

This version was adapted from a previous letter written by Hannah Brencher, founder of The World Needs More Love Letters.

A Love Letter to First Year Graduate Students.

Dear You –

It's your first semester of graduate school, and you're feeling overwhelmed. You may be thinking you can't possibly keep up this pace for the next few years.

You're going to do just fine. It's normal to feel stressed when you now have to juggle responsibilities as a student, a graduate assistant, and as a leader in a research lab or department. And of course, there's your non-academic life and the elusive idea of work-life balance.

If you feel like you're the only one struggling, you're not. **You were accepted into your program because you have a lot to offer, and also learn.** So, the imposter feeling is just that, the refining and growing of your skills. Stay strong and remember why you applied in the first place.

Reach out to the other students in your program. **You'll be surprised to hear they're worried about the same things that you are.** Remember that other students aren't your competition. Support each other.

Join online groups whether that be a Facebook group or a listserv. Tip: Grad school forums can be a great place to share your joys and your pains. We are all trying to make it through this together.

And, remember your family and friends back home! While they may not understand exactly what you're experiencing in grad school, they can still be a great source of support. You may be right down the road or thousands of miles from them. Even if you can't see them as often as you would like, make time to call, video chat, or write letters.

Don't hesitate to establish relationships with your advisor or major professor, and other professors in your department. They understand the challenges of grad school and your program, and they've made it to the other side. Plus, the better they know you, the better equipped they are to put in a good word for you with their professional networks.

Set aside time to be involved in your field's organizations and clubs. Not only is this a great way to build personal and professional connections, it also looks good on your resume or CV.

Another way to enrich your graduate experience is to be involved in research. Pick a topic, explore some articles, see if your classmates or favorite professor would be interested in starting a project. Even if you already have to do a thesis or dissertation, other collaborative projects are a great way to build relationships and an impressive CV.

If you can, take a class outside of your field for your elective, maybe try something you've always wanted to learn about but haven't had the opportunity to explore. You could even take a non-academic personal enrichment course to learn a new skill.

**If you take nothing else from this letter, hear this: make time for self-care.** Grad school is a time for limitless opportunities – but your resources are limited. You don't have to sign up for every project, club, or extra activity to prove your worth or your right to be here. Find what is most important to you and focus your energy there. **But, always leave enough time to do whatever makes life enjoyable for you.** It's the only way to make it through!

Ultimately, one thing we eventually learn in grad school is that time is a commodity and it takes a lot of effort to spend it wisely. Set some goals. Write them down and work them into simple, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time specific goals (SMART goals). You can do it! Search the web for goal setting handouts and strategies if you want.

And hey, if you're feeling overwhelmed that's okay. We all feel that way at some point (more often than not... thanks 2020). Talk to your advisor. Talk to your cohort. Talk to your professors. Reach out to CAPS. Use your resources like the Center for Educational Access (CEA).

Remember... You've got this. You've really got this. And if ever you start to believe that you don't, come find me.

Love,

Someone who's been there before.

Resources:

- Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS). Our staff includes professionally licensed Mental Health Clinicians and Board-Certified Psychiatrists. We also have full-time and half-time trainees available to provide counseling under the supervision of a licensed Mental Health Professional. Call (479) 575-5276 to schedule an Initial Assessment.
- Center for Educational Access (CEA): 209 ARKU University of Arkansas Fayetteville, Arkansas 72701. P 479-575-3104. F 479-575-7445 (fax). [ada@uark.edu](mailto:ada@uark.edu) <https://cea.uark.edu/>
- Information for graduate students: <https://graduate-and-international.uark.edu/graduate/current-students/student-resource/index.php>