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## Mental Health Concerns in Graduate Students: Implications and Effective Interventions

Brody Fanshaw  
brody.fanshaw@go.winona.edu

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Mental Health Concerns in Graduate Students: Implications and Effective Interventions

Brody Fanshaw

A Capstone Project submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the Master of Science Degree in

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Winona State University  
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Counselor Education Department

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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CAPSTONE PROJECT

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Mental Health Concerns in Graduate Students: Implications and Effective Interventions

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

Brody T. Fanshaw

Has been approved by the faculty advisor and the CE 695 – Capstone Project

Course Instructor in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Science Degree in

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Capstone Project Supervisor: Anquinetta V. Calhoun, Ph.D.

*Anquinetta V. Calhoun*

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Signature

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### Abstract

Graduate school can be a stressful time for students. In addition to academic tasks, individuals in graduate programs frequently experience stress due to personal and professional obligations. The distressing nature of managing these priorities allows for an increase in mental health concerns, such as depression, anxiety, and suicidality. The reviewed literature finds that programs that have positive factors within their department, such as a positive environment and supportive advisement, allow for an opportunity to curb these concerns. The literature also notes the importance of universities preparing their students for these stressors during their time in their graduate program, in addition to discussing the stressor and mental health resources during student orientation. Further research is needed on the graduate student community in regards to mental health.

*Keywords:* graduate school, graduate student, mental health, stressors, self-care

Contents

Introduction.....5

Review of Literature.....6

    Graduate Student Population.....6

    Mental Health Concerns and Trends.....7

        Stress and Compounding Factors.....7

        Depression and Anxiety.....8

        Suicidality.....9

        Specific Program Trends.....9

    Positive Factors.....10

        Support.....10

        Self-Care.....11

    What is Being Done.....11

    Application to the Clinical Mental Health Field.....12

Conclusion.....13

    Implications and Applications.....13

    Limitations.....13

References.....15

### **Mental Health Concerns in Graduate Students**

The initiative of advocating for mental health concerns in college students is a phenomenon that has increased drastically over the past decade, but the focus tends to stray from a rather large group of students in the college community: graduate students. The majority of research and advocacy efforts for mental health concerns focus on undergraduate students, especially efforts to curb said concerns (Bamonti et. al, 2014). This has allowed for the focus of graduate student well-being to grow further behind, while the increase of services and advocacy for undergraduates has progressed (Bamonti et. al, 2014).

Graduate students often have differing stressors than their undergraduate peers, specifically that of time and financial constraints (El-Ghoroury, 2012), primarily focusing on the balance of personal, professional, and educational tasks, as well as graduate students having the higher median of debt. Notably, these stressors impact separate sections of the graduate community in different ways, whether it be an individual's year in graduate school or the department that they are in (Lipson et. al, 2016). To illuminate the presence of mental health concerns within the graduate student population, the following are explored: current trends in the graduate school community, positive factors which have impacted programs in healthy ways, and how this information impacts the clinical mental health counseling community.

## **Review of Literature**

The literature on mental health concerns within college student populations, whether it be undergraduate or graduate, is notably extensive as of recent years. As the research on mental health within the college community grows, a question inquiring on the mental health status within graduate students increases, as the majority of research focuses on that of the undergraduate population. This review of the literature not only explores the research done on the graduate student population and common mental health concerns within the group, it also explores various compounding factors that create additional challenges. The remaining literature focuses on what can be done to improve the overall well-being of the graduate student population through self-care and stress reduction techniques, and how the mental health community can support these individuals while they are going through this notably stressful process.

### **Graduate Student Population**

The graduate student enrollment within universities in the United States has gradually increased since 1960, and as of 2018 the population consisted of 1,004,176 receiving post-baccalaureate degrees (i.e. master's and doctorate degrees) across private and public institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). The gender breakdown of individuals that conferred master's degrees is 591,738 females and 412,438 males, while the distribution of race/ethnicity for post-baccalaureate degrees is 62.7% White, 14% Black, 11.2% Hispanic, 8.5% Asian/Pacific Islander, and .5% Native American/Alaska Native (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). The United States Department of Education (2021) reports that the majority of graduate degrees conferred at both private and public institutions during this period of time were derived for the business, education, and health profession fields.

## **Mental Health Concerns and Trends**

The level of distress within the graduate student population is notably high, and has even been noted as a “mental health crisis” (Charles et al., 2021, p. 1). The literature regarding mental health focuses primarily on graduate student stress levels and factors that compound those stress levels, depressive and anxious symptomology, and substance use (Allen et al., 2020). Some research discusses trends within individual programs, but the information regarding this varies in amount of data and depth dependent on programing (Sharifian, 2019).

