



CENTRE FOR INNOVATION IN
CAMPUS MENTAL HEALTH



Canadian Mental
Health Association
Ontario

Graduate Student Mental Health Toolkit:

A guide to supporting graduate students' mental health

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About

The graduate student mental health toolkit is a guide to supporting students prepared by the Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health (CICMH).

This guide is part of a provincewide effort to enhance student mental health by promoting positive mental health and well-being at post-secondary institutions.



Target Users

This guide targets student leaders, frontline staff, faculty members, graduate student supervisors and program leaders who directly interact with students as a part of their roles and responsibilities, in addition to policy makers and strategic planners who indirectly influence the experiences of students. Readers are encouraged to use this guide to consider the accessibility of resources and how services can be expanded to support student retention, time to degree completion and success.



Purpose

This toolkit aims to take a meaningful approach to offering guidance on how to support graduate students from all walks of life, whether in need of mental health and addictions supports or not, and the suggestions provided are meant to enhance campus experiences for graduate students in the long term. “Graduate students” refers to students in post-bachelor professional programs, master’s, doctoral and post-doctoral students.



What to expect/how it can be used

This toolkit discusses the unique challenges faced by graduate students, their impacts on mental health, and the importance of addressing pre-existing conditions in campus life. This is not a definitive resource as the experiences, perspectives and approaches of students are diverse across the province and informed by their lived experiences. However, the steps and strategies outlined provide a foundation for learning, reflecting and engaging.

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Background

Discussion of post-secondary mental health often focuses on undergraduates and overlooks graduate students. Yet, there is evidence suggesting challenges related to mental health are also a growing issue within the graduate student population. For example, in a sample of about 2,300 graduate students (including 26 countries and 234 institutions), graduate students were more than six times as likely to experience depression and anxiety compared to the general national population.¹ In the United States, findings from the 2019 National College Health Assessment (NCHA) suggested that, of approximately 13,000 graduate and professional school student participants, 64 per cent rated their overall level of stress in the past 12 months as “more than average” or “tremendous.”² The table below indicates responses for what students found to be traumatic in the past 12 months:

Within the last 12 months, any of the following been traumatic or very difficult to handle:

	Percent (%)	Male	Female	Total
Academics		38.2	48.9	45.6
Career-related issue		34.3	39.2	37.7
Death of family member or friend		10.5	15.5	13.9
Family problems		18.3	29.2	25.8
Intimate relationships		25.8	29.4	28.5
Other social relationships		17.6	22.8	21.5
Finances		25.6	35.1	32.1
Health problems of family member or partner		13.7	21.9	19.3
Personal appearance		14.4	23.7	20.9
Personal health issue		15.4	23.6	21.1
Sleep difficulties		24.8	30.7	29.1
Other		6.3	8.6	8.2
<i>Students reporting none of the above</i>		33.7	20.9	25.1
<i>Students reporting only one of the above</i>		13.5	12.4	12.7
<i>Students reporting 2 of the above</i>		13.5	13.0	13.0
<i>Students reporting 3 or more of the above</i>		39.2	53.7	49.2

Note: Male and female categories used in the survey are binary and do not capture the range of identities participants have.

A study using the NCHA Canadian reference group data found significant differences between 1,461 graduate/professional students with mental health conditions and 3,291 graduate/professional students without mental health conditions. Specifically, participants with mental health conditions reported experiencing higher levels of stress and more impediments to academic performance.³

Social isolation, apprehension about career opportunities, higher than normal levels of depression, and anxiety have all been identified as contributing to graduate student distress. Conflict-laden adviser/advisee relationships, in particular, have been identified as a major source of chronic distress, as the graduate student is acutely aware of the power differential and potential threats to their academic career. Factoring in the demanding work loads of teaching, undertaking research, coursework and constant evaluation by supervisors, it should come as no surprise these compounding and multiple sources of stress can lead to, are associated with and often exacerbate mental health challenges.

The graduate student population constitutes a highly-diverse demographic and thus requires a multidimensional approach oriented to academic and cultural supports in addition to the more traditional psychological services model. Psychological and professional services, while necessary, are not sufficient to meet the needs of graduate students who comprise a diverse group in age, background, experience and cultures. For the most part, graduate students are adults who have an array of life responsibilities including financial commitments, work, parental and family demands. The conversation about graduate student mental health is being framed predominantly within the context of academic support provided to, and specifically targeted for, graduate students. These

factor prominently in mental health discussions, surveys and initiatives across North American campuses and, as such, university communities are being challenged to go beyond simply raising awareness to focusing on the beneficial behaviours that foster mental health in an adult population.

