Graduate Students in Psychology's Mental Health: Needs Assessment Findings

AD HOC MENTAL HEALTH COMMITTEE AND WORKING GROUP

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### PREVALENCE RATES
From empirical studies with graduate students

**DEPRESSION**
11–39%

**ANXIETY**
18–41%

**SUICIDAL IDEATION**
- 11% (past two weeks)
- 12% (past year)
- 4.3% tried or seriously considered attempting suicide (past year)

Barreira, Basilico, & Bolotnyy, 2018; Drum et al., 2009; Evans et al., 2018

### TOP 10 STRESS FACTORS
Proportion of students reporting high, medium, or low levels of stress (n = 106)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stress Factor</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Not applicable</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Thesis</td>
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<td>2. Work overload</td>
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<td>3. Work-life balance</td>
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<td>4. Pressure to produce research</td>
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<td>5. Courses</td>
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<td>6. Finances</td>
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<td>7. Mental health</td>
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<td>8. Career opportunities after the PhD</td>
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<td>9. Teaching and research assistantships</td>
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<td>10. Thesis supervisor</td>
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### IMPROVING RESOURCES
Students who indicated that mental health resources on campus could be improved (n = 108)

- **Agreed**: 85%
- **10%** neither agreed nor disagreed
- **5%** disagreed

### NECESSITY FOR NEW RESOURCES
Students who indicated that new mental health resources were necessary on campus (n = 107)

- **Agreed**: 72%
- **18%** neither agreed nor disagreed
- **10%** disagreed
UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA’S MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

KNOWLEDGE OF SERVICES
Psychology graduate students’ knowledge of the University of Ottawa’s mental health resources (n = 109)

OPENNESS TO SERVICES
Graduate Students in Psychology’s openness to the University of Ottawa’s mental health resources (n = 109)

UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA AND COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

BIGGEST OBSTACLES TO ACCESSING SERVICES
Proportion of students endorsing these factors as obstacles to using services on campus (n = 109)

TOP CHARACTERISTICS OF A MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCE
Important characteristics of mental health resources endorsed by the greatest proportion of students (n = 109)

1. Reduced cost
2. Evidenced-based
3. Not affiliated with the School of Psychology
4. In the official language of their choice
5. Offered by a clinical psychologist
6. Rapidly accessible
Based on the findings of the needs assessment, we recommend the following actions to address the mental health needs of graduate students:

**Improving the dissemination of available mental health services to graduate students** would be extremely valuable, as several available resources were virtually unknown to students, professors, or staff. A regularly updated mental-health resource guide for on-campus and community mental health resources is in development. We recommend that the Faculty of Social Sciences (FSS) make an action plan for ongoing and systematic dissemination of the guide (e.g., through their website, on orientation day with new students, during mandatory courses, and appended to course syllabi.

It would also be worthwhile to **increase the accessibility of services**. For example, by **helping students to be able to afford mental health services**. We recommend that the Graduate Student Association (GSAED) negotiate for improved insurance coverage for mental health. We also recommend that the FSS advocate for financial relief for upper-year students (e.g., part-time status, tuition waiver). Similarly, where possible, we recommend that the FSS seek sources of funding for graduate students that are not tied to research productivity.

We also recommend that the FSS **hire a full-time mental health professional** specifically for its graduate students. It would be especially valuable if that is able to meet the need for evidence-based services for more severe mental health difficulties.

To **help students better manage the demands of their program**, we recommend that the FSS conduct focus groups with graduate students to identify changes at the program level that could remediate students’ program-related stress while maintaining program integrity. One such possible change might be to implement more pass-fail courses. We also recommend that the FSS examine ways to reduce stress arising from the thesis supervisor-supervisee relationship (e.g., through supervisor training and annual evaluation).

Relatedly, we recommend that the FSS clarify communication with students (e.g., about teaching/research assistantships, employment outside the university, changing thesis supervisors, mediating supervisor-supervisee disputes, or research expectations). We also recommend that workshops be delivered by the FSS to help graduate students develop specific skills (e.g., time management, assertiveness, mindfulness, stress management).

Finally, **helping students to overcome stigma** could remove a barrier between students and mental health service use. One major way to reduce this stigma could be through increased structured self-disclosure by professors about their own use of services. Stigma could also be reduced faculty-wide if the FSS were to offer a mental health stigma-reduction workshop to its graduate students (e.g., “The Inquiring Mind” workshop).

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