An article recently published in the November/December 2015 issue of the Criminologist highlights the importance of building and maintaining relationships in graduate school. What happens, though, when despite all of your efforts, you still feel isolated? Workplace isolation is broadly defined as, ‘employees’ perception of being separated and lack of opportunities for emotional and social interaction with the manager and team” (Marshall, Michaels, & Mulki, 2007). In the context of graduate school, where telecommuting (i.e., working from home) can be the norm and where most work tends to require high degrees of autonomy, it is no surprise that some students and perhaps even faculty may feel disconnected from others. Whether this isolation is real or imagined, the consequences of such feelings are hardly trivial: a recent study found that isolation in the workplace has more negative effects for mental and physical well-being than being bullied or harassed (O’Reilly, Robinson, Berdahl, & Banki, 2014).

So, why do some people feel isolated and not others? For graduate students, perceptions of social isolation can stem from several factors, including: being a racial or ethnic minority, coming from a non-English speaking country, being significantly older or younger than other students, working full-time, living far from campus, having young children, or transitioning from a lucrative career (e.g., Council of Graduate Schools, 2009; Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Loo & Rolison, 1986; Thomas, Willis, & Davis, 2007). Regardless, there is hope for graduate students. Below, I list ten ways that you can rise above discomfort and actively confront your feelings of isolation:

1. **Don’t take it personally**: Too often, we perceive innocent situations as adversarial. If you find yourself in a new environment where you seem to have little in common with your peers, you may be hypersensitive of your interactions with others. A good rule of thumb is to always give people the benefit of the doubt. Ask yourself, is what I’m feeling real or imagined? It could very well be the case that your feelings of isolation are indeed valid. If this is true, approach the individual(s) in question in a non-confrontational manner and voice your concerns. More often than not, what you’ve been experiencing is simply a misunderstanding. It could also be the case that you’ve inadvertently done something to warrant others’ distancing themselves from you. This is a perfect segue into my next tip:

2. **“Run to Criticism”**: A mentor of mine once suggested that, despite how difficult it seems, one should always “run to criticism.” We’ve been wired to view our flaws as deterministic. In other words, if there’s something we don’t like about ourselves or that turns people off, there’s a tendency towards avoidance. Instead, we should embrace our imperfections and be open to ideas of how to improve our shortcomings. If nothing else, hearing others’ critiques of us will help us develop thick skin—something you’ll definitely need if you plan on pursuing a career in academia.

3. **You are NOT alone**: Though it may seem this way, graduate school is not the bane of your existence (or at least it doesn’t have to be). Try your best to establish relationships outside of your department. My favorite part of my ASC conference experiences is being able to network with others who share my interests. You can also try to do a better job at keeping in touch with family members, friends from undergrad, or people from your hometown. Sometimes a “blast from the past” can be enough momentum to get you through a rough day. There are also alternative communities in your graduate school that would welcome you with open arms.

4. **Own it**: Instead of being embarrassed or bitter about the things that distinguish you from others, try embracing your differences. I’ll admit—I would much rather discuss Kanye than Kuhn and on some days, I check TMZ more than my email. In the same regard, when others can only talk vaguely about issues of racial disparities in the criminal justice system, I can draw from an arsenal of personal experiences, bringing a different perspective to an otherwise abstract discourse. What is it about you that sets you apart from others? Perhaps you’re from a country where the justice system is remarkably different from that of your home institution. Use this perspective to enhance the learning experience of others. Whatever your circumstance, embrace your differences—don’t mask them.

5. **Tunnel vision**: Do you ever feel upset when you overhear people in the office talking about an event that you couldn’t attend due to a scheduling conflict? Have you ever scrolled down your social networks and seen pictures of your colleagues hanging out while you’re stuck at home finishing your thesis? Though balance is key, graduate school should be a time of focused and dedicated study. If you find yourself feeling left out, channel that energy towards productivity. Skip a happy hour or two to work on something that will actually enhance your future. Make a vision board, update your short- and long-term goals, or explore potential career opportunities. Don’t let the “fear of missing out” get the best of you. In the end, you will be very proud of yourself for buckling down and making the most of your time.
6. **Educate others**: Congratulations, you now have a “cause.” If there’s something you feel is out of place at your institution or missing from your department, tap into your inner activist and do something to evoke change. Maybe you feel lost because you don’t have a mentor. Why not volunteer to help an undergraduate who may be in the same shoes? Or, if you think there should be more support for commuters or students with families, mobilize a group of fellow graduate students who share your sentiments. If your research interests are misaligned with others in your program, start a blog or newsletter to raise awareness. Not only will you have a space of your own to express yourself, you’ll also get practice writing for a larger, more diverse audience.

7. **Take the initiative**: If you find yourself “out of the loop,” create your own. Plan a night out on the town or invite your classmates to a dinner at your home. Whether your idea of a good time is a little more offbeat or you’re super-laid back, you may be surprised by how much people are willing to try new things.

8. **Take a chill pill**: How many times, as graduate students do we complain about not having enough time to relax? We work so hard and seldom have time to ourselves. In this case, isolation can be a good thing. If you find yourself growing bored, it could be a good sign that you’re doing a good job balancing all of the many demands that come with graduate study. Don’t take this down time for granted. Meditate, go for a hike, stare into space—do whatever you can to appreciate the flexibility you have now because you’ll be entering the workforce before you know it and may not have a lot of unstructured time.

9. **Get fit**: Most universities offer intramural sports like soccer, ultimate Frisbee, or even boxing/martial arts. In addition to helping you stay in shape, participation in these groups can be the perfect opportunity to make new friends and to relieve stress.

10. **Seek professional help**: If your feelings of isolation take a turn for the worse, there is no shame in talking to a qualified professional. Most universities offer free or low-cost mental health services because, face it—it gets rough sometimes. As aspiring social and/or behavioral scientists, we of all people should understand the value of an informed opinion. If you feel like there’s nothing you can do to feel more comfortable or if being disconnected from others in your program is impacting your productivity, don’t hesitate to seek professional help.

References:


