

## **On Mental Health and the Economics Profession**

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There is increasing concern over stress and professional climate in the economics profession as well as growing recognition of the importance of mental health in our field. Recent survey evidence presents alarming statistics. Barreira et al. (2018) find that 18% of graduate students at top Economics departments experience moderate to severe symptoms of depression and anxiety and 11% report suicidal ideation in a two-week period. American Economic Association (2019) finds that 66% of economists are dissatisfied with the overall climate and 60% do not feel valued within the field of economics.

In light of these statistics, we feel it is important to address these themes explicitly in our graduate course this semester.

While non-exhaustive, we would like to summarize a few comments based on our own observations and experiences as well as those that have been identified by friends and colleagues. We cannot individually change the nature of our profession, but our hope is that these thoughts may help you navigate the hurdles of mental health when they inevitably arise.

1. Stress, anxiety, and depression are all incredibly common. Each one of you will confront these to varying degrees throughout your lives and careers. There is nothing to be ashamed of, and it is important to find help and support to navigate these challenges. Avoiding or hiding the problem rarely makes them go away.
2. There are structural aspects of our profession that make stress inevitable (e.g., competition for a narrow range of perceived “good” jobs/publications/grants/awards, strong emphasis on individual intellectual contributions, rapidly escalating standards for empirical evidence, etc.). Understanding that experiencing stress is a byproduct of the nature of our work, and not a result of a personal failing can help alleviate the tendency to self-blame. And, it is important to remember that you have the opportunity to define success in your own way. There are a wide range of institutions and roles where you will make important contributions.
3. Given the previous point, it is important to find things outside of economics that you find value in so that you are not solely judging your self-worth by your success in economics. Your worth is not a function of whether you get a top 5 job or decide to leave the field of economics. You have innate worth and keeping perspective is critical.
4. You will receive critical feedback on your work with varying degrees of tact throughout your career. Honest criticism is one of the most valuable gifts one can give in our environment, yet sometimes the delivery leaves something to be desired. Regardless, more often than not the intent is to help you and your research improve and succeed, especially when coming from faculty at Michigan.

Even if some feedback might be painful to hear, try to remember the intent with which it is given. No one on our faculty takes pleasure in proving wrong, putting down, or humiliating our students.

More broadly, it is useful to keep in mind that everyone, including faculty, have good days and bad days and that comments that people make partly reflect the content of your work and partly reflect the commenter's state of mind. Following up after critical feedback, especially in a one-on-one setting, can often yield more constructive tones and conversations.

5. Everyone's research evolves on different timelines. Although it is hard, try to avoid comparing yourself to your peers. There will always be someone else out there who you will think that you are not living up to.

The nature of research after graduate school can change quite dramatically. There are more opportunities to coauthor and less pressure to write "the one best paper". While new constraints will arise, the specific pressures you face as a graduate student will not last forever.

6. While we try to look out for our students, you are often the ones best positioned to identify peers who may be struggling emotionally. We encourage you to support each other and to not be afraid to express concern for your peers. Fostering a supporting culture can reduce the isolation and competitiveness that produces distress among some graduate students and can push students on the margin to seek help when they otherwise would not have.
7. If challenges with your mental health are regularly interfering with your ability to work, thrive, and find joy in each day, we strongly recommend that you take advantage of the resources available on campus through the University of Michigan CAPS program and University Health Service (see links below) and contact our department's Director of Graduate Studies ([chouse@umich.edu](mailto:chouse@umich.edu)). You do not need to face this alone.

#### **Resources available to all University of Michigan students:**

[UM Mental Health Resources](https://caps.umich.edu/article/um-mental-health-resources): <https://caps.umich.edu/article/um-mental-health-resources>

[UHS Resources for Stress and Mental Health](https://uhs.umich.edu/stressresources): <https://uhs.umich.edu/stressresources>

[National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](https://www.suicideline.com/): (800) 273-8255

#### **Citations:**

Barreira P, Basilico M, Bolotnyy V., 2018. "Graduate Student Mental Health: Lessons from American Economics Departments." URL: <https://scholar.harvard.edu/bolotnyy/publications/graduate-student-mental-health-lessons-american-economics-departments>. Working Paper.

American Economic Association, 2019. "AEA Professional Climate Survey: Main Findings." URL: <https://www.aeaweb.org/resources/member-docs/climate-survey-results-mar-18-2019>. Technical report.