Strange dreams

Four years into my Ph.D. program, my hands started to go numb each night as I slept. I didn’t think much of it at the time; it was just uncomfortable and weird. Then one night, while sound asleep, I somehow mistook my numb arm for a snake. I threw myself out of bed and woke in a panic—panting, trembling, heart racing—on my bedroom floor, poised to defend myself against this imaginary snake. A few nights later, my hand was a spider. Once again, I launched myself out of bed in utter panic. I later discovered that these nighttime events weren’t simply strange dreams; they were a direct result of grad school stress.

At the time, I was working toward my Ph.D. and training to be a clinical psychologist. I spent half my time sitting in a dark room listening to the “pop pop” of neurons firing as rats explored mazes and the other half seeing patients, helping everyday people work through anxiety, depression, stress, and burnout.

Juggling the Ph.D. and the clinical program caused the perfectionist in me to run riot. There was never enough time to immerse myself fully in either world. I oscillated between striving to be the best and, when I couldn’t, struggling to find motivation to work at all. The clinical exam loomed large in my mind and played into my worst fear: being exposed in front of a panel of experts as the fraud I believed I was. I lived with a constant sense of impending doom.

During lunch, I’d sit around the table in the department staff room with Ph.D. student and postdoc friends, joking about my nighttime attacks. “You thought your hand was a snake?” they’d say. Then we’d laugh, swapping stories about the sorry state we were in. At no point did I think I should see a doctor. It simply made for a funny story.

Later that year, while discussing a patient’s symptoms with a neurologist, I realized that my anxiety could be the direct cause of the numbness in my hands. The perpetual stress was triggering tension in my shoulders, and that, in turn, was putting pressure on my nerves and cutting off the circulation to my extremities.

There was a certain irony in that realization. I’d spent years learning about psychological tools for dealing with stress and anxiety. But until then it never occurred to me that I, too, was experiencing an abnormal level of stress and anxiety—or that I might benefit from the tools I was using to help others. I had never seen my problems as anything other than reasonable responses to the pressures of academic life.

When virtually all your peers are exhausted, stressed, and working overtime, how can you see your own experience as a cause for concern? There were some exceptions—peers who had better work-life balance and didn’t appear to be riddled with anxiety—but my friends and I persuaded ourselves that their more balanced approach was a failing, a lack of wanting. They clearly weren’t on the same career path.

When I figured out why my hands were going numb, I turned to running to relieve my stress. That helped somewhat and my strange dreams went away, but it was a Band-Aid solution to what should have struck me as a more serious problem. A psychologist could have helped me manage my stressors more effectively and push back on the mounting workload.

I can’t go back and change my approach to grad school. But I’m now in a position to show others an alternative path. I specialize in helping academics navigate similar challenges and take a healthier approach to dealing with the pressures of academia. I’ve worked with academics at all career stages, and I’ve seen firsthand how many of them harbor a chorus of inner voices demanding perfection and telling them that the sacrifices are necessary for success.

My message to those I work with is that the stereotype of the overworked, stressed-out academic is unhealthy and outdated. Productivity and well-being are not mutually exclusive. In fact, prioritizing your well-being can improve not only your productivity, but also your motivation, insight, creativity, and enjoyment. So, when your internal alarm bells send you a warning signal—or when snakes attack in the night—don’t laugh; take action. ■

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