Balancing Graduate School and Personal Life

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Link to captions
Notes to presenters

• Envision this session to be highly interactive.
• Use the charts simply to drive a conversation with the attendees
• Get attendees to share their views and comments on the topics
• Share personal experiences as part of the interaction

Questions

• Will we have a microphone with a runner?
  • From whose laptop will we present?
Agenda

• Introductions
• Importance of grad-school/life balance
• Self reflection
• Sources of imbalance
• Some suggestions to achieve balance
• Self reflection recap
Take a moment:
Say hi to your neighbors
Why is having a personal life essential for successful graduate studies?
Top Reasons

People with meaningful lives outside of grad school have:

• Higher risk tolerance
  • Support networks and self-esteem
• Brain rejuvenation
  • Required for creative brain work
• Good citizenship
  • Outside and in grad school setting
• Broad skills
  • People skills, unexpected idea cross fertilization
• Perspective
  • Long term thinking, combat narrow-mindedness
Self-Reflection:
How do we define a “balanced life”?
How do we define a “balanced life”? 

• No single answer; different people have different perspectives
• In general terms: ensuring your interests and priorities in life are properly tended to
• Definition changes for each individual throughout the years
• Healthy in one’s priority areas (e.g., family, spirituality, health, work)
Is your life in balance?

• Rate yourself: 1-imbalanced, 5-well balanced

• When do you feel most in-balance and out-of-balance?

• List three things that trigger you to go out of balance.
Sources of Imbalance
Identify external sources of imbalance

Academic demands

• Courses: advanced topics, new skills required, …
• Research: open-ended questions, creativity, vague definitions of quality, pressure to publish, no obvious finishing line, …
• Work Relationships: (co-)advisor, lab-mates, collaborators, …
• Logistics: focus on course work or start research earlier, choosing / changing advisor, …
• Desire to do service for your community

Personal life

• People in our lives: partners, parents, children, friends, …
• Life commitments & health issues
• Finances as graduate student
• Logistics: caring for loved ones, home, transportation
• Homesickness
Sources of imbalance

Grad Student Work Output

- Unrealistic goals
- Procrastination
- Forced creativity
- Relying on external affirmation
- Lack of realistic planning

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Identify internal sources of imbalance

- Procrastination
- Impostor Syndrome
- Visceral responses to microaggressions
- Lack of self-care
- Chronic medical conditions
  ○ Anxiety, Depression, ADHD, etc.
- Temporary medical conditions
Getting back to balance?

• List five things that are most important to you.

• List three non-academic activities you enjoy the most.
Tips to balance work and life
Nine Work-Life Balance Tips

#1: Manage your time wisely

#2: Accept and make tradeoffs

#3: Pay attention to your self-confidence
Nine Work-Life Balance Tips

#4: Make time for yourself
#5: Make time for your interpersonal relationships
#6: Get organized
Nine Work-Life Balance Tips

#7: Learn how to say “no”

#8: Ask for help when you need it

#9: Live your enjoyable and sustainable life now!!
Self-Reflection Recap
Self Reflection

• How do you define balance?
• Recognizing when you’re in/out of balance
• Recognize the importance of stress triggers
• Mitigating Imbalance
  • Identify steps you will take to avoid your triggers
  • Identify activities you can do to reduce stress when out of balance
THANK YOU

Questions???
Tip 1: Time Management

Unstructured nature of research, and long delayed rewards
Enduring myth of work-aholism being correlated with success

Solution: Practical and Philosophical (Reject the Myth!) - Time management helps a lot!

- Find personal “best time” in the day, block it (find your best work style)
- Block one day or hours-per-day for grad-work only (no email/social media)
- Schedule “activities”
- Schedule fixed hours for “stuff”, be ok with that
- Reward yourself
- Read books, find one that “fits” your nature
Tip 2: Manage Tradeoffs

Admit it: we cannot do it all, we cannot have it all

Trade-offs
- Between goals and expectations
- Between ambitions and reality
- Between what you want to do, what others want you to do and what you can do

Saying “NO” is a valid choice you can make
- Take time to decide
- Consider trade-offs
- Avoid guilt-driven decisions
- Have a “NO” buddy, someone who helps you prioritize & say NO when appropriate

Accept and adjust to imbalance
Tip 3: Self Confidence

Admit that

• We can succeed in the long term, but may fail on some things on the way
• Some insecurity is normal
• We exist in a society that has a certain social normal
• We are being evaluated by others--peer review is hard!

But we can

• Enjoy and be proud of our successes, even small ones
• Think positively, always, even in difficult times
• Extract confidence from within, exhibit it
• Seek out support, when needed
Tip 4: Make time for yourself

Why?

• Creative and highly technical work is hard on our minds and bodies
• Burn-out is a real thing that effects creative and talented people

Brain rejuvenation

• What do you like most? What do you love?
• Happiness is strongly correlated with “small” things
• Schedule “rejuvenation” (gym, concert tickets, community service, friends, weekends)
• Take time off!
Tip 5: Make time for your interpersonal relationships

Why?

- an important part of your life and happiness
- personal happiness affects creativity
- conversely, unhappiness negatively affects creativity

Explicitly Include interpersonal time in your schedule

- Helps your partner know what to expect
  - e.g., Saturday date night
  - Sunday playtime
- When you have a deadline, don’t cancel, reschedule interpersonal time (make up time)
  - Lets your partner know they are important too
Tips 5 & 6: Get organized / Ask for help

• Tip 5:
  • Use productivity software (e.g. trello, Notion, etc.)
  • Get things out of your head and onto paper (or digital files!)

• Tip 6:
  • Utilize your internal and external mentor network