

Report on the Status of Student Mental Health in the Department of Medical Biophysics

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Mental Health & Wellness Committee:

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I. SUMMARY OF DATA ACQUISITION METHODS:

We conducted an anonymous survey (n = 51) that inquired about the status of MBP student wellness, with a specific focus on the impact of graduate school on mental health. Our aim was to develop a better understanding of the mental health needs of students within the department.

In addition to the survey, we held two drop-in round table discussions, one at MaRS (n = 5) and one at Sunnybrook (n = 6). In these discussions, we gave students 12 cards that each described a stressor. The students broke off into small groups and were asked to place the cards in order of how much they felt it impacted their mental health. Students then participated in a facilitated conversation through which we dug deeper into how each stressor personally affected them.

II. SUMMARY OF RESULTS:

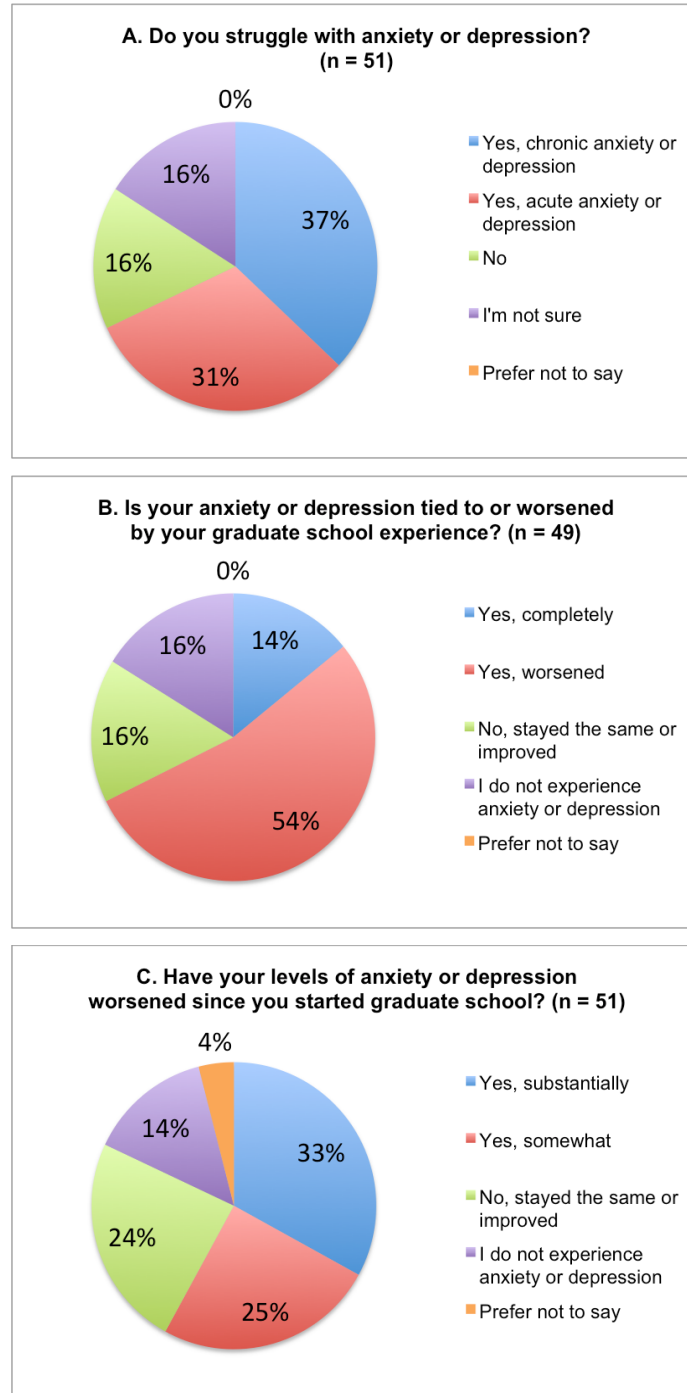


Figure 1. Results from the anonymous, non-mandatory MBP student survey. The survey was designed such that students could choose which questions they would like to answer and which they would like to forgo answering due to the sensitive nature of the topic. This explains the discrepancy in the number of respondents to each question.

