

## Supporting Student Wellness to Enable Resiliency During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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*The COVID-19 pandemic has created a unique time, requiring flexibility to adapt to evolving circumstances. The shift from being fully immersed as a doctoral student on campus, to being a full-time mother and online student at home and largely isolated, was a significant and challenging change. Paradoxically, I was filled with gratitude for additional immediate family time while I also felt incredible stress due to a lack of dedicated professional time. Determined to persevere, I embraced three strategies that fostered my resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic: (1) listening to course content; (2) dedicating time to daily physical activity; and (3) spending time outdoors. Moving forward, I will continue to prioritize my wellness by embracing the strategies identified here, and I encourage universities to explore how student wellness can be more comprehensively and proactively supported.*

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When COVID-19 hit Alberta, I was in my first year of doctoral studies in the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary. At the time, I was a research assistant, a teaching assistant, instructing two Kinesiology courses, taking two campus-based courses, and volunteering as a health promotion coordinator in a Calgary school. My partner was working in a downtown office and our three-year-old daughter attended daycare fulltime.

In the year that followed, my everyday bore no resemblance to the graduate student life I once knew. Due to intermittent lockdowns and concern for contracting and spreading COVID-19 to vulnerable family members, my immediate family isolated; my husband and I worked from home and my daughter was taken out of daycare. Paradoxically, I felt so grateful for the time with my daughter as her primary caregiver, while I also felt profound stress from the piling up of professional to-do items. I would multitask Zoom meetings with my daughter beside me, occupying her attention with screens and toys. I felt pulled in two directions: saddened and guilty for not investing in quality time with my daughter and stressed for not devoting time to my professional demands. Additionally, I felt as though I lacked time to myself - time to invest in my own wellness. Despite my flexible and accommodating supervisor and course instructors, my

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partner, who worked diligently to support me when not obligated by his own professional schedule, and the generous intermittent support of my daughter's grandparents, I felt a high degree of stress. However, with long-term goals set on a tenure track position, I was determined to persevere.

The purpose of this article is to introduce three strategies that I have used, and continue to use, to support my wellness during the pandemic and that have allowed me to be productive as a graduate student. I believe that by sharing these strategies, other graduate students might feel encouraged to adopt or adapt these strategies to support their own wellness, specific to their context. The three strategies I have used to facilitate my resilience during the pandemic include listening to course readings, dedicating time to daily physical activity, and spending time outdoors.

### **Strategy One - Listening to Course Content**

In the past, I have enjoyed listening to audiobooks in my car on the way to work. One day it dawned on me that perhaps audiobook-like technology, where my mobile device reads desired text aloud, might be available to listen to pdfs in a similar fashion. After some Googling, I found several text-to-speech applications available for iPhone (e.g., NaturalReader) and Android (e.g., @Voice Aloud Reader). Using Bluetooth technology to connect my phone and vehicle speakers, I became more time efficient by listening to course content while driving.

Listening to course content also enables me to move my body and complete house chores while learning; I often plug in one headphone while walking my dog, tending to the lawn, shoveling snow, or doing laundry. Listening to literature enables active time which directly works against the negative effects of sedentary behavior and physical inactivity on physical health (Warburton et al., 2006a), while also allowing me to be more efficient. I use other applications on my phone to record voice memos (ex. Easy Voice Recorder or Otter) when I want to build on or highlight the content I listen to. Recording voice memos replaces the side column notes and highlighting I typically do when reading articles on my computer or on printed paper. Later, when I return to my computer, I listen to and type out the recorded notes, or copy and paste a transcription of the recording (app dependent) into a Google Doc. Worthy of mentioning, headphones with microphone and start/stop button features make listening and recording voice memos quite seamless.

### **Strategy Two - Dedicating Time to Daily Physical Activity**

Physical activity is an investment in myself; it allows me to be my *best* me and benefits my physical and mental well-being (Mandolesi et al., 2018). When I have been active, I feel good, which is no surprise given physical exercise can improve mood, reduce anxiety, and foster general well-being (Mandolesi et al., 2018). I enjoy walking, running, and biking indoors and outdoors year-round, rowing indoors, ice skating, resistance training, and cross-country skiing.

