A person wearing a striped shirt and a skirt stands on a large, dark rock in the foreground, with their arms outstretched towards a bright blue sky filled with scattered white clouds. In the background, a large, dark, conical volcano rises against the horizon, with some green hills and a forested area in the mid-ground. The overall scene conveys a sense of triumph and hope.

# **THE LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL:** DEFENSE, GRADUATION, AND BEYOND

Leslie Ralph, Ph.D.  
Counseling and Psych Services

TRUE OR FALSE?

Graduate students have  
**HIGHER STRESS/DISTRESS**  
than the general population.



# TRUE

(surprise!)

AND stress is the most commonly  
reported barrier to academic  
performance  
(American College Health Association)



WHY YOU???



AFTER ALL, YOU'RE:

Driven

Ambitious

Intelligent

Motivated

(you're kind of a big deal)

anything else?







**THE VERY SAME QUALITIES THAT GOT  
YOU HERE CONTRIBUTE TO YOUR  
STRESS.**

# COMMON AREAS OF STRESS

- **ACADEMICS**
- **SOCIAL/FAMILY**
- **FINANCIAL**
- Life (you can't pause it!)
- Identity/'otherness'
- Imposter syndrome
- Balance
- Expectations + culture of the program
- Relationships with faculty
- Self-esteem/self-worth
- Perfectionism
- Lack of experience



# STRESS = DEMANDS > OUR RESOURCES

How do the demands placed on you change as you near the end?

- Endless revisions.
- Uncertain future and lack of control.
- Imposter syndrome (Am I \*really\* qualified to do this as a real job? Is this \*really\* me?)
- Fielding questions from friends and family members.
- The pressure you've been saying will help you perform better is now overwhelming.



# HOW DO YOUR RESOURCES CHANGE AT THE END?

- Working more independently.
- Exhaustion.
- Burnout.
- Too much on your mind – too many questions, too many unknowns.
- Friends have started to graduate.
- Time is running out.



**NOW MORE THAN EVER IS THE TIME TO  
REFUEL, REFOCUS, AND REALLY GET OUT  
OF HERE.**

# 4 CHEESY-SOUNDING STRESS-MANAGEMENT TIPS THAT ACTUALLY WORK

#1: Eat that frog.

Meaning...

Take immediate action. Do the thing you're dreading first. Persist until it's done.

Read more in this article: <https://www.briantracy.com/blog/time-management/the-truth-about-frogs/>



# 4 CHEESY-SOUNDING STRESS-MANAGEMENT TIPS THAT ACTUALLY WORK

#2: Surround yourself with your goal's environment.

Meaning...

Know what your goal is and build it into your life. Go to the places that are most conducive to meeting your goal. Surround yourself with people who “get” or at least support you in your goal. Develop the habits that will help you meet your goal.



# 4 CHEESY-SOUNDING STRESS-MANAGEMENT TIPS THAT ACTUALLY WORK

#3: Make it visual.

Meaning...

Give yourself a verbal reminder of your goal and your progress. Make it fun and rewarding. Think giant grocery store fundraiser thermometer.



# 4 CHEESY-SOUNDING STRESS-MANAGEMENT TIPS THAT ACTUALLY WORK

#4: Give yourself a mental board of directors.

Meaning...

Identify the most influential people that you'd like to "consult" with as you work toward your goal. Read what they've written, watch their videos, and imagine what they would tell you when challenges arise.



# CULTIVATE RENEWABLE ENERGY, NOT RENEWABLE STRESS.

(THE CASE OF PERFECTIONISM)



# **MOMENT OF TRUTH:**

Your research will never be perfect.

Your writing will never be perfect.

Your CV, job applications, interviews, job talks...will never be perfect.

...but we're all perfectionists here.



**WHETHER OR NOT PERFECTIONISM'S “OKAY”  
REALLY DEPENDS ON WHAT KIND WE’RE TALKING  
ABOUT.**



Kinds of perfectionism: you can understand perfectionism by 2 things – who is the focus and what's the motivation

## **PERFECTION SCENARIO #1: THE FOCUS IS ON YOU AND ONLY YOU – BECAUSE THESE ARE *YOUR* STANDARDS.**

- Known as **perfectionist strivings** or **positive perfectionism**.
- This can actually be good under the right conditions...
  - IF the focus is on excelling (vs. perfection).
  - IF the goal is to improve (vs. be perfect).

