

Navigating Well-Being Through the Academic Transition of Doctoral Studies

by Zoraima Rosario-Rolón, Early Career Scholar

“I am not a quitter! My mother is not a quitter! I can’t be my children’s role model if I quit!” These were the words resonating in my head during my doctoral studies at Manhattanville College’s Educational Leadership in Higher Education Program. I encountered mental exhaustion and was unmotivated to read or write about my topic. I realized through my guilt and resolve that unfortunately, as a doctoral student, I created perspectives and coping skills that were unhealthy and unrealistic. I was unaware and unprepared to mitigate the wave of unpredictable events and waves of psychological and physiological emotional distress attached to the process — which left me exposed to the elements of stress, relentless pressure without protective factors.

Sadly, my experience is common among doctoral students. In this reflection I aim to discuss what I believe to be a normalized practice in higher education of ignoring unspoken stressors and pressures that can be a detriment to the progress and success of doctoral students.

This reflection helped me realize that I was not the only one who has felt the debilitating effects of the stressors connected with doctoral studies and the evolution of an academic identity. In fact, studies examining doctoral researchers’ level of stress and frustrations throughout their doctoral studies with a focus on well-being concluded that the normalized characterization of pressure and stressors yield psychological anguish and negative mental health. More than half of doctoral students struggle with balancing professional, personal and academic life and uncertain futures as they aspire for career advancements (Kismihók et al., 2022; Veit and Ware, 1983; Kurtz-Costes et al., 2006; Mays & Smith, 2009; Schmidt & Hansson 2018; Stubb, 2011). Across large-scale studies, doctoral researchers often identified anxiety, depression, and loss of behavioral or emotional control as a result of the distress they experienced in their doctoral program.

My experience encompassed each; however, “loss of behavioral or emotional control” was quite unexpected and unexplainable for me. As I aimed to complete my coursework and maintain a balance between work and family life, I refused to acknowledge that I was experiencing psychological distress and mental fatigue. After all, I was used to high stress and never experienced depression or anxiety because of it. I could feel the exhaustion, but I thought I was successfully “pushing through.” In my head, all I needed to do was get to that last course and I would be able to breathe, freely pursue my topic, defend my proposal and be on my way to completion.

But that lie to myself further complicated my psychological and physiological distress. My mind, body, and soul were completely disjointed, and I shut down emotionally, physically, and cognitively.

It wasn’t until my beloved dog, Pip, unexpectedly passed that I realized I was in trouble. I was no longer “pushing through” the imaginary dissertation wall; it was bigger, thicker, and unpassable. I couldn’t bounce back emotionally. I couldn’t contain my emotional outbursts often manifested in uncontrollable aggression and crying, unbearable sadness, inability to concentrate and a heightened lack of interest in even uttering words related to my topic.

While the unexpected loss of my dog was devastating, it was not my first experience of loss. So why this overreaction? It is clear to me now that my reaction was the perfect storm: the culmination of all the normalized stressors encountered throughout my doctoral program exacerbated by my personal loss, which propelled me to quietly, but massively, snap. I was trapped in a vortex, riddled with panic attacks, isolation, imposter syndrome, guilt, and complete withdrawal.

I accentuate the word “quietly” because I did not allow anyone to know what I was dealing with. I felt much shame and disappointment. My spouse and my dissertation chair were the only two to see me spiraling out of control. I was fortunate to have a positive relationship with my supervisor and she (and my spouse) became my protective factors. Both ensured that our interactions centralized around everything and anything but my dissertation topic and focused greatly on my well-being and self-care. As I regained my mental strength, it became easier to speak about my emotions with them, and eventually, others.

Studies have revealed that doctoral students do not often have positive relationships with their supervisors and often consider them to be part of the stressors described earlier. Sverdlik and Hall (2019), in their literature review for their study on doctoral students’ psychological well-being and motivation, cited the works of researchers that drew connections between family support, socialization, cohort learning and relationship with doctoral supervisor as crucial influences of doctoral students’ motivation and attrition (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2014; Tanaka & Watanabea, 2012; Gardner, 2010; Ferguson, 2009; Hancock, 2007; Gearity & Mertz, 2012). Their study concluded that optimal well-being and personal motivation occurred during the coursework phase rather than the comprehensive examination or dissertation phase.

