

Transcript: Grad School Confidential, Episode 3

Hitting the Wall: On Burnout in Grad School

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Chantal 0:04

All of this workload started in September, and continued on because I also had a master's thesis to wrap up and graduate and start a PhD in the fall. So there was a lot going on. And by July, I had a girls' weekend planned in New York City with my best girlfriends, people that are my supporters, are my champions. And I remember not being able to enjoy myself, just I couldn't bring myself to have fun. And it happened to be July 4 in New York City. And everyone was very excited when the fireworks began. They all ran ahead, and I sort of hung back in the crowd. And I remember looking at the fireworks and starting to cry, and not even knowing why. And then I realized, wow, you need to check in with yourself, and you're burnt out. This is a problem.

Rob Desjardins 0:59

This is Grad School Confidential. And if you're feeling spent or exhausted, or just plain burnt out, this episode is for you.

Grad School Confidential. A podcast about the unglamorous, and sometimes bewildering, life of the graduate student. I'm Rob Desjardins. And we just heard from Chantal Labonte, a grad student here at the University of Alberta. Her story brings to light the kinds of feelings that can overwhelm you when you're already overwhelmed, and suffering from burnout. Many of us have been there. So let's talk about it. Once again, we're joined by our advisor and guide, psychologist Suman Varghese. Hi, Suman.

Suman Varghese 1:52

Hi, Rob.

Rob Desjardins 1:53

So I guess the first thing we have to think about is, you know, burnout is a word that we use a lot. A non-specialist like me, I say it all the time. But I'm not sure I know what it actually means. So why don't we start there. What is burnout?

Suman Varghese 2:08

The term was coined in the literature back in the 70s, and it was kind of described as an exhaustion or wearing out in the face of constant demands. But I would say it's essentially a response to prolonged stress. And we often talk about three dimensions of burnout. So for sure, there's that exhaustion, when you feel completely drained, and that can be physically, emotionally or mentally. Secondly, there's this idea of depersonalization. And that's when you start to feel detached or cynical about your work, maybe you don't care as much anymore. And the third would be a drop in your sense of personal accomplishment. So you might not feel as productive; you might just be feeling useless and inadequate, or just not feeling any satisfaction from your work.

Rob Desjardins 2:46

So you feel tired, disengaged, and unproductive. And we know grad students are especially vulnerable to these feelings. Why is that?

Suman Varghese 2:56

There's a lot of risk factors for burnout, and a lot of them go hand in hand with grad school. A high workload without time to rest and recover can be problematic; not feeling a sense of control over your work can also contribute to burnout, whether that's because you don't feel like you know what to expect, or even the unstructured nature of a lot of the work. Another risk factor is lack of reward. As humans, our behavior is often shaped by reinforcement. So if we get something good, chances are we'll do it again. Grad school, on the other hand, is a grind. Students often don't get a lot of tangible results when they're in the trenches, reading, writing, doing experiments. Failure and obstacles are really part of the process, and there's often a lack of feedback and recognition. And community is a protective factor against burnout. If you have strong relationships with your colleagues or supervisor, you're likely to be more engaged. Whereas if you're feeling isolated, which we know is common in grad school, you're at greater risk of burnout.

Rob Desjardins 3:51

So now that we have a kind of intellectual framework for understanding it, let's go back to Chantal and hear what led to her burnout.

Chantal 4:02

During my master's, I was completing my coursework, and there was a class that was notoriously difficult, and it sort of had this record as being a course that a lot of students found very challenging. But I had always had the attitude throughout my undergraduate degree of sort of like, yeah, yeah, I can sort of do it all. I have really good time management skills. And I've always been able to face those difficulties and carry a full, challenging schedule with ease. And so despite these fair warnings, I worked two part-time jobs outside of school, along with my research assistant's contract and my coursework. And I thought I was rocking it, because I was hitting all of my deadlines. I was showing up where I needed to

be when I needed to be. But in reality, I wasn't checking in with myself and I really wasn't doing well. I was experiencing a lot of anxiety at the time. I wasn't able to overcome failures and rejections in the same way that I formerly would have been able to, and all of that was really taxing over time.

Rob Desjardins 5:13

So it sounds like things sort of crept up on Chantal without her noticing. What are some of the red flags that someone might be heading toward burnout?