Graduate students rely on their supervisors for research and financial support and career guidance. Not surprisingly, supervisory relationships are highlighted as being critical to all aspects of the graduate student experience and an emphasis toward improving supervisor/supervisee interactions is gaining momentum.⁴ Of course, quality mentoring is a skill that can be developed with support for faculty members. Mentorship programs are being introduced to address these expectations in a changing academic culture. These include clear communication, being respectful of students as ‘junior colleagues,’ and recognizing that academic pursuits, while important, are one aspect of life graduate students are trying to juggle. In addition to overseeing their students’ research, faculty members (and particularly supervisors) are expected to be familiar with university guidelines and procedures, facilitate professional development opportunities, value the students’ decisions, understand the need to balance priorities, provide constructive and timely feedback, and provide ongoing encouragement and support. Graduate students turn to their supervisors for support that obviously falls outside the realm of providing counselling and psychiatric services on campus.⁵

How do graduate students differ from undergraduate students?



Demographics

1

Age

According to National Graduates Survey (2015), the median age of graduation for students in Canada at the undergraduate level is 23, while it is 28 and 32 for the master's and doctoral levels, respectively. Furthermore, at the doctoral level, no graduates were under age 25.⁶



2

Debt and finances

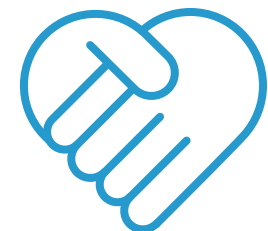
The same survey indicates the average debt owed upon graduation is \$15,300 at the undergraduate level and \$28,000 and \$33,000 at the master's and doctoral levels, respectively.⁷



3

Marital status

Other aspects in which graduate students might differ from undergraduate students are in terms of marital status and/or families. According to a report from McGill University, very few undergraduate students (three per cent) reported being legally married (and not separated) or living with a common-law partner (six per cent). Not surprisingly, these proportions increase at the master's level (16 per cent and 15 per cent, respectively) and the doctoral level (30 per cent and 18 per cent, respectively).⁸



4

Citizenship

There is a high level of variation that exists among different post-secondary institutions in terms of international student demographics. Much of this can be seen as a result of the types of programs offered by the college or university. To take the example of two large universities situated in close proximity to one another, Ryerson University reports 5.9 per cent international students enrolled at the undergraduate level⁹, and 15.9 per cent at the graduate level.¹⁰ However, international students make up 22.5 per cent of the undergraduate population and 16.8 per cent of the graduate population at the University of Toronto.¹¹



Staff or student?

Unlike a majority of undergraduate students, graduate students are likely to also be employees of their institutions in the form of teaching assistants, graduate assistants or research assistants. As a result, graduate students may find themselves straddling the boundary between staff and student on campus. Some may find themselves in the unique position of socializing with undergraduate peers while struggling to maintain professional boundaries as campus staff. Furthermore, some graduate students have expressed concerns over being seen by the students they are teaching while waiting in or entering counselling offices on campus.¹⁹ During the review and consultation process for this toolkit, students mentioned being treated as though they are legitimate members of the faculty helps foster a sense of commitment, community and responsibility to maintain the standards displayed by the advisers and professionals within the organization to whom they aspire to be like. Students advocated for being treated as “staff-in-training” rather than students who are employees.

Unique factors affecting mental health

Researchers found that worries about the competitive academic job market, poor career prospects, lack of control, inadequate support from colleagues, work-life imbalance and a difficult supervisor-student relationship were all linked to psychological distress. Combined, all the sources of graduate school stress build up into emotional adversity that can affect student performance.¹²

A connection between academic workload and perceived stress exists among graduate students, with students who spent a great deal of time in classes and labs and working on assignments reporting high levels of stress.^{13,14} Furthermore, graduate students often lack healthy balance in their personal lives, with many focusing the majority of their attention on academic work to the exclusion of hobbies, interests and personal relationships. In many instances, graduate students are detached from the social and cultural activities often targeted to the undergraduate population on college campuses.

Graduate students often report higher rates of stress than undergraduate students.¹⁵ The common sources of stress reported by graduate students include schoolwork, finances, graduate/teaching assistantships, career planning and family issues.^{16,17,18} Stress management programs targeting the common sources of stress should be provided to graduate students. Specific challenges to graduate school should be openly discussed along with the various forms of assistance available on campus. Similarly, graduate advisers can play an integral role. It is documented that among graduate students who experienced a stress-related or emotional problem that significantly affected their academic performance over the past year, those who had a better relationship with their advisers were more likely to use counselling services. Because graduate students report high stress levels due to financial reasons, universities should ensure graduate students have access to adequate mental health insurance and high-quality counselling services.

