

## **Ph.D. Shock: Typical Challenges Ph.D. Students Face**

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### **Feelings**

When I started drafting this article about my first year as a Ph.D. student, I found myself writing a success story featuring me as its hero. My initial draft was awful; it looked like one of those books claiming they can make you rich, thin and successful in thirty days! I stopped writing for a while and then my supervisor suggested a book, *Bird by Bird*, by Anne Lamott (1994). Written as a guide for writers, Lamott advises “good writing is about telling the truth” (p. 3). So, let me tell you the truth. I am a very normal, ordinary Ph.D. student, and like many others, I have experienced many ups and downs during the first year of my Ph.D. journey. Unfortunately, I don’t have any secrets I can divulge or any magic formula to make you a successful Ph.D. student. However, I thought I would share my story for those of you who have just started your doctoral program and want to avoid disappointment.

I started a new life in St. John’s, Canada, with my admission to the Ph.D. program in Education. Although the culture shock of experiencing an unfamiliar way of life in a foreign country is always challenging, joining a Ph.D. program was what I can call a real shock. I am originally from Iran with a Bachelor degree in Counseling Psychology, and I got my Master’s degree in Educational Psychology in Malaysia using quantitative methods with little background in the philosophy of research. The Merriam-Webster dictionary (2015) defines cultural shock as “a feeling of confusion, doubt, or nervousness caused by being in a *place* that is very different from what you are used to”. In my case, being in a Ph.D. program has been very different from what I experienced as a Master’s degree student, and I felt confused and disorientated soon after my first class. Doctoral research requires a completely different set of educational and psychological skills.

I remember the first time I read the course outline for my first Ph.D. course. The topics to be covered were about the philosophical foundations of research, theory, epistemology, etc. I realized my knowledge about research was immature, basic and limited. While I read Google was always open on my laptop to help me search for the meaning of terms that were new to me including “ontology”, “axiology”, “epistemology” and “discourses”, to name just a few. After reading I had to write a proper reflection on what I barely understood. It was a painful process! As a student who enjoys participating in discussion, sitting in a class quietly was especially challenging. I have always been an achiever at school. I received straight A’s and graduated at the top of my Master’s degree program. However, all that external validation I was accustomed to suddenly stopped.



“After reading an assigned article about theory in my research course several times without complete understanding, I left the library and sat in front of Burton’s pond, staring at the ducks and every major form of mental illness surfaced - delusion, panic disorder and self-loathing...”

Excluding my mom, I was not honest with myself, or others, when I began to feel my Ph.D. program was becoming a real struggle. I hesitated to ask for help and I didn’t talk about my concerns with my supervisor, my department, or my support services. I waited until things turned into a crisis and, as a result, I got the lowest mark I’d ever received.

“I talked to my mom, crying:  
‘Mom, I’m no longer exceeding expectations.  
I feel disabled. What if I can’t handle it?  
What if I disappoint my supervisor? What if I fail?’ And I  
crumbled. I felt lost.  
My mom looked at me worried,  
her daughter never cried over her study.”

The thoughts in my mind drove me crazy:  
“My classmates, my supervisor, and my professors are going to find out I don't  
really belong here. Admissions made a mistake.”

My first semester finished while I was struggling to adjust to my new academic life. It took me a semester to acknowledge my depression symptoms and ask for help. Finally, I visited my doctor, I went to the counseling center, and slowly I began to heal. However, I felt ashamed to admit to my family, my peers, and even my close friends that I saw a doctor and counselor for my depression.



Semester break began  
while I was in a deep hole,  
shouting from the bottom: "I'm stuck,  
it's dark,  
and I'm overwhelmed".  
I knew that I couldn't  
continue like that,  
so I took a hard look at my life.

I believed using counseling services was a sign of failure. Despite my feelings, I knew there were other Ph.D. students suffering like me. Among the Ph.D. students (my friends) I know around the world, I have seen very real problems like depression and anxiety. Studies increasingly show mental illness is on the rise among academics (Shaw, 2014). Unfortunately, it is rarely discussed openly and academic institutions are accustomed to ignoring psychological distress among Ph.D. students, creating a "culture of acceptance around mental health issues in academia" (Shaw, 2014).

