

Feeling overworked, academia?

MIND MATTERS is a campaign of the IMP, IMBA, GMI and the Max Perutz Labs with the aims to raise awareness about mental health in academia, destigmatize mental health issues and getting help, inform about professional help services on campus and encourage mental health self-care.



It's Sunday morning, a friend invited me for brunch, but instead of enjoying good food and conversations with my friend, I find myself at my desk, surrounded by stacks of research papers. My computer hums as I type furiously, fueled by copious amounts of coffee, I decided to cancel at the last minute, all in a race against a looming research proposal deadline. Meanwhile, just a few meters away in the lab, a western blot is running, about to demand my attention any minute. "Just one more crucial experiment," I reassure myself. I'm not alone; at least three of my colleagues share the office with me today. We'll exchange tales of our Sunday productivity on Monday, boasting as if we've earned a badge of honor.

Picture this: In just a few months, one of us will hit a wall. Endless work, no time for vacations, and chronic stress will leave them depleted. Their passion for research will be replaced by cynicism and detachment, and even small tasks will seem insurmountable. Sleepless nights, racing thoughts about research and deadlines, unmistakable symptoms of overwork. It's time for a change!

Our multiple identities - a balancing act

In our journey through life, we often juggle numerous roles, each contributing to our unique identity. We are someones child, a parent, a friend, a partner and a scientist. Our multifaceted identities can complement one another leading to happiness and fulfillment. However, imbalances in roles, particularly when personal and professional identities clash, can create tension and stress.

Kucirkova and Fahad (2022) discuss in their book "Inspirational Women in Academia" the multifaceted identities that women in academia have. They state that the key to leading a fulfilling and content life doesn't involve reducing the number of roles or identities we have, but rather involves choosing these roles thoughtfully and investing our time in

them mindfully. Effectively managing multiple roles means placing importance on prioritisation, planning, working together with others, delegating tasks, and handling numerous responsibilities simultaneously ¹.

Deeply investing in multiple roles and finding our balance is challenging, we often feel overwhelmed. Kucirkova and Fahad (2022, p. 40) state:

"The existence of multiple roles and the time demands they represent often lead to feelings of stress and guilt over not doing enough for one or the other identity role."

We academics are often deeply passionate about our research, leading us to invest extra time and effort willingly. The blurred line between personal and professional life in academia can make it difficult to establish boundaries, leading to overwork. Kucirkova and Fahad (2022, p. 55) alarm us:

"Academics do a disservice to themselves by treating their jobs as a hobby and not counting the working hours."

Academia's struggle with overwork is well-documented:

In a Nature survey, 70% of graduate students reported working over 40 hours per week, with some exceeding 70 hours ².

Postdoctoral researchers often exceeded 50 hours per week and worked more than five days ^{3,4}.

Principal investigators (PIs) also felt the pressure, with 17% reporting over 70 hours in a week and 25% working a seven-day week ³.

How can we be happy if we spend so much time on one of our multiple identities while neglecting the others?

The glorification of overwork - a cultural paradigm

While academia undeniably faces systemic issues like pressure to publish, excessive workloads, inequalities and competition for limited funding (we explained academic challenges in our first newsletter), overwork in academia in particular represents an almost cultural paradigm. Embracing this glorification can lead to an unhealthy relationship with work, exacerbating mental health issues ⁵:

- **Everyday Interactions:** Normalizing overwork finds subtle expression in everyday exchanges among scientists, often disguised as humorous banter. Jokes about the "luxury of taking holidays" or about the life of PhD students as "basically rotating between sleeping at their desk and working in the lab", manifest the notion of perpetual labor.

- **Expectations of Availability:** Interactions reinforce expectations on how colleagues should work. Colleagues are often specifically praised for working during their leave ("thank you for getting back to me so quickly at the weekend") and working after hours or quickly "stopping by the lab on the way to the park on a Sunday".

- **Leisure as a Guilty Pleasure:** The unspoken expectation to prioritize work above all else often manifests in conversations that make leisure activities seem like a guilty pleasure. This includes remarks like "who can afford such a time consuming hobby" or, expressing guilt for "not reading the newest paper on your holiday, but instead reading a work of fiction". These comments and remarks contribute to an environment where individuals might feel inferior or "unacademic" for taking well-deserved breaks and pursuing hobbies unrelated to work.

"Academic work is by its nature never done; while flexibility of hours is one of the privileges of our work, it can easily translate into working all the time or feeling that one should."

BERG AND SEEBER 2016, P. 17

▼ From <https://phd-comics.com/comics/archive.php?comicid=1967>

It's imperative that we recognize the role we play in shaping this culture of overwork in academia. By establishing our own boundaries, we not only prioritize our well-being but also send a powerful message to our peers.

Setting boundaries - a necessary task

Setting boundaries as academics is essential for maintaining a healthy work-life balance and preventing mental illness.

In our next Zoom seminar, this Tuesday 07.11., we can learn from Professor Nina Junker why it is important to set boundaries as academics and how we can care for ourselves by doing so.

