, and personal goals will help you to remember that your graduate work is just one part, although a very important part, of your identity.

Deal with the feedback. This is perhaps one of the most difficult as well as one of the most essential, lessons to learn. As graduate students, the feedback we get most often from advisors is only on those things that need improvement. This is a natural time-saving technique: successful endeavors are put away, and we move on to whatever needs to be done next. As graduate students, we can feel unappreciated or even incompetent when no positive feedback is given. There are several ways to cope with this. First of all, realize that if a part of your work goes without comment from your advisor, it probably means that the work was satisfactory. Try to release the need for positive feedback from others for motivation. However, if you really need more direct positive feedback, you can ask your advisor directly, “What did you think of my work on …”. Of course, this question is open for both praise and criticism. Finally, you can ask, “What part of my work this week do you think was the best?” Be clear, assertive, and direct with your questions to avoid being perceived as “whiny” or “needy.”

You may have to ask directly for positive feedback from your advisor, but there will no doubt be plenty of advice on what can be improved. Unfortunately, some people are not good at giving criticism that sounds like it is constructive. It is up to you to receive all criticism as constructive criticism. If you need to, write down a better, more objective way to state your advisor’s critique. Read and review it to allow yourself to hear the way the critique should have been stated. You can write a summary of the meeting with your reworded critique. Send the summary to your advisor and ask for his approval. This exercise not only promotes clear communication but also provides a way for your advisor to “sign off” on the new statement. Above all, do not take negative feedback personally.

Act confident. It would be wonderful if we all were confident about our abilities and our work all the time. This is not a realistic goal. Graduate students are familiar with imposter syndrome, the feeling that one is an imposter in the field, posing as an effective researcher. While there are ways to build self-confidence, this is often a long and personal process. When you are meeting with your advisor, it is important to act confident even when you do not feel confident. Again, it is the job of the student to convince the advisor that he is worthy of a degree and to be thought of as a peer. This process can be facilitated by staying professional and acting confident.

Be judicious with the word “no.” When your advisor asks you to do something that you do not want to do, it is important to realize that you do have the right to say no, but that you should seriously consider the request first. There are always consequences to saying no to an authority figure, and before you deny a request you should weigh these consequences with your reasons for not wanting to comply. Does the request require that you violate your core values? Would compliance damage your self-respect? In this case, it is reasonable to deny the request, understanding that this may take a toll on your student-advisor relationship.

Know how to ask. Just like you have the right to deny requests from your advisor, you have the right to make requests as well. When you need support or resources, you can ask in an effective manner by communicating clearly and assertively. The DBT skills teach us that when we want to ask for something, or to say no, we can follow the acronym DEAR: Describe, Express, Assert, Reinforce. Start by describing the situation, and then express your opinions and feelings about it. Assert yourself and be clear about either saying no or making a request. Finally, reinforce your decision. If your advisor compiles, how might he benefit? What can you do to negotiate? Following these steps gives you a better chance of getting what you want and ensures that you have been heard.

Getting motivated

One of the most pervasive issues in graduate school is a lack of motivation. It is easy to get “burned out” on a thesis.
that has been your focus for several years. What can we do to overcome a lack of motivation?

**Take breaks.** Contrary to popular opinion, it is perfectly normal to take a break! It is important to take breaks—both small breaks during the day, and larger breaks on a weekly and monthly basis. However, a break only rests your brain if it is a stress-free, guilt-free break. You must give yourself permission to take a break. This is the most effective way to overcome a lack of motivation, so let go of the guilt and take a break!

**Be focused.** One reason we lose our motivation is that we feel that our entire lives revolve around our work. This can cause burnout quickly. Instead, realize that it’s okay to have a life outside of work. Whatever task you are engaged in, focus fully on that task. At work, focus on getting your work done. When you get home, focus on doing the things you do at home. For example, when you wash dishes, take the time to really feel the sudsy water slip on your fingers. When you take a walk, focus on your breathing and the sound of your footsteps. If you feel you work all the time, it may be that you are in fact, engaging your brain in worrying even when you are supposed to be doing other tasks.

**Focus on the facts.** If you feel unmotivated, examine the cause. It could be that you are telling yourself negative statements that are not factual. For example, the common Imposter Syndrome feeling is when we assert to ourselves, “I am not as good at research as my peers.” These types of statements are not factual, yet they are stated as fact. They are detrimental to your self-image and motivation.

Begin by noticing and writing down all the things you say to yourself. Then rewrite them with only the facts—things that can be proven. For example, the above statement may be restated, “I do not feel as proficient as I actually am. It is a known fact that many people feel this way. I am not alone in this. I am doing my work to the best of my ability and having times of slow progress is all a part of the graduate school process.” Each time you are tempted to berate yourself, restate your feelings in a positive way. Motivation is likely to follow.

