

Slow on the Fast Track: A Mindful Oath to Management and a Ph.D. Survival Guide

Jody-Lynn Rebek, Ph.D., Algoma University, Canada

Abstract: As an entrepreneur, instructor, and new mother, becoming a student again was no easy task. It was important for me to find the right balance to energize my pursuit of learning, nurture my young family, and attend to work obligations all while achieving doctoral program outcomes. I could not conceive of program expectations thoroughly enough to prepare. Yet, by investing time to make a plan and establish routines, tools, and techniques at the onset, I managed obligations effectively and efficiently. My plan translated into a mindfulness routine that maintained consistent levels of motivation, and inspired me to apply methods to help me succeed. Drawing on my doctoral experiences and empirical research in mindfulness and motivation, this article illustrates approaches to assist students with managing personal, professional, and scholastic expectations. By dedicating time to be mindful and cultivating a mindset to manage priorities, students can engage in a healthy pursuit of learning and achievement, and strengthen their human potential.

Keywords: Student wellbeing, Mindfulness, Conscious, Management, Motivation, Scholastics

Introduction

My decision to pursue and attain a Ph.D. took deliberation, mindfulness, sacrifice, emotional pain, and personal transformation. Somewhat like childbirth, I was unaware of how the Ph.D. journey would evolve and impact my life. Based on personal reflection, dialogue with others, and support from my immediate network, I took a deep breath and jumped into a Ph.D. on the fast-track to finish swiftly. I quickly realized as a student, management consultant, instructor, and mother who struggled with anxiety, the importance of mindfulness. During the first part of my learning journey, I would leave my young children behind: Gabriel (3 yrs.) and Mateo (6 yrs.). This still pains me, as I invested much time with my children around my flexible work schedule as a stay-at-home-momprenneur. When I parted from my family, each of the 700 miles I traveled left me in tears. With my loving home in my rearview mirror, I surfaced from my role as a mompreneur into a new territory of academic demands and visibility (Markides, 2020). Mindfulness rejuvenated and supported this learning process and sustained my Ph.D. journey. Reminders to breathe instilled self-awareness, focused my attention, promoted acceptance of my experiences, and improved my academic performance.

I am not alone in this experience, as many students struggle with stress, pressure, and multiple priorities. According to Women's Policy Research, approximately 4.8 million students were parents with 71% being women (White, 2014). Challenges of attaining a graduate degree increased when student parents attempted to balance family responsibilities with graduate expectations (Jakubiec, 2017; Markides, 2020; Wiciak, 2020). Student parents were shown to experience many negative effects such as excess sleep deprivation, anxiousness, and other stressful factors (Engelhard, 2013; Jakubiec, 2017). Severity of negative effects were impacted by gender and family structure, in terms of caregiving, and women with children were shown to leave graduate school more than any other type of student (e.g., single or male parent; Thesien et al., 2018, Wiciak, 2020). Research has also found that as doctoral students transitioned into the academy, they faced overwhelming stress related to work-life balance, role negotiation (with numerous roles), gender or culture, teaching responsibilities, and unclear expectations (Brown & Watson, 2010; Eddy & Gaston-Gayles, 2008; Leaman, 2015; Schmidt & Hansson, 2018). As a parent, the challenges I endured to fast-track studies were exhausting and exhilarating, especially since I was also transitioning into a new role as instructor at an American university. Unexpected pressures created high-stress situations between teaching, mothering, consulting, and studying. Research exposed me to an underlying mindset of "self-sacrifice for the collective advancement of humanity" and "a persistent expectation on graduate students . . . to overwork themselves" (Diamandis, 2019; Herzog, 2005, as cited in Eleftheriades, Fiala, & Pasic, 2020, p. 8).

Even before COVID-19, research revealed many students struggled with depression, anxiety, and mental health issues (Brooks & Anumudu, 2016), with nearly half reporting emotional exhaustion weekly (Ribeiro et al., 2018). These struggles were exacerbated by COVID-19, with student parents abruptly entering the world of remote learning with their children; over 40% of parents experienced deteriorating mental health due to pandemic-related stressors (Canadian Mental Health Association & University of British Columbia, 2020; Gadermann, et al., 2021). It is more important than ever for students and faculty members to employ strategies that protect students from engaging in a downward spiral of depression. In my experience, choosing mindfulness (i.e., meditation, silent walking in nature) promoted positive thinking and reduced negative reactions. Research showed that mindfulness practice improved

academic performance and mitigated mental health risks in students, reducing anxiety, depression, and cortisol response (Gardner & Kerridoe, 2019; Regehr et al., 2013).

