

“Like an Empty Shell”: Living with Depression in Grad School

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SPEAKERS

Rob Desjardins, Student, Suman Varghese

Student 00:05

I remember once I was going out with my mum, and I was helping her with the grocery shopping. I just remember walking out with the groceries and everything. And she was talking to me and I, it was like I couldn't hear, you know, it was like just white noise. And it wasn't, I couldn't sort of process it. I felt really empty inside. And I felt really guilty that I couldn't sort of be present there, you know. So I felt like a shell, you know, like an empty shell.

Rob Desjardins 00:36

That's Sol, a recent PhD graduate, talking about her experience with the onset of depression. It was lonely and frightening. And it happened while she was in grad school.

Student 00:51

I don't think it's a coincidence that there's so many graduate students that are dealing with these kinds of mental health problems. The competitive nature of academia is crazy at times. It's very powerful. And it's always there. You know, it's a rat race constantly. And it feels like you can never stop.

Rob Desjardins 01:14

Today on Grad School Confidential: navigating a graduate program while living with depression.

Rob Desjardins 01:32

Grad School Confidential. A podcast about the unglamorous, and sometimes bewildering, life of the graduate student. I'm Rob Desjardins, along with our guide, psychologist Suman Varghese. And Suman, you provide therapy to grad students like Sol. So where should we start here? What's the first thing we should know about depression?

Suman Varghese 01:57

Well, there's a lot we can and will talk about depression. But I would maybe just start by saying depression is more than just a feeling. Even though we often use the word informally, major depression is a mood disorder that can have some pretty devastating effects on someone's thoughts and feelings

and behaviors. And when people start to feel depressed, it can be a little bit confusing, where they don't really recognize what's happening, kind of like Sol described in the introduction. I think depression is even harder to detect if you're in a high pressure environment, like grad school.

Rob Desjardins 02:27

Sol did talk more about that when she shared her story with us. She was in the middle of her PhD when the symptoms started to creep up on her.

Student 02:37

I had really decreased appetite. I was tending to oversleep. I felt very, very numb. You know, I felt incredibly disconnected from everyone and everything. I sort of felt like a robot at times, you know, I was on autopilot constantly. There were times where I was crying, almost every day for weeks. I didn't really understand there was depression. So I just sort of well, you know, went along with it. And I tried my best to just pretend that nothing was happening to me. I was really hiding myself and my symptoms from everyone. There was a period of times I was still living at home. Nobody knew that I was depressed.

Rob Desjardins 03:25

So Sol talks about feeling disconnected, numb, crying frequently. So Suman, are these common symptoms of depression?

Suman Varghese 03:37

Yeah, a lot of people talk about feeling numb and disconnected. With major depression, people tend to have a persistent low mood. And they often also lose interest in the things they enjoy. And some other common symptoms are just feeling really tired or low energy, having difficulty concentrating, maybe losing weight or gaining weight. Depression can also make people feel really worthless and guilty, and that can have big impacts on how they might be thinking and behaving.

Rob Desjardins 04:05

And that was certainly true for Sol.

Student 04:08

After I earned a scholarship from NSERC, I would constantly tell myself, Oh, that was a fluke. It's that sense that I didn't deserve to be there, that I didn't belong, that they would find out. There was also a lot of thoughts around experiment results, thinking, Oh, no, it didn't work again. My supervisor's not going to be impressed with, you know, what I did last week. Like it wasn't enough. It was never enough. Whatever output I had, it was it was never enough. I also felt whatever I had to contribute wasn't worthy, that, you know, I felt very unsure about contributing at lab meetings or seminars or stuff like that. And I was like, Okay, well, no, that's probably a dumb question, or that's probably wrong. So I doubted myself a lot.

Rob Desjardins 04:58

And as Sol approached her candidacy exam, and she was working longer hours, the pressures started to increase.