As a first step, we have to define our priorities and reflect on what is important for us in our life. Which of our identities do we want to embrace and nurture? To be able to cultivate all of these identities, we can set boundaries by defining our working hours and personal time, and by communicating these boundaries with colleagues and supervisors. Accepting the boundaries of others is also important in maintaining healthy and respectful relationships. Additionally, we should prioritize self-care and allocate specific time for personal activities, hobbies, and relaxation to achieve a healthy work-life balance. But for sure this is not an easy task in the academic system.

Slow academia - a more healthy approach to research?

Slow academia is a concept and movement within the academic community that encourages a more measured and deliberate approach to academic work, research, and life. It draws inspiration from the broader



TEXT ANNA FEDL, IRENA YORDANOVA, JULIA LEODOLTER, TAMARA KLOCKNER



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"slow movement" that advocates for slowing down, simplifying, and savoring various aspects of life.

In their book "The Slow Professor" (2016), Berg and Seeber come up with the strategy of slow academia as one possibility to combat the observed high amount of stress among academics which results from the fast pace of academia creating the feeling of not having enough time. They believe that time management tools are not sufficient to resolve the problem of time stress: "The real time issues are the increasing workloads, the sped-up pace, and the instrumentalism that pervades the corporate university." They propose that academics need timelessness and not time management ⁶.

Timelessness is defined by Mainemelis (2001, p. 548) as "the experience of transcending time and one's self by becoming immersed in a captivating present-moment activity or event." Only in such a state we can be creative and get deeply absorbed in our tasks ⁷. Similar is the experience of the "flow"-state, happening "when psychic energy - or attention - is invested in realistic goals, and when skills match the opportunities for action. The pursuit of a goal brings order in awareness because a person must concentrate attention on the task at hand and momentarily forget everything else." ⁸.

Both the feelings of timelessness and flow bring us joy and support our well-being. Of course there is no easy recipe how to achieve a state of flow in which we feel timeless.

Berg and Seeber (2016) propose the following points that can help us to focus on our present-moment activity:

▲From <https://phd-comics.com/comics.php?f=1870>

- **We need to get offline**, to break free from continuous interruptions and multi-tasking.
- **We need to do less**, each of us possesses a maximum capacity for effective work and continuous concentration.
- **We need regular sessions of timeless time**, to allow ourselves to be focused and foster our creativity.
- **We need timeouts**, to do pauses in our workday and be kind to ourselves.
- **We need to change the way we talk about time**, to change our perception how we perceive the passing of time.

In today's fast-paced academia, it has become increasingly necessary to challenge the culture of overwork and its glorification. To regain control over our lives and prioritize well-being, setting clear boundaries is essential. By identifying what truly matters to us and understanding that quality outweighs quantity, we can establish a healthier work-life balance, protect our mental and physical health, and ultimately find fulfillment in both our personal and professional spheres.

"Our brains, like our bodies, need periodic rest.

The brain is like a muscle. It gets tired.

We need recovery time, downtime, and

decompression time."

DAVID POSEN

FURTHER READING

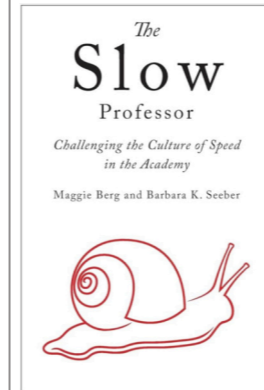


INSPIRATIONAL WOMEN IN ACADEMIA

SUPPORTING CAREERS AND IMPROVING MINORITY REPRESENTATION

NATALIA KUCIRKOVA and LOLETA FAHAD

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The Slow Professor

Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy

Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber

Kucirkova, Natalia and Fahad, Loleta. **Inspirational Women in Academia. Supporting Careers and Improving Minority Representation.** 2023. Routledge.

Berg, Maggie and Seeber, Barbara K. **The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy.** 2016. University of Toronto Press.

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MINDFULNESS RESOURCES

Jon-Kabat Zinn
<https://jonkabat-zinn.com>

Creator of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program. His teachings and writings have had a significant impact on stress reduction, pain management, and the promotion of overall well-being through mindfulness techniques. Many of his books about mindfulness are available in English and German.

MBSR-MBCT Vereinigung Österreich
<https://mbsr-mbct.at/>

Website only in German. Information about Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction and list of available courses. Courses have to be paid.

Dr. Britta Hölzel - I AM Onlinetraining

Online course, only in German: Systematische Einführung in die Achtsamkeitspraxis in 31 Tagen, 15 min täglich von Britta Hölzel.

(Discount ,IMBA_50' or with the link: https://iam-onlinetraining.de/p/achtsamkeit1?coupon_code=IMBA_50&product_id=4673281)

Helpful apps

- Insight Timer Meditation
- Headspace
- Balloon
- 7 Mind
- Calm

Most of the apps have a free part, however, to access all resources it is often required to buy an abo.

OUR UPCOMING EVENTS

Check out our weekly posters and newsletters, and get inspired by our fantastic speakers:

- TOMORROW, 07.11. Nina Junker

We are looking forward to seeing many of you at our next events!