### **Some Tips to Cope With Typical Challenges Ph.D. Students Face**

In the text that follows, I provide a few important pointers based my experiences and what I have learned along the way and what I think every Ph.D. student should know.

#### **Be Aware of Isolation and Expand Your Network**

During the New Year holidays when the Iranian community (MUNIRANIAN) prepared to celebrate Yalda night, the longest and darkest night of the year and the northern hemisphere's winter solstice, I joined a Yalda choir group and started socializing. In Persian culture, "Yalda" symbolizes the triumph of light and goodness over the powers of darkness. For Iranians, Yalda is a night when friends and family gather together to eat, drink, sing and read poetry until well after midnight.

*"With all my pains, there is still the hope of recovery,  
Like the eve of Yalda, there will finally be an end."  
- Sa'adi (Persian poet)*

During those practicing sessions, my “Ph.D. Yalda night” got slowly brighter! The most important part was seeing other postgraduate students from different fields talking about their challenges. I started to realize the process is pretty much the same for almost every postgraduate student.



It was like they were  
looking at me at the bottom  
of the dark hole, saying:  
“Hey Bahar!  
We know what it's like  
down there, and  
you're not alone”.

I realized I needed a social life while working on my program. I truly believe there is need to talk about the sense of intense isolation experienced by many doctoral students. Over the course of their average working day it is typical for most Ph.D. students to not speak to anyone until evening. Doing such solitary work, one sometimes ends up feeling completely cut off from humanity. This is not widely acknowledged, and many prospective doctoral students aren't aware of or prepared for this.

### **Join a Group (Book Club, Writing Group, Research Group)**

Find appropriate networks and join to make connections with other professionals with the same research interests who may be able to provide help and advice while you work on your thesis. My supervisor introduced me to a research exchange group working in the arts and health (NLCAHR), and through them I met other researchers, community activists and artists who aim to explore how the arts are connected to health. This type of collaboration, as well as forms of personal and professional networking, has provided several benefits for me. Most importantly, I identified a new research opportunity for my doctoral project, what Chambers (2004) beautifully calls, “Research That Matters” – research that matters to me, research I am really passionate about.

### **Relieve Yourself from Perfectionism**

I truly believe that perfectionism is a real enemy that disguises itself as a helpful, encouraging friend. Some people may protest and argue perfectionism helps people to accomplish their best work and achieve their goals. However, I agree with Anne Lamott's



(1994) description of perfectionism as “a mean, frozen form of idealism” (p. 31) that encourages us to set goals which are unrealistic and beyond reach. Setting high goals can create anxiety, fear of failing to produce perfect work, fear of making mistakes, and fear of criticism. Even worse, it can result in procrastination and the failure to produce anything at all.

Over the past three semesters I learned if I don’t overcome my perfectionism, I would not be able to get very far in my life or academic career. To remind myself of the danger of perfectionism, I often listen to Brené Brown’s fantastic TED talks (Brown, 2010) about the power of vulnerability. I am reminded of “the capacity to engage in our lives with authenticity, to cultivate courage and compassion, and to embrace — not in that self-help-book, motivational-seminar way, but really, deeply, profoundly embrace the imperfections of who we really are” (Brown, 2015,19:01).

### Take up a New Hobby



My roomies  
at the office -  
sitting in their  
swimsuits, waiting  
for me to finish  
my work and go to  
the pool.

*"I'm in a rhythm, held by the water."* (Landreth, 2013)

My counselor suggested I try meditation to increase my ability to deal with life’s inevitable stresses, to increase my concentration, and to reduce my depression symptoms. I’ve tried meditation and yoga, but they did not work for me. I found them boring and I couldn’t keep myself motivated to do them regularly. I decided to start swimming, which works well for me as a sport as well as a meditation and mindfulness activity. When I am in the pool, swimming, I feel free of any self-consciousness, and as Landreth (2013) describes, “In the pool, we all just do what we're capable of, whatever that is. And once you’re swimming, no one else is counting, no one muttering ‘she didn’t do much’ or ‘she’s slow’. We’re all here, is what counts.”



