

**PRACTICES OF  
RESILIENCE FOR  
UNDERREPRESENTED  
GRAD STUDENTS**

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**DECEMBER  
2019**

## ABOUT

This guide was created by students in a seminar offered by Community, a campus organization for and by underrepresented graduate students in STEM at UW-Madison. In the course, we discussed issues of identity as they relate to graduate life, learned vocabulary for understanding and describing our experiences as minoritized students, and explored strategies for remaining resilient in environments that fall short of embracing non-dominant voices. We hope it will serve others as a toolkit for surviving and thriving in graduate school.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This seminar was designed and implemented as a Delta internship by Taylor Tai. We would like to thank Gabe Javier for being the faculty advisor, as well as Claudio Gratton for serving as the instructor of record. The framework for identifying “practices of resilience” draws on the work of Z Nicolazzo <sup>1</sup>.

## CONTACT

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**Type-casted / typecasting:** labeling a person or people for the characteristics you believe they behold based on their appearance and/or participation in certain groups <sup>13</sup>

[Example: There is only one faculty member of color within a certain department. He is typecast as the go-to person for issues related to the experiences of students of color.]

**Racial battle fatigue:** the fatigue that results when one constantly faces racially dismissive, demeaning, insensitive and/or hostile environments and individuals; the social and psychological responses of being in minority group within a white-dominated environment, usually on campuses <sup>16,17</sup>

[Example: A student of color at UW is exhausted and anxious after weeks of working with white students on a class project.]

**Horizontal microaggression:** when members of a targeted or minority group exhibit brief and commonplace verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults towards people of color; can occur between members of the same or different targeted groups <sup>18</sup>

[Example: A Latino man compliments a black woman on how articulate she is -- surprised that she is well educated.]

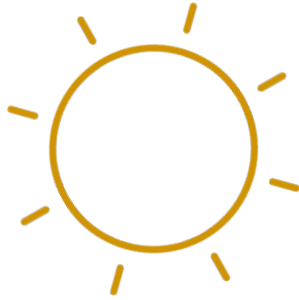
**Horizontal hostility:** when members of a targeted group believe, act on, or enforce the dominant system of discrimination and oppression; first used by feminists in the 1970's to describe factionalism within the women's movement <sup>19, 20</sup>

[Example: A light-skinned black professor experiences backlash from the Black Student Association when the professor spoke about their experience as a black individual in university during the 1970's. The BSA believed the professor spoke out of place since they do not present as "black enough".]

## SET HEALTHY BOUNDARIES.

Your physical and mental health always come first. Boundaries that protect you from overworking or being stretched too thin are critical for self-care and a healthy work-life balance <sup>2</sup>. This takes practice and may be hard at first. Start with the steps below.

- 1. Say no.** It's okay to say no to things that cross your boundaries. Keep practicing, even with your advisor.
- 2. Prioritize your wellbeing.** Write down the things you need every day to be well, then create a set of rules to help you get what you need. For example, Hanna needs a lot of rest to recover from work. She made a rule that she doesn't work on evenings or weekends, even though other grad students do.
- 3. Do a 'boundary audit'.** Make note of people, situations, and activities that distress you -- especially ones that cause guilt, resentment, or anger. Determine what needs to change and set a new boundary accordingly. For example, you may resent your advisor for asking you to do domestic or secretarial tasks (which, by the way, are disproportionately assigned to women in the workplace). In response, you could make a short script that you always use with your advisor when asked to do these or other tasks outside of your role as a graduate student.



## TAKE BREAKS FROM YOUR WORK.

Giving yourself space from hard, overwhelming, or stressful work can often boost your productivity when you return with a refreshed mindset. Meditate, look at pictures of cats, get a coffee, take a nap, do a workout, talk to a friend. In Madison, capitalizing on sunny days by taking breaks outside can be a nice way to stock up on fresh air and sun before the winter comes.

If you can take a break with exercise, you may also get the added benefits of mitigating depressive symptoms and improving your energy throughout the day <sup>3</sup>. Options for getting active include visiting one of the UW gyms, trying out a group fitness class, going for a walk along the Lakeshore Trail, biking or walking to campus, hiking at the UW Arboretum, attending a free yoga class, or visiting one of the many fitness studios in Madison.

**Respectability politics**: when minority or marginalized groups are told (or teach themselves) that in order to receive better treatment from those in power, they must behave “better” <sup>10</sup>

[Example: Instructing young black men to pull up their pants in order to be taken seriously or respected.]

**Vulnerability hangover**: the unsettled or anxious feeling after putting oneself in a vulnerable position; exacerbated by not yet knowing what the fallout or reaction is going to be <sup>11</sup>

[Example: After protesting with Black Lives Matter, Audrey was anxious while waiting for backlash from the news and her job.]

