

Science can be an anxiety-ridden road. It's best to develop coping strategies early in the journey

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It's two in the morning and, for the fifth night in a row, I cannot get back to sleep.

This little professor is frightened by a big undergraduate class. Twelve hundred students big, to be exact. My mind is racing through countless embarrassing scenarios. What if my fly is down or sweat drips profusely through my sweater? (Note to self: wear a dark shirt and keep your hands over your crotch.) What if I mess up the AV system or trip on stage or have to blow my nose? What if they realize I'm a first-rate imposter trying to teach second-year genetics and leave the classroom en masse? Wait, what if I cannot sleep because I'm so anxious, show up to class exhausted, and then suck even more at teaching?

Well, some of these prophecies did come true. For the entire semester, I arrived in class drained, sleep deprived, and sweaty. And although it's been 5 years since I last taught that massive second-year genetics course, my mind has been hard at work finding other things to keep me up at night. Darn it, David, why did you spend the whole day on your email when you could have put a dent into that manuscript you have been meaning to write? But if I start writing the manuscript, where will I find time to work on the grant that's due this October? What was I thinking registering for three conferences in 2 months? "Tomorrow," I swear to myself, "I will stop incessantly checking social media!" as I reach for my iPhone on the bedside table.

To be fair, I came into this world a worrier. I did not give up my baby bottle until I was eight, I always keep a lifejacket and

helmet close by (just in case), and I'm a life-long proponent of the security blanket. Name me a topic, I'll give you three good reasons to be concerned about it. This is why I've always admired the cool, calm, and collected—the Roger Federers among us who can play a five-set Wimbledon final and only have a faint glistening of moisture on their uncreased foreheads. I, on the other hand, am apt to buckle at the knees when stepping onto the stage of a small conference. Why, dear universe, was I destined to fret the small, medium, and large occurrences of everyday life?

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“We live only a few conscious decades, and we fret ourselves enough for several lifetimes.” – *Christopher Hitchens*
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Despite the light-hearted tone of this essay, severe anxiety is no laughing matter. It can not only be debilitating but life-threatening in extreme cases. When talking with family, friends, colleagues, and students it is apparent that many struggle with mental health issues, anxiety often being at the top of the list. Although mental illness can impact anyone, I sometimes wonder if academia is particularly anxiety inducing.

Indeed, what makes university life so enjoyable—freedom—is also what can make it so stressful. Apart from committee meetings and teaching obligations, I have immense freedom (and privilege) in how I

structure my workday. For example, on any given morning I could go to the lab and tinker, visit a coffee shop and write, or sit in my office and read. I also have the freedom to choose what I study, write, teach, and read about. This is wonderful but can lead to the widely described phenomenon of decision fatigue, which is closely linked with anxiety. I see this in many of the students I interact with, and rightly so as the decisions they must make can have huge impacts on their lives. To PhD or not to PhD, that is the question, and so is where to do it, what to focus on, and who to work for—or maybe just scrap the research and go all in on medical school?

Of course, life as a research scientist is also one of constant uncertainty, which is the BFF of anxiety. And we scientists know from grizzled experience to be skeptical about the future, that our losses will outnumber our wins. Experiments will fail, manuscripts will be rejected, grants will crash and burn, job applications will get ghosted, collaborators will flake out, exorbitantly expensive equipment will go kaput, and everything will take ten-times longer than it should. It also does not help mental health that so much of science and academics is done in isolation behind a computer screen in the hunched-over, hand-on-forehead seated position with walks to the coffee pot substituting as a daily exercise routine.

Then there is the dirtiest, most demoralizing word in all of science—the “P” word, and I'm not talking about plagiarism. I mean *procrastination*. You know the drill. It's the

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end of the day and you say to yourself: “Not too shabby, old friend. You certainly knocked off some of the items on that to-do-list.” But when you look deeply into your eyes in that bathroom mirror you realize it was all a ruse, a series of trifling tasks to avoid the thing that really needs doing. In my case, that is usually writing. Procrastination is much more than a loss of productivity; it can have damaging effects on mental health, contributing to chronic stress and anxiety.

I like to think that over the years I’ve come to a gentleman’s agreement with my anxiety. It tries to cripple me with fear, and I try to outrun it via a plethora of trial-and-error coping strategies. One of my bigger errors was the bottle-of-wine approach, although at least I now know the difference between a Bordeaux and a Beaujolais. I have found moderate success with daily exercise, a healthy diet, and hobbies outside of science. But be skeptical of anyone proclaiming to have cure-all for mental health woes. In

my experience, the anxiety coping concoction is unique to everyone and will likely need to be tweaked continually over time.

In the past year, my anxiety has reached weapons-grade levels. This is primarily the consequence of a recent cancer diagnosis and the uncertainty surrounding my health and longevity. There’s nothing like studying a 5-year-survival rate with a 6-year-old snoring in the next room to get that cortisol flowing. And when it flows, I’m constantly amazed by the rainbow of physical symptoms it can manifest and my enduring ability to be in denial over their root cause. Persistent itching ... likely the detergents I’m using. Chronic diarrhea ... must be a wheat allergy. Incessant dizziness ... probably an inner ear problem. Unending fatigue ... I’m just out of shape. Panic attacks ... well, maybe I’m a bit high-strung. Just when you think you have figured it out—discovered the permanent solution—the mental health arms race strikes again, leaving you running

for the washroom while simultaneously scratching yourself and reaching for the wall to prevent passing out.

When it becomes overwhelming, I remind myself that I’ve gleaned more meaning, perspective, and empathy from my sufferings than from any of my successes. And it’s the adversities we endure—not the pleasures we seek—that often become the great adventures of our lives. Unfortunately, we do not always get to choose which “adventures” get thrown our way. But as holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl so aptly said: “Everything can be taken from a [person] but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way”. For me, that’s regularly choosing to have a sense of humor. So, if you are struggling with mental health this sweaty, sleep-deprived, itchy, dizzy, and poop cancer survivor wants you to know that you are not alone.