

Survival Skills for the Graduate Student

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ABSTRACT

Surviving graduate school in the computing field has a significant impact on personal lives, self image and emotional health. This "mental makeover" will equip women with skills designed to enhance life during graduate school using Dialectical Behavior Therapy techniques. The skills presented will help women stay focused, have effective interactions with advisors, make good decisions, balance school with personal life, cultivate self-confidence and assertiveness, and defuse worry, anxiety, and guilt.

INTRODUCTION

The 2004 Berkeley Graduate Student Mental Health survey indicates that almost half of graduate students at Berkeley report having emotional or stress-related problems that seriously affect their well-being. Almost 10% have seriously considered suicide, and approximately 1 in 200 students have attempted suicide [1]. A similar study at the Federal University of Sao Paulo in 2004 indicated that 44% of their graduate students suffered from either a depressive or anxiety disorder, 48% from a sleep disorder, and 18% reported suicidal tendencies [5]. Both surveys also conclude that women graduate students report significantly more mental health struggles than the men graduates.

In 1988, the President for the American Association for the Advancement of Science, concerned by graduate student mental health survey results at Stanford and MIT, called for a widespread change in the graduate school environment [6]. Given the more recent results of the 2004 surveys, the graduate school environment has not changed, and the mental health of graduate students, especially women graduates, is still a very serious concern. While widespread institutional change is ideal, it will inevitably take time, while current graduate students are suffering from a variety of emotional and mental disorders.

It is essential that women graduate students be equipped with skills for dealing with the emotions brought on by the stress, financial difficulties, and life changes of graduate school. Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) created by Dr. Marsha Linehan offers just such practical coping skills that have been shown to be effective in lowering stress, anxiety, and depression [2][3]. These skills have been taught nation-wide through workshops and group sessions, and skills manuals and worksheets are available [4]. DBT skills are divided into four units:

- *Core Mindfulness* skills focus on effective and deliberate decision making which balance the facts of a situation as well as the emotions associated with that situation.
- *Stress Management and Distress Tolerance* skills focus on practical ways of managing stress and decreasing debilitating distress.
- *Emotion Management* skills focus on learning to identify and manage our emotions and emotion-generated thoughts.
- *Interpersonal Effectiveness* skills focus on getting what you want and need from others, while enhancing the relationship and maintaining self respect.

Many of the skills that are a part of DBT are directly applicable to women in graduate school. The well-known problems reported by women graduates such as "Imposter Syndrome" can be addressed using the practical tools of DBT. Knowledge of these techniques not only can give women the endurance needed to complete graduate school, but can also help women stay healthy and happy during this most stressing of times. This presentation will focus on the applicability of DBT skills to the graduate school environment, and will provide both students and professors with a basic understanding of these skills and the resources to develop peer-run skills groups.