

A Psychologists Survival Guide to Graduate School

Attending graduate school can be a very exciting experience, in that not every university student has the opportunity to gain entry into this prized and prestigious position. After all, less than 1% of the population successfully completes graduate school. It also has the possibility of opening up a lot of doors and future opportunities in both academia and industry. When completed, graduate school can have a very positive impact on self-esteem and self-confidence. You also learn work skills which are invaluable for your future in any occupation or endeavor.

However, despite all these positives, what you may not be prepared for is the possibility that attending graduate school can also bring with it significant anxiety, guilt, worry, frustration, fear, uncertainty, hopelessness, jealousy, panic, rivalry, depression, skepticism, and procrastination. Graduate school is emotionally tough for many reasons.

Some of the reasons graduate school can be more taxing than undergraduate school include:

1. During graduate school, there tends to be a lot less structure, particularly once the coursework is finished.
2. Working with supervisors can be very challenging at times, especially when supervisors aren't always supportive or skilled in this role.
3. There is a lot of uncertainty around how much work is enough to complete a thesis or dissertation.
4. Your role as a graduate student can be confused with your role as a teaching assistant, research assistant, or employee.
5. The whole process of graduate school can last for 7 to 9 years or more.
6. In graduate school, you may have a limited number of peers to normalize this difficult process or to guide you along the way through all these years.
7. Intelligence alone is a poor predictor of success in graduate school since everyone else is also very smart, and other work behaviors and personality qualities become more important.
8. Course grades are far less important than your research skills.
9. Interpersonal skills can be far more important to achieve true success, depending on your field.
10. Any money you started out with through parents or savings is likely long gone by graduate school.

To try and survive your graduate school experience, there are a number of choices which will likely enhance this process. These include:

Strategies:

1. Go To Graduate School For The Right Reasons

Many students attend graduate school for the wrong reasons, including:

- a. Trying to avoid the “real world”.
- b. Not knowing what else to do in their life.
- c. Staying in school because it feels safe.
- d. Feeling like their parents, or other people, expect it from them.
- e. Being smart, and feeling like it is the only logical step.

Instead, attend graduate school for some of the right reasons, such as:

- a. It is what you really want to do.
- b. It will help move you toward your vocational goals and dreams.
- c. You are passionate about learning.
- d. You have a specific research topic in mind, based on your passion.
- e. Your life dream is to be an academic.

Try to determine what you are hoping to get out of graduate school before you make this long and arduous journey. If it is for some of the right reasons, you will have no regrets in the end. However, if it is for the wrong reasons, your chances of enjoying the process and finishing go way down.

2. Don't Neglect Your Basic Needs

Since graduate school can take so many years to complete, neglecting your basic needs is simply not going to work. These basic needs, which many graduate students tend to ignore, include the need for adequate sleep, exercise, a healthy diet, down-time, fun and in some cases, even basic hygiene. Without meeting these needs consistently, the likelihood that you will be able to be on top of your game academically is very low. Too many students see graduate school as a period in their life when they have no choice but to sacrifice or forgo these needs, since there are so many things to accomplish. This is a case, however, of needing to work smarter, rather than harder. Concentration and memory improve significantly if you are emotionally and physically nourished. Emotional instability is inevitable if self-care is not prioritized. Schedule time in to meet these basic needs, just like you would for any other essential activity.

3. Develop A Healthy Support Network

Graduate school can be a very lonely existence, or one of the best times in your life, if you reach out and make connections with other graduate students early in the program. Research says that the best way to get through stressful life situations is to

have a solid support system. Who better than other students who are sharing all the same struggles and can relate to your suffering. You also need to share your emotional struggles once trust is built, in order to get the most out of the support. If you are too busy trying to maintain a façade of competence and confidence, you may miss opportunities for real connection. Also, other graduate students, particularly those senior to you, can be a great source of information, guidance, and resources, since they have already lived your reality. Support can also come from existing friends and family, so try to stay in touch.

4. Develop A Connection With Your Supervisor

One of the most common reasons students fail or drop out of their studies is that they don't have the support of their supervisors. Putting energy into this relationship is essential, but this doesn't mean that you need to be best friends. It does mean, however, that you have a solid professional relationship, and if a true friendship develops too, that's a bonus. This usually means developing a balance between relying on your supervisor for support and direction, and working independently and with true initiative. Where this balance lies will also depend a lot on the personality and expectations of your supervisor. You need to try and gauge this as you get to know him/her. Frank discussions around these expectations are okay too, rather than leaving it up to your judgment or observations. Face it, there are also some supervisors who are not great in this role and this might mean trying to make a shift to a new supervisor, once you have given the relationship an adequate try. Many students end up switching supervisors, but do this in the most respectful way possible so you don't burn too many bridges. This is often considered a last resort, not the first. Often, honest conversations can help deal with any potential conflict. Don't be afraid to open up in an assertive way and with the utmost respect. Supervisors are people too, and usually want it to work. Getting to know your supervisors is also important because they are the ones who will ultimately write your reference letters.

