

Grad School Confidential, Episode 2  
“Scholars in a Dangerous Time”

Episode Transcript

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Rob Desjardins 0:01

One Saturday in March, the University of Alberta sent an unprecedented email to students and staff. "Due to COVID-19," it said, "the university will move to remote delivery of classes for the remainder of the winter term." People had been tracking the pandemic in the news, but the announcement still came as a shock. Instructors were frantic. Students were confused and stressed. And some of the hardest hit members of the community were those who are already...mostly...alone. New graduate students who had just arrived in January to begin their studies and were still struggling to find their footing.

Rubio 0:41

When COVID hit, I basically had no one to talk to. So for me that felt...oh, geez, that felt like someone was, like something was ripped out of my heart, you know?

Rob Desjardins 0:54

COVID felt ominous, like a brand new challenge. But in some ways, it only made an underlying problem worse. Because grad students have been struggling with isolation for as long as there have been grad students.

Loneliness and isolation, the secret burdens of the grad student. Today on Grad School Confidential.

Grad School Confidential. A podcast about the unglamorous and sometimes bewildering life of the graduate student. I'm Rob Desjardins. And today we're tackling a problem that's familiar to many people, whether they work in labs or libraries. Isolation. To help us

through it, we're joined by our advisor and guide, psychologist Suman Varghese. Hi, Suman.

Suman Varghese 1:50

Hi, Rob.

Rob Desjardins 1:50

So COVID-19 has brought new meaning to the term isolation.

Suman Varghese 1:55

Absolutely, we've been physically separated in ways we could have never imagined. So we've not only lost out on our ability to socialize in the way we usually do. But we also lost out on all our informal interactions -- just being around people, saying hi to someone in the hallway, that kind of thing.

Rob Desjardins 2:10

And if that's true for us, it's all the more true for new graduate students. We talked to two people who were newly minted grad students at the time.

Leah 2:20

I'm Leah Hammond. And I am a first year master's student in the Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry in the Department of Pediatrics.

Rubio 2:29

Hi, everyone. My name is...well, actually my name is pretty long, but for short it's Fernando Rubio. I actually go by Rubio. So I'm a current student in the Department of Physiology here at the University of Alberta.

Leah 2:46

I came out of private industry, and I was working a lot with people. And so when I came into grad school, I was, you know, the only person in my lab aside from a PI and a postdoc. And so it felt all of a sudden very isolating.

Rubio 3:04

It was really hard, like starting to build a new network of friends and everything. I was starting to make that when COVID hit. So it was like, oh, my God.

Leah 3:16

I was really looking forward to meeting new people and making new connections and, you know, trying to broaden my network. And with COVID, that just really didn't happen. So it's felt pretty lonely, to kind of just be stuck in my room and trying hard to meet people. I was very jealous of people who'd been in grad school for longer, because they already had networks and connections. And a lot of the advice that came out at that point was, oh, make sure to lean on your people. And I felt kind of forgotten by a lot of that advice, because I didn't have those networks. And there weren't really good ways to build them.

Rubio 4:00

I come here from another country. I don't know absolutely anyone apart from my supervisor. And so what do I do? How do I start interacting with other people, you know? My home used to be like the center of activity regarding all my friends, like I would have friends basically every day at home. And we would be like cooking, or like playing video games. Or even if they were, everybody was doing homework, there was still someone around the house and I would be like talking to them. So when I learned that I wasn't going to have classes, I was just like, wow, what am I going to do? I felt like really alone. And at some points even like a little bit like desperation.

Leah 4:42

Grad school I would say, so far, for me, feels a lot like me alone in a room.

Rob Desjardins 4:52

So, Suman, even if COVID has sort of accelerated and supercharged the feeling of isolation, for sure, a lot of grad students can probably relate to that phrase "alone in a room". I mean, loneliness is a particular challenge for grad students, right?

Suman Varghese 5:08

Absolutely. In grad school, we're kind of just left on our own, a lot of the times. Much of the work is self directed and independent. Cohorts are pretty small, sometimes non existent. There's a lot of long hours working by yourself on things very few people understand.

Rob Desjardins 5:24

Sometimes that includes even your peers and classmates, right, who have different interests or might use different research methodologies. I remember, myself, coming into a program in Montreal, a new city, where people spoke a new language. And you know, like, even my, my classmates seem to be speaking, kind of a different language, a different academic language. And it was really isolating.

Suman Varghese 5:48

Yeah, it's so challenging. And I think there's really layers to the isolation because there's that inherent isolation we just talked about in grad school. But there's that extra challenge when you start. So like you said, the new academic language, there's new people to meet, often you're in a new city, and grad school itself is just such a unique environment. So your entry point can be particularly isolating. And then right now, when you think about the pandemic, and the role COVID is playing, it's like you can't meet and connect with people in the informal ways that we used to, or even in the social settings we used to have, and that can feel really lonely.

Rob Desjardins 6:25

Just to clarify, too, I mean, there is a difference between being physically isolated, and feeling lonely. What is that relationship?