Suman Varghese 5:24

I think the signs aren't always obvious. So for Chantal, it sounds like externally, she was doing fine -- meeting deadlines, getting things done, going on a trip. But it really started for her emotionally, like she talked about anxiety being high and not being able to deal with setbacks as well. So I would say if you're noticing changes in how you feel, if you feel exhausted, maybe you don't care as much, not as motivated: those might be some red flags. Some people really feel it physically. So headaches, getting sick more, maybe eating more or less. And then behaviorally, oftentimes, it can lead to procrastination or just not being as productive.

Rob Desjardins 6:01

We actually heard from other graduate students, as well, who could completely relate to these feelings of burnout.

Katherine 6:07

I was spending, you know, seven o'clock in the morning until 11 o'clock at night, working in the office, would barely take lunch breaks, and it was just trying to prepare.

Rob Desjardins 6:17

That's Katherine Bishop, a sixth-year PhD student, talking about the weeks leading up to her candidacy.

Katherine 6:24

And I didn't quite realize, or, like, recognize that I was in burnout. But I was, you know, snapping at my partner, even going home and like seeing dishes in the sink, I would totally be triggered, and just, you know, break into tears or just be angry for no reason. I felt like I wasn't doing enough. Like I constantly had to keep doing things, or reading or prepping or focusing only on that, not taking breaks, because I wouldn't let myself take breaks, because you feel like you can't.

Rob Desjardins 7:03

And that pace and pressure can take a real toll. Here's Alle DeMelo, a first year MBA student. She's no stranger to burnout, either.

Alle 7:14

Feeling burnt out is not fun, by any stretch of the imagination. It can feel very exhausting. And you can feel very beat down. I'm sure I'm not the only one who can say you can hear a little voice of self doubt at that time. Not just saying that, like, you're tired, you need to stop; saying you're tired because you're not good enough.

Rob Desjardins 7:44

Wow. So as Alle and Catherine were talking there, I feel like they could have been giving us a readout of a page of my diaries from when I was a grad student 10 or 15 years ago. So much of that sounded exactly like the way I used to talk to myself. I'm wondering, Suman, is this -- is there something about my personality as a grad student that might have made me, you know, more likely to think or respond that way?

Suman Varghese 8:12

That's an interesting question. Because I think once we start to feel burnt out, it can really fuel that negative internal dialogue. But there's also certain personality traits that make us more prone to get burnt out. So for instance, if you're a perfectionist, it's easy to feel like things are never good enough. People who tend to be high achievers, or feel a great need to be in control can also be at higher risk of burnout. And then if you're pessimistic, so if you tend to have a negative view of yourself or the world, chances are you're at greater risk for burnout.

Rob Desjardins 8:46

Well, here's another thing I remember from my experience as a grad student. I remember hitting that wall. And I remember taking quite a bit of time to be able to find my stride, after I pushed myself almost to the breaking point. I needed some kind of, like, recovery period. And interestingly, both Alle and Catherine talked about that exact topic.

Alle 9:13

It's almost like an injury, I think. When you burn out, you have to have a recovery period, you have to go back into work slowly and not overwork yourself afterwards, and let the injury heal, before you can really go back to your full capacity.

Katherine 9:35

And I think that was one of the reasons why it was harder for me to get back into it after. You know, I didn't necessarily have the motivation. I was sleeping better and obviously eating better and like wasn't as stressed, but just, I didn't have motivation to get back into it right away. I had edits I could go through and it was like you know what, I'm not ready.

Rob Desjardins 9:59

So it sounds like there's more going on there than just stress.

Suman Varghese 10:03

Yeah, and I think, you know, stress and burnout, we often talk about them together without really distinguishing what makes them different. And it's actually kind of interesting, I think. If you think of stress as sort of over-engagement, you know, when you have too much to do, oftentimes, I think there's like an urgency and anxiety associated with it. Whereas, burnout is almost the opposite. It's like with that prolonged chronic stress, it's like, you know, when you hit a wall, and you start to feel disengaged, so instead of feeling, you know, reactive and anxious, you might actually feel like nothing or feel blunted, feel detached. And when you feel like you have no motivation left, that's often a sign we're talking about burnout versus stress. And I think more often that ties into feelings of depression versus anxiety, which might be more associated with stress.

Rob Desjardins 10:53

So grad students have good reason to be thinking about the potential for burnout, looking out for it. And also thinking about, you know, other, better ways of navigating through their programs. So earlier, we heard Chantal's story about her breakdown at the fireworks. Let's listen to how she was able to get out of burnout.