Given these common struggles in my experiences and empirical findings, I identified mindfulness, motivation, and management mechanisms as effective methods for overcoming the challenges that doctoral students face during their study journey. Some research has highlighted the synergy between mindfulness, motivation and the ability to lead or manage performance more effectively (Brendel, Hankerson, Byun, & Cunningham, 2016). Some educational faculties already employed such mechanisms to support graduate student wellbeing by providing opportunities to promote “positive thinking patterns”, time management strategies, and instill motivational processes to enhance student engagement (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018, p. 8). In this paper, I describe the importance of nurturing a conscious mindset, developing intrinsic motivation, and employing management methods to enhance the process and outcome of the Ph.D. journey. Specifically, this study aims to provide relevant concrete guidance and tools to support graduate students' ability in managing their perspectives, expectations, timelines, and duties with greater awareness and effectiveness. To that end, this paper is divided into three sections: (1) mindset and mindfulness, (2) motivation, and (3) management methods.

Mindset and Mindfulness

My intention to explore human potential drew me into the topic of mindfulness research. Mindfulness means to awaken present-moment awareness or conscious control, and stems from Buddhism as one of the Eightfold Noble Paths as a meditation practice (Hanh, 1976; Kabat-Zinn, 2017). Mindfulness is a disciplined practice promoting awareness, characterized by three degrees: non-judgmental, present attentiveness; concentration power, sensory clarity; and equanimity or open heartedness (Siegel, 2018; Young, 2016). Ragoonaden (2015) stated that mindfulness is a human capacity for participating, observing, and accepting life experiences from a compassionate perspective, one that connects well-being and maximizes human potential. Meditation is one of the more common mindfulness practices that requires patience, time, and discipline and is seen to train the connection between the heart and mind (Siegel, 2018). Meditation “trained a specific quality of mind” and holistic “way of being” to “discover, support, and act in congruence” with one’s “true self” (Nübold, Van Quaquebeke, & Hülshager, 2020, p. 482).

Scientific research illustrated that mindfulness meditations “increased concentration/attention, psychological well-being, generosity, loving-kindness, and deepened understanding of experience/content, creativity and insight” (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 22). Many types of interventions applied in various fields, such as health, education, psychology, and in corporate business have proven the multifaceted benefits of mindfulness (Rebek, 2019). Some educational facilities already provide resources to support student wellbeing (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018). Mindfulness and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) were the two best strategies for supporting student success in the psychosocial and academic domains, promoting mental health (Conley, Durlak, & Dickson, 2013). There are different mindfulness practices such as yoga, silent walking in nature, meditation, and reflective writing (see CMind, 2021).

In my case study research, I employed meditation as a mindfulness intervention due to its accessibility. I examined a six-week intervention in a higher education leadership course and evaluated undergraduate experiences using a conceptual model that aligned the Social Change Model of leadership, with psychological and intrapersonal competencies of thinking, being, and doing (e.g., Higher Education Research Institute, 1996; Haber & Komives, 2009; Cook-Geuter, 1999; Erikson & Erikson, 1998; Watkins, 2013; as cited in Rebek, 2019). I engaged 13 participants and two faculty members in qualitative methods (e.g., pre- and post-surveys, focus group, journals, audio-visual recordings, course artifacts). Eighty percent of undergraduate participants reported a more positive mindset and 75% reported increased self-awareness, even though one participant struggled with getting into meditation and another did not practice due to religious beliefs (Rebek, 2019). In another study, Fletcher used a computer metaphor (Shojai, 2016) to illustrate the accessibility of meditation where *software* represents your beliefs (religious ideologies); meditation upgrades your *hardware* so that software improves. Meditation has been shown to impact our brains' hardware or improve brain functioning, leading to positive personal and professional changes (Ninivaggi, 2019, as cited in Rebek, 2019). Mindfulness, a practical method to focus attention on the present, promotes self-awareness, and significantly enhances individual transformation and positive actions (Hunter, 2013; Hunter & Chaskalson, 2013; Mager, 2018; Rebek, 2019; Siegel, 2018).