From the anonymous survey that was conducted, we found that 68% of the 51 MBP students who responded are currently experiencing anxiety and depression (Figure 1A). Among 49 respondents*, 67% say that their anxiety and depression are worsened or tied to their graduate student experience, with 14% indicating that their anxiety and depression are completely tied to their graduate student experience (Figure 1B). In addition, 58% of 51 respondents indicated that their anxiety and depression has worsened since they began graduate school (Figure 1C).

When we performed the round table discussions, students similarly indicated the strong impact of stressors related to graduate school on their mental health. In order of student concern, the main mental health stressors for MBP students are: lack of motivation and/or a feeling of stagnation in their research, career anxiety, difficulty maintaining a work-life balance, and concerns about their supervisor and/or lab-mate relationships. Descriptions of how each of these stressors affect students, as well as comments on other stressors discussed at the round table discussions, can be found in Section III.

*Although 51 students completed the entire survey, only 49 responded to this question.

III. STUDENT CONCERNS:

i. LACK OF MOTIVATION/STAGNATION IN RESEARCH

Description of stressor: Stress attributed to the inability to be motivated or passionate about the student's project, on a short- or long-term basis. This may include feelings of guilt for not working hard enough, or feeling like they do not belong (*i.e.* imposter phenomenon).

Student comments: This was the primary stressor for students at the round table discussions. Some students do not feel passionate about their research, and this lack of passion is accompanied with a personal guilt. In other words, students feel unmotivated, and feel as though they are wholly responsible for this lack of motivation. In addition, some students felt as though they had to sacrifice their research interests for their career prospects. This is discussed in more detail in the following section, but is relevant here in that these students saw their compromise of passion for career prospects as the main reason that they do not feel motivated by their research. Another main reason that students feel unmotivated is because there is a lack of a clear goal or aim for their research project. Students said that it is hard to be motivated when they don't know what they're working towards.

Mental Health & Wellness Committee action: As this is the main concern among MBP students, our first formal event as the Mental Health & Wellness Committee will be a Productivity seminar. More details on this seminar can be found in Section IV.i.

ii. CAREER ANXIETY

Description of stressor: Anxiety about the future, career options, resume building, or further education.

Student comments: Students do not feel comfortable in their knowledge of career options post-graduation. This leads to feelings of uncertainty about the value of their degree and of their qualifications, and worsens their lack of motivation. Students would like concrete advice on specific career paths, and would like faculty input on this advice. They feel as though the career advice that they do receive is fully student-driven.

In addition to these points, as mentioned in Section III.i, some students felt as though they had to sacrifice their research interests for their career prospects. This was more prevalent in students with a physics background. These students felt that, when they applied and ultimately accepted their offer to MBP, they had to make a compromise between conducting research in the pure physics that they were passionate about, or conducting healthcare-related physics research, as they perceive it to be more employable.

Mental Health & Wellness Committee action: We have shared this feedback with the MBPGSA Career Development Association.

iii. WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Description of stressor: The pressure to perform research with extreme rigour, meet certain progress expectations and compete with peers causes students to work extremely long hours and forego extracurricular interests and social interaction. This leaves students feeling stressed, burned-out and unhappy, and reduces passion for research.

Student comments: Students feel as though they have to choose between having a work-life balance or being productive in their research. In students' minds, to be seen as productive and successful by their supervisors, there is a perceived pressure to work over 40 hours per week. Many students feel the pressure to work on weekends in addition to full work weeks despite this being out of range of a normal work week in our society. Many students indicate that these pressures are directed by their supervisor, lab culture, and the larger culture of being a research-based graduate student at the University of Toronto. Students feel guilty attending extra-curricular workshops or events for fear of taking time off from their work, which prevents them from obtaining needed benefits from such events such as de-stressing, or obtaining critical information such as is presented in mental health workshops/events on campus. Students often forgo social opportunities in light of using all their time to progress their research.

