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Managing Stress and Burnout

Lisa S. Sosin and John C. Thomas

The doctoral degree is an arduous undertaking, filled with a multitude of academic and personal challenges, peppered with stints of exhilaration and strain. The stress that doctoral students face is substantial and high attrition rates testify to the need for students to be prepared for the obstacles ahead (Powers & Swick, 2012). This chapter discusses stress and burnout with the aim of providing doctoral students with strategies to manage the stress, so that stress does not lead to mental, physical, and emotional problems that could threaten a strong, healthy, and successful journey.

CASE STUDY

For Karl, the strain of his doctoral journey was an understatement; he described it as a "voracious monster" that consumed him. Over the past five years, Karl lost himself as he labored to balance classes, full-time employment, family responsibilities, and community involvement. No leftovers existed for Karl as he strived to earn high grades, maintain his faith, and not lose his family in the process. The doctoral program became an end in itself rather than a journey. Karl could not even remember why he wanted a PhD in the first place.

In spite of his best efforts, however, he floundered pleasing anyone, particularly his wife. To assuage his censorious musings, he withdrew further into his "man cave." Karl was bewildered that his wife was pressuring him to finish. His inability to manage the chaos was consuming Karl bit by bit. The fallout was dysregulation of his feelings and behaviors. He struggled to maintain focus on his dissertation and contemptuously argued with his committee's feedback. Karl vacillated

between anger and cynicism, sadness and despair. He was vexed, distempered, and unaware of his impact on others. Simply put, Karl was losing his grip on life. The spirit to finish, however, had not completely abandoned him.

As severe as it was, it would get worse. After successfully defending his dissertation proposal, Karl learned that he no longer had access to his intended sample. He knew to finish his degree he had to start again. The news not only stunned Karl, it paralyzed him. He ceased to function: no appetite, no sleep, no energy, no motivation, and no hope. Karl wanted to retreat to the cocoon of his bed and wish reality away. His comportment and relationships deteriorated even more when everyone was telling him to get over it and move on. Without the mental, emotional, or physical capacity to cope, however, Karl was incapacitated. It was a foregone conclusion that he would be another statistic of quitting.

In time, Karl realized if he was going to move forward in life at all, he needed help. He became sick and tired of being sick and tired. It was at this point that Karl started counseling. He believed that having to restart his dissertation was the real problem. Also, Karl projected all responsibility to everything and everyone and saw himself as a victim. He recoiled from the idea that he might have responsibility for his current state of affairs. Moreover, Karl contended that his problems would go away if everyone would "get off of my back." While Karl argued that his problem was outside of himself, the true root to his debilitation was much deeper.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Stress is often uncomfortable. Like a small pebble dancing in a shoe, stress chafes requiring attention and making its removal a top priority. Positive stress, or *eustress* (Lazarus, 1974), pertains to the optimal variety that facilitates productivity and achievement. Eustress is the welcomed motivator to stay on task, to produce. When coupled, stress and scholarship unite with a voice that screams, "Get to that research; attend to that writing!"

Stress can be beneficial as it awakens in the doctoral student increased attentiveness to tasks, scholarship, excellence, and progress. It serves as a portent to press on to the prize and to thrust toward the academic finish line. Stress compels students to keep their commitment to advancing in their program and finishing well.

Distress, on the other hand, goes beyond the friendly impulsion toward creativity and productivity, and its consequences are counterproductive and sometimes dangerous (Kofoworola & Alayode, 2012). For doctoral students, distress results when pressures to perform exceed the capacity, or perceived capacity, to produce. This stress can have negative consequences on bio-psycho-social functioning and a possible trajectory

to various medical, psychological, and interpersonal problems (Clay, 2013).

Distress, perceived by the body as a threat, initiates a physiological reaction. This stress response begins with increased breathing and a release of fat and glucose into the bloodstream. The senses become hypervigilant as the body becomes prepared for action against impending danger. Heart rate rapidly increases, causing rises in blood pressure, and the blood races to the brain and away from other parts of the body. As the body prepares to move into action, muscles tense and become prepared to fight, flight, or freeze (Shrand, 2012).

The stress response is extremely helpful when emergency situations arise. For example, if a fire alarm sounds, immediate action is needed to effectually deal with the danger. Once the danger is mitigated, normal physiological processes are automatically resumed. When the threat does not recede, the stress response is chronically activated, inducing the body to show marked signs of deeper distress due to the constant strain of sustained arousal (Shrand, 2012). The human body is not made to function under constant distress. However, due to the relentless demands during the journey, doctoral students may experience accumulated or prolonged distress.

