



MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES IN ACADEMIA HAVE BEEN AGGRAVATED BY THE PANDEMIC

BUT THEY HAVE STRUCTURAL CAUSES

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Mental health issues such as burnout, depression, and anxiety are a prevalent problem in the academic scientific workforce. According to a [study](#) published in 2018, graduate students are more than six times as likely to experience depression and anxiety as compared to the general population. The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated this problem and the existing inequalities in academia. Several recent reports show that depression and anxiety have risen sharply in some higher-education institutions over the past year. For instance, in the US a poll that focused on the effects of pandemic showed that among 1,122 faculty members 70% of the respondents said they felt stressed in 2020, a number that is the double that of 2019 (32%). In Europe the figure is quite similar. A European poll of academic journal and book authors by De Gruyter, a scholarly publishing house in Berlin, found that mid-career researchers, particularly women, have been hit the hardest by work-related stress.

As an early-career researcher in ecology, I can tell from my own experience how hard it has been to overcome stress and anxiety during this pandemic, and even before. I believe that just the fact that such discussions are happening right now is extremely important although they are only a first step. We need more concrete actions pushing towards systemic change in academia. I am not saying, for example, that the guidance we are given about how we as individuals can mitigate and control stress

and anxiety, such as “take time away from work” and “develop a routine to better manage your time”, are not important. My point is that we should not forget that the attitudes we can have as individuals are limited, as they are not isolated from the academic system itself. Individually focused programmes help individuals to build up more resilience, regain motivation, and plan work better, but many mental health problems result from structural problems in academia. As soon we are immersed in a system with a toxic culture of “publish or perish”, and which narrowly defines excellence and how it categorizes and rewards success, we as individuals will continue to be constantly subject to stress. Furthermore, if not part of major effort to tackle the health-damaging structural causes, the individually focused programmes can also create a mindset of ‘blaming the victim’, whereas the problem is much more the system itself.

The pandemic has also exacerbated the existing inequalities in academia, with mental health issues likely to have a disproportionate increase in academic researchers from marginalized groups — among them, women, and people from racial, sexual and gender minorities. Harassment and discrimination can cause profound mental health problems among academic researchers. Nearly one quarter of respondents (23%) of a 2020 mental health survey said they want academic organizations to implement measures that promote equality and

prevent harassment, discrimination and bullying. The underrepresented minorities are certainly the ones more affected by the current academic culture. As a black man from South America, I know from my own experience how difficult is to stay and progress in the scientific career due to the systemic racism. I have found that forging connections with those who might have similar vulnerabilities helps me to create a sense of belonging and to build confidence, especially when raising concerns with people in senior positions and academic stakeholders. I have found support and ways to reach other people that might be in need of help through some groups and networks such as the [REED Network](#) and the [ODU Initiative](#).

It is important that all of us from students to postdocs and early- and senior-career researchers, collectively demand those in power, including university administrators, members of hiring committees and department chairs, to enact policies that address harassment and discrimination and that effectively manage the prevalence of mental health issues in academia. We need to build a more supportive, inclusive and true collaborative culture across the whole academic system. ✨