Meditation has been found to open individuals to blind spots and expose true thoughts, feelings, and behaviours (Carlson, 2013). After participants practiced for an extended period, mindfulness meditation was shown to impact the

cognitive (thinking) dimension, promoting self-awareness and well-being, and transforming mindset (Anderson, 2016; Edwards, 2016, Ragoonaden, 2015; as cited in Rebek, 2019). Research also confirmed that the process of mindfulness promoted calm, clarity, and compassionate attentiveness or confidence on the affective (feeling) dimensions, potentially instilling motivation (Langer, 2013, Young, 2016, as cited in Rebek, 2019). “Lastly, mindfulness is a presence that embodies our behavioural dimension . . . the practitioner began to operate and present themselves to others as fully aware and integral (Goldman Schyler, 2010; Kabat-Zinn, 2003)” (Rebek, 2019, p. 180).

Through my dissertation research, I was inspired by prior literature to consider mindfulness to include: a practice (think), a process (be), and a presence (do) of non-judgemental, attentive, and calm state of congruence (Rebek, 2019). Mindfulness became a way of living, and meditation served as an instrument for ongoing self-inquiry (Kumar, 2013; Kumar & Downey, 2018, Rebek, 2019). I discovered that meditation had an interweaving effect for participants, promoting an awareness of thinking (mindset), being (motivation), and behavioural changes (methods employed; see Figure 1).

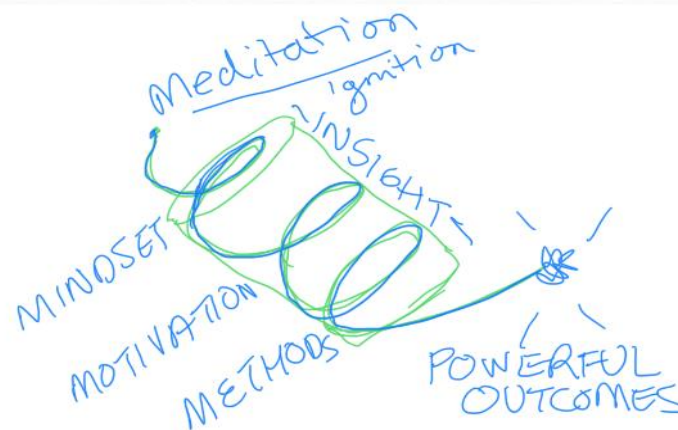


Figure 1. Meditation Spiral. This personal sketch of my self-reflection on meditation, illustrates the integrated practice, process and presence of mindfulness I engaged in throughout my academic scholarship. Over time, meditation strengthened a positive mindset, intrinsic motivation, and the use of management methods for swift outcomes in my scholarship journey.

Mindfulness had a cumulative effect on participants’—and my own—transformational learning (Rebek, 2019). Rathunde (2001) shared Montessori’s suggestion that intrapersonal learning requires “experiences of deep concentration” returning to them often to set up an “upward spiral of growth”. A knowledge spiral also included learning, reflecting, growing, and sharing (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 2006, p. 14). For instance, “the recursive, reiterative process of identity” fostered a positive mindset through spirals of inward reflection and attentiveness to deeper thoughts as lessons learned (Priest & Middleton, 2016, p. 45). Like spiders who delicately follow the spiral path to the centre, connecting all parts to form a structure (web) to nourish and sustain its life, I discovered a path called mindfulness to heightened awareness, illuminate mindset, and strengthen integration (emotional, mental, physical, spiritual). Mindfulness was learning as it slowed me down to listen, discover knowledge attentively, and renewed my mindset. As a result, learning became my priority rather than grades. By remaining attentive to learning, I transformed professionally and personally. Our deepest calling is to grow into our own authentic selfhood by learning about who we are and are becoming, and with a willingness to look honestly we gain self-knowledge (Palmer, 2017). The process and outcome of this introduction to the Ph.D., with the symbolism and surprise of a top grade initially, affirmed my mindset.

To protect myself from getting engaged in a downward spiral of depression, I chose mindfulness. When not taking time for mindfulness (i.e., meditation, silent walking in nature), I would be susceptible to negative thoughts and overwhelming feelings, and lacked focus. This reminder to slow down and breathe along the journey was transformational. My ability to remain present by practicing mindfulness daily for at least 20 minutes in the morning

and evenings was a gift. With regular mindfulness practice, I gained a fresh and positive outlook that motivated me. Mindfulness created space to find peace and trust in my ability to fully accept and complete tasks. I felt clarity, confidence, and a calm mind (Rebek, 2019). Even though I could not afford the time to practice mindfulness, once I dedicated time for it, it actually afforded me more time. I was efficient due to being more mindful of present-moment priorities, and motivated to complete tasks with flow and focus.

