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Essay on seven steps to surviving grad school

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I started my Ph.D. program in physics like most students beginning graduate research programs: bright-eyed, enthusiastic, and driven to excel. Part of me worried, though, that I'd slowly wilt like many other grad students seemed to have done, becoming a tired, jaded version of my previous self. Since then, with help from mentors and many of my own mistakes, I've learned some lessons for keeping my motivation alive. Below, I've assembled them into a seven-step survival guide. Putting these lessons into practice is not always easy, as I've found. Still, I've accepted the challenge, and I invite you now to join me.

1. Stop feeling the impostor: reframe your outlook: Let's just take a minute to admit something together: Grad school is intimidating! When you're constantly interacting with talented, dedicated peers and brilliant, accomplished researchers, you can easily begin to feel inferior. If you feel impostor syndrome, you're in good company — in fact you're likely part of a large majority of grad students.

Sure, lots of people feel like impostors, you think to yourself, but *I'm* the one who's right to feel this way.

Sometimes no matter what you achieve, you still feel like the kid who doesn't belong. I often need to remind myself: If you're here, and you're trying, and you're having some fun, you DO belong.

Meanwhile, to overcome your doubts, try to shift your attention to your strengths. We have a tendency to focus on those things that are the hardest for us, and take our strengths for granted. Take some time to appreciate that some things do come easy to you, and probably aren't as easy for other people. (I envy my friends who are naturally organized; they don't realize how much I struggle just keeping track of my stuff). So maybe you didn't ace that last exam. But you were awesome at getting others excited about your research at that recent poster session. Since you can't be the best at everything all the time, at least give yourself due credit (and maybe a few extra pats on the back) for the things you do well. Tell yourself you're competent, and you'll find more courage to excel.

Secondly, try to come to peace with not always being the smartest person in the room. Think of it as a privilege to be in the company of so many competent individuals. You get to pick their brains! If you treat these people as resources rather than competition, you'll come out of grad school with more knowledge, more accomplishments, and likely more self-confidence. So swallow your pride and enjoy the thrill of interacting with the minds around you.

2. Ask more questions: I'm embarrassed to tell you how frequently I sit through physics lectures in which the instructor has completely lost the class and no one seems to be following the lecture material. The instructor turns around occasionally to ask if we're understanding, and we respond

with silence. We're each too nervous to admit that we don't know what's going on, thinking, "I might be the only one." Meanwhile, the instructor is wasting his time, and so are we.

Let us resolve to leave the comfort of silent listening and engage with the lecture. Ask questions when you're confused! Risk being the only one who doesn't get it. It's much more likely that others are confused about the same thing. You may even find that your question frames the topic in a new way that helps your classmates understand the material more fully. And if the question is not as brilliant as you were hoping, who really cares? It's still good for you! If you ask more questions, you'll find yourself paying more attention and getting less bored in lecture. In the end you'll learn more and likely enjoy the subject more. It's a win-win-win!

If you find that the professor dislikes answering questions mid-lecture, (an unfortunate situation that I hope is going out of style), then write them down in your notes and make a point to take them up with the professor or teaching assistant after class. Remember, you're taking the time to attend this class. You owe it to yourself to engage and make the time well spent.

3. Learn to say NO: So your college friend asks if you'd teach a lesson at the middle school where she works. Or maybe your department head wants you to be a grader for a freshman exam. Or perhaps there's a position opening in the graduate student council and the previous holder of the position thinks you'd make an excellent replacement.

I get it. You want to say yes. You want to be involved! You like to help out. You're a good person and you can't stand letting others down. Besides, you can probably squeeze one more little commitment into your schedule, right?

STOP. It's time to learn to say no. You know you're already over-committed. Remember: a Ph.D. program is different from your undergraduate college; here, your priority is research. When you take on too many other commitments, your work will inevitably suffer. This is not to say you should spend no time on anything except for research. Rather, figure out which are the few additional activities you want to pursue and commit yourself to those things wholeheartedly. If a new opportunity comes up that you think is really worth adding to your schedule, give yourself some time (at least a day) to mull it over before jumping in.

It may feel cruddy to say no, especially when the person asking you to take on the additional responsibility is your friend or someone you respect. I've chewed off my fingernails worrying over how to say no to all kinds of extra commitments. Still, try to give others the benefit of the doubt—they will almost always understand that you're a busy grad student and can't afford to take on anything new right now. You'll be able to respectfully turn down the offer. It will be okay. And trust me: the future version of you will thank you for giving yourself the time now to focus on your Ph.D.

4. Focus on now -- have a persistent attitude: Maybe the apparatus breaks, or it just won't work in spite of all you've tried, or you can't make any progress on the theory problem you're tackling, or the data you took are inconclusive. Getting your Ph.D. can feel like climbing a mountain where the trail loops back on itself and at times it seems you're hiking downhill more than uphill.