Chantal 11:18

I think it was a series of small shifts. It started with being frank and honest to myself. There was a conversation number one, it was with myself. Part of that conversation also included a lot of self-compassion around, it's okay to not be okay, and have it all figured out. Since that initial experience, where I truly thought I was rocking it, I've learned to be more self-aware and check in with myself. I've been able to develop strategies to better communicate that to the people around me, to my partner, to

my friends, to my colleagues, to my supervisor. And I think that's been very important for me in terms of maintaining balance as much as possible, in maintaining boundaries that allow me to be successful and to really create some safeguards to prevent future burnout.

Rob Desjardins 12:15

So Chantal mentions a series of small shifts. We're talking about coping strategies for burnout, Suman. Is that a good place to start?

Suman Varghese 12:24

I think calling it a series of small shifts is a really nice way of putting it, because it usually is a process and there's different pieces that can help towards preventing burnout. So Chantal actually highlighted a lot of useful things. First of all, the idea of self-awareness. So we need to check in with ourselves, because if we don't know things are not okay, we can't really do anything about it. She talked about self-compassion, and I think that's a really important point. Just around, you know, a lot of times when we're not doing okay, it's really easy to be hard on ourselves. We heard Alle and Catherine talk about that voice of self-doubt. So just bringing understanding to ourselves, knowing that it's normal and okay to struggle at times. And then Chantal also talks about knowing what you need and communicating that to others. For some people, it might be saying no. For others, it might be saying yes more often. Figuring out how much time you have for other commitments or for people, and setting boundaries around that. And Chantal really emphasized how much she had to communicate that with the people around her. And I think that ties in, too, with the idea of community and how important that is.

Rob Desjardins 13:30

How about the ways we deal with our work, when we're bogged down with burnout. Is there ways that we can approach the work differently, think about it differently?

Suman Varghese 13:39

I think both. We can take tangible steps to problem-solve what we're dealing with, and also work on shifting the way we're thinking about the burnout and stress. Our perspective on things really makes a difference. So if we value working over all else, it's really easy to neglect our well-being. So reframing downtime as a necessary part of our lives can be useful, and recognize that it not only helps us feel better, but it can help us be more effective when we are working. As always, how we think about our situation impacts how we feel. So people who are more optimistic tend to fare better under stress. And that's because it becomes easier to embrace challenges, to maybe even find humor in the struggle, as well as seeing the positives. So all of that can help us be more resilient. But on a more practical level, I think, grad school is tough, with the unstructured nature and all the demands it has. So treating it like a job can be actually a helpful way to look at it. And that means putting limits and boundaries around the time we're working because it is so easy to work morning until night, seven days a week, and even when

we're not working to feel guilty about it. So intentionally putting time aside for breaks, for downtime, for hobbies, all of that kind of thing is really essential. And then I think if you need more feedback or deadlines, talk to your supervisor. Also, reach out for help if you're struggling. It is really easy to just kind of keep our struggles hidden, but if you need academic support or emotional support, it's always okay to ask. And even if you needed a deferral or a leave, I think it's important to find out what your options are.

Rob Desjardins 15:10

Speaking of taking care of yourself, speaking of boundaries, what can you do to stay healthy at those times when you're just feeling totally exhausted?

Suman Varghese 15:20

We talked about how exhaustion is like one of the fundamental pieces of burnout. And this is where basics around taking care of our well-being come into play. So you'll often hear people talk about sleep, exercise, and nutrition. And we keep coming back to those because we just know they're that important. Exercise 30 minutes a day. Even if you break it up into 10-minute chunks, taking a 10-minute walk in the middle of your writing can really help. Nutrition: it's really easy to stop eating, it's really easy to overeat, it's really easy to just want to binge on junk food. But again, remembering that what we eat and how we're eating has a huge impact on our energy levels. And of course, sleep. So having a regular sleep and wake-up time -- again, it's really hard when you feel like you have to keep working, keep working. When we have, you know, a bit of exercise, good routines, it also gives us a bit of a sense of control over our lives. So we talked about how lack of control can contribute to burnout. So even these small steps can not only help you physically, but they can mentally help you feel more in control of your life.

Rob Desjardins 16:34

And that's it for another episode of Grad School Confidential. We'll have resources on burnout on our website: uab.ca/gsc. If you have feedback or ideas for a future show, send us an email: gradschoolconfidential@ualberta.ca. Grad School Confidential is a production of the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research at the University of Alberta.

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