Staying Sane in Grad School and Beyond

Personal reflections and advice

Paul Ward
Services and Information

• Jack.org
  • http://www.cbc.ca/toronto/features/offcourse/

• Also on campus:
  • Counseling Services
  • Health Services (https://uwaterloo.ca/campus-wellness/)
  • Police Services
  • QPR (https://uwaterloo.ca/campus-wellness/events/qpr-mental-health-training-1)

• And off campus:
  • Grand River Hospital
  • Qualia
  • Your family physician (YMMV)
  • James Bambrick
First: A Caveat

• I’m not a psychologist
• I’m not a psychiatrist
• I’m not a qualified counselor
• This talk is about what I’ve learned over the years
  • as a graduate student
  • as a tenure-track faculty member
  • as a high-tech employee
  • as a supervisor
  • in depression
  • with children
  • ...
And who’s mental health is this about?

- You
- Your family
- Your fellow grad students
- Students for whom you may be a TA
- People whom you may supervise
Rough Outline

• Mental-health issues or life-management issues?
  • Or both ....
  • Self Sabotage is Real
  • Diagnosis is good

• Treatment is Better
  • Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy
  • Getting Things Done
  • Social Networks are not your friend

• Some rules I have found helpful
Why am I so miserable?

• Am I depressed or am I in depression?
  • My spouse just left me, I just got fired from my job, and my dreams as a kid of being an astronaut probably won’t happen ....
    • Of course I’m depressed!
    • (but I may also be in depression and that’s why my spouse left, why my boss fired me, and why I’ve given up on my dream)

• Am I anxious or do I have anxiety disorder?
  • I am taking five courses, I’m failing one, barely passing a second, and I have a 50% final exam tomorrow
    • Of course I’m anxious!
    • (but maybe I have anxiety disorder and it is interfering with my ability to study, which is why I am failing (and have reason to be anxious ...))
Self-Sabotage is Real

• The two great motivators in life are
  • Fear and greed
  • Reward and punishment
  • Positive and negative reinforcement
  • Pleasure and Pain
  • …

• Both can cause problems
  • Drowning in pleasure
  • Deer in the headlights
    • Fear behind me is good
    • Fear in front of me is bad
Diagnosis is good

• Self-diagnosis is probably wrong
  • I’m OK ...

• Diagnosis means
  • My problem is known
  • My problem has smart people figuring out treatments that work
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Treatment is Better

• What do we *know* works?
  • (Peer-reviewed, replicated, double-blind, ....)
  • Drugs
  • Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT)
    • AKA Rational Emotive Behavioural Therapy (REBT)
    • AKA Applied Stoicism
      • CBT dates to the ’60s and the work of Aaron Beck
  • Mindfulness
Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

• ABC
  • Action
  • Belief
  • Consequence

• DEF:
  • Dispute
  • Effective
  • Feelings
What are the beliefs that cause problems?

• Cognitive Distortions:
  • What I *perceive* the world (my world!) to be like is not (may not be) an accurate perception of reality
  • Examples:
    • Generalizations:
      • I did badly on this assignment (worth 0.5% of my final grade); I’m going to fail this course; I’m useless at this material; I’m useless at everything I do; I’m a failure in life; …
    • Catastrophizing:
      • My car tire is flat because I ran over a nail somewhere; I just bought an aquarium for my son and broke it; everything in my life is falling apart …
    • Binary thinking:
      • I *HAVE* to … ; you *ALWAYS* … ; things *NEVER* …
Dichotomous and Emotional Thinking

• I have to ....
  • No you don’t

• Must
  • Really?

• Always ...
  • Really?

• Never ...
  • Really?

• I feel like ... would be a good/bad/... thing to do
  • Think
  • Believe
What Do I Control and What Don’t I Control?

• I control a lot less than I think I do
• I don’t control other people
  • (even my children)
• Is my “problem” caused by me or by others?
  • The only thing that is actionable is if it is me
    • so let’s assume that it is me
Getting Things Done (David Allen)

• A short list is better than a long memory
• Preemptive Multitasking is your enemy
• GTD:
  • Capture
  • Clarify
  • Organize
  • Reflect
  • Do
Social Networks are not your friend

• Do the math:
  • You have 200 friends on Facebook/LinkedIn/...
  • In everyone’s life something **good** that is **significant** happens every 2 years
  • Therefore in 2 years 200 good, significant things will show up
  • Or 100 in one year
  • Or 2 per week.

• So, every week something good and significant happens to two of your friends
  • Meanwhile you chug along at a pace of something good and significant every two years
  • Of course you feel bad!
Stop looking up and start looking down!

• You are in one of the richest countries in the world
• You are in one of the top universities in the world
• But others are better off than me
  • Sure, but how many people on the planet are worse off?
  • 5 billion people don’t have Internet ....
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Some Rules I have found helpful

- Stay Sane: Never do anything that you cannot undo
- Remember who you are
- Do better or don’t complain
- Life is a marathon not a sprint
  - And always tragic in the end ...
  - Why do bad things happen to good people?
    - Because bad things happen to everyone!
- Illegitimi non carborundum
- Never attribute to malice what is equally effectively explained by stupidity
- Set your own standards
This is Water

• David Foster Wallace
• https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CrOL-ydFMI