



FACULTY OF SCIENCE GRADUATE STUDENT RESILIENCE TOOLKIT

**TOOLS FOR MANAGING STRESS, BUILDING COPING SKILLS,
AND THRIVING IN ACADEMIA**



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
Faculty of Science

Faculty of Science
Embedded Counselling



Graduate school in the sciences is an exciting and intellectually rewarding journey. It is filled with opportunities for discovery and innovation! But it can also feel overwhelming. Demanding coursework, teaching, lab or fieldwork, long-term projects, and data analysis often translate to long hours and intense workloads. Add the pressure to publish, secure funding, and meet supervisor expectations – it's no surprise that many grad students experience high levels of stress.

If you're feeling stressed or overwhelmed, you're not alone. Studies show that graduate students are significantly more likely to experience mental health challenges – and are six times more likely to struggle with anxiety and depression – compared to the general population (Evans et al., 2018). **The challenges you face are real, but so are the opportunities to build resilience and seek support.** Taking care of your mental health is not just important, it is essential for both your wellbeing and your success as a graduate student and beyond.

ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

This toolkit is here to support you throughout your journey. Inside, you'll find practical strategies for managing stress, building resilience, and accessing resources that help you navigate your graduate studies with strength and care. **Look out for 📝 reflective exercises to guide your personal growth, 📌 tips on how to apply specific strategies, and 📖 helpful resources** that you can explore on your own to deepen your understanding and practice.



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Remember, you’re not alone on this journey, and you deserve the tools and support to thrive in both academia and your personal life.

RECOGNIZING STRESS

Stress is a normal part of life, and many of us manage it well most of the time. But it can become problematic when it starts to feel constant, unmanageable, or isolating. When stress builds without relief or support, it can lead to **burnout**.

Burnout is characterized by emotional and physical exhaustion, along with feelings of negativity and cynicism toward one's work and accomplishments (Nagy et al., 2019). In high-pressure, project- or research-intensive settings, such as graduate education, burnout has been identified as a major factor in students' decisions to leave academia (Hunter & Devine, 2016).

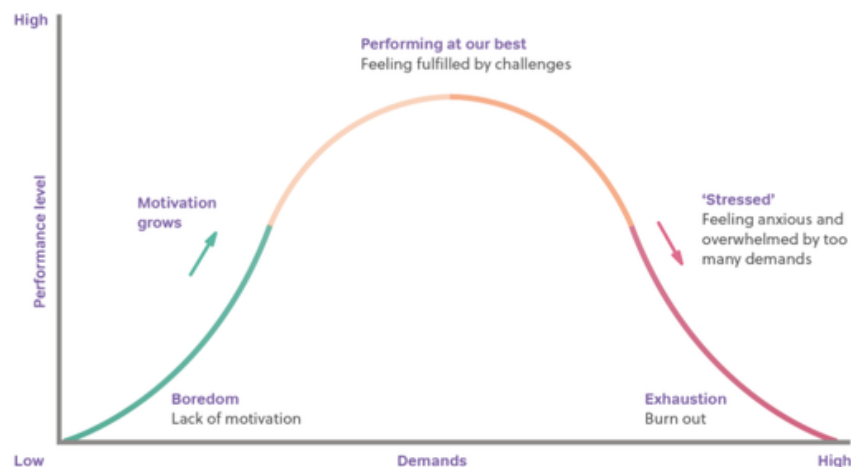


Image from MindWell, www.mindwell-leeds.org.uk

Recognizing the signs of stress early, and taking small, intentional steps to respond, can make it easier to manage before it escalates. Developing this kind of awareness is a foundational step toward building resilience and sustaining your wellbeing throughout your academic journey.

COMMON SIGNS OF STRESS (“PACE”)

To help you notice early signs of stress, try using the acronym PACE, which stands for **Physical, Action-Based, Cognitive, and Emotional signs**. This simple framework can guide your self-check-ins and help you tune into how you’re really doing, especially during busy or demanding times.