5. Learn To Set Healthy Boundaries

Since your supervisor, committee members, and often instructors are going to place all kinds of demands on you, it is essential that you learn to set some boundaries in terms of what you can or will do to meet these. Judging what is necessary to do and what is optional is a real skill, since there is no manual for this to follow. Whatever the balance, you have to make it doable for you, given all the competing demands. There are times when you just have to say "no", and you need to know that any reasonable person would do the same thing to survive and create a life worth living. Setting boundaries means learning to be assertive, and remember, being assertive builds self-esteem and earns the respect of others. Also, remind yourself this is a skill that can be learned, and if you are lacking in this area, counselling can help teach you this skill, or you can join an assertiveness training group.

6. Learn The Art of Time-Management

Since so much of your time after you complete your course work is unstructured, if you don't learn how to manage your time, literally years can go by without a lot to show for it. Plan to accomplish something every day by scheduling to work, even if that something is just photocopying or organizing some of your articles. Treating your research like a job can be helpful. Come in and leave University at the same time each day. This gives you time to meet all those other needs you have beyond achievement. A day planner or application on your smart phone can help keep you on track.

7. Exercise

This strategy is key, because there is a huge mind/body connection. Healthy body, healthy mind, and if your mind is emotionally healthy, your ability to concentrate, retain information, write coherently, sleep and have the energy for everything ahead of you, goes way up. Exercise also causes the release of endorphins in our bloodstream, the best natural high we can get. Exercise can take any form, but it should be something you like, otherwise you are unlikely to keep it up on a regular basis. Also, remember, given all of the potential benefits, it will become more enjoyable over time.

8. Learn How To Organize

If you don't already have some great organizational skills, graduate school is definitely the time to learn them. Otherwise, you will do a lot of extra work during the course of your degree, which has little pay-off to you. For example, randomly reading articles with no plan to summarize and categorize them will likely mean you will simply have to repeat the process of reading them all again at some point. Lack of organization almost always leads to lack of productivity, and you have more than enough to do without wasting a lot of time. If you are not sure how to develop these organization skills, watch or ask other students in your program, or your instructors, who have these skills how they do it. Each person has some strategies that they have developed to keep themselves organized and on track. This will also likely mean buying items like a filing cabinet, file folders, labels or a book shelf. Clutter and disorganization can feed into feelings of hopelessness, because we can internalize this chaotic environment.

9. Learn To Prioritize

Since the demands placed on a graduate student almost always exceed the hours in a day, prioritizing is an absolutely essential skill. The outcome of not learning to prioritize is chronic stress and failure to meet some crucial expectations. Talking to other students, your professors, supervisors, or committee members can all be

helpful in making an accurate assessment as to what is more or most important. It is easy to spend far more time than you should on relatively unimportant tasks, because they are easy to do compared to tasks that you should prioritize. Prioritizing is a complex skill that can be learned with a lot of practice. You will have lots of time to practice it in graduate school.

10. Overcome Procrastination

If there was ever a time when procrastinating is likely, and fatally dangerous, it is during graduate school. Face it, all of us procrastinate to some degree, but it's the students who make it a habit who experience the most stress in the long term, and run the risk of academic failure. The problem is that procrastinating can be quite gratifying in the short run and therefore this habit continues to be reinforced over and over again. It's important to try and determine the reasons you procrastinate, including such things as: perfectionism, feelings of inadequacy, undeveloped study skills, aversion to discomfort, resentment, being overextended, lifestyle issues, fears of success and negative emotional states. Please access the Mental Health Centre website for the handout on ideas to overcome procrastination.

11. Focus On Learning, Not Grades

In order to get into graduate school, you likely had to put a lot of emphasis on grades, but now you're in, the focus should be on other aspects, particularly learning. In order to get through activities like comprehensive exams, your candidacy and your final defense, the more you know and understand, the better you will ultimately do. As well, in order to do great research, you need to know a lot about different research methodologies and your research topic. Given limitations of time and energy, if you focused too much on grades, all of these other areas will likely suffer.

12. Develop Your Own Research Interests

One of the biggest issues in graduate school is being able to keep up your motivation, particularly as you write your thesis or dissertation. This problem will only be intensified if you don't develop a research topic that is based on your own passion and interests, rather than those of your supervisor, instructors, or department. It's tempting to just do something because your supervisor has some funding, the topic is "popular", the research looks "easy", or your supervisor already has thought through the research methodology, but it's so easy to lose interest as the long process gets underway under these circumstances. This means spending some significant time early in the program checking out potential research topics and then shifting some of your coursework toward this direction (i.e., a paper that will overlap with your literature review). When the going gets tough, passion in your research topic will get you through. Otherwise, it is easy to question why you ever wanted to do the degree, and you will probably never finish your thesis.