# STRIVING FOR EXCELLENCE IS POSITIVE.

## ***Fear of failure and self-criticism? Not so much...***

Fear of failure and self-criticism lead to:

- Self-sabotage.
- Overthinking, overanalyzing, overcomplicating.
- Obsession to detail.
- Procrastination.

## **PERFECTION SCENARIO #2:** THE FOCUS IS ON EVERYONE ELSE (AND WHAT *THEY* WANT).

- Known as **socially prescribed perfectionism**, aka “people-pleasing.”
- Linked with:
  - Mind-reading thoughts (“He thinks I’m an idiot.”)
  - Comparisons, especially to those who we perceive as superior.
  - Fear and self-criticism.



# **PERFECTION SCENARIO #3:** THE FOCUS IS ON EVERYONE ELSE...BECAUSE *THEY* SHOULD AIM FOR PERFECTION (LIKE YOU!)

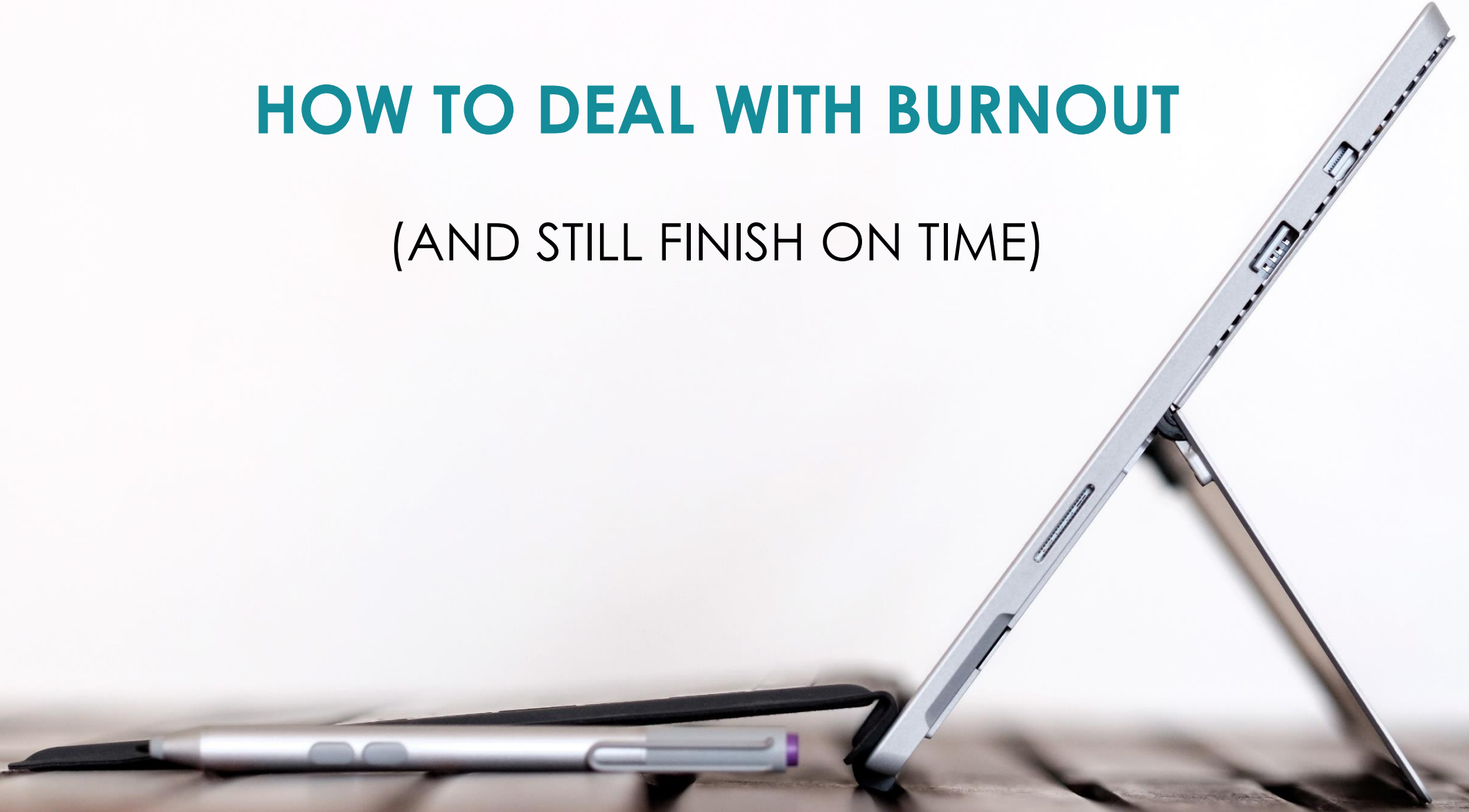
- Known as **other-oriented perfectionism**.
- Can look like criticizing or being controlling.
- Hard on your relationships.
- Hard on your time management if you can't delegate or wind up doing things all over again to do it "the right way."

