

Dissertation Therapy:

Beat the Anxiety, Reclaim Your Motivation

Ann Glauser, Division of Academic Enhancement, offers “dissertation therapy” to graduate students who feel stuck, as though they just can’t get past the obstacles to writing their dissertations or theses. She helps everyone from students who haven’t begun their research because of second thoughts about their topics to students who are three-quarters of the way through the dissertation but have somehow lost their motivation. Most think that “everyone else is sailing along while they are windless and rudderless.”

The truth is, though, few graduate students get through the thesis or dissertation without facing both self-doubt and motivation problems. With the proper mindset, time-management and goal-setting skills, and anxiety-reducing techniques, you can conquer such obstacles and get back on track.

The Motivated Mindset

Some students do seem to get through their programs more easily than others. The ones who manage to stay motivated for the duration usually have well-defined goals – including what they want to do with their degrees – are willing to put forth the effort to achieve them, and break down their large goals into smaller tasks.

Motivated students are generally skilled problem solvers and decision makers and are assertive about asking for help or otherwise getting what they need to be successful. They also tend to have a sense of belonging to their programs or departments and report having a lot of support from others within and outside their departments.

Set Goals to Get Motivated

Most people respond to large challenges the same way they respond to catastrophes: they are initially very motivated and creative about developing strategies and solutions, but as time goes on without visible progress, they find it more and more difficult to stay motivated and develop new strategies to deal with changing circumstances.

That’s where goals come in: they allow you to see the progress you’re making toward meeting the larger challenge. You need large goals, such as finishing your dissertation, graduating and seeking a particular career. But

you also must set the smaller goals necessary to accomplish each large goal. Then break down small goals into individual tasks. In this way, you can chart your progress as you check off tasks, which helps you stay motivated. Be flexible with your goals: it’s o.k. for both your goals and your strategies for reaching them to change.

A motivated perspective is also generally an optimistic perspective. It’s a lot easier to say than to do, but maintaining a positive outlook helps keep you open to opportunities and ready to act quickly and effectively when they appear. Such successes, much like reaching small goals, help to further fuel your optimism. If you can maintain a sense of curiosity about what you’re learning, that too will help you stay motivated.

Get Past the Procrastination Mindset

A mindset that includes optimism and curiosity is an advantage as you work through the thesis or dissertation process, but your mindset can be a hindrance if you are a procrastinator. Most people who have problems with procrastination possess time-management skills; their mindsets simply prevent them using those skills.

The procrastination mindset can include a sense of hopelessness or being overwhelmed. Procrastinators tend to jump to negative conclusions about themselves and their abilities. They begin to discount their past accomplishments and worry that others will find out they really don’t belong in graduate school. Procrastinators tend to feel guilty about their procrastination and beat themselves up over things they “should have” done, making it even more difficult to get motivated.

If you have problems with procrastination, there are some things you can do:

- Prioritize and schedule.
- Figure out ways to remind yourself that you are smart; review your past accomplishments or re-read a paper of which you’re proud.
- Allow yourself to start out with small steps.
- Test the things you think you can’t do: Write just one page of that chapter you’re sure you can’t finish. Chip away at it until you prove yourself wrong.
- Finally, if you find yourself repeatedly vowing not

to miss another deadline and repeatedly missing deadlines nonetheless, consider working with a counselor at the Division of Academic Enhancement (<http://www.uga.edu/dae>) or University Health Services (<http://www.uhs.uga.edu/CAPS/index.html>) to help break that cycle.

Minimize Anxiety

Anxiety is a pervasive feeling that something horrible is about to happen and that, when it does, you won't be able to cope with it. The writing anxiety that many students feel as they face the thesis or dissertation is a form of performance anxiety. You can minimize it – although probably not completely banish it – using the same techniques you would use to manage any other type of anxiety.

First, realize that all the small things you deal with in life combine and contribute to the stress you feel. Often, you're not even aware of the stress daily events can cause, because we are conditioned to think only of major events as creating stress. As a result, you may be attributing stress from other sources to anxiety about finishing your thesis or dissertation. Sometimes just recognizing the stressors in your life can mitigate your anxiety about the big project.

Even when it relates to a big event like a thesis or dissertation, anxiety is more about the fear that you won't be able to cope with the consequences than the event

itself. Again, sometimes without even realizing it, we tend to think self-defeating, irrational, negative thoughts about our abilities to accomplish goals and the consequences of failure. Identify any irrational thoughts you're having and rationally talk yourself out them (e.g., "If I were really as dumb as I'm telling myself, I would not have been accepted into my program," or "My advisor will not hate me or kick me out of the program if I have to ask for a short deadline extension.")

Next, deal with the physical symptoms of your anxiety, which can include rapid heart rate, sweating, nausea, fatigue, insomnia and muscle tension. Try meditation, controlled breathing or other relaxation techniques. If you can find ways to deal with anxiety, whether it is on your own or with the help of a counselor or support group, you can stop procrastinating, get more motivated, feel better about yourself and get that dissertation or thesis done. ■

Based on the Graduate School seminar "Dissertation Therapy" by Ann Glauser, Division of Academic Enhancement. To view this seminar in full, visit <http://www.grad.uga.edu>.

Manage Time with Values in Mind

We all know that we should manage our time with our goals in mind. The whole point of time management is to accomplish goals in available time. But, if you can base your time-management strategy on the personal values behind your goals, you can really make the most of your potential, increase your academic achievement and create a sense of general happiness in your life as you spend time on the things that matter to you.

First, identify the significant values in your life. Next, ask yourself how your academic preparation and your degree connect to your values. What major values are you supporting or furthering by getting this degree? What is your ultimate goal, beyond degree completion, and what parts of your academic preparation are most necessary to achieving that goal? What steps do you need to take to achieve that goal and others?

Once you have answered these questions, you can set priorities and manage your time based on them. By linking each task you must complete to a goal that furthers a significant personal value, you help yourself stay motivated. Therapists call it "values-congruence," and what it means is that, each day, you can look at the work you're doing and see how it gets you closer to where you want to be.