Motivation

An important aspect of motivation centred around energizing an individual's psychological processes and behaviors to support persistence, including mindfulness and vitality (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Contemplative practices such as meditation promoted clarity of personal motivations and actions, and strengthened greater congruence and confidence in an individual's true nature (Baumeister & Bushman, 2013; Nübold et al., 2020; Rebek, 2019). Other studies have demonstrated that when people are mindful they embrace more intrinsic values and set personal goals that are connected to well-being (Brown, Kasser, Ryan, Alex Linley, & Orzech 2009; Grégoire, Bouffard, & Vezeau, 2012). The awareness of intrinsic motivation could lead to personal growth as "the thrill of mastery, and of accomplishment is a powerful motivator" (Brock, 2015, pp. 167-168). Theory and research suggest that people could increase happiness through simple intentional positive activities, such as a positive affirmation, showing and expressing genuine gratitude, and practicing kindness (Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2013). Schweingruber (2006) coined "Positive Mental Attitude (PMA)" to describe this motivational philosophy. With a positive mental attitude, people were more adept to handle the stress and draw upon experiences in a motivational way, focusing on fulfilling goals. Research that used the four constructs of HERO (Hope, Efficacy, Optimism, Resilience) within development activities showed participants gained a positive motivational mindset for who they were and who they were becoming, leading to positive performance outcomes (Luthans & Youssef, 2004; Luthans, Avey, Avolio, & Peterson 2010; Roche, Haar, & Luthans, 2014).

Positive mindset is important, especially in light of research on self-determination theory that showed when intrinsic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied, self-motivation results (Deci & Ryan, 2008). However, even with self-motivation, the "human spirit can be diminished or crushed" or individuals "reject growth and responsibility", which thwarts motivation and well-being (p. 68). Add to this, the inherently challenging university life for students. Students are required to invest time and finances without any guarantee of success, and many find resiliency and motivation to respond to daily pressures via meditation (Gardner & Kerridge, 2019; Ribeiro et al., 2018). In pursuing a higher trajectory and avoiding an all-too-common fall out, mindfulness was shown to instill motivation through heightened self-efficacy, and goal-setting to help individuals craft a clear path—one that accepts responsibility and growth opportunities presented (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Rebek, 2019).

My capacity to turn my attention inward through meditation offered insight into human motivation and behaviour. Daily meditation strengthened understanding of my present experiences, and motivated perseverance through challenges (Rebek, 2019). Meditation routines were a priority to consistently nurture a positive mindset, create meaningful and successful life satisfaction, and keep me motivated regardless of obstacles. I could make decisions and stay motivated toward my priorities with clarity.

My peaceful mindset motivated imaginative visualization of my future. Using visualization, I was clear about what I needed to do. My plan directed my work by outlining all tasks and deadlines for coursework, research, writing, ethics, grant applications, scholarships, presentations, and other scholarly works. This plan kept my vision alive, motivated me, and kept me on track. I used positive affirmations every morning and set intentions along with visualizations on key intentions each day.

Method for Management

Mindfulness has proven to promote positive methods for management and states of mind that led to positive behaviours, like bettering oneself and prioritizing time and goals effectively (Owen-Smith, 2018; Siegel, 2018; Rebek, 2019). In management education, it is suggested that 80% of time is spent on thinking through and planning projects to achieve the outcomes intended (i.e., with the right quality, cost, scope, and timeliness; Daft, 2017; Kloppenborg, Anantmula, & Wells, 2019). Time management was a necessity in accomplishing tasks, managing stress, and balancing priorities with a jam-packed schedule (Berg & Seeber, 2016; Hyatt, 2019). Goals and plans have been shown

to help graduate students achieve task accomplishment, by establishing a strong path forward (Daft, 2017; Fletcher, 2019; Hyatt, 2019).

The *bullet journal* method was one way students could craft plans and manage time by documenting goals and thoughts, gauging progress, and promoting a sense of accomplishment through gratitude practice (Carroll, 2018). Crafting three large goals for the week, and three goals per day, could also promote a sense of focus and empowerment (Hyatt, 2019; Moran & Lennington, 2013). To achieve targets, goals must be broken down into concrete actions that are then scheduled (Daft, 2017; Moran & Lennington, 2013). Time management is also a form of self-management that focuses attention and keeps it sharp during tasks (Ariga & Lleras, 2011). Self-management adds more space for concentration and has been shown to be a means to achieve higher quality output (Palvalin, van der Voordt, & Jylhä, 2017).

