

Avoiding PhD Burnout (a few handy tips)

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There are many times when we feel totally overwhelmed with all the things we have to do in our daily lives. The feeling of being constantly overwhelmed can lead to the start of 'burnout' (i.e., an inability to stay focussed, problems in prioritising activities, difficulty balancing workload etc.). Here are a few practical tips to limit being overwhelmed about your PhD in the first place.

Systematically evaluate your work practices – The long term solution to avoiding 'burnout' is to learn to manage yourself. You must systematically examine work pressures and patterns, personal strengths and weaknesses, managerial styles and expectations, influences outside work, and factors that you can and cannot control. This can help identify specific issues, clarify the circumstances that lead to unpleasant feelings, and help you plan a remedial programme.

Know your personal limits – You know yourself better than anyone. You have to decide "how much" and "how long" you can devote to all the things you need to do on your PhD. Where possible, use the word 'no' particularly if you feel you are being pressurized into doing things you don't want to do (like taking on teaching commitments)!

Admit you can't get everything done – You cannot do more than is humanly possible. Learn to focus on items in your 'to-do' lists that must get done daily. Other things can be progressed by breaking them down slowly into manageable chunks.

Identify sources of satisfaction – Satisfaction with your life and PhD should come from within. You need to assess what is important to you in your life and what you value most. This will certainly help the 'work-life' balance.

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Re-examine your work tools – You need to ask yourself whether you are in control of your tools or are they in control of you? Do you really need to answer every e-mail and take every telephone call as they come in?

Block off time and space – To get PhD work done that has to be finished, you need to create space. Put a “Do not disturb” sign on your door, screen your telephone messages and/or work at home.

Talk to your supervisor – If things really get on top of you then talk to your supervisor. The last thing they want is an unhappy unproductive student. They have an obligation to help you manage your workload effectively.