

Managing Stress and Pursuing a Healthy Lifestyle



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To my fellow postdocs,

Happy National Postdoc Appreciation Week (NPAW)! For NPAW, I wanted to write a blog post that would recognize some of the behind-the-scenes struggles of postdoc life. Specifically, I wanted to highlight mental health in our post-graduation world, written on behalf of all the private voices who have shared their stories with me over the past few years. While the stigma around mental health issues has gotten better (just look at Twitter!), I continue to hear whispers of personal pain and fear of professional repercussions. I felt it was essential to bring these fears forward and to share my own experience with managing stress and pursuing a healthy lifestyle.

A collection of whispers:

- “Everyone else can deal with the stress—and I should be able to—but I can’t.”
- “I can’t ask for time off for personal reasons.”
- “I don’t want people to know about my mental health issues because I won’t be hireable/able to adopt children/attract a partner/recruit people to join my future lab.”
- “I don’t want my PI/coworkers to treat me differently or think I can’t handle my work.”
- “I don’t have time to go to regular therapy appointments because my PI expects me in the lab during the hours the therapist is available.”
- “I never knew if it was OK to talk about.”

Wearing a mask: Personally, there are many times where I’ve felt like I’ve had to wear a mask—play a part, hide my pain—because I didn’t feel like it was appropriate to show weakness. I’ve lied to the people who care about me because I don’t want them to see how poorly I’m doing, or that I’m not getting better. The truth about mental health is that you can be a high-functioning, productive individual and still feel unwell. You can have anxiety and sound confident; you can have depression and always make jokes.

Celebrating success: In my own experience, I’ve found that celebrating every victory, even small ones, matters. A few months ago, I found myself in a bad mental health place. My experiments had been failing, I was behind on my leftover *graduate school* writing (lesson learned: finish all your publications before leaving a job), and I generally felt like I wasn’t doing anything right professionally or personally. I often find that exercise helps clear my head, and I love using the guided runs from the Nike Run Club app. On this day, I knew I needed to get up and do something positive, but my motivation was very low.

I stumbled upon a guided run called the “I Need a Win Run” and decided to give it a shot while I took a 30-minute jog outside. The whole guided run was about changing your perspective, focusing

on the positives, and identifying every moment where you had a win today. Deciding to run was a win. Putting on shoes was a win. Getting out the door was a win. Halfway there was a win. Completing the workout, especially on a day where you felt terrible, was a win. Some days, a win is going to be that your RNA-seq looks beautiful and you have a new mechanistic insight to your research. Most days, your gains are going to be much more personal, and it's up to you to set the parameters and make sure you are living your best life, celebrating what is going right.

The illusive work-life balance: There is a lot of buzz these days around having a work-life balance, and often the expectations are different from the reality. It's one thing to say you have to leave early to pick up your kids, but how do you tell your PI that you need to leave early—regularly—to see a therapist? Sure, they don't need to know the details of your health issues, but realistically they are going to worry about what's happening if you are leaving work to see a doctor every week. Personally, I don't have a solution for this, other than that I've always sought to work in labs and at universities that have supported my personal development and health. However, I've never seen a lab where there isn't some expectation of long hours/productivity. This is particularly true for postdocs, who are expected to be transitioning to independence while generating data faster than they ever have before. To this, I can only say that you must *make* time. Your health should be the most important thing. It's OK to take time off if you need it. Seek professional advice if you aren't managing well on your own.

Finally, remember to rest. You don't need to wait for the weekend or a holiday to rest. Make time for yourself. Take a 10-minute walk in the middle of a Tuesday, stop, and have lunch without writing a grant at the same time. Be honest with yourself about whether working every weekend is helping your project move faster, or if you are burning yourself out.

Professionalism and honesty: Sometimes on bad days, it feels like it would be easier to be violently, physically ill rather than to have to ask for time off to deal with an invisible illness. It can be tough to ask for time off for a problem that is not always visible to others. However, know that you are protected, and your health (physical and mental) should be a priority to you and your employer. Concerning professionalism and honesty, I'm very curious to understand how the rest of the community feels about this topic. Do you disclose your mental health status to HR or your PI when you are hired/diagnosed? Do you tell your PI what you're going through, or do you take sick days as you need them without explanation?

Let's talk about it: If anyone has personal insights on managing communication about mental health or creating a work-life balance, please feel free to share in the comments (or on Twitter @SarahCarratt). Please feel free to [contact me](#), and I can also post your reply/story anonymously.

Reading materials:

- ["How to Be Good at Stress"](#) by Kelly McGonigal (TED Ideas)
- ["Evidence for a Mental Health Crisis in Graduate Education"](#) by Evans et al. (*Nature Biotechnology*)
- ["The Stressed-Out Postdoc"](#) by Carrie Arnold (*Science*)

Resources:

- National Postdoctoral Association: <https://www.nationalpostdoc.org/page/mentalhealth>
- Federal resources: <https://www.mentalhealth.gov/>
- TED: <https://www.ted.com/topics/mental+health>