I joined the MUN Crocheters' and Knitters' Society, a group of MUN students (mostly graduate students), who get together one hour weekly to knit, talk and have fun.

I suggest you find a fun activity for yourself. There is no fixed formula, if you don't enjoy yoga, that's fine; yoga is not the only way to slow down our hectic, contemporary lives. Sit and think about what makes you really happy and relaxed, consider the availability and its cost (both financially and time wise). There are several ways to have fun and relax your mind for a moment; there are awesome mental and physical benefits from some old-fashioned hobbies (like knitting and gardening).

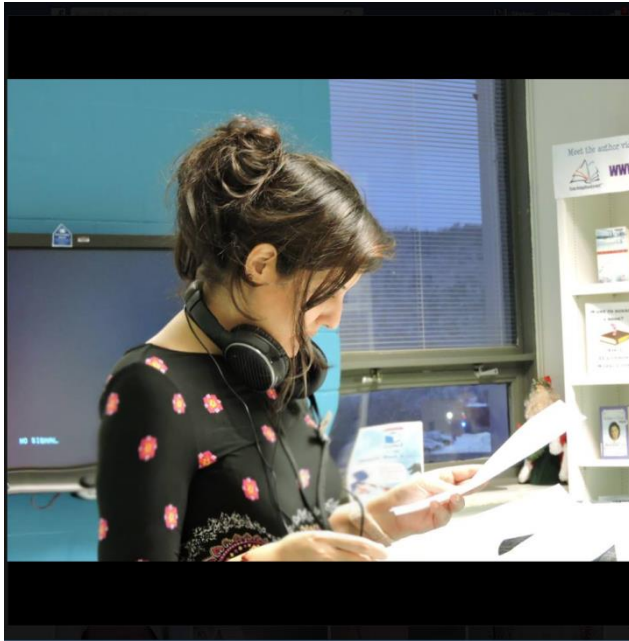
### **Challenge Yourself**



My supervisor and supervisory committee constantly keep me posted in regards to events related to my research areas, as well as new books and articles I might be interested in reading. At the beginning of the winter semester, I received an email from one of my professors about the SSHRC storytelling contest in which participants must tell a story about a SSHRC funded project. I'm a very visual person with a personal interest in using cameras and pictures, so using arts-based research methods (Baron, 2008), I decided to make a video. My three-minute video *Dress Like a Teacher* (Haghighat, 2015), examines how teachers' clothing can support social and cultural differences and was based on a project by my supervisor. I explored how social, cultural and personal factors shape how

teachers present themselves. During the first month of the winter semester, I put all of my efforts into making my first video. I felt alive again; it was a great learning opportunity and a chance to be creative. It also gave me energy to heal, to be motivated, to study harder, and to boost my confidence.

### **Build up a Good Relationship with Your Supervisor and Supervisory Committee**



A comment on my Facebook profile picture  
(taken during the video recording day).

Despite all of the challenges, I am lucky to have a very understanding and supportive supervisor who has made this journey much easier for me. Yet many doctoral researchers are not so fortunate. What I can say, however, is that you should see your supervisor as a collaborator on your project. If your supervisor is not getting in touch with you regularly, don't simply sit and wait for him/her to tell you what to do – that's what I did at the beginning and still do a bit now. Your situation might be different, and some supervisors may have a very traditional approach and be very hard to deal with from your perspective. However, the sooner you take control of your project, and build the best POSSIBLE relationship with your supervisor, the better!

### **Enough Regrets for the First Ph.D. year**

I believe our time as doctoral students is a time when we learn so much about ourselves. I learned that I had not formed an identity beyond making people proud of me. I learned to cope with failure, to make mistakes. I learned it was okay to rely on other people and ask for help. I'm not exactly sure what to do as I move through this process, but I'm working

on it. I understand that there are many difficulties and problems in doing a Ph.D., but I'm still learning, allowing myself to make messes in order to find out who I am in academia, why I am here, and what I'm supposed to do. I have learned to "embrace my brokenness" (as cited in Popova, 2014), reflect on my experiences, and move on.

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