

The measure of success

When I was a Ph.D. student, a respected professor at our school had a heart attack in his office and died. As he was whisked away to the ambulance, I numbly watched familiar faces in the department succumb to shock. I didn't know it at the time, but this deeply troubling experience would shape my thinking about how to craft my academic career after I faced my own life-changing illness. While I was a postdoc, a sudden neurological disorder left me unable to walk, took my vision, and held me in the grip of vertigo and crushing migraines. With the help of a small army of health professionals, I began to improve. My brain started compensating for the lost neurons, and my muscles learned to fire again, but I don't know whether I will ever recover completely. This harsh reality check has made me think seriously about why academia promotes unhealthy work habits and how I can pursue the research I love while also taking care of myself.

Prior to my illness, I worked extremely long hours, sometimes even sleeping in my office if I faced a deadline. I hoped that my hard-won achievements would eventually be judged worthy of tenure. When I returned to work after my illness—despite its severity, I took just 2 months off because of dwindling sick leave, increasing medical bills, and no certainty of ongoing employment—I fell back into the academic achievement trap. I spent all my time working and worrying, and my health began to decline again.

But fear of a relapse made me question my actions and, ultimately, the trajectory of my career. I thought about the professor who died. I thought about a friend who left academia because the pace and environment had negative mental and physical effects. I realized that my years in academia had eroded my mental health. I didn't want to hurt myself permanently by pursuing career advancement at all costs, but I didn't want to leave either. So I decided to accept my physical limitations and—an even more difficult task—shed my prejudices about what a successful career looks like.

Now, with the support of academic and industry mentors, I am building a nontraditional academic path. I am still a university research fellow, but my research into how mining companies can decrease their environmental impact is funded by industry. For these funders, what matters more than my publication record or the “prestige” of my institution is my creativity, integrity, and ability to produce rigorous science that solves real-world problems. I feel like a pressure valve has been released in my life, easing the worries and long hours



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and allowing me to better manage my illness. And I find applied research immensely satisfying. Watching nutrient-rich water rejuvenate an acidic mine pit lake, I have seen that my work has value beyond contributing to my h-index. Perhaps most importantly, I was well enough to be there to witness it.

My illness made me think about my behavior and health in a way that I hadn't earlier in my career. Now, when I'm tired, I rest—even if I'm in the field. My actions and the direction of my career have surprised some of my colleagues, who sometimes make off-the-cuff comments about my “laziness.” These hurt, but I know that I'm doing the right thing for myself. I hope that others will also prioritize their personal well-being, even if it means letting go of deeply held beliefs about what we are “supposed” to do for our careers.

According to the numbers, my chances for long-term success in academia don't look great. Women and people with disabilities are underrepresented, and belonging to both groups puts me in a particularly difficult position. But rather than focusing on what members of underrepresented groups need to do to “adapt” to academic culture, we should be interrogating the system itself, which expects all of us to work excessively at the expense of our physical and mental health. Maybe we need new measures of success. ■

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