**Start slowly, reward generously.** It is often difficult to come back to work after a break. When you feel very unmo-
tivated, do not try to conquer too much at first. Make a list of your overall research goals, and subdivide them into medium and small goals. Make the small goals very small. Some days it is difficult to just turn on the computer. For each goal, have some reward associated with it. Small goals can have small rewards such as taking time to light a candle or pet your cat. Medium goals can be things such as stopping for a short walk or a few minutes of Web surfing. Larger goals can be more extravagant. Just be sure that all rewards are healthy and guilt-free.

**Rework your schedule.** In times of low motivation it may be helpful to change your work schedule. If you usually procrastinate during the day and work at night, try viewing your studies as a traditional nine-to-five job for a while. Work during the day and relax at night guilt free. If you generally work on one task until it is complete before going to the next task, try to rotate tasks in and out. It may help to see steady progress on many facets of your research rather than getting stuck on one issue. If your workday is defined by time (“I will work eight hours today!”) try defining your workday by tasks instead (“I will get five things done from this list today.”). The variation in your routine can often aid in getting out of an unproductive mindset.

**Build your confidence.** Sometimes we are unmotivated simply because we don’t feel confident that we can tackle the task ahead. There are several techniques for building your confidence. First, you can practice doing things not necessarily related to research that you know you do well. For example, are you a master chess player? Do you like to paint? Can you knit? Do some of these things that highlight your other unique talents. Not only will you be taking a break, but you will be reminding yourself that you are a talented person. The confidence you build in this area will spill over into the rest of your life.

Finally, don’t be ashamed to be your own cheerleader. Having a statement like “Eyes on the Prize!” at your desk can help you visualize graduation when you feel overwhelmed. Tell yourself that you are strong, unique, and talented. (You are!) Remind yourself that your dissertation is only one part of your life, and it should not consume you.

**Finding balance**

Even with these tips, you may find yourself distressed under the load of graduate school. In addition to using your graduate school’s mental health resources, here are a few exercises to try.

**Don’t isolate yourself.** Hopefully by now you realize that having difficulties with motivation, stress, or guilt in graduate school is perfectly normal. You are not alone, and that realization itself can be very helpful. In addition, it is important to find a network of support in your peers, family, friends, or counselors. While I do not advocate relying on faculty for moral support (keep that relationship professional) it is very helpful to find other graduate students with whom you feel comfortable sharing. No one else understands your situation quite like they do. If you feel uncomfortable with other students at your institution, there are several online graduate support networks, some of which provide one-on-one mentoring.

**Distract, soothe, relax.** When you are really feeling distressed about your work, it is time for an intentional break. Often it helps to distract yourself for a while to give your mind a break from the worry. You do not want to avoid the issue for an extended period of time, but a short distraction can help you through a particularly rough day. Soothe yourself by experiencing pleasant sensations. See if you can engage as many of your senses as possible. For example, if you take a cup of tea into the bathtub and put on soothing music, you can smell and taste the tea, hear the music, feel and see the warm water. Engage your senses and mind in this experience, and resist thinking thoughts like, “I don’t have time for this!” (The truth is, this may be your fastest track back to work.) In addition, you can try relaxation techniques such as deep breathing or meditating. There are also many great books and CDs on relaxation.

**Re-examine your goals.** This time, when you write down your goals, focus not on your work goals but your life goals. Too often items like “achieving personal happiness,”
“maintaining a successful marriage,” and “keeping myself healthy” are goals we have but never acknowledge. They take second place behind professional goals, when in reality our long-term happiness may depend more on our meeting these goals than on meeting our academic goals.

Take time to remember why you decided to come to graduate school in the first place. What do you want to do after graduation? (There is life after graduation, after all.) Remind yourself what is really important.

**Conclusion**

If you are a graduate student struggling with feelings of inadequacy, lack of motivation, or just plain stress, please know that you are not alone. You may feel incapable, but you are very capable of these things: You can act confident with your faculty while cultivating real confidence. You can deal with your advisor in a professional manner, asserting yourself while being respectful and open to criticism. You can give yourself permission to take breaks and reward yourself for getting work done.

You are a uniquely talented, bright person who can survive graduate school. Getting a higher degree is an important career goal, but it is just one of your life goals. Your success is not defined as what degree you obtain or how long it takes you to obtain it. You should not feel guilty for taking breaks, staying fit, having friends, or having a hobby. These activities will help give the mental healthiness and confidence you need to succeed at graduate school as well as at life.

**Read more about it**


**About the author**

Shannon Duvall (sduvall2@elon.edu) earned an M.S. and Ph.D. in computer science from Duke University. She has been teaching computer science at Elon University since 2003. She owns and maintains www.gradMentalMakeover.com, which contains information on graduate student mental health.