Highly-focused attention is the central characteristic of optimal performance or flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), while scattered attention, as characterized by multitasking, is related to more error-prone and slower performance (Rubinstein et al., 2001). Attention plays a central, if not primary, role in nearly every aspect of human endeavor (Hunter & Chaskalson, 2013, p. 209).

Mindfulness instills self-awareness, self-knowledge, and could elicit personal transformation (Hunter, 2013; Hunter & Chaskalson, 2013; Mager, 2018; Siegel, 2018). To succeed in graduate education, students require a solid understanding of who they are as a scholar, self-awareness of their priorities (i.e., personal, professional, scholarly, family), and of ways to plan, organize, lead, and evaluate life in present-time (Berg & Seeber, 2016). I will outline resources that focused my attention while remaining organized and efficient throughout my doctoral journey.

Mindfulness Practice

I scheduled time daily and found moments in the day for deep breathing. Twenty minutes of meditation infused me with the motivation to craft my research. I established a unique routine to practice mindful breathing (Greater Good Science Centre, n.d.). I would wake up, engage in gratitude, go for a walk or run, and then sit in silence. I followed this with positive affirmations and intentions for the day quietly in my mind before my hygiene routine. Sometimes triggers were helpful, and stickers on my mirror, phone, and planner served as reminders for me to breathe and relax. This mind training shifted my mental models and attitudes, to engage in possibility-focused outcomes, rather than the deficit-based mindsets I was accustomed to. By practicing, I allowed life to unfold without controlled expectations, welcoming all experiences while keeping my mind focused on the life I envisioned. I was an active participant in life circumstances and focused on the process, rather than the outcome. These outcomes are aligned with proven benefits of mindfulness, such as increased working memory capacity, greater comprehension, and other cognitive abilities that improve academic performance (Mrazek, Franklin, Phillips, Baird, & Schooler, 2013).

Project Plan

Project management knowledge helped me to craft a plan. This plan outlined my goals, taking large deliverables and breaking them down into small tasks with deadlines. The plan served as my map and tracking device, and provided focus, preparation, and celebration of small accomplishments along the way to earning my doctorate. Visualization helped me imagine outcomes and determine priorities that I broke down into goals (descriptive future targets or outcomes) and objectives (quantitative measurable aspects for each goal). For me, it was imperative that I used a planner or journal for documenting my yearly, monthly, weekly, and daily goals. I noted changes to enhance my productivity, energy, and happiness weekly by taking time to be grateful and reflect on what I was doing and what I could do better. This process was essential to motivation, ensuring I understood where I was and what I needed to do to advance efficiently.

Time Management

In addition to using the bullet journal method, I also discovered the *Pomodoro* method (i.e., focused work for twenty-five minutes with absolutely no distractions, take a five minute break; then do four iterations, followed by a twenty-minute break, and repeat; Scroggs, n.d.). Pomodoro was effective at maintaining my productivity and focus. Using this method, I completed tasks easily. I used a sand-timer as a visual initially, which was helpful not only for me in the office for myself but also when other colleagues needed me. When the sand-timer was running, I couldn't attend

to anything else and colleagues knew this as well, so I was left undisturbed. I eventually started using *Kanban Flow* that integrates a *Pomodoro* timer for better project management, time tracking, and task completion (KanbanFlow, n.d.). Alongside mindfulness training, these techniques allowed me to keep my attention sharp during tasks, and promoted time management which was one method education faculties applied to support graduate students (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018).

Integrate Efficiency

I researched software to assist me in learning quickly. I describe applications for writing, references, and organizing research that I found expedited tasks.