Keep moving forward. Be persistent! No matter how badly yesterday went, start fresh today. Now, I'm not saying you should stubbornly stick to research ideas when they're failing. Abandoning unsuccessful ideas for fresh ones and tackling old problems in new ways will help you move forward when you're stuck. A persistent attitude means accepting that changing course is part of research, and resolving to try your hardest today no matter what happened yesterday.

Each day has the potential to be a success, though only if you believe it can be. Today is an opportunity, and if you come into work moping about yesterday's failures you're already setting today up to go badly as well.

Sometimes I find myself focusing too much on regrets of the past (time I shouldn't have wasted or problems I should have solved more quickly) or on worries about the future (Will I be able to come up with creative research ideas? Will I finish this project in time?). When I find myself brooding, I remind myself that all that matters right now is RIGHT NOW. The past is past, and you'll be in better shape tomorrow if you concentrate on your work today. Every moment NOW is a brand new chance to accomplish, to learn, and to have fun. Carpe diem!

5. Plan for the future, but not too much: Yes, I just told you to focus on right now, today. Well, do that most of the time. Once in a while, though, look ahead.

It's tempting to get caught up in the day-to-day haul of grad school and lose sight of where you're headed. You may find yourself, by default, assuming whatever goals your advisor has or your lab mates have should be your goals as well. If you don't think about your own aims, you might graduate one day and realize all the skills you've developed are for a career you never actually wanted.

So sit down this week and make a list of long-term goals (or revisit an old list if you've made one in the past). Conceptualize a plan for the next 5 or 10 or 20 years and write down intermediate steps that you can take to get yourself there. Use this exercise to help you figure out what YOU want to do with your future.

Check in periodically with your list to keep yourself on track and in the right mindset. And absolutely make amendments every time you check in, as your interests and plans develop and transform. Think of yourself as a ship's captain. It's prudent to set your course early on, so you're headed in the right direction. Also, along the journey, you must adjust your sails and steering as the winds and weather change.

Plan for the long-term, but don't over-plan. The future is inherently unpredictable; therefore, having static, inflexible ambitions is perhaps less wise than having no ambition at all.

I thought I wanted to work in gravitational wave physics until I met an atomic physics professor at MIT and learned more about the exciting cold molecule experiments his research team was conducting. I decided to rotate with his group, and I've been hooked ever since. Meanwhile, I am learning that even famous academics and Ph.D.s who have led successful careers in industry or management have had flexible attitudes. In conversations, when I ask some of these scientists how they ended up in their fields, they tell me stories of winding paths led them to where they are now. They also confide that they can imagine being just as happy in a range of different fields, had circumstances worked out differently for them. These scientists I admire recognized that many stops along their paths were beyond their control, and they remained flexible to the changing conditions. From them, I learned to accept that the future will never go quite as I plan and, therefore, I should welcome opportunities that I may not have been expecting.

If you're open to being happy with a wider range of outcomes, you're more likely to find one of those outcomes that make you happy.

6. Make time for play: Make some time in your schedule for something fun and relaxing, whether that's an intramural sport, singing in a choir, getting together with friends, or reading a good novel. Don't feel guilty about taking a break from your work now and then to relax and recharge. Giving yourself time away from your research and classes to unwind will help you keep things in perspective. It'll make your challenges feel smaller and more manageable, and it'll cut down your risk of burnout.

As for me, I've chosen rock-climbing and yoga. Yoga teaches me control over my stress and rock-climbing absorbs my attention completely, clearing my mind of research or coursework that is

worrying me. After practicing yoga or spending time climbing, I usually feel rejuvenated and ready to work harder.

Whatever you choose for your own hobbies, I think it's important to keep some boundaries between grad school and the rest of your life. When you're playing, try not to let work thoughts seep into your mind. If you're thinking about work during playtime or thinking about play during work time, you won't do either as effectively. You may even find that taking some time away from a problem you're working on will help you tackle it with fresh clarity when you return. So respect your time off and you may find yourself more productive during research hours.

7. Practice gratitude: As a graduate student you're in a unique and privileged position: your job is to think and to discover! When student life gets stressful or tedious, remind yourself of what you love about grad school.

As for me, I love the intellectually stimulating environment. I appreciate the opportunities to tinker and be creative. I find it thrilling to finally make something in my experiment work, and I enjoy the satisfaction of reaching new understanding of a tricky concept. I'm grateful for the constant challenge in my work life; I'd much rather be challenged than be bored.

Make it a habit to be thankful every day for the opportunities you have in grad school and for the fun, challenging work you get to do. Show gratitude to your advisor and to your mentors. Thank your friends and family members who stand by you through the toughest days. Acknowledge all the support that's helped you get to where you are now.

Ultimately, the journey that is grad school is a gift. Enjoy the ride, since you're only here for a short part of your life. And practice gratitude. I believe you'll find it brings you more joy in the end and still more reasons to be thankful.

Author Bio:

Jennifer Schloss received the [Hertz Fellowship](#) ^[1] and is pursuing her Ph.D. in physics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She enjoys exploring quantum phenomena in cold gases of atoms and molecules, fiddling with optics and electronics, and mentoring undergraduate women in physics.

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