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Hey everyone! I'm Rachel Stumpf, I am a postdoc at Boston University and I am hosting today's episode of Vitamin PhD Navigating Mental Health and Balance. Over the past few years, a number of high profile studies have put graduate student mental health in the spotlight. For instance, a research from a team at Harvard and an article published in Nature both conclude that the percentage of graduate students who experience mental illness is higher than the national average. Our guest on today's show, Susanna Harris, decided to take on this issue by starting an organization called the PhDepression. Susanna is currently a graduate student herself at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, so in addition to learning more about Susanna's work and her new project, PhD Balance, we'll also be talking about how she finds balance within her own life

Hi Suzanna, it's so great to have you on the vitamin PHD podcast today.

Susanna:

Hi, it's an absolute honor to be here. I'm so excited. Yeah.

Rachel:

For listeners who aren't familiar, I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about the PhDepression.

Susanna:

Absolutely. PhDepression was started in March of 2018. That started mostly spurred on by the fact that I saw this paper from nature biotechnology showing that about 40% of Grad students were dealing with mental illness. I saw this number and part of me was really shocked to look around and see a group of people and think that maybe a fourth of them, maybe more, were dealing with these things. At the same time, I wasn't really that shocked because I also dealt with depression. I also deal with anxiety and I wanted to just find other people in the spaces I already occupied, which was social media in a lot of ways. I was at the time, a fourth-year Ph.D. student at the University of North Carolina where I will hopefully be graduating this year. It started as a project to just show the faces of Grad students with mental illness and give them a space to share their stories.

Rachel:

How has the Ph depression kind of evolved over time? I know that now you have this Ph.D. balance program that you just launched, right?

Susanna:

We were deciding between launching a separate project or changing our name and we realized that as much as I loved PhDepression, that was my baby, my name. It was something random that I thought up at two in the morning. We got some really good feedback from people. One, saying that they weren't exactly sure how to say the name, which is not a great start. Also, they didn't necessarily find us at first because they didn't want to or they didn't feel like they aligned with, Ph depression. Where we do talk about things from bipolar disorder to borderline personality disorder to PTSD, to postpartum depression. That was not captured in our name. The other reason is that we are moving towards a model now that is not just sharing the stories and sharing the resources but rather to allow students to ask for and create their own resources, whatever they think is important for them now.

Rachel:

Great. What do you think is in store for the future for Ph Balance?

Susanna:

Well, we have a lot of hopes and plans and the cool thing with this project is I'm working with an incredible team of people who are willing to jump on every great idea and not at all afraid to pull me aside and say that as an awful idea. These are the things that we have in mind that they've at least given the green light on. What we want to do is it's going to look like a subscription-based web platform. This is similar to a lot of stuff that universities already pay for. What's going to be unique to this is not only that it's going to be focused on overall resilience, it's going to be professional and personal resilience for graduate students. It's going to be driven by what graduate students are currently talking about, what they are currently experiencing, and what they want to be sharing. What it's gonna look like is that you can come in and using hashtags, using sorting systems, and find whatever you're interested in. Maybe you're thinking what are my skills and my potential weaknesses or areas of improvement in terms of finding a job in the industry?

If we have that resource, then you can go and look at that blank sheet or you can watch a video or something like that. What we've seen with our work with Ph depression up until this point is that people really resonate with the stories, with the information being shared by other students because it's usually much more relatable in terms of what people are going through right now. even on the professional side, I think it's really important to take ideas from students and those who are currently facing the system because we know how fast it changes on the personal side, it's going to be the same system where it's going to be resources created by the people who are or have recently gone through the certain challenges but focused rather on building relationships, especially those outside of work, mindfulness, meditation and overall wellness. Which mental illness is still going to be at the forefront of our mission and I think really ties a lot of this together.

Lastly, the part that I'm really, really excited about is we are going to provide a space for a chat forum and allow people to use hashtags. Again, when people are going to log into the site what they're going to do is use their real information to get in but their profile is going to be whatever they decide it is going to be. I would be Susanna L Harris but I could also be SLH92. If I wanted to go in and ask a question saying I'm having this uncomfortable situation with a labmate, here's what's going on. Can I get feedback from people? That allows me to be honest about the situation, not have to be hypothetical, not have to use weird things, not have to be concerned that my university or someone else in the lab is going to see that and come back and tell someone. I think that that will be a really crucial part of this because we realized students really want the support that they need to thrive. They want it in a way that is safe and accessible.