According to the World Health Organization (2020), optimal health benefits for adults can be realized with approximately 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity per week, where moderate physical activity (55% to 69% of  $HR_{max}$ ), and vigorous physical activity (70% to 89% of  $HR_{max}$ ), are calculated in relation to maximum heart rate ( $HR_{max}$ ) which is roughly determined by subtracting age in years from 226, or 220 for men (Warburton et al., 2006b). While my heart rate is tracked by a strap around my chest that is connected to my phone, I prefer to listen to the needs of my body and invest the effort necessary to relieve perceived stress. During the pandemic, I have found that *vigorous physical activity* best supports my wellness, which is consistent with findings that post-secondary students who are vigorously active are less likely to report perceived stress (VanKim & Nelson, 2013). However, as a graduate student with a family, it can be challenging to find time to dedicate to physical activity; what works for me is committing

to being physically active every day and engaging in that physical activity first thing in the morning while the rest of the house is still sleeping.

### **Strategy Three - Spending Time Outdoors**

I have also increased the time I spend outdoors as a strategy to manage stress and support my wellness. Individuals only need 20 to 30 minutes in nature to benefit from a significant reduction in stress (Hunter et al., 2019). Living in an inner-city community, I primarily utilize geographically accessible pathways and nearby parks and water bodies to find my connection to the great outdoors. I am often in awe of the vastness of the water reservoir or the sparkle of the stars when I go for a walk or a run in the dark. These opportunities and feelings of awe foster a connectedness to nature and a sense of eudaimonia (Capaldi et al., 2015). My daughter and I also enjoy venturing outdoors together daily, making the most of the full-time hours we enjoy together at home due to the pandemic; we often stop to marvel at the complex network of branches by looking straight up a spruce tree trunk, or we follow the bright glow of the moon at dusk.

I spend time outdoors by converting regular indoor activities to regular outdoor activities as well, offering more spontaneous moments of awe and positively effecting well-being (Anderson et al., 2018). I enjoy drinking my coffee in the warmth of the morning sun. I also enjoy working on my laptop outdoors in temperature above 10°C, on a plywood desktop propped up by two barstools. My daughter and I read books, play games, and solve puzzles - all outdoors. We embrace the Norwegian proverb, “det finnes ikke dårlig vær, bare dårlig klær,” meaning there is no bad weather, just inappropriate gear (Nikel, 2017). Whether in t-shirts and shorts or in snowsuits and toques, there are few days of the year we do not venture outdoors.

### **The Trifecta**

I am most productive and efficient with my time when I combine the three strategies discussed above. I find that being active outdoors is freeing, allows me to continue to challenge and develop my physical literacy, and is more enjoyable in comparison to exercising indoors. While being physically active, I also enjoy the silence that follows a completed reading/listening, which is a time when I often conceive new ideas and connections between topics; a notion that is supported by the positive effect of physical exercise on cognitive and executive functioning (Mandolesi et al., 2018). Embracing physical activity outdoors while listening to readings has allowed me to continue to be productive as a professional, while prioritizing my wellness.

### **Final Thoughts: Technology, Privilege, and Student-defined Support**

The technology and tools identified in this article are available to me due to my family's position of privilege; I am fortunate to be able to afford the materials and services that support my learning and well-being. I encourage post-secondary institutions to continue to explore an open-minded and multidimensional approach to supporting student wellness. In addition to important supports that help manage illness such as covering costs of medication and counselling, are there opportunities to support a more salutogenic and proactive approach to wellness and student health care coverage?

Especially for full-time graduate students, who depend on highly competitive scholarships and have limited incomes, one might inquire as to how a university might monetarily support a proactive approach to student wellness. I envision subsidization for students to purchase tools and services that can enable wellness activities, such as a bike, headphones, or snow apparel that I have mentioned in this article. However, the strategies mentioned in this brief are specific to what

benefits *my* individual feelings of wellness. Wellness is multidimensional and nuanced (Eberst, 1984); students should define for themselves what they require to support their wellness, honouring their varying cultural definitions and perspectives regarding wellness. Perhaps, instead of specifically defining what can and cannot be covered through a student health care plan, ask *why* and *listen*. Yarning materials (Towney, 2005), colouring materials (Dresler & Perera, 2019), or claiming mileage to volunteer at an animal shelter (Friedmann et al., 2015), could all be included in a list of what is considered for subsidization to support student wellness. I encourage universities to re-evaluate how they can proactively support multidimensional wellness so students can be resilient, persevere, and achieve their academic potential.

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