Student 05:06

I was sort of in that month where you kind of just isolate yourself and you're working your candidacy full time. It was a very, very stressful and very scary time. I was very scared that I would fail. I remember very clearly I was at the dining table, I had just finished eating. I just remember this clarity where it was, suddenly, everything seemed really obvious and very straightforward. You know, I was like, I, I want to kill myself. I thought, okay, how do I actually do this? It's scary thinking back how straightforward it was, and how clear minded I felt I felt at the moment. You know, sometimes you'll think, you know, if I had a gun, just shoot myself, you know, sort of, off handedly, I remember then I was like, Okay, well, clearly, I don't have a gun. So I can't actually do that. So what's the next option? You know, I thought, can I turn on the car, and just let the gas do its thing. And then I thought, Well, I wonder if that's actually true, but there's gonna be leaks, and then it's not gonna work. And then my third thought was, okay, well, I can drown myself.

Student 06:29

I sort of didn't feel connected to anything. I felt like, I didn't belong, either in academia, or within my relationships with my family and my friends. Yeah, it was also a lot of thoughts about, I'm going to fail, they're going to kick me out of the program. And then everything that I've sort of worked towards will, will come crashing down, or, you know, they'll realize that I'm, I'm not good enough. But I felt entirely empty. I had no hope. I just feel like, nothing's gonna get better. So you're just sort of want -- want to put an end to it.

Rob Desjardins 07:26

So Suman, Sol shared some really heavy experiences. Can you help us unpack that?

Suman Varghese 07:36

Sol really gives us a glimpse of what can happen to our thoughts and feelings when we are depressed. She talked about isolation and disconnection, feeling hopeless, feeling nothing can change, and how that really led to a lot of the suicidal thoughts she was having. I think we can acknowledge that suicide is a hard thing to talk about. It can be triggering for some people, it can be scary for other people. But we have to know that when people are feeling depressed, suicidal thoughts can be quite common. Now, that doesn't mean they're going to act on those thoughts. But it's very possible for those thoughts to kind of pop in their mind. Most people who are having suicidal thoughts don't necessarily want to die, but rather escape the feelings or thoughts or situations that they're in. And they feel like that's the only way out of their suffering. I think Sol explained it well when she talked about that hopelessness and feeling nothing could ever change. Depression lies to people, it distorts reality to make them feel their situation is helpless, and the future is hopeless, no matter what might actually be happening in their lives. Cognitive psychologists often talk about sort of a bias in the way we see the world when we're depressed. And we have this ability to kind of latch on to all the negative thoughts. And they talked about something called the negative triad. And that's essentially when you have negative thoughts about three things, the world, the future, and yourself. Now, I think we saw all of those thoughts come up when Sol sort of described her experience, and just to break that down a little bit, so she had negative thoughts about the outside world so the university would fail her, her supervisor would be disappointed in her. She also had a lot of negative thoughts about the future, that she'd fail, she'd lose

everything she worked for, she's always going to feel this way. And then of course, she had a lot of negative thoughts about herself around feeling she was unworthy, feeling she wasn't good enough. So we can see how all three of those things kind of work together to make someone feel really really desperate.

Rob Desjardins 09:33

It also sounds like she felt really alone in these thoughts.

Suman Varghese 09:38

Yeah, people dealing with depression can feel really isolated in their experiences and we definitely heard Sol talk about, you know, feeling she doesn't belong, feeling disconnected from everybody, hiding her symptoms. Sometimes we even call it perceived isolation because objectively someone might have supports or people they can turn to, but when they're going through it, they mean not feel like they can. And there's a lot of reasons for that, you know, people carry a lot of shame when they have these types of negative thoughts, particularly suicidal thoughts. Sometimes they feel guilty, sometimes they worry about burdening other people. So I think it's just really important to start talking openly about things like depression and suicide as these experiences are more common than we often realize.

Rob Desjardins 10:22

With that in mind, Suman, what actually causes depression?

Suman Varghese 10:27

Depression is kind of tricky, because unlike some conditions, there isn't one specific cause. So we know it's a combination of our biology, as well as psychological and social factors. And the causes can be different from one person to another. I like to think of it as there are certain factors that predispose us or put us at higher risk for depression. And that can definitely include our genetics, our family history, maybe early trauma we might have experienced, medical conditions. Then there's also personality factors. So people who worry a lot, people who are pessimistic, people who are more self-critical, are also more susceptible to depression. In addition to sort of the predisposing and personality factors, there are some things that can precipitate depression or trigger its onset. So if we're really lonely and isolated, if something stressful or traumatic is happening in our lives, so that could be loss, that could be illness, that could be relationship problems. On the other hand, there isn't always an identifiable trigger. So I think it's just important to remember there's no single cause for depression; it's a combination of stress and a person's vulnerability and the environment they're in.

