There is no rigorous estimate of the incidence and extent of mental health issues in postdocs. There is little doubt, however, that being a postdoc is stressful. Most postdocs work extremely hard, often for long hours and at low pay. Because of their commitment to work—and because they tend to work in labs far from home—they often are isolated from close friends and family. Furthermore, there aren’t enough jobs, and they may feel stuck.

“I’m kind of freaking out,” says Cleyde Helena, a neuroendocrinology postdoc at Florida State University in Tallahassee. “I always wanted a tenure-track position, but with my CV and current abilities, I don’t think I can get it,” she says. “I could do another postdoc, but that takes time. I’m 37.”

Not long after starting his postdoc, Street found that his creativity and motivation were shot. His productivity suffered, and his feelings of inadequacy grew worse. He worked longer hours to try and keep up. “My brain wasn’t working right; it kept getting in my way,” he says. “Soon, my biggest aspiration was just to survive.”

Like other high achievers, postdocs find it hard to seek help. “People are afraid to admit they can’t hack it,” Street says. Jennifer Cohen, a current AAAS Science and Technology Policy Fellow (AAAS is the publisher of Science), says that many postdocs avoid on-campus help even when it’s available because they worry their research advisers or other members of the lab will find out they are struggling.

Former postdoc Mahadeo Sukhai, vice president of the board of directors of the National Postdoctoral Association, says that some foreign populations are especially opposed to help. “I’m from the South Asian diaspora, and I can tell you that if you have a conversation with someone from this diaspora about a mental health issue, it’s probably not going to go very well.” That’s bad because foreign postdocs “tend to be much further from home, and … have to deal with these issues far from their normal supports,” says Jennifer Oh, director of postdoctoral scholar affairs at the University of California, San Diego.

What can be done? Institutions need to find ways to provide appropriate support services to all postdocs, including those with fellowships. Advisers should be attentive to changes in behavior such as mood swings, working at night, isolation, and emotional outbursts.

Christian Gloria of Hawaii Pacific University, Kaneohe, first author of an article in the journal Stress and Health that studied a population of postdocs, says that advisers can offer significant support by reinforcing positive emotions.

Postdocs should be reassured that their problems need not threaten their careers. They can help themselves by seeking support (including professional help), employing “adaptive” coping strategies (such as planning and positive reframing), and avoiding “maladaptive” ones (including denial, self-distraction, and substance abuse).

Along with medication and therapy, Street began to view his life as an experiment. He started running. He started a gratitude journal and amassed a collection of life hacks to improve his productivity. He blogged about his experiences and discovered that others were experiencing the same thing. “I thought I was the only one,” he says.

Finally, it can help to get out of the lab more and do things you enjoy. “It’s easy to forget there’s life outside the lab,” Cohen says. “So if you love to dance … make time to dance every day. It will keep you sane when everything else gets crazy.” ■
The stressed-out postdoc
Carrie Arnold (July 31, 2014)
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Editor's Summary

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