Academia's forgotten footnote

In my third year of grad school, everything seemed to fall apart. I was dealing with my grandmother's death, and then my girlfriend and I broke up. I spent the following year in a painful feedback loop of depression and despair. Every day, I would trudge into lab and try to get excited about my projects. But when I encountered minor hurdles such as a failed replication or contaminated samples, I would become discouraged and give up. Even when my experiments went smoothly, I felt guilty about the time I had wasted being unproductive. I knew I was struggling, but I didn't ask for help. I thought I could deal with my state of mind just as I had dealt with every other problem in my life: Bottle up my emotions, attack the problem with logic, and iterate until I arrived at a solution.

This time, however, that approach didn't work. I wasn't sleeping well. I couldn't focus enough to read even a brief paper in one sitting. During a lab presentation, I got so dizzy from exhaustion that I had to stop midway through. Balancing work and my mental health had become untenable. I concluded that trying to persist with my lab work was not fair to myself or to my group. When I gathered the courage to discuss time off with my adviser, she encouraged me to take a hiatus.

In the beginning, it felt like a blessing to have time to focus on personal projects and self-care I had neglected, including a healthy dose of binge-watching basketball. But after 3 months, feelings of academic guilt crept back. Despite not feeling fully up to it, I convinced myself that it was time to return.

I tried to mask my depression, but the impact on my work was apparent again. A few months after my return, my adviser called me into her office and initiated a forthright discussion about why I was not being productive. I wondered whether it was time for me to leave my Ph.D. program. I felt like a failure, and I thought of suicide for the first time. These thoughts finally pushed me to see a therapist.

At first, therapy felt awkward and ineffectual. I was not accustomed to introspection, and I certainly was not accustomed to being probed about my problems. But over time, my counselor and I developed a rapport. She helped me figure out that while my girlfriend and I were together and my workload ramped up, I had socially isolated myself, which meant that I didn't have a support network to draw on when things got tough. She also encouraged me to connect with MindHandHeart (MHH), a coalition of students, faculty, and staff promoting mental health and well-being at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

A year and a half of counseling and MHH gave me the tools I needed to strengthen my relationships and establish a support structure to help cope with any future episodes. I revitalized friendships and opened up about my feelings. My lab work improved, and I am on track to graduate in the next year.

Studies have shown that 40% of Ph.D. students are depressed. But if it weren't for my own experiences, I would not be aware of this—and therein lies the problem. Academics tend to be averse to discussing mental health openly, and higher education's mental health safety net is patchy— a forgotten footnote that all too often fails its students. I am lucky that I have a supportive adviser and health insurance that covers mental health care. And I am lucky that I made it to therapy when I considered suicide. I could easily have waited too long.

Even if you aren't personally burdened by these issues, everyone must take action to support those who are struggling, and to ensure that institutions have support frameworks: advisers trained to deal with mental health issues; student-run support programs; and community events with a focus on diversity and inclusion, because students from underrepresented groups are more likely to experience depression. If your institution doesn’t, what can you do to help before someone you care about becomes a different kind of footnote?

Arnav Chhabra is a grad student at Harvard-MIT Health Sciences and Technology in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Send your story to SciCareerEditor@aaas.org.
Academia’s forgotten footnote
Arnav Chhabra

Science 360 (6386), 350.
DOI: 10.1126/science.360.6386.350