**Imposter syndrome**: a false, sometimes crippling belief that one’s successes are attributed to luck or fraud rather than skill; chronic self-doubt that overrides external proof of competence; also called “imposter phenomenon”; first coined to describe women in the workforce by Clande and Imes in 1978 <sup>12,13,14,15</sup>

[Example: Lee is experiencing imposter syndrome after being accepted to a graduate program. They have several years of experience in their field and have won awards on a number of presentations, but believe that their acceptance was sheer luck.]

**Slacktivism**: supporting a political or social cause via social media or online petitions; characterized as involving very little effort or commitment <sup>4</sup>

**Digital activism**: activism that uses the internet and social media as platforms for political mobilization and action <sup>1</sup>

[Example: The Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) was founded online in 2001 as a way for people who identify as asexual and questioning to come together and validate their existence without regard to geographic distance.]

# PART TWO

## GLOSSARY

We think it's empowering to learn vocabulary that describes our experiences. Here's a collection of terms we've found valuable. This is not an exhaustive list, but a launching point for further research and exploration.

### FIND A COMMUNITY THAT ALLOWS YOU TO BE YOUR AUTHENTIC SELF.

When feeling isolated, try to find ways to connect around the cultures and practices that are important to your identity. Shared interests such as food, hobbies, or things that remind you of home can be good starting points. You may need to look beyond campus to find your people or your space, but the benefits in terms of support and belonging are enormous<sup>7</sup>. We recommend seeking a community early on so that you have people on your team when you begin to hit research setbacks and other struggles later.



To get started on campus, check out the events, organizations, and support groups under the Multicultural Student Center (MSC), Multicultural Graduate Network (MGN), Wisconsin Involvement Network (WIN), Gender and Sexuality Campus Center (GSCC), your department, and other student organizations. To seek community off campus, try plugging in to cultural groups around Madison for dancing, night markets, festivals etc.!



## IDENTIFY AND LEVERAGE YOUR CONFLICT STYLE.

Your relationship with your advisor is central to your career, so knowing how to navigate conflict well is key. Consider whether you're confrontation averse or prone, and what cultural or personality traits influence your interactions. This can prepare you to enter conversations when sticky issues of funding, campus climate, manuscript authorship, etc. arise.

If you feel a solution is nowhere in sight, OMBUDS, HR, and other offices can mediate conversations. Document interactions in writing so there are clear records of your efforts towards resolution. For more serious situations, you can report hate, bias, and harassment on the graduate school's webpage.



## BREATHE TO CONTROL STRESS.

Focused Breath<sup>9</sup>: Use this when you need to slow down and move awareness from your mind to your body. Close your eyes and settle into your space. Bring attention to your breath, but don't worry about controlling it. Notice the rhythm and sensations in your body. If your mind wanders, observe your thoughts, brush them aside, and return to the breath.

Ujayi Breath<sup>10</sup>: Use this for high anxiety and stress. Try for slow, steady, full breathing. To start, pretend you're fogging up a mirror while you exhale out of your mouth. You'll feel a constriction in your throat and hear a "ha". Now, create the same feeling, but breathe through your nose. Breathe evenly while slightly constricting your throat to create a soft "ocean-like" noise. Inhale to fill your belly first, and then your chest, then exhale in reverse.

Affirming mantra: Repeat a word or phrase on the inhale and a different one on the exhale. Use words that embody the qualities you need in hard moments. For example, "I am strong, I am calm". Other word options for this format include steady, complete, supported, worthy, beautiful, enough, safe, resilient, peaceful, happy, brave, capable, grateful, focused, grounded, confident, doing my best, fearless, powerful, human.

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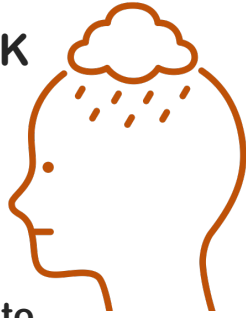
# PART ONE

# PRACTICES OF RESILIENCE

## DON'T HESITATE TO SEEK MENTAL HEALTH HELP.

Your emotions are valid, and pushing them down doesn't allow you to navigate them.

Therapy can be a helpful space to process stress and emotion, as well as deal with anxiety or depression. Many grad students have found the resources below useful.



**Let's Talk:** Drop-in listening sessions across campus with a counselor. They're free and confidential and no appointment is necessary. Details on University Health Services (UHS) website.

**Multicultural Student Center Drop-In:** Programming in collaboration with staff and counselors from the Division of Student Life, Writing Center, and UHS.