Rob Desjardins 11:38

In her case, Sol reflected on some of the things that she felt contributed to her depression.

Student 11:44

I lost my grandma, it was very shocking and sudden, and I was very close to my grandma. So that played a big role. I also had other stuff with other personal relationships. Honestly, I also feel that grad school played a huge part in it, you know, the constant stress. There's also a lot of competition between students. People who go into grad school are high achievers. So even if you don't want to, you're

constantly comparing yourself to others, and to other students, you know, who published first, who graduated first, who got that higher impact factor? I was constantly comparing myself. And it wasn't out of a sense that, you know, I want to be the best one, you know, often to tell myself, I just want to even just pass, you know, I just want to, at least just make it.

Rob Desjardins 12:34

So it sounds like grad school itself was a major factor that affected Sol's mental health.

Suman Varghese 12:40

Definitely. We talk a lot about individual factors when talking about depression. But it's so important to recognize how much the environment can play a role. Studies consistently show that the rates of depression are higher in grad students than in the general population. And there could be a lot of reasons why; Sol talked about some of them when she talked about the competitive nature, the constant pressure to achieve, feeling like you can never stop. I think on top of that grad students are often working long hours by themselves with no guaranteed results; there's not a lot of certainty about when they'll publish, how long their program will be, when they'll graduate. On top of that, they're not necessarily getting paid a lot to do the research, and they don't necessarily have a guaranteed career path once they graduate. I think supervisory relationships can also be a big point of stress; a lot of people have difficulties in that relationship. So I think it's just important to acknowledge there's a lot of systemic factors that make grad school challenging.

Rob Desjardins 13:38

Yeah. And when grad students are experiencing those stressors, it can be hard for them to find the time to check in with themselves to really come to terms with how they're feeling. And in Sol's case, she needed to take a break before she could see that something was wrong.

Student 14:00

I was really lucky that I could take some time off. So I went away, I went out of town for about two weeks. And that really helped me to realize that, okay, something is really off. That sort of perspective of sort of stepping outside everything at home and in the lab made me realize that okay, I can still be happy. And after that, I guess I was more aware of my symptoms. And it still took me a couple of months to really accept and realize, okay, you know, I think I need help. This is not normal.

Rob Desjardins 14:37

Sol decided to get help. But she had to battle her thoughts and feelings to get there.

Student 14:44

I think it was a mix of a little bit of embarrassment. You know, thinking, you know, I'm so lucky and I feel so privileged to just have this supportive family and friends and have what I consider to be a pretty good life, to be feeling this way, you know, it doesn't make logical sense. In the beginning, there was also the fact that I didn't really understand what was happening. Also a sense that it was only me who was going through this, that I couldn't connect to others, so they wouldn't understand what I was going through. If you think, oh, it's probably not depression, it's probably not anxiety. Those are exactly the kind of things that depression and anxiety tell, you know, that voice sort of tells you, Don't seek

help. It's not, you know, it's nothing big, people have it worse. You know, the clinic and the services that the university has offered were really, really helpful. I, um, with therapy and group therapy and all that, you know, I started addressing some of the factors that I think contributed, such as you know, dealing with grief or those personal relationships that I had. I did learn some useful tools in those sessions. CBT, which I think is probably the one of the things that has helped me the most, and the medication was huge. A couple of months before I started taking medication, I was almost absolutely opposed to taking it. I sort of felt, Oh, I don't need it, or, you know, I'm strong enough to do it without medication. I felt very isolated and lonely, and it was a scary process, but it was definitely worth it.

Rob Desjardins 16:34

So, Sol describes both medication and CBT as helpful. So first of all, Suman, can you tell us what role medication may play in dealing with depression?