Graduate students' relationships with their advisers or principal investigators are also known to impact the quality of their experience. In an international study across 26 countries among graduate students with anxiety or depression, half did not agree their immediate mentors provided "real" mentorship (about one-third of both groups agreed with that statement). Responses were roughly similar to questions about whether advisers and principal investigators provided ample support and whether they positively impacted students' emotional mental well-being. More than half of those who experienced anxiety or depression did not agree their advisers or principal investigators were assets to their careers or that they felt valued by their mentor.¹

Recommendations for policy/program considerations

Suggestions from the Canadian Federation of Students–Ontario¹⁹ and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators.²⁰



Flexible counselling hours

Ensure graduate student mental health services offer flexible hours, including evening hours. This is necessary to accommodate graduate students' schedules, which often involve being on campus in the evenings and on weekends, while also taking classes, facilitating labs and teaching during regular business hours. Telecounselling or online psychotherapy may also offer more flexible opportunities for both counsellors and graduate students.



Private and separated space for graduate student counselling services

Choosing an appropriate location is important for maintaining student confidentiality so graduate students are not in the same place as the students they may teach or facilitate labs.



Comprehensive training of graduate-specific issues

Having an on-campus counsellor available exclusively to graduate students who is familiar with the unique challenges graduate students face. Additionally, provide all staff with training on graduate-specific issues as well as basic mental health safety training and mandatory equity, anti-oppression and anti-stigma training.



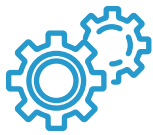
Access to and promotion of e-health technology

A 24-hour mobile or chat line would allow students easy access to mental health professionals. Although this cannot directly replace traditional counselling, it is a useful first point of contact that would provide students with alternate methods of seeking assistance. E-mental health solutions also go beyond online counselling, and may include the use of client management or student engagement platforms. E-mental health resources in the references list below corresponding to the following citations offer an in-depth look at existing solutions.^{21,22}



Building graduate student issues into a campus-wide mental health initiative

Institutions should embed graduate student mental health and development into the institutional vision and strategic goals of the campus. Doing so will increase knowledge, reduce stigma and expose the roots of the problem. Raising awareness helps encourage members' commitment to take action and foster change on campus.



Comprehensive training of graduate-specific issues on campus

Specific training and orientation at the workplace on graduate-specific issues and roles cannot be overlooked. Staff and graduate students should be included in the development of training programs. Trainings should include professional development, wherever possible, and provide mandatory equity, anti-oppression and anti-stigma training to all workers and students. Many scholars and practitioners also encourage faculty to develop greater awareness about mental health resources on campus. This is important, however faculty and student affairs staff should additionally work to create climates where students feel comfortable discussing mental health before the issues become exacerbated to the extent they need professional intervention. It's important they also learn how to implement strategies to promote mental health in their departments. Their role is to help promote well-being within their own departmental culture.



Tailoring services to students at different stages of their program

In a study that examines differences in well-being at various stages of a doctoral program, it was found students reported the highest well-being and internal motivation during the coursework phase, while the comprehensive examination phase was found to be the most challenging for the majority of students as indicated by the lowest wellness and motivation scores.²³ Targeted programs for students at different stages of their academic journeys will ensure students receive support when they most need it.



Extend partnerships with campus career centres

Graduate students, student affairs staff and faculty often remain unaware of career development resources on campus. Many students face anxiety about their future work opportunities, including those who might pursue tenure-track positions. Concerns around the increasing “giggification” of the academy and pressures to publish as graduate students may contribute to these anxieties. Other students struggle with the realization they might need to consider non-academic careers. When acknowledging many graduate students hold concerns about career uncertainty (which can lead to increased anxiety and/or depression), it makes sense for faculty to work with other partners, such as career development services, to ameliorate these concerns. Collaboration in the form of workshops, class visits and/or events serve as important opportunities for connection, and faculty members can assume lead roles in fostering these partnerships.

COVID-19 considerations

Creating campuses that are equitable and inclusive requires a closer look at the underlying policies in consultation with members and students from different communities. A policy provides the framework for program design and determines how services are delivered. Embedding principles of equity in all policies and planning processes is a crucial step toward targeting discrimination and violence, promoting social inclusion, and enhancing access to resources.