Additionally, Pyhältö et al. (2012), after studying doctoral education, acknowledge the complexities involved in the transitions of doctoral students throughout their doctoral studies, which results in some students not completing their programs because of experiences and challenges they encountered. Their study surveyed 669 doctoral students. Participants revealed a variety of problems that “related to general working processes, domain-specific expertise, supervision, the scholarly community, and resources” (p 1). Most importantly, their study identified an evident relationship between well-being and study engagement of doctoral students, giving doctoral programs a reason to consider methods to deepen their support of doctoral students’ well-being as they encounter problems.

As I reflected on what I experienced and searched for more plausible reasons for my “shutdown,” it became clear that doctoral students require an immense amount of time to transition into a possibly new academic identity, which often involves a professional, academic, and personal transformation. Doctoral programs must recognize and be alert to this transition. Moreover, they should ensure student candidates are aware of their pace and their well-being.

Kismihók et al. (2022) recognized that half of doctoral students have their dreams crushed as they encounter a state of dystopia somewhere between their enrollment and graduation and leave their program permanently. This is understandable because there is a psychological phenomenon that intertwines the process of loss and attainment. In one aspect you are evolving into a researcher with new values, perceptions, and enthusiastic career goals; yet you are also riddled with uncertainties, anxiety, and pressures about the

individual you are becoming and the individual you are leaving behind. All the while you manage assignments, presentations, networking, current work responsibilities and personal events without having the time to speak your emotions.

While I felt my professors supported my persistence and well-being, I do not believe my cohort's psychological well-being was addressed with us having agency. The transformation (emotional, social, etc.) entailed in the process of doctoral studies was not discussed, nor was time given to recognize the transition occurring.

An article written by Simula and Elue (2023) discussed doctoral students and the impact of grief while moving into a new role, specifically in higher education, which is often not addressed in doctoral studies. In the article, grief is defined as the emotional baggage attached to change. It can range from a feeling of loss to elation as you strive to evolve into an academic scholar. The authors posit that "going into a new role without processing your lingering emotions may stunt your opportunities to engage authentically in your new role and fully embrace your new professional identity" (p. 2). As in my experience, ignoring the space to comprehend your academic transition leads to suppressed emotions, pressures and stressors that can cripple your process. That is why it is crucial to engage students in navigating and processing unanticipated grief.

All experiences, difficult or not, make you who you are and come with learning curves that build your resilience. The learning I would like to share is:

- **Higher education should stop normalizing various stressors and maladaptive signs of psychological or physiological well-being as part of the doctoral journey.** Constantly overlooking doctoral students' anxious or depressive behaviors and emotional distress is detrimental. Studies (across various doctoral disciplines) have elucidated that doctoral programs and psychological/physical health of doctoral students are relational. found, with respect to students' psychological well-being and its relationship to their doctoral program outcomes, that stress, anxiety, and exhaustion levels were higher among students that considered dropping out of their studies. Dealing with grief and loss in the process of chasing a doctoral dream is complex- especially when it is left unaddressed and when doctoral students are unprepared to adapt to the transition. Supervisors and programs need to accept accountability for their doctoral students' well-being to support not solely their persistence but more importantly, their resilience.
- **Perspectives and images are everything as a doctoral student. Doctoral candidates need to shift their mind from "being a quitter or failure" and reframe it to "pausing and regenerating."** Adapting a growth mindset means seeing unanticipated disappointments or frustrations as a place to grow from. Refrain from creating big images of success (i.e. graduation, publishing, etc.) and think "less is more." Aim for small accomplishments and let those small accomplishments serve as your definition of success.
- **It is vital to listen to what your body is saying.** Love yourself and give yourself grace. If you find yourself exhausted but you cannot sleep, you cannot have a basic conversation and you are nervous most of the time, that is not normal! "Pushing through," as I often defined my progress, is unhealthy. The wall you are trying to push through can be extremely thick and knock you down (as I experienced). Instead, take the time to articulate the emotions you are experiencing. Talk to

someone (take pride when doing so!). You do not receive an extra stripe on your graduation robe for holding in your fears, uncertainties, and frustrations. Sometimes talking can be the best tool to help you “chip” away at the wall!