The average doctoral student balances a multitude of personal, professional, societal, and academic roles and responsibilities, each of which demand a significant amount of attention, time, and commitment (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). These functions, tasks, and relationships make up a carefully managed system and, like juggling batons, must be kept in conscientious balance.

Doctoral students often poise the dynamic and commanding "batons" of marriage, parenting, life-cycle transitions (e.g., caring for aging parents), employment, health, relationships, financial responsibilities, and other commitments (D'Andrea, 2002). Upon entering the doctoral program, they toss in the "batons" of required academic roles, assignments, research, requisite skills, tasks, deadlines, and relationships. While each baton in and of itself requires a reasonable amount of demand, the composite mass of the batons may result in negative effects. And, it may not be long until it feels like batons are dropping all over the place.

The situation is further compounded by doctoral students' lack of sharing of concerns with those around them for fear of being seen as inadequate and incapable of holding up under the pressure (Fogg, 2009). The reality, however, is that a large majority of doctoral students report feeling helpless and depressed during their journey, with 10 percent reporting thoughts of suicide (Fogg, 2009).

Distress unattended or accumulated over time has the potential to result in negative consequences, including burnout (Fogg, 2009). Freudenberger (1974) coined the term *burnout* and described it as a state of fatigue or frustration resulting from dedication to a cause, way of life, or

relationship that failed to produce the desired outcome. Burnout is chronic. It leads to diminished self-worth, defensiveness, anger, fear, anhedonia, illnesses, isolation, apathy, and eventually, "emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment" (Maslach et al., 1996, p. 4).

Students with histories of mental health concerns are especially susceptible to negative effects of stress and burnout (Garrosa & Moreno-Jiménez, 2013). It is important, therefore, to expect the possibility of such overwhelming effect and to develop a plan to deal with distress if it develops. Looking out for signs of stress turning into distress is a good start.

Warning signs of chronic, debilitating stress and burnout include: medical problems, lowered immunity, anxiety (e.g., feeling tense, irritable, agitated, fearful, tired), depression (e.g., feeling hopeless, guilty, ashamed, disinterested, sleep and weight changes, and thoughts of suicide), interpersonal problems, and decreased overall functioning (Clay, 2013). Watching for these signs throughout the course of the doctoral journey is vitally important.

Although the doctoral journey is demanding in general, there are particular phases that incur increased stress. These times coincide with habitually intensified dropout rates and include the period following the first year, before finishing coursework, and during the dissertation phase (Gardner, 2009). Therefore, all students, and particularly those who tend toward depression and anxiety or are under the strain of demanding phases in their program, must develop an antistress, self-care "tool box" to support them in times of distress.

Experts recommend that students have multiple sources and tools for support so they can maintain a high commitment to pre-determined goals, time schedules, and organized plans (Marinsuo & Turkulainen, 2011). These tools, elaborated on in the next section, will help students remain in the stress, not the distress, zone (Abel, Abel, & Smith, 2012).

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

Just as coaches develop effective game plans to anticipate likely and unforeseeable situations, doctoral students also need an adaptable game plan that targets both the problem and themselves (Garrosa & Moreno-Jiménez, 2013; Marinsuo & Turkulainen, 2011). Effective game plans foster *academic resilience*, which is the ability to succeed in an educational setting in spite of exposure to risk factors (Morales, 2008). Resilience is fostered by the following five "R" solution-focused strategies that target circumstances with coping tools designed to minimize them and by self-management action points that address the role that each student plays in the circumstances.

Solution-Focused Resilience Strategies

Realize. Identify and label the real problem(s); what doctoral students assume is the problem is often amiss. For example, Karl's problem was not having to start the dissertation over, but being paralyzed by circumstances outside his control.

Realistic. Set sensible expectations and deadlines. Doctoral students are prone to expect too much from themselves in a short period of time without accounting for the varied demands of life. Creating timelines that apportion the program and the dissertation process can assist doctoral students in developing more realistic goals and expectations. Karl saw himself in a crucible of conflicting messages from his wife who wanted him to finish, yet still have time for the family. Consequently, he created unrealistic academic expectations and simultaneously felt guilty for neglecting his family.

Regulate. Students need to take control of their schedules or their schedules will take hold of them, as in the case of Karl. Time must be scheduled to complete responsibilities, spend time with family, rest, and relax. Powers and Swick (2012) advise compiling important dates and setting deadlines that optimize stress rather than promote excessive stress (see chapter 3 for more practical strategies related to organizing and scheduling).