# WHAT DO YOU DO ABOUT ALL OF THIS?

- Focus on your progress toward *your* most meaningful goals.
- Focus on creating what you want, not avoiding what you don't want.
- Focus on the journey – how you feel, how you're growing.
- Delegate where you can.
- Mind your own business and let people be perfectionists if they want to. You don't need to join them.

# HOW TO DEAL WITH BURNOUT

(AND STILL FINISH ON TIME)





# HOW BURNOUT HAPPENS

Often starts with desire to prove oneself, working harder and harder, and denying own needs.

Progresses to exhaustion, isolation, low motivation, inner emptiness, irritability, feelings of depression, cynicism, detachment, pessimism, and lower productivity.

*Sound familiar?*

# PREVENTING BURN-OUT:

- Sleep! (People need 7-9 hours...yes, even you.)
- Make a point of taking breaks to move, laugh, play.
- Focus on the outcome you want.
- Make choices that help you feel the way you want *while* you're working toward your goal – avoid the “I’ll be happy when” trap.
- Put a priority on contact with genuinely supportive people.

**(AND IF YOU'RE ALREADY BURNED OUT?)**



# BURNOUT TROUBLESHOOTING GUIDE:

- ***Resentments? Too many demands?***
  - Can you say no to create more white space?
  - Can you delegate or outsource?
  - Be on the lookout for sneaky demands on time and energy.
- ***How's basic self-care?***
  - Make a point of taking care of yourself.
  - Learn about and incorporate [PERMA](#) (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, achievement).
- ***Just feeling "over it?"***
  - Are your activities in alignment with your values?
  - Reevaluate your priorities.

LESS STRESS + LESS BURNOUT =  
**MORE MOTIVATION**



# YOU'RE AT THE END OF A MARATHON. STAY MOTIVATED ALL THE WAY TO THE FINISH LINE BY:

- Flowing between focus on **process** and focus on **outcome**.
- Building up your cheering section.
- Practice good self-care and be honest about the necessity of any sacrifices you're making.
- Try to resist the temptation to rush through your work.
- Set aside an hour per week for planning and brainstorming to make the work ahead of you easier. Friday afternoons are an excellent time for this.