Mental Health & Wellness Committee action: None as of yet.

iv. SUPERVISOR/COWORKER RELATIONSHIPS

Description of stressor: Stress induced by conflict with a supervisor, post-doc, co-worker, and/or peer.

Student comments: This concern is complicated, as it varies on a case-by-case basis, and students acknowledged that in our discussion. Most of the students we talked to felt satisfied with their relationship with their supervisor and their work environment with their peers. Students also acknowledged that they felt as though the department is very well prepared and helpful in situations where a problem arises between a supervisor and student that is serious enough for the student to be placed in another lab. However, some students feel as though they do not see their supervisor often enough, and that this leads to longer time to completion. Many students indicated in the comment section of the anonymous survey that insufficient faculty awareness of mental health issues and supervisor relationships were significant contributors to their mental health challenges during graduate school.

Mental Health & Wellness Committee action: Seeking a faculty liaison, as described in Section IV.iii.

v. PRESSURE TO SUCCEED

Description of stressor: Anxiety due to external or internal pressures to succeed in professional or personal life. This may include lack of recognition of the student's work, or fear of judgement and/or criticism.

Student comments: Students feel that they simply aren't succeeding enough, and often feel pressured to compare themselves to their "more successful" peers. They feel that there isn't enough talk amongst grad students about the human aspect of research, and all the failures that come with it. The lack of an open conversation about these common roadblocks in research results in an internal pressure that the students put on themselves. This pressure arises because they feel as though they are the only ones experiencing problems in their research, and that it is a problem with them rather than a natural aspect of their work.

Mental Health & Wellness Committee action: None as of yet.

vi. FINANCIAL STRUGGLES

Description of stressor: Stress attributed to managing finances, repaying student loans, attaining part-time employment, the graduate stipend, living expenses, or any other finance-related issues.

Student comments: Students feel as though the Faculty of Medicine stipend provides students with the bare minimum that they need to live in Toronto, but not enough to enjoy life in the city independently (*i.e.* without help from parents or a second job). One student that we talked to worked three part-time jobs on top of his full-time studies in order to be able to afford to maintain a comfortable lifestyle. This is an issue because of the time management difficulties that come with balancing lab work and a part-time job, as well as the mental repercussions that come from having a lack of "down time".

Mental Health & Wellness Committee action: None as of yet.

vii. SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS

Description of stressor: Loneliness or anxiety due to lack of social interaction or inclusion within the graduate or local community.

Student comments: Most of the students that we talked to did not feel as though this was an issue for them personally, but understood that it would be for students at Sunnybrook or Bayview. Commuting is a barrier to social interaction and contributes to the students feeling isolated from the University of Toronto community. Also, students pointed out that the nature of a lot of the research done in the department is conducive to social isolation, as much of it is either computational or requires sitting alone quietly at a desk. We also had several students request training on how to help a friend in need when they see someone else feeling socially isolated, as this is something they had experienced.

Mental Health & Wellness Committee action: We are in communication with the MBPGSA Social Committee regarding social event ideas that were suggested by students in our survey.

viii. LACK OF ACCESS TO RESOURCES

Description of stressor: Lack of education, awareness or access to on-campus and/or off-campus ESL, mental health, academic, social, legal, or other resources.

Student comments: Most students in MBP feel that lack of access to resources is not a major concern. We are lucky that the university provides us with a number of mental health resources free of charge. However, there is a small concern that is particularly unique to uptown students. Should an uptown student want to take advantage of these free resources, they need to travel up to an hour to get to campus. This commute is a barrier to access. Moreover, there are resources available at Sunnybrook for Sunnybrook staff, but students are not entitled to use these resources. We are unaware of any resources that are available at Baycrest. Currently, our best advice for students with this concern is that they can seek out resources in an area that is convenient for them, as they are covered for up to \$500 of mental health care with the UTGSU Health Plan.