Remember. Students often fall prey to complacency, dispassion, and indifference; all of which displace contentment and purpose. The grueling journey of Karl's doctoral program eroded his purpose; he no longer cared about anything, including his degree. This apathy trap can be side-stepped, at least in part, by writing down the reason for pursuing a doctorate and placing it in a visible location.

Remain. Many students contemplate quitting at some point during the arduous journey of the doctorate, especially when facing challenges associated with the dissertation in the research and scholarship phase. Like Karl, excessive stress floods a student's reservoir that is already at capacity, compelling the student to sacrifice the degree in hopes of finding a sense of sanity. When students regulate stress to prevent the overflow from obliterating their self-embankments, the adverse effects of stress are reduced. To do so, however, requires coping strategies aimed at changing the self.

Self-Focused Strategies

Academic persistence is a complex interplay between academics and a students' capacity to manage stress. Modifying personal perspectives and practices are critical in coping with academic stress (Garrosa & Moreno-Jiménez, 2013). The following eleven "R strategies" aid doctoral students in their battles with stress.

Reality. Humans unknowingly construct their own "reality tunnels" through the materials of senses, experiences, beliefs, values, and attitudes. That is, "truth" is in the eye of the beholder. Once engineered, the reality tunnel filters every experience in an attempt to lower anxiety and manage life. Moreover, new experiences are perceived in ways that reinforce the existing reality structure. The result of this process is that what seems like "reality" is only an abstraction and distortion of it.

Ironically, the challenges posed by facing "true reality" can create a "stress hardiness" when students simply accept it (Garrosa & Moreno-Jiménez, 2013). Karl was stuck in his "reality" that what was happening to him was unfair. He resisted the fact that his fixation on how unfair the circumstances were changed nothing. Coming to grips with the "what is, is" requires the grit to face hard truths. As daunting as this was for Karl, eventually he surrendered to his unwelcomed reality. It was only then, that Karl could look at himself rather than his "reality."

Responsibility. Being a victim is alluring; blaming others or circumstances for personal distress seem justifiable. Yet, paradoxically students who focus on things outside of their control are imprisoned by them (Garrosa & Moreno-Jiménez, 2013). One major hurdle for Karl was to own his reactions to circumstances. He contested every effort for him to accept personal responsibility. Blame and burnout go hand-in-hand. Karl learned that taking ownership enabled his solution to be in his grasp.

Students who believe that self-effort influences the direction and outcome of circumstances are free because they are in control of their lives (Herrman et al., 2011). Personal responsibility also creates a stress hardiness to bear the immense demands of academia as well as life. Eventually, Karl accepted the truth that other people and circumstances did not create his attitude, they *revealed* it.

Respect. Students are often their worst critics; they can precipitously list their shortcomings but deliberate when asked to identify strengths. Ironically, students also attempt to conceal and disguise their weaknesses. When weaknesses are shamefully hidden, however, students are robbed of the opportunity to learn new strengths. Thus, knowing and accepting personal limits, weaknesses, and strengths (LWS) generates equanimity and yields growth.

This was true for Karl, who disrespected himself. When he took stock of his LWSs by listing them out and then detailing the role that they played in his life, Karl found numerous insights about himself. One of which, was learning that he had a deep-seated opposition to success. Ultimately, Karl's self-awareness led to self-respect.

Reason. Distressful feelings find passageway through "reality tunnels." Karl soon accepted that stress was not *in* the situation, but in his *appraisal* of the situation. His cognitive perception and interpretation of his circumstances determined his level of distress, not the events themselves. Like Karl, students must unearth unproductive beliefs that distort

perceptions and impair understanding of life. Replacing problematic thoughts and lies with healthier thoughts and truth promote self-control and diminish victimization (Garrosa & Moreno-Jiménez, 2013). More-over, when Karl started to combat martyrdom he progressed to possess-ing *self-efficacy*; that is, a belief in himself (Castro et al., 2011).

Relinquish. Academic demands in concert with life's responsibilities effectuate excessive stress. Feeling overrun with life, Karl lost any margin in his life for new stressors let alone managing existing ones. Humans are like machines in the sense that maintenance is necessary for maximum performance, but different in that humans require constant attention. Though it is hard, relinquishing unnecessary and peripheral commit-ments is necessary to keep afloat.

For Karl, listing *optional* versus *essential* commitments was far easier than actually discarding them. Without doing so, however, he would never have had relief. Of course, while it is impossible to eliminate all the weight of life and academics, jettisoning certain burdens lightens the load (Garrosa & Moreno-Jiménez, 2013).