Suman Varghese 6:35

People can feel really lonely, even when they're surrounded by a lot of people.

Physical isolation is really our separation from others. So when we're physically alone, and so COVID-19, of course, has caused a lot of isolation through our need to distance. And grad school, like we mentioned, also often has some inherent isolation in it. Loneliness is really that painful emotion we experience when we feel disconnected from others. How lonely we feel can depend not just on how isolated we are, but it can depend on how we feel about ourselves, the world, other people, relationships, and our expectations around those things. I think loneliness, like every feeling, is telling us something pretty important. As humans, we have a need to feel connected. We're social creatures. So loneliness is kind of our mind and body's way of telling us that something's not okay.

Rob Desjardins 7:32

And you can hear it in Leah and Rubio's voice. So let's go back to their story, and hear a little bit more about how isolation affected them.

Leah 7:41

I found it really tough to know where to go with questions. I kind of felt like I had a million questions. And I didn't want to go bombard a grad coordinator or my PI, because I knew they were so busy. But still, like, it definitely feels like you don't know what you're doing. And nobody else really knows what you're doing. Everything kind of got put on hold. And it felt very much like well, why even bother doing anything, it's not going to take us anywhere any faster. And nobody has a plan. So might as well watch Netflix.

Rubio 8:20

Since all of my experiments were canceled, I wanted to read more papers, get prepared. Be more knowledgeable in the field that I'm researching on. However, it was really hard for me to like focus on reading the articles. And sometimes I would just like stare into my tablet and be like, Oh my god, I hope everything's gonna be alright, what's gonna happen? I was starting to worry about literally everything, what am I going to do with my future, and rethinking everything. So it was during that time period, it was really hard for me to start focusing on the things that I really needed to do.

Leah 8:57

I had to take some time to sort of figure out how I was going to handle the not knowing. I've always liked having a plan and knowing where I'm going next. And it I really had to sit with it and just kind of accept that nobody really knew where we were going. And that that had to be okay. Because if it wasn't, I wasn't going to be okay.

Rob Desjardins 9:26

So Leah and Rubio talk about how isolation impacted their well being and their productivity. Is that pretty typical?

Suman Varghese 9:36

We know that isolation is is really linked to negative impacts on our mental health. I mean, the pandemic itself just brought a certain level of stress and unknowing into all our lives. But I think being isolated in that process can just make the stress so much worse. Isolation has been shown to be linked with anxiety, depression, of course loneliness, and it can leave us just feeling like we don't belong. Isolation can also affect our energy and motivation and sense of purpose. So in some ways, it's no wonder their productivity went down.

Rob Desjardins 10:08

What are the specific barriers there that are at work that are making that productivity hard?

Suman Varghese 10:13

I guess there's some really practical things, like they talk about their experiments and research being put on hold, even access to supervisors, resources, maybe people who could be helpful was kind of limited. So I think there's just practical things that got in the way. But for sure, we know that when people feel connected, they tend to be happier, they tend to be more motivated. And they tend to persist more, when things are, are tough. So if we have a sense of belonging, there's been studies that show that, yeah, even in the face of like impossible tasks, people persist through it. So I think there's both practical and emotional reasons why it would be hard to to stay productive during that time.

Rob Desjardins 10:53

The good news is that both Rubio and Leah did manage to work through the challenges of isolation.

Leah 11:00

I actually remember having kind of a full breakdown around Easter, because my family was like, you know, like, you've stayed really safe, you've stayed in quarantine, we're out in the country, there's no cases out here. It'll be safe if you want to come for Easter. And I took it so very personally like that it was my responsibility to keep them safe by staying alone. And I think it's important to know that it's okay to need people still. It took a lot to get me there.

I've always sort of seen myself as an introvert and very independent and you can do it on your own. And this has really taught me to be like, Oh, you know, it's okay, that you're feeling lonely. And you feel like you need to go and reach out to someone, that's okay. You shouldn't feel bad about not having people and being actively pursuing them. It's like, it's kind of embarrassing to be like, Oh, I have no friends. Please hang out with me. But sometimes that's what it takes. And I, in my experience, everyone who I kind of said that to, they were so open and willing to connect and willing to go out of their way to make sure that I felt supported and that there were opportunities for me to get engaged. And so I would say go for it, like, as awkward as it feels, go for it.

Rob Desjardins 12:39

So, Suman, Leah began by talking about her experiences this past Easter. Of course, she had the option to see her family at the time. That's not the case right now, when cases have skyrocketed, and we're in full lockdown. But regardless, like whether it's physically or virtually reaching out, how did she recognize that she needed people?

Suman Varghese 12:59

I think she had to go through something incredibly painful to get there, as we kind of heard. And that's really acknowledging the loneliness and isolation she was feeling. Acknowledgement is truly the first step and being able to name it and to validate it, to recognize it's okay to feel that way, is really important. Even though feeling lonely and isolated can be such a painful experience, the feelings can also motivate us to pursue the connection we need and want.

