Finding Balance on the Academic Tightrope: A Message for Self-Care Perspectives from a Post-Doc and Early Career Faculty Member

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How did we get here?

GR: The proudest and happiest day of my life was the day I was hooded. As a child of immigrant parents and first-generation scholar, the race was over...mic drop. While I felt relieved at having this huge weight lifted, the elation quickly subsided with a dark cloud of uncertainty replacing it. The only thing I knew upon graduating was that I didn't want to go into practice. I had just finished a grueling year on an APPIC internship, working 40-60 hour weeks at a public high school in the Chicagoland area, all while writing my dissertation in the evenings. While my internship was positive and memorable, the burnout was real. I felt drawn back to research, but not ready for an academic position. I had very few publications to my name, none of which were first-authored. I had years of “field experience,” but I knew from my friends’ horror stories on the job market, I wouldn't make the cut on paper. I had this recurring nightmare that my degree would be revoked, and I’d wake up in my old bedroom in California, a failure and a fraud. My fears were completely irrational because it should've been enough knowing I had made it this far. I earned my doctorate through blood, sweat, and tears (many, many tears). It was a milestone that anyone in my place would feel proud. I knew I was suffering from that psychological phenomenon we call “imposter syndrome.” Yet in my case, it felt magnified as a woman, Latina and person of color, and first-generation college graduate.

Graduate school always felt like a competition for which I was ill equipped. The world of academe was my “Hunger Games,” with students competing for that lucrative spot in the ivory tower, only I was no Katniss. I rarely saw students or professors like me the victors. When you have a critical mass lacking in education, students of color can feel isolated, misrepresented, and misunderstood. I didn’t feel cut out for it and honestly needed a break to recover from my experience as a graduate student. A post-doc training position seemed like the perfect remedy. It gave me mental space and clarity to consolidate my academic and cultural identity, one that was independent from my advisor and previous work. I needed time to build self-confidence and self-discipline as an independent researcher, but without the pressure of complete accountability. I felt I had much to learn about research methodologies, project management, grant writing, and translational research. These topics were never covered in my graduate program, and I needed to hit the ground running. While in some disciplines post-doc positions are the norm, for me it was a personal choice. I chose a research post-doc over a clinical one because I needed the time and flexibility to engage critically with research and build my own research agenda and plan, all while still having the structure, training, and mentorship afforded through a T32 NIH training position. A clinical post-doc would have taken time away from what I needed to accomplish. I needed to build competencies in research areas I felt needed further improvement and would prepare me for a tenure-track position. I needed to prove to myself that I was cut out for a career in academia.

SZ: Only six months into a postdoc, I found myself alone in a hotel room, trying to coax myself into eating dinner while reviewing my notes. The next day would be my first on-campus interview. Sure, I had made it through several Skype calls, but this was the real deal. I had felt this nervous only a handful of times before (i.e., the night before my GRE, the night before my qualifying exams, the night before
my oral proposal). I was alone with my racing thoughts...Will I forget everything I’ve prepared? What if I sound dumb? What if I have a technological failure? How do I show them I’m a good fit? What would Beyoncé do? Surely, I was an imposter, and they would see right through me.

Obviously, there are things you prepare for. You research the school, department and program, peruse faculty profiles in the hopes of finding something worth bringing up at meetings, and make a list of questions to ask during individual interviews and meals. You review your slides and anticipate the hard questions, the soul crushing ones that slam you with the potential of derailing your talk altogether. No one tells you how to prep your mind or body for this type of pressure, nor the amount of mental and emotional energy it requires to put your best self out there for display.

In my case, NO SLEEP, none whatsoever. I had completely psyched myself out and would have to run on adrenalin for the long day ahead. I forced down some toast from the continental breakfast bar, showered, put on my new suit, and waited for a member of the search committee to pick me up.

The day flew by. By lunch, I had found my stride, having survived the panel interview and research talk. I liked these people. I wanted to be a part of this department. Feeling at home motivated me to work for it even harder. Despite a hiccup in the afternoon – giving my teaching talk in a room with no monitor, only the slides projected behind me, and several standing faculty members with nowhere to sit – I walked away from the day’s schedule of events feeling confident.

You realize there are two sides to the coin. You should like them too. You’re interviewing them as much as they are interviewing you. It wasn’t until dinner that I started to crash. I’ll never forget those last conversations, trying with all my might to stay “on” long enough to make my best final impressions. After checking in with my husband (then fiancé) and parents, I crashed within 15 minutes of getting back to my room.

If my experience sounds too easy, let me assure you, it was anything but. Being a first-generation college student, I was raised by supportive parents who knew very little about the university system. During my undergraduate years, I learned the value of strong mentors and the utility of office hours, things no one tells you about going in. Perhaps this is one of the reasons I am so happy in my current position. Throughout graduate school, I was set on the coveted position at a research university. However, ending up at a teaching university that values research turned out to be just the right fit for me. I now have the opportunity to work with a student body that consists primarily of bright-eyed, first-generation students, affording me the chance to provide direct mentorship to students, in whom I see my younger self.

**Build your support system.**

**GR:** As researchers, it’s easy for us to get lost in our work. We go out in search of a question, collect data, crank out the data, and get that pub. Life isn’t linear and sometimes throws you unexpected curveballs. I suffered a physical injury a few months into my post-doc. It impacted my mobility and focus, draining me physically and emotionally. I was living on my own in a new city with no friends or family in the middle of winter in Wisconsin. I was fortunate to have amazing colleagues and a mentor who provided support and prioritized my recovery first. My recovery taught me that self-care is about a balance between the physical, emotional, and mental. If you neglect one domain, the others will quickly
spill-over and drain you of your energy and productivity. It’s important to build relationships and a community for those times you feel vulnerable, defeated, or stuck. I felt immense guilt, but my support system helped me see that it was ok to ask for help, my recovery came first.

**SZ:** Be it your partner, friends, colleagues or mentors, find the right person to talk to for each issue you encounter. Our academic roles can be isolating, and “outsiders” might not quite “get” why we’re so worked up about that syntax error, job we’re applying for, or paper that is in R&R hell. Gone are the days where you just needed your parent’s advice. One thing that I have found particularly helpful as a new faculty member has been connecting with more senior members within my department. Grabbing a coffee or just saying hello in the hallway has been invaluable in making the adjustment into my current role. That said, building that support system means that you must be supportive to others too. Don’t forget to pay it forward.

**Work hard, stay humble.**

Now you have a Ph.D. and have published a few papers...sorry, but you’re not the sole authority in your field. You’re still learning. Humility is one thing they don’t teach in graduate programs, let alone cultural humility. Though you may be wellversed in your area and have the experience to back it, it only takes one question at a conference, one review of your work by a colleague, or one journal rejection to check you. So, “check yourself first before you wreck yourself.” As psychologists, we find solace and comfort in the human experience, learning from others teaches us about ourselves. Don’t shy away from the unfamiliar!

**Treat yo’self.**

Finally, all that hard work should be rewarded, and taking time for yourself or to spend with your friends and family is key to staying sane. Recently submit your first, firstauthored paper? Got positive feedback on your first tenure review? Nailed that conference talk? Whatever it is, you should take time to do something for you, outside of work. The two of us are hitting the spa the next time we’re in California together! How will you treat yo’self?