Rachel:

Yeah, that sounds so exciting and I really love how there's that anonymity involved. Because I think even for myself as a Ph.D. student, oftentimes I felt really stressed or just overwhelmed, especially when I started applying for jobs and was finishing my dissertation. Sometimes it's hard to figure out who you can really talk to. I've got a great support system in my family and my partner. For people outside of higher education who haven't had that kind of experience before, it's hard to really understand what it's like to go through it.

Susanna:

Absolutely. I think that a graduate school is a place where you're constantly in transition, right? Someone who's going through their first year of a PhD, their situation is very different from someone who's in the second year of their masters, right? Even though they might be the same age, the same race, the same ethnicity, they're going through very different things. Similarly to people who are in the exact same program but have very different personal identities are also going to be having a different experience. At least what I have seen is that some of the people I expected to be very supportive of me, just maybe didn't understand the situation. Or maybe they were at a place in their life where they couldn't give that support. Whereas I've found a lot of people, especially through these projects with PhD Balance and just otherwise online where people understand where I'm coming from and are able to say you got this, we got this.

Rachel:

One of the questions I wanted to ask you is about the terminology that you've decided to use. so this new project is called PhD balance. I think that word can mean different things to a lot of different people. When you think about balance within the context of doctoral education, how do you think about that term?

Susanna:

Thank you for asking that question. Cause it is. It can be a very contentious term actually where we say balance and people think of a completely static scale where you have two things that are exactly the same way and it's staying there. I like to think about it more in terms of doing yoga and I think it's very helpful and it's something I wish I did more, of course. When I'm doing yoga with what is talked about is being mindful about when you're starting to lose your balance. It's all about training yourself and recognizing your body and learning its limits, not deciding it beforehand. And over time building that stability. It's not something where you're completely still, but rather how long can you hold a pose? Can you be mindful as you're doing it? Can you get a little bit further into it? Can you stay there for longer or in a better posture? Most importantly when you fall out of that pose, it happens but you don't just leave, you're not just going to leave the yoga because you fell out of the pose. You're going to reset, rethink, be patient, be kind with yourself and get back up.

That's how I see balance in life as well. Or at least how I try to see it. That sometimes you're going to push yourself too hard. Sometimes you're going to be overextended, whether or not you want to or not, and you're going to fall down and you're going to have to get back up. It's that balance of learning how to realize when you're going to fall and taking that time to kind of step back a bit and focusing, rather than perfect stillness, focusing on learning to rebalance and get as close to that middle line as you can as quickly and as patiently as you can.

Rachel:

That's a great analogy. I love that. I do yoga as well, so that definitely resonates with me. I think what's cool about that is about balance as well in Yoga class, when you're doing a balance pose, you're really noticing lots of things about yourself. Not only am I balanced, am I in this posture? Also, the way that you're feeling and where your gaze is. It's a way to also be really aware of what brings you balance.

Susanna:

I'm glad we went with balance and I think it does, it represents some of those difficulties we faced. I don't think anyone I've talked to is asking for Grad school to be easy. They're not asking to get rid of all challenges. They're not asking to be protected or coddled. They're asking for the resources to deal with these sorts of things. Thanks for asking.

Rachel:

Related to the question of balance, I think oftentimes in graduate school people have this expectation, whether someone's actually told them this or it's internally imposed, that research should be your sole priority. That's not everyone's sole priority. People have lots of other things in their life from relationships to health and wellness to hobbies and projects that are of interest. I'm curious for you, you've got obviously these projects that you're working on which require time and I know that you also do volunteer work. How do you navigate these different priorities and commitments in your life?