Physical

- Chronic fatigue or low energy
 - Restlessness
 - Frequent headaches or stomachaches
 - Changes in appetite or sleep patterns
 - Tension-related aches or pains
 - Neglect of hygiene or physical self-care
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Action-Based

- Skipping classes, meetings, or other commitments
 - Withdrawing from social interactions
 - Neglecting personal routines or self-care
 - Reduced engagement or motivation in academic work
 - Decline in academic or research performance
 - Procrastination or avoidance behaviors
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Cognitive

- Difficulty concentrating or staying focused
 - Mental fog or slowed thinking
 - Persistent worry or anxious thoughts
 - Negative self-talk or harsh self-criticism
 - Thoughts of failure or hopelessness
 - Indecisiveness or trouble making decisions
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Emotional

- Heightened anxiety or nervousness
 - Irritability or frequent frustration
 - Feelings of guilt, shame, or worthlessness
 - Emotional numbness or detachment
 - Persistent loneliness or isolation
 - Loss of joy or motivation
 - Sudden or intense mood swings
-

EXERCISE: CHECK IN WITH YOURSELF & REFLECT ON “PACE”

Stress and burnout can build up gradually, making it important to check in with yourself regularly. Take a moment to reflect on your stress level by following the instructions below:

- Find a quiet, comfortable space, close your eyes, and take a few slow, deep breaths.
- As you breathe, gently reflect on your PACE. Are you noticing any physical, action-based, cognitive, or emotional signs of burnout? (You can refer to the list above for guidance.)
- Write down the thoughts and feelings that arise during this reflection. It's important to acknowledge them without judgment, allowing yourself to be present with whatever comes up. This step is key to addressing your feelings with care and compassion, without judgment.



MANAGING STRESS: THE 4A'S

Do you ever feel like there just aren't enough hours in the day to manage your responsibilities and take care of yourself? When stress starts to pile up, even simple tasks can feel exhausting, like hiking up a mountain with a heavy backpack.

This next section introduces the **4A's of Stress Management** which is a practical framework that helps you respond to stress based on the nature of what you're facing. Whether it's about setting boundaries, shifting your perspective, or accepting what's outside your control, the 4A's can help you take action in ways that lighten the load. The 4A's include **Avoid, Alter, Adapt, and Accept**.

AVOID

While some stress is unavoidable, or even necessary, there are times when we can choose to step away from unnecessary or minor stressors. This might mean saying no, setting boundaries, or planning ahead to prevent avoidable tension.

TIP: WAIT - ISN'T AVOIDING STRESS A BAD THING?

Stepping away from stressors entirely, especially in the long term, can sometimes backfire, making the situation even harder to manage later. But that doesn't mean all avoidance is harmful. In fact, strategic avoidance can be a helpful coping tool when used wisely. Here is how to make it effective:

- **Identify the stress triggers:** Pay attention to specific people, situations, or activities that consistently cause stress and drain your energy. Recognizing these patterns will help you make conscious choices about when and how to engage, or when to step back.
- **Take short breaks:** Rather than completely avoiding the stressor, try short, intentional breaks. For example, if thesis writing feels overwhelming, a 10-minute walk can help clear your mind and restore your focus when you return.

Examples

- Set clear academic and personal boundaries. Have your [student roles and responsibilities](#) documented clearly. Protect your time outside of research and work.
- Differentiate between “must-dos” and “nice-to-dos”: Prioritize essential deadlines and deliverables.
- Limit overcommitment: Remember that you do not need to join every project or committee.
- Minimize avoidable stressors: Reduce time spent on unproductive tasks (e.g., endless paper formatting or debugging non-essential side projects late at night).

ALTER

When a stressor can't be avoided, changing the situation itself can make a difference. This could involve communicating your needs more clearly, renegotiating deadlines, or adjusting your routines to create more balance and flexibility.

Examples

- Adjust your lab or work environment: Reorganize your workspace, digital or physical, to support efficiency and comfort.
- Communicate effectively with Principal Investigators, supervisors, and lab/teammates: Clarify expectations, timelines, and roles to make workloads more manageable.
- Review and renegotiate commitments when overwhelmed: Deadlines can sometimes shift, and project scopes can be adjusted.
- Revise your routines: Adjust what you watch, how you move, who you spend time with to foster a [healthy, sustainable lifestyle](#). Small shifts make a big difference.
- Use productivity tools: Consider utilizing project management software, productivity apps, or writing schedules to help maintain structure.



