

## Supporting Grad Students' Emotional Challenges

Your third year graduate student just isn't cutting it. While she did well in the core courses, she's struggling to move forward in her research. You hardly ever see her in the lab, and she seems to be avoiding you. She has trouble taking initiative and wants to be told exactly what to do. You assume she's not PhD material and isn't serious about a research career.

Your assumptions are probably wrong.

Eight out of ten reported causes of academic struggle are mental health related,<sup>[1]</sup> and graduate students are six times more likely to experience depression and anxiety as their peers of the same age.<sup>[2]</sup> This isn't surprising when you consider the social isolation that can occur in graduate school, the abstract nature of research, financial stress, poor work/life balance, and lack of effective mentorship. Women, international, and transgender graduate students are often most impacted.<sup>[3]</sup>

As a research advisor, what can you do? Watch for signs that a student might be struggling with emotional distress, including: deteriorating academic performance, changes in mood and behavior, evidence of significant substance use, repeated requests for special consideration, evidence of self-injury or interpersonal violence, and hopeless communications in e-mail, social media, or face-to-face.<sup>[3]</sup>

If you do have concerns about a student, how should you respond?<sup>[3]</sup>

- Talk to the student about your concerns, and then listen. If the situation warrants, recommend that they visit the Counseling Center or check out the website. Offer to go with them if they want or if you are concerned about self-harm. Let them know if counseling is covered by their student health fees. If they choose not to go to the Counseling Center, don't push.
- While you cannot guarantee "confidentiality" to a student, you can assure them that you will only inform those on campus who can get them the help they need.
- Check in with the student later to see how they are doing.
- Have an open-door policy and be there to support the student.
- If you feel comfortable doing so, share with the student your own experience about feeling overwhelmed as a graduate student in order to reduce the stigma that students might feel about seeking help.

As a faculty member, it is your job to help your graduate students do their job—thus, you may sometimes need to serve in a counseling role to help them get the help they need. It's important to know your limits and when to set appropriate boundaries, but most faculty err on the side of avoidance rather than overinvolvement.

Departments can also coordinate their support for graduate students:

- Invite someone from the Counseling Center to attend the first year graduate student seminar and/or a graduate student seminar to talk about mental health resources available on your campus. Share statistics about mental health issues so that students know their struggles are not unique.
- Sponsor a panel discussion where senior graduate students talk to first year graduate students about navigating graduate school.
- Encourage students to meet with their PhD committee annually to get input and feedback on their progress.
- Support departmental or college student organizations that create opportunities for students to connect with one another socially and professionally.

Research advisors can improve the productivity of their research groups by supporting graduate students who are struggling with non-technical aspects of graduate school.

### REFERENCES

1. ACHA-NCHA Survey, Reference Group Executive Summary (Spring 2016). <https://www.acha.org/documents/ncha/NCHA-II%20SPRING%202016%20US%20REFERENCE%20GROUP%20EXECUTIVE%20SUMMARY.pdf>, accessed May 26, 2019.
2. Evans TM, Bira L, Gastelum JB, Weiss LT, and Vanderford NL (2018) Evidence for a mental health crisis in graduate education. *Nature Biotech.* 36:282–284.
3. North Carolina State University Counseling Center, Recognizing Students in Distress. <https://counseling.dasa.ncsu.edu/workshops-and-events/stop-the-stigma> accessed May 26, 2019. □

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