

Survival Skills for the Graduate Student

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ABSTRACT

Surviving graduate school in the computing field has a significant impact on personal lives, self image and emotional health. This “mental makeover” will equip women with skills designed to enhance life during graduate school using Dialectical Behavior Therapy techniques. The skills presented will help women stay focused, have effective interactions with advisors, make good decisions, balance school with personal life, cultivate self-confidence and assertiveness, and defuse worry, anxiety, and guilt.

INTRODUCTION

The 2004 Berkeley Graduate Student Mental Health survey indicates that almost half of graduate students at Berkeley report having emotional or stress-related problems that seriously affect their well-being. Almost 10% have seriously considered suicide, and approximately 1 in 200 students have attempted suicide [1]. A similar study at the Federal University of Sao Paulo in 2004 indicated that 44% of their graduate students suffered from either a depressive or anxiety disorder, 48% from a sleep disorder, and 18% reported suicidal tendencies [5]. Both surveys also conclude that women graduate students report significantly more mental health struggles than the men graduates.

In 1988, the President for the American Association for the Advancement of Science, concerned by graduate student mental health survey results at Stanford and MIT, called for a widespread change in the graduate school environment [6]. Given the more recent results of the 2004 surveys, the graduate school environment has not changed, and the mental health of graduate students, especially women graduates, is still a very serious concern. While widespread institutional change is ideal, it will inevitably take time, while current graduate students are suffering from a variety of emotional and mental disorders.

It is essential that women graduate students be equipped with skills for dealing with the emotions brought on by the stress, financial difficulties, and life changes of graduate school. Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) created by Dr. Marsha Linehan offers just such practical coping skills that have been shown to be effective in lowering stress, anxiety, and depression [2][3]. These skills have been taught nation-wide through workshops and group sessions, and skills manuals and worksheets are available [4]. DBT skills are divided into four units:

- *Core Mindfulness* skills focus on effective and deliberate decision making which balance the facts of a situation as well as the emotions associated with that situation.
- *Stress Management and Distress Tolerance* skills focus on practical ways of managing stress and decreasing debilitating distress.
- *Emotion Management* skills focus on learning to identify and manage our emotions and emotion-generated thoughts.
- *Interpersonal Effectiveness* skills focus on getting what you want and need from others, while enhancing the relationship and maintaining self respect.

Many of the skills that are a part of DBT are directly applicable to women in graduate school. The well-known problems reported by women graduates such as “Imposter Syndrome” can be addressed using the practical tools of DBT. Knowledge of these techniques not only can give women the endurance needed to complete graduate school, but can also help women stay healthy and happy during this most stressing of times. This presentation will focus on the applicability of DBT skills to the graduate school environment, and will provide both students and professors with a basic understanding of these skills and the resources to develop peer-run skills groups.

SURVIVAL SKILLS

Advisor Relations

A graduate student's relationship with her advisor is probably one of the most important factors for being successful in graduate school. Many students find it difficult to be able to ask their advisors for what they need, get their point of view taken seriously, or even refuse unreasonable requests, all while showing respect to the advisor and maintaining a likeable personality.

Several techniques can be employed to create and maintain a good student/advisor relationship. Before advisor meetings, the graduate should decide what her priorities for the meeting are. Goals for each meeting should include not only academic priorities, but also priorities for maintaining the relationship with the advisor, and maintaining self-respect. These goals can sometimes conflict with one another. We will present techniques for defining these goals and prioritizing them. In addition, we will show how to create an environment for the meeting that is conducive to getting the goals met. We will give exercises for how to effectively ask for and negotiate for things while keeping an easy, likeable manner.

Making Decisions

Graduate school decisions range from as complex as choosing an advisor or thesis topic to the everyday decisions of how to manage one's time. These decisions are often made based on what the student feels pressured or "guilted" into doing, when they should be made based on what is effectively meeting her short- and long-term goals.