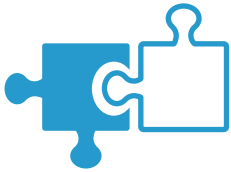
Increased flexibility

Research activities are significantly affected by the mandated physical-distancing directives. This includes the inability to perform laboratory and fieldwork (including in-person research data collection via interviews), limited access to resources (such as library, full access to online software/platforms off-campus), and connecting with international networks due to the travel restrictions. Furthermore, during this time, graduate students have restricted access to supervisors and committees, both of which are essential for the continuation and completion of their studies. To adapt to this new online and travel-reduced environment, supervisors may need to provide more coaching and/or facilitate peer-to-peer information sharing and troubleshooting. Moreover, many graduate students are active carers for dependents or have now become the key source of childcare in their households. They may no longer have the time or uninterrupted space available in the coming months to dedicate to their academic work. These new realities will most likely require a lengthening of project timelines. Things graduate students may need are flexibility on degree timelines, funding and emergency financial support, and additional help navigating an uncertain job market.



Address inequity challenges

While there has always been variability among students due to a number of factors, this current crisis will undoubtedly cause even more disparities. Moreover, not all graduate students and early career scholars will be equally disrupted by coronavirus. Instead, those who are already most vulnerable will become doubly disadvantaged. With the switch to online teaching, graduate students whose funding depends on teaching will be spending more time working and less time researching. Graduate students living in poverty, who do not have access to high-speed internet or a quiet workplace, will also be particularly hard hit. Hiring committees, supervisory committees and institutional units administering scholarships and awards should encourage applicants to explain their unique situations in cover letters and interviews as appropriate. Any explicable gap in productivity should be considered, since it does not reflect the applicants' true ability to meet and/or exceed expectations, when not working in the midst of a global health crisis.



Hybrid course delivery

While it can be very difficult for campuses to predict how the 2020-21 academic year might proceed during the pandemic, many institutions are choosing a hybrid model for graduate-level courses. In some cases, this could mean synchronous online courses, coupled with in-person attendance for smaller class sizes (such as less than 15 students). In other cases, courses are delivered in-person and online simultaneously, giving students the flexibility to choose whether they will attend in person. This may be particularly important for international students whose only options may be to take online classes due to border closures, visa issues and travel restrictions. Graduate programs tend to be small and involve critical discussions. In a new hybrid reality, supervisors will need to consider how they replicate these discussions that promote critical thinking and decision-making in virtual environments, and across cultures and time zones. Graduate students taking online courses may also have to take online proctored examinations, which can be another source of considerable stress. Instructors should consider implementing alternate forms of evaluation such as take-home examinations and assignments.



Increased formal and informal supports

During these challenging times, students will need continued access to counselling and academic supports. Many institutions have successfully made the transition to providing e-mental health supports for students. See the references below corresponding to the following citations for some examples of e-mental health policies and procedures.^{24,25,26} Other forms of support, such as thesis-writing groups, peer support groups, fitness and nutrition counselling could also be helpful. In the absence of in-person graduate student events, like socials and pub nights, consider organizing webinars, virtual events and chatting platforms for students to remain engaged with their community.



Appendix A: **Additional Resources**

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Additional Resources

[Inclusive Mentoring for Graduate Students](#)

Strategies for graduate students and faculty advisers. Highlights critical strategies and resources for effective mentor-mentee relationships: providing advice, focusing on communication, mentoring across difference and setting goals and expectations.

[A Mentoring Guidebook for Faculty](#)

Written by the Graduate Student Senate of Case Western Reserve University, this guidebook includes checklists and worksheets for faculty adviser-advisee first meetings and setting expectations, and addresses advising and mentoring within diverse communities.

[Advisor-Advisee Relations: Guidelines](#)

These guidelines help students and faculty navigate a healthy adviser-advisee relationship by recommending best practices.

[More Feet on the Ground](#)

An online mental health education program proven to increase campus awareness of mental illness and mental health resources for post-secondary students. This online course is geared toward staff and faculty supporting students on campus.

[Video Call Support Groups for Doctoral Researchers An Implementation Guide](#)

A step-by-step guide to setting up video call support groups for doctoral students. This initiative is suitable for, and could benefit, all master's and doctoral researchers in any department. It may be particularly useful for those in arts and humanities where the experience of doing a doctorate can be more isolating than the natural sciences. It may also be particularly helpful for those who do not spend much time on campus, which tends to be those who are older, part time or have caring responsibilities.

[Starting an Effective Dissertation Writing Group](#)

A guide to starting a dissertation writing support group for graduate students. This document highlights implementation strategies, potential pitfalls and templates for student use.

[Graduate Student Mental Health & Wellness Report](#)

A summary of initiatives targeted at improving graduate student well-being at the University of Alberta.

[Graduate students' mental health: Results and recommendations from a needs assessment of psychology graduate](#)

A report of a needs assessment to identify the mental health needs of the University of Ottawa's graduate students in psychology and to determine if the mental health services available meet those needs.

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