Suman Varghese 16:46

So antidepressants can be really useful in reducing symptoms of both anxiety and depression. Now, they don't work for everyone. And not everyone who is depressed necessarily needs medication. But we do know that about 70% of people who take medication for depression find it helpful. And the first thing they usually notice is a boost in their energy, better sleep, better appetite. Now medication can only do so much. So we know it's best to combine it with lifestyle changes and therapy.

Rob Desjardins 17:16

And just to go back to another term that Sol used, what is CBT?

Suman Varghese 17:22

CBT stands for cognitive behavioral therapy. It's an evidence based approach to treating depression. And it's a really practical form of therapy that focuses on skills and strategies. The premise behind it is that we can change the way we're feeling by changing our thoughts and behaviors. So we tend to view ourselves and the world through our own subjective lens. And when that lens becomes distorted or too negative, it can really fuel depression. Now, we definitely heard that when Sol talked about seeing herself as this fraud who didn't belong, who would fail everything. So CBT teaches people to step back from their thoughts and look at the world in a more realistic way.

Rob Desjardins 18:03

And you could really hear that change in thinking when Sol talked about how things got better.

Student 18:11

Honestly, takes a lot of effort and time on your part, which kind of sucks. You know, I mentioned before, I had thought that, you know, getting this big scholarship that I didn't deserve it, that there was a mistake and stuff like that. So yeah, eventually that thinking sort of shifted to No, I, I deserved it. There's a reason why they chose me, you know, they they even give you a breakdown of your application, and you know, how many points or what percentile. So there is actually data that supports the fact that I did deserve that scholarship. So that that kind of thinking, that really helped, you know, that confidence that that gave me sort of also manifested itself in different ways. So I felt I felt more confident expressing my views at the lab. So you know, thinking, No, I think this is what's happening. I

think this is the mechanism. So defending my work I also thought was easier. And that also gave me more confidence with my experiments and, you know, my manuscripts thinking, Okay, no, this is you know, what, this is good science. And I do think, like, I'm not an outcast, I do belong here. There's a reason why I'm in grad school.

Rob Desjardins 19:26

So one last thing, Suman. If someone listening to this episode is noticing symptoms of depression, what should they do?

Suman Varghese 19:34

So we'll post some more in depth information on strategies on our website, but there's a few things I can highlight. Like we heard a lot about today, challenge your negative thoughts. Be a scientist; look for evidence to see if your thoughts are actually true. And in that process, be compassionate with yourself. Lifestyle changes are essential. So creating a routine that allows for regular sleeping, eating and exercise can make a big difference. And it's also important to continue to do things you enjoy, even if you don't feel like it. Changing our habits can be so hard, especially with depression working against us. So it's always best to start with small goals. I think it was a Reddit user who came up with the idea of the nonzero day. And the idea is anything more than nothing is progress. So maybe the first goal is to get out of bed or to shower or to read one page or to do one pushup, wherever you're at, start with really small steps. And that will help create the motivation you need to keep building. And finally, I would just say we can't forget the importance of support. It's so easy to withdraw and isolate ourselves. And it's so scary to be vulnerable and open up. But we do know isolation only makes people feel worse. So talk to someone about how you're feeling, whether it's friends or family or a professional. And if you need any kind of academic support or accommodation, talk to your supervisor or someone else at the university. It's never easy to have these types of conversations, but it can be a really important part of healing.

Rob Desjardins 21:05

And that idea of talking about your feelings is something Sol really emphasized. Let's give her the last word.

Student 21:14

That's something that I've learned. The more I started to share my experience with mental health and with depression, the more I realized that there's so many people out there that have their struggles or that know someone who has struggled with mental health. And that's sort of good and bad. You know, because you realize there's so many people struggling, but it also gives you a sense of community and support. That help is really -- it was for me at least very, very helpful.

Rob Desjardins 21:54

If you, or someone you know, is struggling with suicidal thoughts, please reach out. We'll have crisis line information on our website, along with resources for dealing with depression: uab.ca/gsc. If you have feedback or would like to suggest an episode topic, email us at gradschoolconfidential@ualberta.ca. Grad School Confidential is a production of Counseling and Clinical Services at the University of Alberta.