Rob Desjardins 13:27

And that's exactly what Leah did. So did Rubio, by the way, even though it wasn't always easy.

Rubio 13:34

I started to get like this need of like, I need to start engaging more people. Because there is no other way that I'm going to start to make friends. I was a little bit scared, because I don't know exactly how the culture of making friends work here. In Mexico, at least, even if I don't know the person, I would like to start randomly talking about something and see if it goes from there. And most of the times it works. But here everyone looked at me and I was just like, Oh my God.

I basically decided to kind of like try to give it a go again. But here in the department. And so then I will have like a little bit of more room to start to talk about like more common things instead of like random stuff. And it worked. That helped me a lot. I felt like I wasn't sure how to begin a conversation. Was I being rude? Was I being...I don't know. I was thinking a lot of things of how others will perceive me instead of actually just doing. So, at some point, I started thinking, you know, just stop thinking about what the others will



think. And just give it a go. Even if they look at you weird or something, you know, at least you tried.

Rob Desjardins 14:56

I think we can all relate to Rubio's story, to those awkward moments when you try to reach out. Why is it so hard to put ourselves out there?

Suman Varghese 15:06

Yes, very relatable. I think we've all had moments where we felt really vulnerable and maybe intimidated to put ourselves out there. And sometimes that's because we're scared of rejection or we feel we don't belong. A lot of times when we're lonely, there's a lot of negative thoughts bouncing around, like people don't like me, or I'm awkward, I don't belong, I can do it myself. These kinds of things can make it even harder to take those steps. There can also be a bit of a learning curve for international students, the norms around making friends can be quite different from what they're used to, kind of like Rubio mentioned. So it can be an added challenge to learn the norms and the communication skills. And then let's not forget, right now we have the added challenge of pandemic life where, again, the informal interactions, the ability to make small talk, all of that is kind of gone. So now we have to be really intentional and seeking out interaction, we can't just take it for granted that we'll have those opportunities.

Rob Desjardins 15:59

Now, Rubio did a good job of overcoming those feelings. What can we kind of learn from his experience that other people can apply?

Suman Varghese 16:07

I think he was brave. And that's something we all need to do when we want to connect with more people. Even though it felt awkward or even though he wasn't really sure culturally how to go about doing that, he took the risk. There's inherently always a little bit of a risk of rejection when we put ourselves out there, when we reach out, when we initiate. But learning that that's okay, it's a normal human experience to go through that, to have those thoughts, to even face rejection. It's really, really easy to avoid the

interactions, avoid initiating because you're afraid or you're nervous. That discomfort that comes with putting ourselves out there is not just common, but it's also like transient, it'll go away. And worst case scenario, it's an awkward moment.

Rob Desjardins 16:48

Any suggestions on how to reach out specifically during a pandemic?

Suman Varghese 16:53

Like I kind of mentioned earlier, you have to be a lot more intentional, because you don't have those like natural ways of just saying hi to someone or the familiarity of seeing them day after day. So you can still join student groups and clubs, events, volunteer, lab meetings, all these things are still going on. It's just in a new format. So it might take that extra effort of initiating those things, joining those groups, maybe sending a message out in the chat or saying something within the group about, Hey, anyone want to meet up after? Making the intention might feel a little bit more awkward or scary when you have to do it online. But those things and opportunities are still there. And Leah and Rubio took their steps during a pandemic. So it's definitely possible.

Rob Desjardins 17:36

And as we heard from Leah and Rubio, there's some real benefits to taking those risks, right?

Suman Varghese 17:41

For sure. They connected with others, they felt less isolated, they felt better overall, and they were able to move forward with their work. So there's so many benefits. It can also build a sense of confidence and even competence. We learn when we face our fears that we can handle it, we can tolerate the discomfort. And the more we take those risks, the more we realize it's okay. And we can generalize that to other areas of our life, whether it's academic or personal. It's worth remembering that reaching out, making conversation, taking the initiative can be much harder for some people than others. So if you're shy, socially anxious, or just introverted it can sometimes feel harder.

As an introvert, I remember my first day of grad school. It was in a new city, I didn't know anyone, I was in line at an orientation feeling nervous and awkward, kind of out of place. And I just remember thinking, Okay, just ask the person in front of you something random about the orientation, anything to connect or make a conversation. What's the worst that can happen? And from there, it ended up being a longer conversation. We ended up having lunch that day, and eventually became roommates and really good friends and years later, we're still friends. Obviously, it's a little easier to take those risks when we're not in a pandemic. But either way, I think the feelings of doubt or uncertainty or feeling awkward can exist. No matter the circumstance, it's pretty cool to see how a small risk or small interaction can lead to a great connection.

Rob Desjardins 19:10

And that's it for another episode of Grad School Confidential. We'll have some resources on isolation available on our website. Go to [uab.ca/gsc](http://uab.ca/gsc). To contact us with ideas or feedback, reach out at [gradschoolconfidential@ualberta.ca](mailto:gradschoolconfidential@ualberta.ca). Grad School Confidential is a production of the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research at the University of Alberta.

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