13. Keep A Record Of Your Successes

Focusing on what you haven't done, or have yet to complete, and not focusing on what you have done can become a bad habit. Keep track in some way (in a diary, calendar, journal or notepad) of assignments, papers, research, or whatever you have accomplished, to feed your motivation in a positive way. There's nothing that breeds success like success, but we have to be able to see and acknowledge it, since no one else is likely to do so. We are constantly filtering our experiences, so why not filter out the positives rather than the negatives. This is what highly successful people do.

14. Stop Comparing Yourself To Everyone In Your Program

It would seem like a very natural tendency to compare yourself to those around you, and in many ways it is. This, however, will really increase your anxiety and fear in graduate school and is a habit you need to try to break. There will always be someone with higher grades, more scholarships, more TA's and RA's, more publications, more friends, better connections with their supervisors, or those who seem to need to put in less effort, but comparing yourself isn't going to make you feel better or even likely perform better, particularly if you are already highly stressed. One's best performance comes when anxiety is more in the middle of the bell curve, not at the end. Comparisons only heighten our anxiety and distress. Focus only on what you need to do to be successful, because your graduating is largely independent of how everyone else does, unless you are getting failing grades, of course.

15. Expect To Do A Lot Of Your Work Independently

Many students are frustrated because they don't feel they are getting enough guidance from supervisors and committee members, after coming into their program expecting a lot of guidance along the way. Graduate support and direction can happen, depending on your supervisor, but more often, part of being a graduate student is learning to be independent. As well, professors are often very busy themselves and would like to be available, but have multiple demands placed on them, and multiple students to supervise. Learn to do everything you can on your own, but also be assertive enough to ask for what you need when you get stuck. Scheduling regular meeting times with your supervisor can be a way to have more structure, but not overwhelm your supervisor.

16. Avoid Taking Feedback and Criticism Personally

During the course of your degree, you are likely to get a lot of feedback, particularly from instructors and supervisors, which can be a very powerful source of learning, or a way to beat yourself up. For some people, this criticism can be taken very

personally, particularly if you already struggle with self-esteem issues and see every negative comment as an indicator of your worth. This is a habit that you would be very wise to get out of from the minute you start your degree, because graduate school is difficult enough without this tendency. Instead, see all feedback as the best way we can learn, and realize that some instructors/supervisors may not have great skills in giving feedback in the most appropriate fashion, but you have the ability to perceive it in a healthy/helpful way. Also, be aware that some feedback says more about the person giving it than you. Feedback is just information and it doesn't mean that you have to follow all of it. Use your discretion.

17. Realize That Everything Takes Longer Than You Think

You can avoid a lot of discouragement by understanding from the beginning of your degree that everything you do takes longer than you had originally imagined. Trying to find a research topic can take months and months, or even years in some cases. Tracking down books and articles can take days or weeks. Setting up experiments can take forever, due to endless obstacles. Applying for research funding or scholarships can be a long and tedious process. To avoid a constant sense of discouragement, it is psychologically a lot healthier to anticipate this from the beginning and learn to take things in stride when the inevitable happens. Managing expectations is a big part of getting through graduate school.

18. Just Finish Your Thesis

Too often graduate students feel that because their thesis or dissertation needs to be original work, it also needs to be their life's work. This mindset then, in turn, often means students are spending far more time than they need to, and in the end it just needs to be finished. Your degree is either complete or incomplete, and your thesis/dissertation doesn't come with a final grade. Your life work can come later if you are in an academic job and you have the time and funding to complete it. The worst thesis is the one that never gets finished. Save yourself a lot of time and emotional distress.

19. Find Value In The Experience

Graduate school is a lot more than just a way to find a better job. It can be a life altering experience. All those years teach us so much about ourselves, the world, other people, and academia. Try to treat it as more than just something to get through, but rather, an important part of this journey called life. Few times in your life will you be challenged this much, so there are endless opportunities for growth. Be willing to take chances and move outside of your comfort zone. Don't give in to skepticism and cynicism, because before long it can get the better of you. Remember, we create much of our experience, depending on what we focus on and what our expectations are. Find ways to make graduate school one of the best times of your life. You can create friendships that are lifelong and meet mentors who will

forever inspire you. With perseverance and determination, your self-confidence can be elevated to allow you to rise to any new challenge. Always remember that life is not a race. It's everything we do along the way that makes it meaningful.

20. Try Some Form Of Counselling

If you have tried all the above strategies and you are still struggling emotionally, try some type of counselling. Individual counselling can help you on a number of levels, including: providing guidance and support, working on cognitive strategies to deal with unhelpful thinking patterns, processing your graduate school experience on an emotional level, helping you deal with self-defeating patterns including procrastination, addressing issues you might have with your supervisors, and teaching you stress or depression management strategies, just to mention a few. The Mental Health Centre on campus also has a group called the Graduate Student Support and Strategy Group, which meets on a bi-weekly basis. It can help you to not feel so alone in your struggles, and to learn additional strategies to cope.

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