Mental Health & Wellness Committee action: The committee has designed posters with information about how to access mental health resources, and has distributed them throughout PMCRT, PGCR, and Sunnybrook. Additionally, information on how to access the Faculty of Medicine Embedded Counsellors has been circulated through an infographic slide presented before both uptown and downtown student seminars.

ix. OTHER STRESSORS

There are stressors that were discussed with the students that are not mentioned above, as students felt as though these stressors did not impact their mental health. These stressors are: issues with their health, conflicts with relationships outside of the lab, current world issues, and discrimination (sexism, racism, ageism, etc.).

IV. MENTAL HEALTH & WELLNESS COMMITTEE INITIATIVES:

i. TIME MANAGEMENT AND MOTIVATION WORKSHOP

We have asked Dr. Jasjit Sangha, a Learning Strategist at the Academic Success Centre at the University of Toronto, to host a Time Management and Motivation Workshop for students. This workshop will be held in September 2019. The workshop description is as follows:

This workshop will discuss how graduate students can strengthen their self-efficacy through understanding the social and emotional aspects of learning and how it can impact motivation, completion and engagement in their work. The workshop will also discuss how learning strategies such as time management, setting a realistic pace for your work, and study habits can help to develop structure and accountability when in a self-directed learning environment.

ii. POTENTIAL FUTURE INITIATIVES

Seminar announcements about resources available to students: This initiative, aiming to reduce the “Lack of access to resources” stressor, will help students become more aware of resources available to them through the University of Toronto and their local institution (UHN, Sunnybrook etc.).

“Roadblocks to success from current students, alumni & Pls” podcast, and workshop on imposter phenomena: This workshop and podcast will help normalize the doubt and lack of confidence students may feel during grad school, and will aim to provide students with useful strategies and coping mechanisms to reduce the pressure they may feel to succeed.

“How to help a friend in need” podcast, and University of Toronto Health & Wellness’ Identify, Assist, Refer (IAR) training session: Some students expressed concern about the lack of resources available specifically regarding how to help someone else that is struggling. Through this podcast and the IAR training, students will gain a better understanding on how to help those around them in need.

“How to manage your finances in grad school” workshop: Throughout this workshop, students will learn valuable skills and tips on how to manage their finances, in order to reduce the financial stress that comes with grad school.

Distribution of Health & Wellness Campus Resources Card: The Health & Wellness department at the University has created a card-sized list of resources on campus. We are in the process of acquiring these to distribute to students at MBP events and during orientation.

iii. REQUEST FOR A FACULTY LIAISON

The Mental Health & Wellness (MH&W) Committee is seeking a faculty member to serve as a Faculty Liaison. The Faculty Liaison will be an individual who is interested in providing feedback and helping to run mental wellness initiatives for faculty and students. By attending monthly meetings with the MH&W Committee, the faculty member would act as a bridge between the committee and MBP Faculty, and would oversee planning for upcoming events, as well as help elucidate what resources faculty need to support the mental health concerns of their students. Through discussion with the Faculty Liaison, we hope to determine what is realistic in terms of faculty support for MH&W events, and provide faculty with outlets for mental health training. The MH&W Faculty Liaison would help recruit faculty to these MH&W-related events when possible, and obtain faculty feedback about events and trainings that they attend.

The time commitment for this role would involve the Faculty member attending 1 meeting with the MH&W Committee per month, with additional communication via email.