RESOURCE: GRADUATE PATHWAY TO SUCCESS

[UBC Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies](#) offers a variety of non-credit workshops, seminars, and activities designed to strengthen the skills and competencies that support your success throughout graduate school and beyond, both professionally and personally.

Discover how to build effective supervisory relationships, implement self-care strategies, and maintain a balanced lifestyle, among other topics. Check out the [calendar of workshops and events](#) for upcoming sessions.

ADAPT

Not all stress comes from the situation itself – sometimes it's how we view it. Reframing your mindset or shifting your perspective can help you better cope with challenges and even find opportunities for personal growth.

Examples

- Reframe obstacles as part of the research process: Things like failed experiments, bugs in your code, or rejected papers are not personal failings, but are part of the process of learning and discovery.
- Identify learnings from different stages of the process: Take a moment to consider what you are taking away from the experience. Reflect on what you have learned about yourself and the process that will help you shape your next steps.
- Remember your “why”: Keep sight of the bigger purpose behind your research. Keep the long-term perspective in mind.
- Celebrate small wins: Track progress in a journal or even a sticky note on your wall. Remember that publishing a paper is not the only milestone worth acknowledging.

TIP: CELEBRATING SMALL WINS

When you start tracking progress, consider these tips:

- **Find a tracking tool that works for you.** Whether it's a beautiful notebook, a digital tool, a wall of sticky notes, or something you create yourself, experiment with different methods until you find ones that stick.
- **Focus on your actions, not just results.** Instead of simply writing “got my draft approved,” try noting “submitted the first draft of the paper.” Tracking your steps is a powerful way to celebrate progress as you move toward the end goal.
- **Make tracking a daily habit.** If you're unsure where to start, ask yourself, “What is one thing I accomplished or learned today?” This simple question can be a great prompt to keep you engaged.



ACCEPT

Some stressors are just out of our control. In these moments, focusing on what you can control, expressing your emotions, and practicing self-compassion can ease the emotional weight of what you can't change.

Examples

- Acknowledge what's beyond your control: Things like funding outcomes, peer reviews, or program structures aren't always in your hands – and that's okay.
- Let go of perfectionism or imposterism: "Good enough" doesn't mean settling, it means your work meets its purpose. Your best will look different on different days, and that's a normal part of being human.
- Practice emotional regulation: Try mindfulness exercises, grounding strategies, journaling, or counselling to build effective emotional regulation and resilience.
- Stay connected to support: Talk to someone you trust like a friend, peer, mentor, or professional to feel less alone and more grounded.



RESOURCE: SELF-DIRECTED RESOURCES FOR EMOTIONAL REGULATION

Grounding Videos

- [The 5-4-3-2-1 Exercise by Calm](#)
- [I am Grounded Meditation by Insight Timer](#)
- [Breathing Exercises by Headspace](#)