### ***Stress and Compounding Factors***

As noted above, the level of stress has been noted to be high. According to Charles et al. (2021), this may not only be due to the stress of the classroom and homework. Yusufov et al. (2019) note that there are various external factors that may be impacting the overall stress levels of individuals within the graduate school community. They further note the variety in potential stressors, including financial concerns, the adjustment to graduate school education, and the climate quality within an individual’s selected program (Yusufov et al., 2019).

Financial stress is common among all college student levels, whether it be undergraduate, graduate, or post-graduate (Yusufov et al., 2019). Short et al. (2019) address this crucial topic in an analysis of the financial stress in the graduate community and the importance of educating the community on finances during this period in a student’s life. They emphasize the tremendous workload in the graduate community, as well as time invested in education, allowing for less time to be available for employers (Short et al., 2019). This, in addition to traditional rent and utility fees, as well as tuition fees and student debt, allow for the level of financial stress within the community to become, and remain, high (Yusufov et al., 2019).



Quality of climate within a program was either an additional stressor noted by the research or a protective factor in the graduate school community. Charles et al. (2021) notes that an effective mentor, as well as an interactive departmental social climate operates as a positive factor for graduate student mental health and the overall reduction of stress within the community. Additionally, in a study by Allen et al. (2020), it was found that graduate students with a supportive advisor allowed for increased moderation between stress, cynicism, and inefficacy within the student.

According to research done by Rizzolo and Massey (2020), levels of stress in the initial year of graduate school can fluctuate immensely as the experience is similar in some ways to undergraduate education, but different in the way of having an increased workload and more levels of applied thought. This study noted the potential for difficulty in psychological adjustment due to these stress levels (Rizzolo & Massey, 2020). Rizzolo and Massey (2020) most notably acknowledge the fluctuation of anxiety levels within the graduate program's population, following up with the need for stress management techniques to diminish, or not reach, anxious thought among first-year graduate students.

### ***Depression and Anxiety***

Garcia-Williams et al. (2014) find that the presence of depression and anxiety are common in the graduate student community. Within the graduate student population, Garcia-Williams et al. (2014) found that average depressive symptoms among the sample as mild depressed mood and loneliness, while the average anxiety symptoms display as anxiousness, nervousness, and stress. Additional studies from Allen et al. (2020) note a strong correlation between high levels of depression and anxiety with graduate student burnout, a common

phenomenon where students, and commonly clinicians, experience high levels of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy, due to high levels of distress for longer periods of time.

### *Suicidality*

In addition to symptoms of anxiety and depression, studies have found there to be a presence of suicidality among graduate students as well (Lipson et. al, 2016). In one of the first investigations into correlates of suicidal behavior among graduate students, Garcia-Williams et. al (2014) discovered that, similarly to that of their undergraduate peers, graduate students endorsing suicidal behavior acknowledge more depressive and anxious symptoms, more negative emotions, and more substance use than their non-suicidal peers. Furthermore, these correlates of suicidality in this study remained consistent with the literature on suicidality, such as higher scores on the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) and reports of high levels of loneliness (Rossom et al., 2017).

### *Specific Program Trends*

As noted previously, the variability in research regarding mental health concerns specific to certain programs is variable in amount and depth. In addition to the findings by Yusufov et al. (2019) indicating high stress in medical, helping, and clinically-oriented graduate programs, Lipson et al. (2016) found that individuals in the humanities were found to be more likely to have mental health concerns. They also discovered that individuals least likely to seek treatment for their concerns were in the business and engineering fields (Lipson et al., 2016).

Another focused graduate field includes mental health graduate programs, in which graduate students not only have to focus on their own mental health concerns, they also need to assist in the treatment of others'. Research into mental health graduate students focus on the

topic of “lived experience”-a concept in which the student is going to the field with external knowledge of mental health, whether it be through personal experience, or an experience with a friend or loved one (Kaus & Moran, 2019, p. 862). They also focus on the compounding effects of “lived experience” and traditional educational stress, and how it impacts adherence to mental health ethics codes (Kaus & Moran, 2019, p. 865). An example of a study of ethical code adherence is addressed in Bamonti et al. (2014), which issues a call to action on graduate students taking care of themselves effectively to provide the most beneficial care to clients while in training, adhering to their ethical obligation of doing so.

### **Positive Factors**

The literature on mental health concerns in graduate students not only focuses on prevalence, but it also focuses on positive factors that impact a graduate student’s well-being (Charles et al., 2021). As indicated by the name, these factors are linked to less distressed mental states of this population. The two factors addressed in the literature most commonly are: the presence of self-care, and the presence of social and emotional support in the life of the graduate student (Sharifian, 2019; Woolston, 2021).

