

Science@CornellVet

A science blog straight from the students and trainees of Cornell Vet

[Home](#) [Divya Shiroor](#) Working towards Wellness



Working towards Wellness

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“You should never do experiments when you’re hungry, tired or overworked!” My PI’s advice rang in my ears as I looked at evidence of my failed experiment in disbelief. All I had to do was add two solutions to a tube, and I’d somehow screwed it up. Going over my week, I realized I’d skip lunch three days in a row, I couldn’t remember the last time I’d slept a full 8 hours, or when I’d last stepped into the gym. When I started graduate school, I’d sworn I wouldn’t become “that student,” and yet, here I was. I realized that if my brain felt too fuzzy to add a solution correctly, and messing this up had me blubbing like a three-year-old, I was definitely doing something very wrong.

My war story is not unique and it’s definitely not restricted to graduate school. Regardless of the degree you pursue, being a student comes with a heavy dose of long hours and demanding work. This makes it easy for the work-life balance scale to tip, resulting in self-care and wellness flying out of the window. Recognizing this, Dean Lorin Warnick emphasized wellness as a top priority at the State of College Address at the end of 2017, saying, “We need to promote a culture where students and staff can get sufficient time away from job responsibilities to look after themselves, without having a negative stigma attached to it.”

I often find that much of this negative stigma is self-afflicted. There have been times when I’ve been half-heartedly exercising at the gym, all the while thinking about how I should be using this time to further my scientific career instead. While I try my best to not compare my journey to my peers, I have also been guilty of stressing about how someone else is working in the lab when I’m taking a break. At such times, it gets difficult to silence that tiny crab that claws my mind screaming, “So-and-so is going to get a Nature publication because they’re in lab while you waste time exercising/sleeping/breathing/doing anything other than research!!” While these sentiments are largely self-driven, I do believe that the existing work culture of the scientific community fosters this to a great extent.

In order to promote a culture that propagates the importance of looking after oneself, Dean Warnick has proposed to establish a wellness oversight committee spearheaded by Susan Fubini, associate dean for academic affairs, and Katherine Edmondson, assistant dean for students and instruction. “The committee has representatives that include DVM students, graduate students, and staff so as to be attuned to the concerns and needs of diverse members of our community,” says Fubini. “The committee has met thrice so far, and we just sent 8 members (4 faculty, 2 students, and 2 technicians) to the Veterinary Wellness meeting in Chicago.”

“We are formulating an agenda with both short-term and long-term goals,” adds Edmondson. “We are currently working on coordinating and publicizing various wellness activities. We are putting together a website with a calendar advertising events focusing on mental and physical wellbeing to the CVM community.”



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Many students I've talked to are concerned about the shortage of counselors available for support. The committee emphasizes that this issue is beyond the scope of their goals and they strive to work more upstream, by first and foremost preparing students for challenges that lie ahead. They are also looking to tackle issues of health and wellness that arise out of structural and organizational barriers. "We are looking to see what we can change in the environment to help students and staff deal with various pressures. How can we support students with children, for example," says Jai Sweet, director of student services and multicultural affairs.

While the committee itself is in its fledgling stage, multiple events currently exist that encourage self-care and wellness. "The CVM Staff Council sponsors the "Spring in your Step" wellness contest which is going on right now," says Mary Beth Jordan, head of human resources. "There is also Beat the Winter Blues which is an event where we host wellness activities such as ice-staking, bowling, laser tag and karaoke nights for DVM students and their significant others every Friday throughout the month of February," adds Sweet. "The graduate student body periodically organizes breakfast gatherings after the weekly work-in-progress meetings," says Arla Hourigan, graduate education manager of the Biological and Biomedical Sciences Ph.D. program. "We also organize yearly events such as snow tubing that happens during winter." As a certified lab rat that ventures out rarely, I can attest to how beneficial these events are for graduate students. Through these events, I enjoy periodically catching up with classmates that I otherwise rarely see.

A strong sense of a very supportive community pulled me to Cornell for graduate school. The wellness initiative spearheaded by Fubini and Edmondson strives to further strengthen this sentiment. A strong community is one where we take responsibility for each other, and for ourselves as well. The wellness initiative will work to facilitate events that promote mental and physical wellbeing, but it is up to us to actively participate and support the initiative. There are a couple of ways in which we can take advantage of this initiative to lead healthier, more balanced lives:

1. Keep a look out for flyers/announcements of fun activities that the program or individual departments in the college might be hosting. Participating in these activities will not only serve as a respite from work/studies but also provide an opportunity to kick back with peers.
2. Don't be afraid to reach out if you feel overwhelmed. We've all been there. You look around and feel like everyone else is doing great while you seem to be floundering. If you feel like you are struggling, talk to your peers. Chances are they're going through something similar. The administration also urges students to not refrain from asking for help from professors/staff. "If the first person you reach out to can't help you, go up the chain until you find someone that does," says Fubini. "Be proactive in reaching out to multiple people. If you expand your network, you'll have more people to guide you through your experience" adds Hourigan.
3. Get in touch with administration involved with the wellness initiative and explore the setting up your own event. This could serve as a great opportunity to broaden your social circle and meet like-minded students that share the same interest.

As students, we face a constant tug-of-war between the drive to succeed and a fear of failure. Our definition of success is very often tied to narrow conventional parameters such as good grades and blockbuster publications. We as a community need to widen this definition of success to include mental and emotional well-being. This might make it easier to prioritize self-care as we work towards achieving other goals. On a personal note, I'm working harder at having a life outside of the lab. I try not to go down the slippery guilt-trip slope with myself when I take time off. Little things like going to the gym regularly or sleeping 8 hours instead of 6 have helped bring balance back into my life and increased my productivity. As for that girl that had a near melt-down on adding the wrong solution, she's around here somewhere, but she no longer has center-stage.

-By Divya Shiroor (DVM seeking Ph.D. student, BBS program)

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