- **Last, the journey to becoming an academic scholar is less about the end product and more about the process.** Focusing on the end product, as I often did, prevented me from seeing my academic transformation. The process of transition is complex, but it is also exhilarating and invigorating -- especially when you take the time to acknowledge the positives (i.e., affirming one’s own expertise) and your growth (i.e., knowledge being gained). You do not produce scholarly work, you become it. So, respect the process!

Robin Roberts (Good Morning America’s anchor) often quotes her mother’s inspirational saying, “*Make your mess your message.*” This is what I believe to be the underlying goal of this reflection. My transition into doctoral studies was difficult, complex, messy and at times, painful. Feeling overwhelmed and mentally fatigued are significant reasons that contribute greatly to the attrition of doctoral students.

Doctoral students must be aware that these psychological and physiological emotions are not abnormal or shameful. Their resilience derives from mentors and supervisors preparing them for what the doctoral journey entails. This includes introducing protective factors to help mitigate the stressors and pressures associated with the experience.

More significantly, it should include empowering them to being receptive to pausing and talking about their festering emotional baggage to regenerate their healthy mental well-being.

Zoraima Rosario-Rolón is a doctoral student at Manhattanville College’s Educational Leadership in Higher Education Program. She is a project coordinator, trainer and coach at the New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute, an adjunct clinical lecturer at Hunter College’s Early Childhood Program, and a content consultant for Sesame Street in Communities’ Social Impact Department.

References

- Ferguson, T. (2009). The ‘write’ skills and more: A thesis writing group for doctoral students. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 33(2), 285-297.
- Gardner, S. K. (2010). Contrasting the socialization experiences of doctoral students in high-and low-completing departments: A qualitative analysis of disciplinary contexts at one institution. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 81, 61-81.
- Gearity, B. T., & Mertz, N. (2012). From "bitch" to "mentor": A doctoral student's story of self-change and mentoring. *The Qualitative Report*, 17(30), 1.
- Kismihók, G., McCashin, D., Mol, S. T., & Cahill, B. (2022). The well-being and mental health of doctoral candidates. *European Journal of Education*, 57(3), 410-423.

- Kurtz-Costes, B., Andrews Helmke, L., & Ülkü-Steiner, B. (2006). Gender and doctoral studies: The perceptions of Ph. D. students in an American university. *Gender and Education, 18*(2), 137-155.
- Mays, T. L., & Smith, B. T. (2009). Navigating the doctoral journey. *Journal of Hospital Librarianship, 9*(4), 345-361.
- Onwuegbuzie, A. J., Rosli, R., Ingram, J. M., & Frels, R. K. (2014). A critical dialectical pluralistic examination of the lived experience of select women doctoral students. *Qualitative Report, 19*, 5.
- Pyhältö, K., & Keskinen, J. (2011). Exploring the fit between doctoral students' and supervisors' perceptions of resources and challenges vis-à-vis the doctoral journey. *International Journal of doctoral studies, 7*, 395–414.
- Pyhältö, K., Toom, A., Stubb, J., & Lonka, K. (2012). Challenges of becoming a scholar: A study of doctoral students' problems and well-being. *International Scholarly Research Notices, 2012*.
- Schmidt, M., & Hansson, E. (2018). Doctoral students' well-being: A literature review. *International journal of qualitative studies on health and well-being, 13*(1), 1508171.
- Simula, B. L., & Elue, C. (2023). *Navigating grief in higher ed career transitions*. Inside Higher Ed | Higher Education News, Events and Jobs.
<https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/blogs/university-venus/2023/10/16/navigating-grief-higher-ed-career-transitions>
- Stubb, J., Pyhältö, K., & Lonka, K. (2011). Balancing between inspiration and exhaustion: PhD students' experienced socio-psychological well-being. *Studies in Continuing Education, 33*(1), 33-50.
- Sverdlik, A., & Hall, N. C. (2020). Not just a phase: Exploring the role of program stage on well-being and motivation in doctoral students. *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education, 26*(1), 97-124.
- Tanaka, M., & Watanabe, Y. (2012). Academic and family conditions associated with intrinsic academic motivation in Japanese medical students: A pilot study. *Health Education Journal, 71*(3), 358-364.
- Veit, C. T., & Ware, J. E. (1983). The structure of psychological distress and well-being in general populations. *Journal of consulting and clinical psychology, 51*(5), 730.