

# Depression, anxiety high in graduate students, survey shows

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Graduate students are more than six times as likely to experience depression and anxiety as compared to the general population, according to a comprehensive survey of 2,279 individuals conducted via social media and direct email. The research team including Teresa Evans, Ph.D., and Lindsay Bira, Ph.D., of UT Health San Antonio describe their results in the March issue of the journal *Nature Biotechnology*.

The survey included clinically validated scales for [anxiety](#) and [depression](#). Nine of 10 respondents were Ph.D. students while 10 percent were master's degree students.

The disparity between graduate students and the general population proved to be about equal for both mental health conditions. On the respective scales utilized to test anxiety and depression, 41 percent of graduate students scored as having moderate to severe anxiety while 39 percent scored in the moderate to severe depression range. This compared with 6 percent of the [general population](#) as tested previously with those same scales.

The study found that female graduate students were more likely to suffer from anxiety and depression than male graduate students. The transgender and/or gender-nonconforming population also scored significantly higher.

Forty-three percent of female respondents scored in the moderate to severe anxiety range and 41 percent in the depression range. This compared to 34 percent and 35 percent, respectively, for the male respondents. For transgender/gender-nonconforming graduate students, the totals were 55 percent and 57 percent.

## **A developing problem**

"There is a growing cry for help from graduate students across the globe who struggle with significant mental health concerns," Dr. Evans, Dr. Bira and the other authors wrote. "Despite increased discussion of the topic, there remains a dire need to resolve our understanding of the mental health issues in the trainee population."

These issues, as identified in the study, include [work-life balance](#) and trainee-adviser relationship.

The graduate students were asked whether they agree with the statement, "I have a good work-life balance." Fifty-six percent of graduate students experiencing moderate to severe anxiety and 55 percent of students experiencing depression said they did not agree.

"Work-life balance is hard to attain in a culture where it is frowned upon to leave the laboratory before the sun goes down," the authors wrote.

## **Relationships with mentors lacking**

Likewise, 50 percent of graduate students experiencing anxiety and depression said they did not agree with the statement that their principal investigator or adviser provides "real" mentorship.

Many universities lack adequate career and professional development programs, the authors wrote, also noting: "Career development encompasses many skills that are vital to graduate [student](#) success, but often not included under this umbrella is mental health."

Dr. Evans is an assistant professor in the Department of Pharmacology and the founder of the Office of Workforce and Career Development within the Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences at UT Health San Antonio.

Dr. Bira is an assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry within UT Health San Antonio's Joe R. & Teresa Lozano Long School of Medicine, where she works with the STRONG STAR research consortium studying treatments for post-traumatic stress disorder. In the larger community, Dr. Bira functions as a clinical health psychologist, offering presentations and workshops to break mental [health](#) stigma and promote emotional wellness.

## Call to action

The authors caution that the study is a convenience sample in which respondents who have had a history of anxiety or depression may have been more apt to respond to the survey. Nevertheless, the data should prompt both academia and policy makers to consider intervention strategies, the authors wrote.

"The strikingly high rates of anxiety and depression support a call to action to establish and/or expand [mental health](#) and career development resources for [graduate](#) students through enhanced resources within [career development](#) offices, faculty training and a change in the academic culture," the paper concludes.

**More information:** Teresa M Evans et al. Evidence for a mental health crisis in graduate education, *Nature Biotechnology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1038/nbt.4089](#)

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