V. ADVICE TO FACULTY:

At the round table discussions, we asked the students a question that was provided by an anonymous faculty member: *“To what extent do students want faculty to get involved with their mental health? How should faculty approach it?”*. The students all agreed that this is very tricky, but that the most important thing is that these conversations stem from a genuine concern for the student’s well-being. As a result, supervisor involvement in their students’ mental health should vary depending on the supervisor’s comfort level. The students do not feel as though it is a supervisor’s responsibility to discuss their mental health with them directly, but they do feel as though it is a supervisor’s responsibility to be aware of other supports and resources, and to direct their students to these supports if they feel as though there may be an issue. If a faculty member feels comfortable discussing mental health with his or her students, a few tips on how to approach it are:

- 1) Ask how the student is feeling at your weekly meeting. They may not open up to you, but if they know you are open to the conversation, then they will feel more comfortable speaking to you at a later date should a mental health problem arise.
- 2) Normalize that grad school is stressful, and discuss your past experience with this.
- 3) In first meeting with new students (or first discussing mental health with long-time students), identify other supports and resources that the student can use if they don’t feel comfortable bringing their concerns to you. A list of these resources and their descriptions can be found on the last page of this report. It is also recommended that you keep a hard copy of this list on-hand in your office to distribute to students in need.

We would like faculty to keep in mind that, although some may feel as though their students do not have any mental health issues, all students are susceptible to the stressors described in this report and it is not always easy to identify a mental health problem as an outside observer. We have compiled a list of suggestions for ways that faculty members can help maintain or improve the mental health of their students. These tips are categorized into the main student concerns mentioned in Section III.

i. MOTIVATION AND STAGNATION IN RESEARCH

- 1) Open the conversation: ask your students if they are feeling motivated, and are satisfied with the pace of their project and their productivity.
- 2) Remind your students why their project is important and useful to you, and how it fits into the bigger picture.

- 3) Set deadlines for your students to do specific tasks, draft outlines, etc.
- 4) If you don't already, meet with your students regularly to check in on their progress (this can be in person or even over email).

ii. CAREER ANXIETY

- 1) Ask your students what their plans are after graduating, and how you can help them achieve these goals.
- 2) Provide your students with opportunities to discuss your knowledge of the job market, and how they can best describe their transferable skills on their CV.
- 3) We recommend that the Department purchase a few copies of "[Success After Graduate School - A Guide for Professional Development for Graduate Students in the Biomedical Sciences](#)" by Lee & Reithmeier. These can be kept in the MBP admin office for students to "rent" out. Supervisors may also want to have a copy in their offices to share with their students if they are unsure of their options post-graduation.
- 4) Advise the Career Development Association to ensure faculty input is a part of their events.
- 5) If your students have a physics background, emphasize how they are using this knowledge when you discuss their research.
- 6) MBP Admin can work with the Mental Health & Wellness committee to create a department-specific career roadmapping brochure, following the format of the Pilot Grad Maps initiative by the Faculty of Medicine.

iii. WORK-LIFE BALANCE

- 1) Remind students to measure their productivity in terms of their research output, rather than the hours of work that they put in per week.
- 2) Clarify expectations about how much time students should be spending in the lab/working.
- 3) Plan social activities or outings with your lab group.
- 4) Encourage your students to attend the many events planned by the MBPGSA Social Committee. Many students will not go to events due to guilt felt from not doing lab work.

iv. SUPERVISOR/COWORKER RELATIONSHIPS

- 1) Consult the School of Graduate Studies' Graduate Supervision Guidelines:
<http://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/Documents/Graduate-Supervision-Guidelines-faculty.pdf>
- 2) Teach your students how to get the most out of supervision meetings - discuss what has worked for you in the past, and negotiate a joint framework.
- 3) Ask more questions. Issues can be complex and layered – dig beneath positions to uncover interests and test assumptions.
- 4) Listen before problem-solving. Setting the stage can take time – build time into key meetings to let stories unfold.
- 5) “Big picture” goal-and-purpose discussions may be more useful than “nuts & bolts” strategizing.
- 6) Have your students summarize conversations and next steps each week to engage them and thus create “buy-in”.
- 7) Be specific about what you can and can't do for the student, and where they can find support outside of the supervisory relationship.
- 8) Your interests matter too! Share responsibility for setting the agenda for conversations.