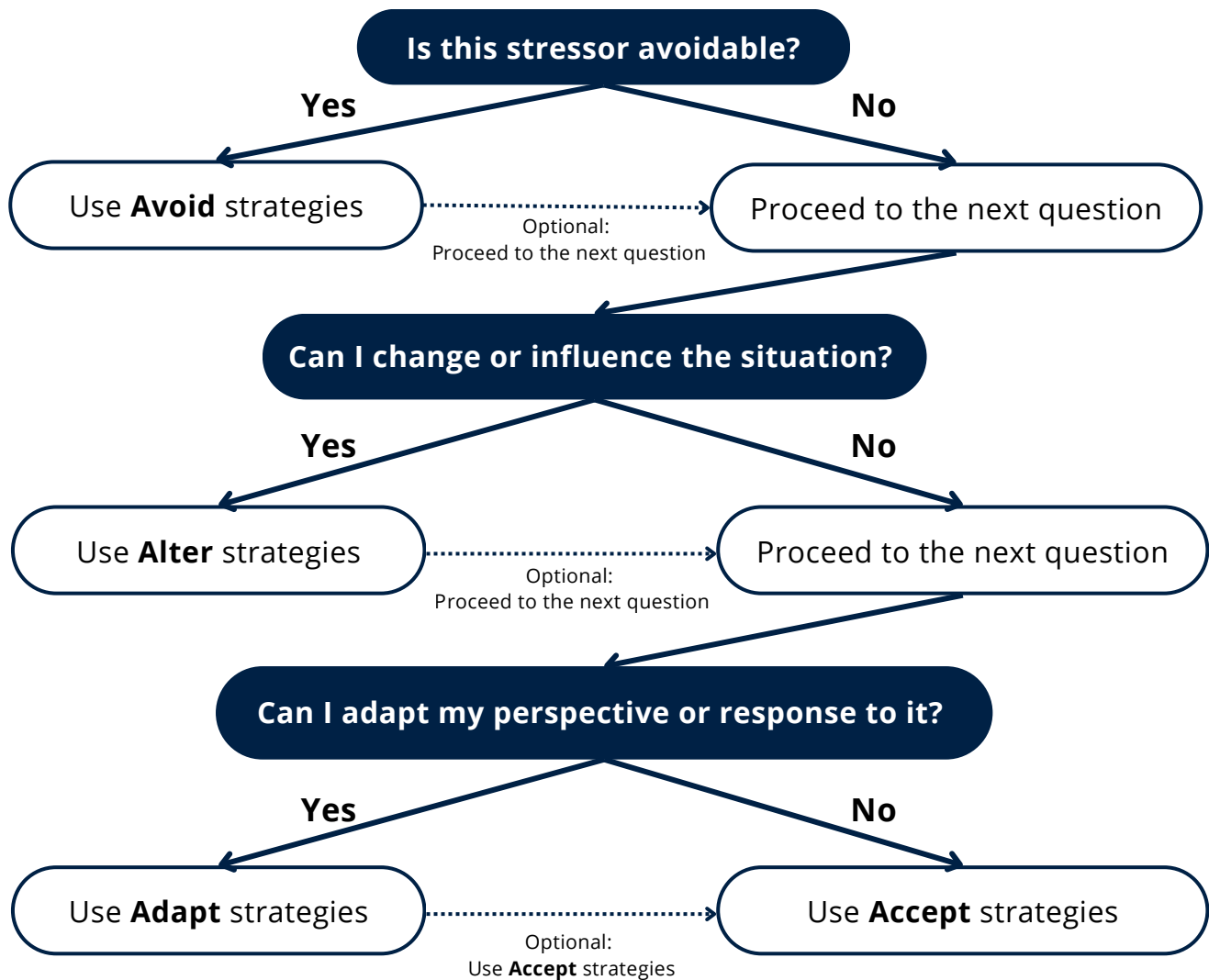
Self-Directed Online Modules

- [Mindfulness Module by HeretoHelp BC](#)
- [Mindfulness Module by Dialectical Behavior Therapy](#)

CHOOSING THE RIGHT APPROACH

There are many healthy and effective ways to manage stress and cope with its impact on daily life. If you choose to use the 4A's of Stress Management, the key is to identify which approach(es) best fits the nature of your stressor.

Here's a simple guide to help you decide which of the 4A's to apply. Ask yourself the following questions in order:



It's also important to recognize that personal and cultural values can shape how we experience and respond to stress and may influence how comfortable or feasible certain strategies feel. If you find yourself feeling stuck or uncertain about how to apply these strategies, connecting with your graduate program advisor or a mental health professional can offer valuable guidance and support as you navigate your next steps.



EXERCISE: FINDING YOUR WAY THROUGH STRESS

1. Ground yourself: Take a few deep breaths. Inhale slowly, hold, and exhale fully. Use a grounding strategy you've learned earlier if helpful.
2. Identify a stressor: Think of one current stressor in your life. Name it to yourself and notice how it's affecting you.
3. Choose an approach(es): Ask yourself, "Can I avoid this stressor? If not, can I alter it? If not, can I adapt to it? If not, can I accept it?"
4. Take action: Based on your answer, write down 1 to 2 small steps you can take this week to manage the stressor using your chosen approach.