In this section we will present decision-making techniques that will integrate academic goals with personal goals of well-being. We will show how to consider both facts and emotions in making decisions. We will also cover how to carry out decisions without guilt or regret.

Self-Confidence and Assertiveness

One of the most effective ways to gain self-confidence is to stop unfairly comparing oneself with others. We will discuss how to separate factual knowledge of situations from those tainted with self-judgment, doubt, or negative emotions. Taking a look at the facts of the situation gives objectivity and confidence.

In addition, we will provide techniques for changing the negative self-talk that usually accompanies low self-confidence. We instead provide "Cheerleading statements" that can be used to give a positive outlook or to remember what we know to be true of ourselves. We will show how self-confidence and mastery in one area can help build an overall self-respect. We also will give assertiveness exercises that can be practiced in social situations to gain confidence that will translate to academic activities.

Balancing Graduate School and the Rest of Life

It is vitally important that graduate students stay connected with others rather than becoming isolated in their studies. It is also important, although most find it difficult, to be able to prioritize mental health along with academic goals. Many students do not get the full benefits of personal time because they spend it feeling guilty that they are not working.

We will present techniques for focusing the mind so that one can be fully present and engaged when working and just as fully present and engaged in having fun. We will show how to give oneself permission to ask for help when needed or to reduce demands on time.

Dealing with Guilt, Worry, and Anxiety and Depression

Even with all the other skills mentioned, most graduate students will at some point face disappointment, panic, depression or anxiety. We would like to give graduate students the tools to understand and deal with these emotions in a healthy way.

It is very helpful to understand the role that negative emotions play in life. Understanding emotions helps give the ability and motivation to tolerate them. There are many practical ways to regulate emotions to stay productive. Eating well, sleeping well, and exercising are physical ways to regulate emotions. We can also train our minds to focus on the positive events that we experience rather than focusing only on the

negatives. Guilt, worry, and anxiety can be reduced by separating the facts of a situation from the emotions associated with them.

Dealing with stress and distress

No graduate student gets through graduate studies without experiencing stress and distress. Whether it is the stress of exams, teaching, or passing preliminaries, in order to be most effective, students need to learn to manage stressors in healthy ways.

When stress becomes debilitating or overwhelming, it is called distress. Distress leads people to act impulsively, often creating more distress in the process. We will provide techniques for distracting oneself from harmful thoughts, self-soothing using the senses, and improving these moments with positive imagery and relaxation among other skills.

PRESENTATION DETAILS

This presentation could fit a variety of the formats for the Grace Hopper Conference, including a full or partial-hour presentation, a Birds-of-a-Feather session, or a mini-track where each skill is presented in detail in 20-minute slots. We believe that this material is vitally important for women graduate student students who may be struggling with these mental health issues. As a result, we would be very happy to present in whatever method is available.

The target audience for this presentation is graduate women, undergraduates considering graduate school, and professors serving as mentors or advisors. It is our perspective, however, that everyone can benefit from these skills, which are so important to creating a life worth living.

Each skill has several associated worksheets that can be used to remember the techniques or apply them to a specific situation. These will be provided in either hardcopy and on-line. Resources for developing a DBT skills group will also be provided.

Speaker Biographical Sketches

Shannon Duvall graduated from Duke University with a M.S. and Ph.D. in Computer Science. She has been teaching Computer Science at Elon University for four years and conducts research in Natural Language Processing as well as Computer Science education. Shannon is intimately familiar with the problems facing women in graduate school, and she is extremely thankful that she was referred to a DBT life-skills class taught by Michele Pagnotta. She has actively used the skills discussed here for the past five years.

Michele Pagnotta has been in practice since 1991. She has received advanced training in Dialectical Behavior Therapy, and has run up to three skills group per week since 1996. She has modified DBT to work with different populations including adolescents, couples, undergraduate students, as well as graduate students. She serves as a primary referral source for Duke University, UNC Chapel Hill, and NC State University. She has used DBT skills with all her clients, and in her own personal life, since 1996.

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