### ***Support***

In a study solely dedicated to the discovery of positive factors related to graduate student mental health, Charles et. al (2021) discovered that one of the biggest predictors of decreased depressive symptoms was the presence of social support. The correlation between the presence of social support and decreased depressive symptoms were notably more strongly correlated than those of their negative counterparts (Charles et al., 2021). In addition to social support, a study published by Woolston (2021), noted that graduate students frequently rely on professional and

emotional support from their supervisors during their educational experience. Woolston (2021) goes on further to address that lack of these supports, especially during stressful events (such as the COVID-19 pandemic), create a potential for a growing mental health crisis among this population.

### *Self-Care*

Another positive factor noted frequently in the literature is the presence of self-care in the graduate student population. The importance of creating an environment with self-care at the forefront can be noted by Barnett and Cooper (2009), in which it is noted that creating a culture that puts self-care first allows for reduced burnout and distress, especially in that of the mental health and helping fields. Furthermore, in a study done by Sharifian (2019), it was found that the frequency of self-care among certain graduate students served as a predictor for professional quality of life. This study, in addition to that of El-Ghoroury et. al (2012), notes the importance of including topics of self-care and wellness in future training initiatives, not only for the future professional life of a graduate student, but also for the individuals they serve.

### **What is Being Done**

As addressed, the focus on mental health concerns in graduate students from a research perspective is a relatively new concept, as opposed to that of their undergraduate counterparts (Bamonti et. al, 2014; Rizzolo and Massey, 2020), but what is being done currently to address this population? Francis and Horn (2017) note an increased focus on mental health on college campuses by the universities as a whole through university-sponsored interventions (i.e. counseling services and suicide prevention teams). Additionally, Sharifian (2019) offered that there are now an increased number of programs specifically targeting the importance of self-care

(especially of those in helping fields). These two interventions, education on external factors, such as financial stressors and quality of program climate (Charles et al., 2021; Yusufov et al., 2019), and increased research on graduate student mental health offer a reference point to future programs focusing on the mental health well-being of their graduate student population (Charles et al., 2021).

### **Application to Clinical Mental Health Field**

The information presented in the research cannot only be utilized to benefit strategies used by counselors for their clients in this population, but it can also be utilized by graduate-level mental health programs to improve their initiatives in the future. Acknowledging the presence of mental health concerns as addressed by Garcia-Williams et. al (2014), will allow for programs to adapt their goals to not only focus on their graduate student's mental health, they will also allow for them to be the most effective and ethical practitioners that they can be.

The promotion of self-care and wellness, as presented by Bamonti et. al (2014) and Sharifian (2019), and the promotion of the positive factors as noted by Charles et. al (2021), exploring beneficial factors to programs such as supportive advisement and a positive departmental social climate, correlate with positive mental health outcomes. Garcia-Williams et. al (2014) not only encourage the promotion of self-care and wellness in graduate student programs, they also note that these subjects should be addressed in program orientation. They further recommend the communication of potential emotional symptoms through the graduate school process, as well as where the students can access mental health support on and off-campus (Garcia-Williams et al., 2014). The application and promotion of mental health concerns within graduate programs will allow for more prepared clinicians, and as a result, an increase in the well-being of their clients.

### **Conclusion**

There is a need for focus on mental health in graduate students and their respective programs. The increased number of individuals attending graduate school and the notable stress that accompanies the graduate school process has shown the presence of distress, anxiety, depression, and suicidality among graduate school students. The presence of certain positive factors in graduate school programs, such as peer and advisor support, promotion of self-care, and preparation for external stress (professional and financial) correlate with positive outcomes for the mental health of graduate students.

### **Implications and Applications**

With the presence of mental health concerns within graduate students, and the rise in students attending graduate programs, an increased focus must be placed on this population. Increased preparation for mental health concerns, promotion for services, and discussion of potential stressors during a program's orientation may be beneficial for graduate students and the program as a whole. The instillation of healthy self-care and wellness in these students will allow for not only a healthy learning environment in graduate school, but it will also allow for a positive professional outcome post-graduate school, modeling healthy steps for an individual's mental health in the working world.

### **Limitations**

As noted previously, research done on mental health within universities is primarily conducted with undergraduate student populations due to their high numbers. When graduate student mental health is studied, it is frequently combined with their undergraduate counterparts,

or compared to them directly. It should also be noted that a bulk of the research solely on graduate students is done on health or helping fields (i.e. social work, nursing, or psychologists), as opposed to other disciplines, due to the lack of the utilization of mental health services of these other fields when in school.

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