

# Slowing down in academia: Is it worth the risk? I say yes.

I recently returned from one of the busiest conferences I have attended in some time. I gave two talks, and went to lots of sessions. Most notable for me were the number of people I hung out with. Lunches, dinners – my dance card was full the whole week. I thought back to a time when I went to conferences and felt like an outsider. These were definitely not those days. I had come a long way, and I was so thankful to see my progress as a professional in my field.

Upon my return home and to normal life, I thought about all the emails I hadn't returned during the week of the conference, and all of the science I had left undone while I was preparing my presentations and going to talks. I knew it was all there waiting for me when I returned to work. I took the entire weekend to decompress. I got a massage. I took myself out to my favorite new restaurant for a great meal. But lurking in the back of my head was the fear that once I did get back into work, I would go back to feeling overwhelmed with all that had to be done. Let's face it – life in academia is intense. Though I haven't quite committed full-bore to that life permanently – I'm currently a postdoc, so I can be on the fence for the next 2-3 years – I'm in a field where if you do research, you're basically viewed as only as good as your last published journal article. And the atmosphere can feel competitive and all-consuming if one wants to stay at the top of one's field of research. I'm not sure I want that, but for right now, this is where I am.

Memories of getting sick three times since starting my postdoc only four months ago were still fresh. I explained some of these bouts of virus with just the act of moving and getting settled, then visiting sick family. But deep down I knew that the underlying reason for my inability to maintain my normally strong and healthy immune system was that once again I was trying to do too much. I wanted to succeed so badly in my new postdoc, with new advisors that I wanted to impress, that I was sacrificing the most basic self-care – like sleep – and overextending myself in all sorts of ways, from scheduling too many meetings in one day to overcommitting when it came to the number of tasks I attempted to do in a given day.

I was diagnosed with borderline high blood pressure during my last year in graduate school, after never having any issues with my blood pressure my entire life. After doing everything I could lifestyle-wise to get my blood pressure back to normal levels – adjusting sodium intake, exercising even more and losing more weight, to the point where my doctor told me not to lose any more weight – I decided to go on a low-dose medication, and my blood pressure is now at normal levels. My family has a history of high blood pressure, so genetics could certainly have been at play. But I also wondered something, given the timing: How much of this (relatively recent) diagnosis is stress related? As I have started to come into my own as a scientist, with more demands on my time – conferences, invited talks, collaborations – has my health started to pay the price? Is it possible to live LESS intensely and still be successful as a researcher?

With all of these health-related issues as “evidence” in support of my blossoming hypothesis that academic life has the propensity to create enough stress (if not managed properly) to cause adverse physical effects (let alone adverse mental and emotional effects), I considered a prognosis. I came to the conclusion that whether or not I am successful in my chosen field is less important than whether or not I am healthy, sane, and happy in my very short (hopefully not, but certainly when compared to the age of the universe) life. Others might be capable of taking on as much or much more than I can without any negative consequences. I don't seem to be in that category. And for the first time in my life, I am starting

to consider that a blessing (because it means I get to practice doing less) rather than a weakness (which used to serve as fuel for me to push harder and do more, so that I could “keep up” with those high-powered super-scientists).

So I made some choices during the last couple of weeks that I hope to keep up. I increased the amount of time I spend meditating in the morning to 15 minutes. During that time I try to concentrate on the sounds I hear outside – birds, cars, a distant passing train. Of course my brain inevitably goes to my daily to-do list, or my grocery list, the rumbling in my belly, whatever. But for those 15 minutes, I just sit there and breathe. And I breathe deeply. I’ve found that by increasing the amount of time I sit still at the beginning of the day, I am less reactive at work and at home. I can handle unexpected events that occur during the day with a little less “Aahh! I wasn’t expecting that! What do I do?!” and a little more “Ok. That happened. What are my options?”. I feel more on an even keel when communicating with different types of personalities. I think more slowly. For me that’s a very good thing.

I’ve caught myself saying things like “that’s good enough” and packing up my laptop, when normally I would hang in there for another two hours so I could cross at least one more thing off my to-do list. I sat outside last week and ate my lunch, and watched pigeons peck around in search of food. I became fascinated by the way their heads bobbed back and forth as they walked. I fell in love with their metallic green and purple necks shimmering in the sunlight. I know this seems a little crazy. Or maybe a lot crazy. But for me to sit still and watch pigeons – with no book or paper in my hand, no phone, no assignment, no one I was waiting for – just to sit there and watch something without an end goal other than to slow the f\*\*k down and be still for a minute? It was a big deal for me.

This philosophy, of doing less and just **being** more may not be very popular among many of my colleagues in academia. And it may not be smart from a career-advancing standpoint. It certainly may not score me points with my advisors. But I have to believe that there are those who will agree with this philosophy, and with my quest to avoid getting on the intense academic train that involves long hours and constant multi-tasking. Books like Pico Iyer’s [The Art of Stillness](#) tell me I’m not alone on this quest. Blog’s like Tanya Maria Golash-Boza’s [Get a Life PhD](#) and the amazing Scientific American guest blog post by Radhika Nagpal, [The Awesomest 7-Year postdoc or: How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Tenure-Track Faculty Life](#) make me think that it might not be so impossible after all to have a normal, healthy, and well-balanced life AND succeed in academia. Revolutionary maybe. But not impossible.

Being driven has always been both a blessing and a curse for me. Without the amount of drive and ambition that I inherently possess, I would not have returned to graduate school after 11 years away from my field, finished my PhD in five years, or won two prize postdoctoral fellowships, and most recently a [TED Fellowship](#). I am grateful for the amount of drive I have naturally. Drive isn’t my problem. Not slowing down and enjoying the scenery while I pursue all of my wonderful, ambitious goals – that’s my problem. So that’s what I’m working on.

There are conferences that I’ve elected not to attend this year, because I don’t want to travel every month. I am married, and it’s important to me to be a consistent presence at home with my husband, our cats, and our friends. I’m finally learning to make decisions based on my own values, not on someone else’s. Of course I do have responsibilities to my funding agencies to show some level of productivity. But my hunch is that there is a large field of space between showing steady progress (including publications) and killing myself going above and beyond what’s reasonable. And thankfully I am finally starting to see that, and make the decision to slow down. As a relatively autonomous, independent researcher, I have that luxury. I realize that not everyone does. But those of us in academia generally do have some amount of flexibility, and the ability to set much of our own schedules. Yes, in two years when I’m back on the job market I might be cursing this blog post, and wishing that I’d tried to get that Xth paper published during my Yth year of my postdoc so I could be more attractive to faculty search committees. But I’m

thinking I'd be more proud of the extra walks I took on crisp autumn evenings with my husband, or of the additional time I spent swinging a toy mouse around my cats' heads while watching their bright eyes transfixed and focused on a single purpose – killing that mouse. I think I'd be happy to have applied some of my drive to the pursuit of a slower, more peaceful existence, where I just hung out more, with friends or alone, with no objective or purpose; an existence that doesn't leave my loved ones saying at my (hopefully a long time from now, but one never knows) funeral, "She really went after what she wanted at work.", but maybe instead something more along the lines of "She really participated fully in life, and I always felt that she was really present – at home, at work, in the world." That's my kind of eulogy, with [Stevie Nicks](#) or [Mary Chapin Carpenter](#) playing somewhere in the background. Definitely Mary Chapin Carpenter.

[Beginning with the end in mind](#) might just help me live longer too.