**UHS Mental Health Services:** Offers individual counseling (10 session limit/year), group counseling (unlimited sessions), topic- and identity- specific support groups (e.g., LGBTQ Support & Empowerment), and workshops (e.g., mindfulness).

**Psychology Research Training Clinic:** Sessions with clinical and counseling psychology doctoral students on a sliding scale

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## STOP COMPARING YOUR SKILLS AND PROGRESS WITH OTHERS.

Everyone's grad school experience is different, so make peace with your own personal timeline. You can be inspired by incredible peers, but don't be hard on yourself for perceived mismatches in how "good" you are as a grad student. You are here to accomplish your goals, not theirs. If you're from an underrepresented background, recognize that you may be carrying burdens that other students do not bear. Factor this labor (e.g., explaining your identity to others, being asked to serve on diversity panels, addressing microaggressions, etc.) into the tasks you give yourself credit for.

Those of us from underrepresented backgrounds are also more likely to worry that we don't measure up to the peers around us, or that we've been admitted to our programs in error (see "imposter syndrome")<sup>6</sup>. The lack of representation in your field, messages in academic texts, etc. play a role in making you feel you don't belong. When you see imposter syndrome rearing its head, ask for affirmation from friends and trusted colleagues.

On standby / standbi: when parts of your identity are less salient, apparent, or easy to express due to your environment; when you don't claim parts of your identity until someone else (perhaps a member of a socially dominant group) does

[Examples: 1. When Chris is around their gym friends, they're on standbi because their queer identity isn't expressed unless someone brings it up. 2. Jaime can't stand for long periods due to his autoimmune disease. His PI knows, but he's on standby because he doesn't think it's relevant to tell other lab mates.]

Code-switching: shifting one's linguistic code (a language or dialect) to another depending on the social context or conversation setting; often used by marginalized individuals for safety or respectability in dominant-group spaces<sup>1,2</sup>

[Example: You might say, "No, I will get back to you about this matter," to your advisor at work, but use "Nah, not yet. I'll letcha know soon," when speaking to friends at a bar.]

Critical mass: underrepresented people experience less stereotyping and higher inclusivity when their numbers in a group reach a certain percentage, typically 15–30%<sup>3</sup>

[Example: A Latinx student that attended a Hispanic-serving university felt welcome and included on campus. After moving to a less diverse university, they began feeling isolated due to a drastic change in critical mass.]

Tokenism: making only a perfunctory or symbolic effort towards representation, especially by recruiting a few people from underrepresented groups to give the appearance of equality<sup>4</sup>

[Example: A TV show that only depicts heterosexual relationships but features one character who hints at liking multiple genders.]

**Stereotype threat:** when minoritized students feel they are at risk of confirming stereotypes about their social group; a contributing factor to racial and gender gaps in academic performance <sup>5,6</sup>

[Example: In a math exam, a woman knows people think men are better at math than women. Her performance is negatively impacted by the pressure of trying not to fit the stereotype.]

**Acute stress:** short-term stress resulting from a specific experience or situation, which induces physical symptoms (higher blood pressure, increased heart rate, increased breathing rate, muscle tension, nausea, etc.) which quickly return back to normal once the event has passed <sup>7</sup>

[Example: Zoe has test anxiety, so she feels acute stress before and during an exam. Once it's over, she feels normal again.]

**Chronic stress:** stress from long-term, repeated exposure to a stressor; scientists believe that our stress response system is not designed to sustain chronic stress, and that it has negative health implications (heart disease, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, type II diabetes, and depression) <sup>7</sup>

**Mindful breathing:** breathing with the purpose of re-centering and relaxing the body; a tool that can be implemented to lower stress levels while also increasing productivity <sup>8</sup>

**Double (or triple, etc.) bind:** having multiple intersecting marginalized identities, which has multiplicative effects rather than additive <sup>9</sup>

[Example: A non-binary student of color experiences a double bind of oppression due to the intersection of cissexism and white supremacy.]

## TRAIN YOUR INNER MONOLOGUE.

We all have an internal monologue that can be damaging if left unchecked. Rather than ruminate over a failed experiment or mediocre presentation, ask yourself, “Does that thought help or hinder me?” This is a simple yet powerful question that allows you to slow down, step back for a moment, and redirect your thoughts to what you learned from the experience and what is within your power to change.

## ADOPT A GROWTH MINDSET.

The “fixed theory of interests” refers to the idea that an individual is born with a set of core interests that they just need to find. This outlook can result in giving up too easily on endeavors that become difficult with the justification that that it must not be a real passion. In contrast, a “growth mindset” focuses on developing interests and learning new skills <sup>4,5</sup>. Remember that your interests and abilities are still evolving.