Rejuvenate. Because stress depletes internal resources, doctoral stu-dents must fortify and booster themselves. Kofoworolal and Alayode (2012) contend relaxation, rest, adequate sleep, exercise, healthy eating, and taking minibreaks from work rejuvenate the body, mind, and spirit. Driven students often feel guilty for suspending their work and losing precious time, but considering rest as a waste of time is misguided.

Workaholics are actually less productive than those who work reason-able hours (Tolan, 2012). The brain requires healthy eating and sleep to restock and renew its neurotransmitters. Otherwise, the brain works against rather than for the student (see chapter 4 for a discussion on this). In addition to these tools, Karl also learned that it is physiologically im-possible to be simultaneously stressed and relaxed; by employing relaxa-tion skills he more effectively managed his stress.

Reflect. Being engulfed in academia can cause students to lose their true identity. A doctoral degree is only *one part* of a person; it is not the defining element. Students must build their lives around something that is stable, purposeful, and a reference point for all of life. When Karl used his faith to center him, he was able to ascribe a broader and robust mean-ing to his life, even in the midst of excessive stress. He also learned that faith buffers stress and relieves it; in particular, prayer is highly effective in reducing stress and promoting well-being (Koenig, 2011).

Relate and reveal. Being consumed by studies disconnects students from others. Yet, research clearly demonstrates social support promotes higher functioning (Herrman et al., 2011). Sharing struggles with treas-ured others, even if they don't fully understand, leads to mastery over adversity (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). Karl not only strengthened his social support, he chose to express his thoughts and feelings into a journal, and meet weekly with a group of male peers to discuss academic and person-

al struggles (see chapter 8 for more on creating collegial support systems).

Respond. In stress, people react without forethought. A student's ability to respond with thoughtful wisdom gives control. Positive perspectives on stress and recurring favorable responses foster the ability to transform negative into positive. As such, students can grow even from the most adverse of circumstances (Herrman et al., 2011). Karl found that changing his thinking increased his ability to respond, rather than react to adversity.

Receive. Being a student means having to receive feedback. Such feedback can be critically delivered or be perceived as demeaning. Historically, Karl regarded all feedback as negative and personal; his natural reaction was to experience high distress and be defensive. Karl assessed how he processed frustration, criticism, rejection, and failure. Though students cannot control what their committee members say, they can control the way it is received. Powers and Swick (2012) stated the work of a student is asking good questions and learning from feedback.

Recognize. Karl opposed professional help because he feared being labeled "crazy." Actually, counseling provides numerous benefits including personal and spiritual growth (Thomas & Sosin, 2011). The hardest step for most people, like Karl, is accepting the fact that help is needed. When help is long overdue symptoms metastasize in severity. Karl's anxiousness, irritability, anger, conflict with family and others, and anhedonia exacerbated into demoralization and hopelessness.

At this point, Karl was defeated and conquered by his circumstances. He couldn't eat, sleep, exercise, or make himself do anything that he previously enjoyed. Academically, occupationally, and socially, Karl was impaired. Though Karl didn't experience substance abuse (including sleep medications), impulsivity, and compulsive behavior, these are also indicators of needing professional help. Many people think, like Karl, that counseling is a last resort; however, had Karl sought help earlier he may not have slid into a prison of gloom.

Rally. The word *cope* is derived from a word that means to engage in war or battle (Aldwin, 2007). Clearly, coping is no easy task. Prolonged stress necessitates intentionality and persistence in employing the game plan, both of which require students to rally the internal strength, faith, and external resources to fight and press forward.

Stress management is best summed up in the Serenity Prayer: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change (e.g., situations, other people), the courage to change the things I can (e.g., oneself), and the wisdom to know the difference." When doctoral students focus their energies on changing themselves, the level of stress stays well below flood levels.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Students pursuing a doctoral degree need to develop an antistress plan to ward off distress and burnout. The following questions can help students employ the strategies presented in this chapter.

- Have you created a timeline that incorporates realistic proposed completion dates for the various aspects of your program?
- How will you respond to desires to quit your program should they arise?
- What are your strengths, limits, and weaknesses, and how might they have an impact on your stress level?
- What commitments/responsibilities do you need to stick with and what nonessential commitments can you let go of or delegate during the doctoral journey?
- What is your plan for safeguarding your mental, physical, social, and spiritual health during your studies? Which "R" strategies do you need to implement?

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

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