Sample

- Stressor:
 - "I feel overwhelmed by constant lab deadlines and I feel like I am falling behind."
- Selected 4A Approach(es):
 - Alter: "I can't avoid the lab work, but I might be able to alter the situation by speaking to my supervisor about reprioritizing deadlines."
 - Adapt: "I can also adapt by reframing this as a learning opportunity rather than a personal failure."
- Strategies:
 - Alter: Schedule a 15-minute meeting with my supervisor to clarify expectations and adjust priorities.
 - Adapt: Remind myself that being behind does not mean I am not capable; it just means I need time to regroup.



In previous sections, we explored the nature of stress in graduate school, how to recognize its early signs, and strategies for managing it in ways that support your resilience and wellbeing. But managing stress isn't something you have to do alone. Whether you're navigating academic expectations, financial pressures, or mental and physical health challenges, UBC offers a wide range of resources to support you.

This section highlights key services and supports available to graduate students to help you stay grounded, connected, and empowered throughout your academic journey.

MANAGING YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

- [Science Mental Health and Wellbeing Resources](#): A centralized online space dedicated to the mental health and wellbeing of the Faculty of Science community, offering a range of tailored information, tools, and resources.
- [Mental Health Care at UBC](#): Offers a wide range of support, including self-directed resources, brief counselling, primary care mental health services, and psychiatry.
- [UBC Counselling Services and Science Embedded Counsellor](#): Connect with the Science Embedded Counsellor, or access same-day drop-in appointments, brief counselling, and referrals to other mental health services through UBC Counselling Services (call 604-822-3811).

- Private Counselling: UBC students enrolled in the AMS/GSS Health and Dental Plan are eligible for coverage for appointments with private mental health practitioners, such as registered psychologists or clinical counsellors. Not sure where to start? Book a Wellness Advising appointment through UBC Counselling Services. A Wellness Advisor can help you navigate your options (call 604-822-3811).
- HR Mental Health Resources: Mental health and wellbeing services, programs, and resources are available to support graduate students and postdoctoral fellows with HR access.
- Here2Talk: 24/7 free, single-session counseling via app, phone, and web.

MANAGING YOUR PHYSICAL HEALTH

- Student Health Service: Access a variety of medical services including exams, diagnosis, treatment, contraception, and prescriptions. Appointments are available by phone, video, or in person for students in British Columbia.
- AMS/GSS Health & Dental Plan: UBC students registered in the AMS/GSS Health and Dental Plan have access to a range of extended health benefits, not just for mental health, but also dental, prescription drugs, and more.
- UBC Recreation: Offers a wide range of fitness, sports, and wellness programs to help you stay active and healthy.

MANAGING YOUR PROGRAM (VIA UBC GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES)

- Professional Development Workshops and Events (topics such as Navigating an Effective Relationship with your Supervisor and Breaking Patterns of Procrastination)
- The Graduate Game Plan
- Supervision Resources
- Graduate Pathways to Success session materials, handouts, and recordings (CWL required; topics include Career Building, Wellbeing, and Communicating Your Research)

MANAGING YOUR FINANCES

- Housing, Food, Scholarships, and Financial Aid (via [Graduate Student Society](#))
 - [Housing Aids](#)
 - [Food and Feeding Aid](#)
 - [Scholarships and Awards](#)
 - [GSS Financial Aid \(GSFA\)](#)
- [Financial Wellness Training and Education](#)
- [Emergency Financial Support](#)

PEER SUPPORT

- [AMS Advocacy Office](#)
- [UBC Graduate Community](#)
- Graduate Student Society: [Peer Support](#)
- Counselling Services: [Grad Student Support Group](#)



THANK YOU FOR TAKING THE TIME

Thank you for taking the time to explore this toolkit.

The very act of pausing to care for your wellbeing, to reflect, read, and resource yourself, is a meaningful step that shines a light on your strength and resilience. You've already done something courageous by reading this toolkit.

Keep going, one small step at a time. Lean into support when you need it. Celebrate the progress even when it is not always visible.

With warmth and encouragement,

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