Berkeley study finds high levels of depression among graduate students

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The Other Mental Health Crisis

A decade after a landmark study of graduate students at Berkeley, a new study finds many problems persist -- and many doctoral students are depressed.

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By

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In 2005, a study found that 10 percent of graduate and professional students at the University of California at Berkeley had contemplated suicide. More than half reported feeling depressed a lot of the time. While concerns about undergraduates' mental health were already growing then and have only increased since, the finding about graduate students surprised and alarmed many experts. And because of Berkeley's prominence in educating future Ph.D.s and professors, the study was widely circulated.

Ten years later, the graduate student government at Berkeley is releasing a new study. It too finds a high percentage of graduate students showing signs of depression.

The new study is not strictly comparable to the one of a decade ago. This time the Berkeley graduate students were asked a series of questions to measure their life satisfaction and depression levels, rather than asking them if they felt depressed. The graduate students were also asked a series of other questions about their lives so researchers could note apparent relationships between certain factors and good mental health.

In terms of depression levels, results from the 790 graduate students who responded to the survey showed that 47 percent of Ph.D. students reached the 10 of 30 points on the scale to be considered depressed. Only 37 percent of master's students did so.

Among the Ph.D. students, the highest rate of apparent depression was in arts and humanities fields -- 64 percent. That's much higher than the rates found in the biological or physical sciences and engineering (all in the 43-46 percent range), the social sciences (34 percent) and business (28 percent).

Based on the responses, the research found 10 factors that appear related to how the graduate students view their lives:

- Career prospects
- Overall health

- Living conditions
- Academic engagement
- Social support
- Financial confidence
- Academic progress and preparation
- Sleep
- Feeling valued and included
- Adviser relationship

The report notes that difficulties in some of these factors may outweigh strengths in others, explaining the higher depression rates among, for example, arts and humanities students. "Interestingly, arts and humanities and social sciences students give the highest ratings to their advisers, though they are the least likely to say they have the space and resources they need to succeed."

The report also cautions that simply being aware of these factors isn't enough to promote mental health. "Survey results confirmed the importance of sleep for alleviating depressive symptoms," the report says. "Inadequate sleep is the top predictor of depression among graduate students. Yet, while presumably students are aware of the importance of sleep and desire sleep, our data shows they are not adequately carrying out this desire. To improve well-being, the university community must go beyond simply raising awareness and help enable beneficial behaviors."

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