



## Promoting Mental Health Wellness in the Postdoctoral Community

Mental health wellness for postdoctoral and graduate trainees is acknowledged by several universities as an important issue that needs to be addressed.<sup>1; 2; 3</sup> Several studies indicate an increase in the incidence of anxiety and depression among college students. One survey examined the links between positive emotions, resilience, and adaptive strategies for moderating anxiety and depressive symptoms in postdoctoral fellows. Of the 200 postdoctoral fellows evaluated, **13 percent were flourishing, 58 percent were languishing, and 29 percent were depressed.**<sup>5</sup> The authors concluded that “in order to optimize resilience among postdocs, it is important to implement programs that would aim to increase individual use of adaptive coping strategies, decrease use of maladaptive coping strategies and increase experiences of positive emotions.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, increasing positive emotions through acknowledgement for work well done or promoting feelings of value and inclusion helped combat clinical levels of anxiety and depression. A survey conducted by the University of California, Berkeley aimed at understanding life satisfaction and well-being of trainees identified similar issues. The top concerns for students included career prospects, financial stability, social support, and feeling valued/included.<sup>6</sup>

Despite these recent efforts, more specific surveys that address the mental health wellness of the postdoctoral population are needed.<sup>3; 4</sup> A joint effort by the University of Kentucky and University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio seeks to do just that; gathering more data on the impact of stress, anxiety, and depression on postdoctoral and graduate trainees nationally.<sup>7</sup> They hope the information will highlight what is needed to support trainee health and career preparation. Utilizing the data from these current surveys, evidence-based interventions to promote mental health wellness among postdoctoral and graduate trainees are being implemented as part of a more preventative and proactive strategy. Major recommendations include:

1. Release information about your university’s mental health facility, OMBUDs office, and confidential counseling services several times a year! These services provide a safe and confidential mechanism for sharing frustrations and talking through difficult situations. A recurring concern among all of the surveys conducted was that postdoctoral fellows were not aware that these services were available to them.
2. Provide outlets for physical, mental, and social wellness without placing fees or limiting access to a particular subset of trainee, faculty, or administrative staff. Offering recreational or extracurricular activities provide opportunities to get out of the work environment as well as bond with co-workers or expand your personal network

3. Encourage faculty to explore training opportunities about positive mentorship and advising to increase healthy dialogue between mentors and mentees.
4. Encourage graduate and postdoctoral trainees to take an active role in their own training and learn how to advocate for their needs in a productive manner.
5. Promote further research. Institutional surveys are an important step to identifying the specific needs of trainees, and provide a method for obtaining institutional support.

Although there will always be stress in the workplace for postdocs, graduate students, faculty and staff, the goal should be to create an environment where people can seek help without stigma. Postdoctoral offices can help facilitate a more receptive environment by providing postdocs with the tools and programs that address their concerns.

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