v. PRESSURE TO SUCCEED

- 1) When your students hit a roadblock in their research, remind them that this is a common and necessary part of the process. Relate to them with a personal story of your own roadblocks as a grad student.

vi. FINANCIAL STRUGGLES

- 1) Be aware of major scholarship application deadlines and encourage your students to apply for them.
- 2) Specifically for Faculty Executive Committee - continue to push for stipend increases in Faculty of Medicine meetings.
- 3) Ask your students if they have a part-time job and, if so, ask if they feel as though they are able to balance it with their research work adequately.

vii. SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS

- 1) If possible, give students a variety of “jobs” related to their research project that allow them to collaborate and work alongside other students.
- 2) Plan lab social activities to facilitate building connections.
- 3) Promote major MBP social events such as Geneva Park and the MBP Olympics.

viii. LACK OF ACCESS TO RESOURCES

- 1) Inquire with the University about student access to mental health resources that are provided at Sunnybrook or Baycrest.
- 2) Have the MBP Mental Health & Wellness Committee list of resources (on following page) on-hand or available in a shared work area for students.

LIST OF MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

In crisis, visit the closest Emergency Room or call 911

Counselling

School of Graduate Studies Embedded Counsellors (free)

Phone: 416-978-8030, Ext. 5.

Book an appointment for counselling by phone or walk-in at 214 College Street, Room 111

Note: Phone rarely answered; may be on hold for 30-60 minutes.

OISE Psychology Clinic (~\$25/session)

Email: oiseclinic@utoronto.ca, Phone: 416-978-0620

Location: 252 Bloor Street West, Suite 7-296

Free Walk-In Counselling Services: List of locations at www.utgsu.ca/insurance/walk-in-counselling/

Conflict or Challenges in Supervisor Relationship

Graduate Student Conflict Resolution Center

Email: gradcrc@utoronto.ca, Phone: 416-978-8920

Community Helplines: 24-hour access to anonymous support (unless otherwise noted)

Good 2 Talk Student Helpline: 1-866-925-5454

Distress Center Hotline: 416-408-4357

Suicide Prevention Hotline: 1-800-273-8255

Gerstein Center Mental Health Crisis Line: 416-929-5200

Assaulted Women's Helpline: 416-863-0511

My SSP for International Students: 1-844-451-9700

Anishnawbe Health Mental Health Crisis Line for Aboriginal students: 416-891-8606

Drug and Alcohol Helpline: 1-800-565-8603

Ontario Mental Health Helpline: 1-866-531-2600

Ontario Problem Gambling Helpline: 1-888-230-3505

Sexual Assault & Domestic Violence Care Centre: 416-323-6040

Toronto Rape Crisis Centre: 416-597-8808

LGBTQ Youthline (peer support, open Sun-Fri 4-9pm): 1-800-268-9688

Online Mental Health Resources

UTGSU Wellness Portal (uoft.me/wellnessportal): Information hub for wellness resources at U of T.

U of T Safety & Support (safety.utoronto.ca): Compilation of on- or near-campus resources for crises.

Identify, Assist, Refer Training (iar.utoronto.ca): Online training module to provide tools to help a friend.

LinkMentalHealth.com (www.linkmentalhealth.com): Help to find local therapists specific to your needs.

eMentalHealth.ca (<https://www.ementalhealth.ca/>): Search engine for local mental health resources.

TranQool (<https://tranqool.com>): Video-based counselling and therapy.

Be Safe (<https://besafeapp.ca/>): App for creating a safety plan to prepare for a crisis.

HeadSpace (<https://www.headspace.com>): App to aid with mindfulness and meditation.