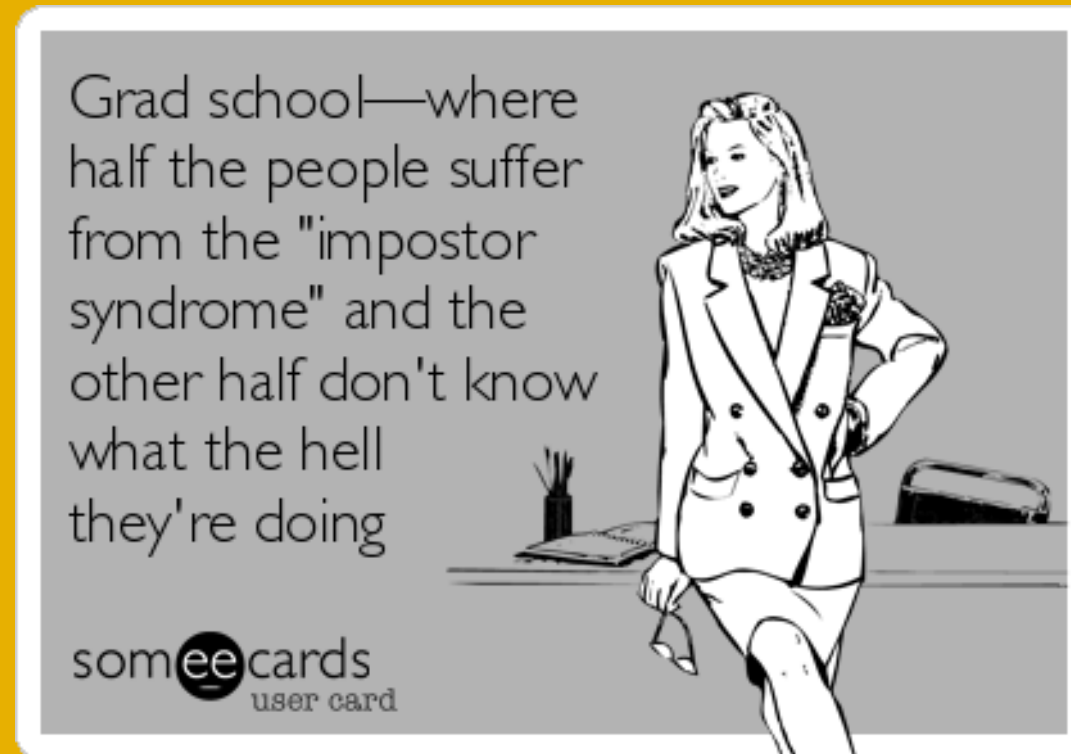


**I HAVE NO  
IDEA WHAT  
I'M DOING**



# ARE Y'ALL (REALLY) READY FOR THIS?

(IMPOSTER SYNDROME AS YOU LOOK TO THE FUTURE)





*Ever feel like a fraud?*

*Feel like they're all going to find out you have no business being here?*

*Afraid that you're going to show up to your real job out of grad school and know nothing?*

## IMPOSTER SYNDROME:

- Perpetual feeling of being unqualified.
- Attributing your success to luck.
- Fear of being found out to be a fake.
- Difficulty accepting positive feedback.
- Feel like your supporters really just pity you.

**IMPOSTER SYNDROME IS COMMON AMONG SMART,  
SUCCESSFUL, AND HIGH-ACHIEVING PEOPLE.**

## *BUT WHY?*

- Positive feedback, actually.
- Being somehow first, other, different, or without a role model or mentor.
- Defining yourself as the winner, best, or achieving more than people around you (so what happens when everyone around you is a high-achiever?)



# HOW TO DEAL:

- Realize that it's very common.
- Talk to someone you trust who:
  - Won't tell you, "Oh, but you're so smart. I'm not as smart as you."
  - Can help you remember how far you've come.
  - Understands that it's **perfectly okay not to be perfect.**

- Look back at your journey through grad school as evidence of growth.
- Start to praise your hard work rather than your intelligence.
  - (And don't view hard work as a reason that you're not good enough.)
  - If you and when you have kids, do this with them, too!
- Give yourself time to be very bad at something before you get any good at it.
- Don't take yourself so seriously.
- Examine whether this feeling is telling you that somethings *off*. Are you being true to yourself?

# HERE'S YOUR RECAP.

(#NOSTRESS)

- Manage demands + resources, manage stress.
- Some cheesy tips actually do work.
- Excellence, not perfection.
- You still need to take care of yourself, even during crunch time.
- Be intentional about your priorities.
- Remember how far you've come.
- Don't take yourself so seriously.



Want to talk to someone?

Find out more about U of A Counseling and Psych Services:

[www.health.arizona.edu/counseling-psych-services](http://www.health.arizona.edu/counseling-psych-services)

Or use your UA login details to set up a free account  
with our Well Track self-help app at

<https://arizona.welltrack.com/>