

By Leela Dilkes-Hoffman

When the trail gets steep

When I was younger I loved going on long, meandering trail runs on the outskirts of my hometown in the Australian countryside. It was my favorite way to escape the stresses of everyday life. I didn't worry about time or distance or pace. I just enjoyed the immersive and meditative experience of running in a beautiful place. So, when I was back in my hometown for a visit after a tough first year of my Ph.D. program, I thought a trail run was just what I needed. But instead of helping me relax, the run did just the opposite: It made me anxious. In the end, I figured out why.

After I moved to the city for college, where my runs traversed flat concrete paths instead of winding dirt trails, I bought a GPS watch and used it obsessively. When I was back in the country, it constantly alerted me to the fact that I wasn't keeping up with my usual pace. I turned my watch off, thinking that would allow me to enjoy my surroundings and find the peace I expected, but I still worried that I was underperforming. My frustration continued as I went on a few more runs in the ensuing days. "Why can't I let go and just enjoy myself?" I wondered. But after some introspection, I realized why I was struggling—both on trail runs and in grad school.

Going into my Ph.D., I had thought that my solid undergraduate track record and strong work ethic would set me up for instant success. To my surprise, I was wrong. I lacked confidence in my research abilities and constantly felt my progress was too slow. Other students' self-assurance, coupled with the tangible results they were achieving, made me feel insecure. Finally, one day I broke down in tears in my adviser's office, wondering whether I would be able to deliver a Ph.D. of any value.

Then came my visit home—and a realization about my trail runs: I was having trouble because I hadn't properly adjusted my expectations to the differences between an urban run and a trail run. In the city, I set target distances and target paces, and I didn't feel satisfied with my run unless my GPS watch told me that I had achieved my goals. On the undulating trails back home, I couldn't keep up—and I wasn't satisfied.

Similarly, as an undergraduate I had thrived on continuous feedback, usually in the form of grades. I had grown accustomed to getting constant assurance that I had done



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When I returned to grad school, I shifted my mindset based on my trail-running epiphany and tried to take a more holistic view of my progress. I focused less on the volume of work I completed and how long it'd been since my adviser complimented me on my progress. Instead, I asked myself questions such as: "Are my time frames realistic for the task? Is my confidence low because I'm working on something I've never encountered before? Will I be able to maintain this level of work output for the length of the project?"

Now, as I near the end of my Ph.D., I'm pleased to report that I'm a happier, more confident scientist. I still hear negative voices ringing in my head at times—telling me that I haven't lived up to my expectations—but for the most part they've faded. I know that a Ph.D. can be a turbulent, unpredictable process, and I've learned to cut myself some slack when I hit a steep hill. ■

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