

Putting Mental Health First to Achieve Excellence at the Intersection of Science and Life

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My name is Mónica Ventura, and I am a Ph.D. student in the Chemistry Department.

Excellence at the intersection of science and life, I have come to realize, can only be achieved by putting your mental health first. Back in 2020 when the pandemic first started, I reached total burn out. I stopped caring about my research and even put my proposal on hold because I couldn't find the energy to finish it. In the past, I never thought therapy was something that I needed, but during that time I thought that I should start going. Before the pandemic, it was almost taboo to talk about therapy, mental health, or work-life balance, but now it's commonplace to speak about it with your friends, co-workers, and even your advisors. This past year, I decided to give myself a life outside of lab. I started reading books that I actually wanted to read, instead of the articles that I had to read for my research. I started going to art classes, where I have been learning to paint with all different types of mediums. I started to meditate to help de-stress and give me better focus. One of my hobbies even consists of just sitting in the park and doing absolutely nothing. I would like to point out that doing absolutely nothing is exactly what we need sometimes. It can be hard to stop overthinking about what projects we need to work on, manuscripts we need to write, presentations we need to create, and the list goes on. However, there are times where we need to listen to our bodies, recharge, and do absolutely nothing. Finding how to navigate work-life balance has allowed me to excel in my field and at life.

Since the pandemic has impacted not only myself, but also many young people, an organization I joined is Big Brothers Big Sisters, where I serve as a mentor to my Little Sister. Through this organization, I've been able to support my Little Sister's mental health, emotional development, and social development.

Over the summer, I joined the Graduate Gathering Committee at the University at Albany. The Graduate Gathering was recently created to allow graduate students in the STEM departments to come together, share research ideas, make new friends, and present our research in a comfortable environment with friendly faces and other graduate students. This has allowed us to re-connect after not seeing each other for two years. We are also planning an event for students to learn about work life balance, conflict management, and self-advocacy in the workplace by bringing in a speaker to present on these important topics.

Not only have graduate students been negatively affected by the pandemic, but my organic chemistry lab undergraduate students as well. Not only were they behind on their organic chemistry lab skills, but also general chemistry, all because they haven't been able to take classes in person. Although it was difficult for me to try to teach them everything at once, I knew I needed to show patience and understanding so that they would feel comfortable learning in my classroom. Because I have been learning patience and understanding for myself, I was able to do this for my students as well.

In this essay, I could write about how many presentations I've given, how many awards I've received, or any other achievements I've made, but none of those would have happened if I didn't put my overall well-being first. I have found that when I put my mental health first, I am a much better researcher, TA, mentor, and person in general.