

The Grad Student's Guide

to Surviving the Pandemic



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When I moved from my home province, Newfoundland and Labrador, to pursue graduate training in Clinical Psychology at the University of Regina, I was ready to tackle a long list of stressors. I had been warned about the busy schedule and the struggle to juggle coursework, research, and clinical training. I fully expected to battle the impostor syndrome and feel the need to prove myself to my professors, my supervisor, and fellow classmates. I was certain that I would miss my friends, family, and fiancé, all of whom I was leaving behind. One thing I was not prepared for was an international pandemic. And like a lot of graduate students, I've been struggling to maintain my productivity – and sanity – during this unexpected and challenging time. In an effort to find my way, I've had many conversations with fellow graduate students across the country about how to cope. Here, I've consolidated lessons learned and advice into a survival guide for grad students.



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1. Expect to be less productive.

The most frequent conversation I have had with my colleagues has surrounded productivity. Due to the closure of many universities and in-person research projects, graduate students have found an increase in free time. For many of us, this increase in “free time” has not increased productivity. As graduate students, we often define our worth as our ability to be productive. When we take time for ourselves, we may feel that we are not doing as much work as we should be like other students or that our supervisors are disappointed. It is important during these unprecedented times that we allow ourselves space to not be as productive as we may have

hoped. We may need to let go of any guilt we associated with what we feel we “should” or “must” be doing. Productivity might not need to be our most important concern during a pandemic, and it is okay to take some time for yourself if that is what you need to be okay and stay safe.

2. Take breaks.

When my self-isolation first began, I had a pretty unproductive first two weeks. Due to some of the guilt about my lack of productivity, I then felt I had to make up for that time. So, I hunkered down and focused all of my energy on school and research. This method also did not work for me, and I experienced burn out very quickly. This was a great reminder of the importance of taking breaks. Having a rigid schedule and not allowing any flexibility was not realistic nor helpful. When I began to allow myself to go for a physically distant walk in the afternoon or have a dance party with my roommate when I was frustrated with SPSS, I finally felt like I was beginning to function as a graduate student at home.

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3. Set attainable goals.

While letting go of some of our guilt associated with productivity is important, we also must take into account the reality of graduate training and the importance of still doing work. As one student put it “Evidently, productivity and worthiness are not synonymous; however, I quickly realized a global pandemic did not mean that my floors no longer needed to be mopped, nor did it mean my thesis would write itself.” It may not be helpful or realistic to believe that productivity would not be impacted by an international pandemic, but we may be able to adjust to find ways to continue to do some of our work. Unfortunately, this task is not a one-size-fits-all kind of solution. There may be some trial and error to find what works best for you. Personally, I have been making small frequent goals to achieve so that each day I have a plan for something I would like to accomplish. I find goal setting to be beneficial for me and it helps me stay on track working on my thesis. One important aspect of goal setting for me is to ensure that the goals I am creating are specific, attainable, and have a deadline.

4. Establish structure while working from home.

Working from home has taken some getting used to for many students. I, for one, enjoyed the structure that comes with working in the lab and have found the transition challenging. One student described their experience as “a difficult transition and in the beginning, I found myself going to bed at night feeling incredibly unproductive and down on myself because of it.” For me, after about two weeks of not feeling well I decided I needed a change. I started to develop a routine for myself that wasn't too rigid and allowed flexibility in my days. I started each day by doing a quick free workout I found on YouTube or a fitness app. I found it helpful to start my day having felt like I already achieved something by getting my body moving. I also learned that I was more productive when I had a separate place where I do my work. As a graduate student I do not have the luxury of a huge space so I designated the kitchen table as my workspace and would only do my work there. Being able physically separate my spare time and work time was something I found beneficial. “I started writing out concrete, step-by-step goals for each day. Immediately after I complete a task, I place a checkmark beside it. Some days, I finish off the whole list and those days are great. Other days, I struggle to check off half of my goals, and that's OK! Because we are existing during a pandemic! It is much easier to challenge those late-night thoughts of “All I do is procrastinate...” when I have a physical list proving that is not the case.”

5. Seek social support.

I have been reminded time and time again of the importance of having social supports. The importance of social supports during this time is a sentiment shared by many graduate students. One student shared: “I ended up returning from a conference when the pandemic was declared and immediately went into quarantine upon my return. So not only have I been away from my social support while at a conference, but I am unable to see them for the foreseeable future.” The idea of being away from my friends and family while not in my home province was quite difficult to grasp until I remembered all of the technology that is available at our fingertips. Since entering into



quarantine every weekend, myself and a few students in my program have been meeting virtually for a themed party using what we have in our homes. So far, we have managed to have a 90's, survivor, and formal dinner themed hangout on video software (e.g., Zoom, FaceTime, Skype). We have enjoyed taking advantage of Zoom's ability to change the background of the video. As we have been apart for quite some time, we have also celebrated multiple birthdays on Zoom as well. Now you don't have to be as silly about video chatting as we are, but the ability truly is endless for us today to remain socially connected while physically distant." One student shared: "On days when I am having a hard time focusing or just need some company, I have faceted with one of my cohort members. We both find we can better focus on our work if we have someone on the other side holding us accountable for staying focused. It is also a nice way to stay close with classmates I haven't seen since the beginning of the pandemic."

6. Stay in contact with your supervisor.

The pandemic has brought with it much uncertainty for a lot of people. Everyday there seems to be new developments on what Universities, provinces, and the country are doing to respond to the pandemic. It is quite easy to become overwhelmed with this information with many of the important questions not being answered. If you are uncertain in how to proceed with your research, confusion about your program, or progress on your thesis, remaining in contact with your supervisor can be helpful. Throughout this pandemic, my supervisor has been a source of support and her guidance to remain on track with my thesis has been especially helpful. Supervisors can be a source of support during this time and provide guidance on next steps for research and program requirements. If you are having a hard time concentrating or being productive during this difficult time, your supervisor may have advice on how to self-motivate.

7. It's okay to mourn what would have been.

Many people are suffering and at times it can seem difficult to recognize our own hardships as others are suffering. I have heard many graduate students say things like "I am really sad that my convocation ceremony will not be happening but that is selfish of me as people are dying or I am upset that I have spent all of this time on my thesis and now I have to defend my thesis on Zoom". We can be both cognisant that people in the world are suffering while also being sad and mourning the special moments we have now lost or that might look different then we imagined.