- **Scrivener** was a time-saving writing application in terms of research, writing, and producing papers in APA format (Literature and Latte, n.d.). I found it speedier than *MS Word* documents since it uses a management format of folders for research, notes, and writing rather than scrolling through pages (Heffernan, 2008).
- Referencing software maintained citations, such as **EndNote** or **Zotero**. *Zotero* was effective at tracking and maintaining my references and producing bibliographies, but was not always accurate (Zotero, n.d.). I turned to using *Google Sheets* to sort, organize, and locate references, and separated different reports, papers, and articles using different sheets for each. There is always a better way, so I encourage further investigation for the best solution for you.
- **Evernote** organized all types of research findings into folders (Evernote, n.d.). I used the *Chrome* plugin for Internet browsers to easily capture and organize papers, websites, emails, etc., so that I could annotate and share them. *Roam Research* enabled me to collect, document, and summarize ideas and write drafts (Roam, n.d.).
- **Atlas.ti** was a qualitative research tool that I also used for my literature review; free webinars and Youtube videos guided me (Atlas.ti, n.d.). This software acts as a database of articles that captures sentences related to your themes in separate folders. The themed documents were used for writing the review and synthesized each theme to capture scholarly literature.
- **Google Docs** produced shareable files with peers and professors to gain feedback and collaborate in real-time. Google has many applications that can be accessed anywhere and information transforms into Sheets, Slides, Forms, etc.
- **Idea Puzzle** was an organized way to focus and develop research (Idea Puzzle, n.d.). It takes researchers through each section of the research proposal, asking key questions and providing explanations.

Whether you are a researcher, student, professor, or manager, these tools can enhance your scholarly writing. The key is finding the methods for management that work best for you.

Conclusion

Individuals who sustained mindful awareness, motivation, and management practices were shown to adapt to issues with agility, focus, and wisdom (Goldman-Schuyler et al., 2017; Brendel et al., 2016). Research has shown the benefits of meditating to better oneself in personal living, self-management, and leadership development (Brendel et al., 2016; Hunter & Chaskalson, 2013; Rebek, 2019). I had sleepless nights attending to scholarly demands or clients' needs and I had many sacrifices, but I took time to re-energize myself. It took some time for me to establish a routine and learn to be more compassionate towards myself (honouring the process as much as the outcomes). Since my Ph.D., I have committed to setting monthly, weekly, and daily goals, and schedules to align with priorities. I strengthened my time management abilities to efficiently target goals, translating my written plan into a schedule to achieve goals I set (not always perfectly or with the intended outcomes). Positivity tools nurtured my positive perspective and engaged me in my studies.

Maintaining a positive mindset was an essential motivator. I found that taking time to meditate and reflect on hope, optimism, resilience, and efficacy helped to support my graduate studies. This meant keeping a positive attitude and visualizing my direction. I was encouraged to integrate mindfulness activities to awaken my creativity and intrinsic

motivation to reach my full potential in my studies (Maslow, 1968/2013). It took time to reframe my thinking if negative, but I was aware of when this happened. Integrating a mindfulness routine upon waking and easing into sleep, combined with gratitude, kept me self-aware and (mostly) in a positive state of mind. Self-awareness has been shown to drive motivation, enabling an individual to develop and master new skills (Martineau, 2004). Research has shown that wellbeing also results from such contemplative practices (i.e., journaling, drawing, silent walking) (Owen-Smith, 2018). I gained peace of mind through mindfulness activities like silent walking in the forest (which I recognized as a privilege). If I felt stumped or exhausted from coursework or writing, I would stop to become mindful by focusing on my breath to find my place again. I formed a protective barrier to the challenges faced and was able to deal with life circumstances authentically. Academic and scientific research confirms that mindfulness improves physical, emotional, and mental functioning (Siegel, 2018). “The success of our actions . . . does not depend on *what* we do or *how* we do it, but on the inner place from which we operate” (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013, p. 18). Maintaining a mindfulness practice, nurturing a positive attitude, and motivating productivity levels towards my goals took focus, sacrifice, and commitment. I hope you find your place and success in your doctoral program, and take advantage of the helpful resources, tools, and mentors around to support you throughout your journey. Time is in your hands—take it, own it, and find ways to extend it through present, real-time self-awareness.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jody-Lynn Rebek: Dr. Jody-Lynn Rebek is Assistant Professor at Algoma University in the School of Business and Economics (Sault Ste. Marie, ON) where teaching and deep learning are a life-long craft (over 20 years). For more than two decades, she has also been an interdisciplinary and social entrepreneur who engages in contemplative, benevolent leadership and community development-based qualitative and quantitative research. Her intent is to discover ways that individuals, teams, organizations, and communities can become more aware, engage in positive development, and learn to lead/change for the better. Her research topics centre around strengths-based approaches to personal development, culture, and strategy all with the intent to promote and better understand health and wellbeing, creativity, mindset and motivation, and performance.