Susanna:

I actually have a situation where I see those as supporting each other rather than detracting from each other. I can pretty confidently say this, not just because I feel it, but that in this last year I've been more productive in the lab and in my Ph.D. than any other year before. This is at a time when I'm traveling, I'm talking to people, I'm working on our team of about 20 people strong, volunteers, and completely international. I have two dogs and I love cooking and I go for hikes with friends and the regular stuff. What it really is, is that while I am working on a PhD, sometimes that gets kind of demoralizing. The point of a PhD is that you're pretty much failing constantly, right? You're constantly testing your assumptions and if you're doing it right, you're probably wrong 90% of the time. If you're doing it right, your experiments are still just gonna fail because that's what they do. When those things happen, I think we have to be honest about that. It doesn't feel good. I think a lot of times we hear in science, well you fail a lot in science, get over it. I think you do eventually build that resilience to feeling those ways and then getting back up. But to also respect that it's demotivating. These other projects, they don't take away from that time. Rather when I need to feel motivated, that's something that I can turn to and say, this is going well, this is worthwhile. Conversely, a lot of times we'll be working on these other side projects and how it will be like, you know what, I actually really love science and I'm excited to go into the lab and do something that I feel like I have been trained for.

I think it's very interesting how we weigh and value certain things where we can directly say, well if you're healthy you're going to be a better lab member. I think we have to remember that in terms of mental and emotional health, if you feel sustained by other things you're doing, that's going to make a difference in how you anticipate problems. If we're in this moment of I am under stress, that I am under attack, when our experiments fail we're not going to be in the right headspace to address them as our best scientists selves.

Rachel:

Yeah, I really like your point about not putting value judgments on the kinds of things that people choose to spend their time on or evaluating them differently in light of one's research. I think I also see this happening in terms of people's family commitments. Sometimes, if you have a family, children, or a partner, it's easy to say I have to be done at this time because I have to take care of these people. If you're single and you don't have a partner or kids, then sometimes there's this expectation again, whether it's external or internally imposed that, well I can just keep working.

Susanna:

I think in academia, as well as a lot of other fields, but we have a *should* problem. We should be doing so many things. It's something to the point where anytime someone tells me, *should*, I try to make a mental note and change it to instead of saying, I should do something, it's, do I want to or do I need to? There are times that it's not an immediate want. If I say, I really want to eat a good dinner tonight, that means I also want to get out of bed and go to the grocery store, right? I might not actually want to get out of bed and go to the grocery store, but I understand it's something in the future. Same with science where I want to have this data. I don't really want to make the regions but I still want to make the reagents. Versus something where it's you should write the news and views, you should go to this conference, you should go to this talk. You should... Your time is really valuable. In a phd we are often chasing something very intangible and like you were saying that sometimes those pressures are external. Sometimes they're an external should, but quite often it's our internal should. You should be working on this, you should be reading more papers. It's just learning to give ourselves the kindness that we would probably extend to other people.

Rachel:

Yeah, that's a great point. I wanted to also talk about another area where I think it can often be really ambiguous for both students and faculty alike. That's in prioritizing health. Whether that's physical health or mental health. I think especially when it comes to mental health, it's often really challenging for people to have conversations about mental health. It's interesting because as a doctoral student, if I would say I'm falling behind in my work because I've had the flu and so I've been ill that's, that's easy to say, but to say I'm falling behind in my work because I'm depressed or I'm anxious, that feels a lot more risky.

What advice would you have for students in bringing these topics up to their advisors or faculty or just navigating these challenges that often arise as you mentioned at the beginning. These are challenges that many, many doctoral students face, right?

Susanna:

It's estimated between 25 and 40% of current doctoral students, that at any given time that number is facing symptoms of anxiety or depression or both. This is a significant number of people, right? I wish I could say we should all talk about it openly. I really do. That's my vision for the future. That's what I want for the future. That we can talk about mental illness the same way we would physical illness, I mean the same thing we do when we're not sure if it's allergies or a cold, you start sneezing. The first thing anyone says when they sneeze is, oh, no, no, it's not a cold. It's just allergies.

I wish that it was the same way when we were having a hard time trying to suss out is this just a bad week, a bad day? Are there some hormonal things going on? There's so many things that are just we're humans or is this a pattern? Do I need to talk about this? Do I need to see someone who's going to help out as something that has gone on for a longer period of time, a couple of weeks. My advice would be to kind of network your way in. No matter where you are there should hopefully, I hope at least and I think it is a good goal, I think that students not only want but probably need to have some people that they trust to talk to. That might be a therapist; for me, it's a therapist and that helps me a lot. But also likely in their lab spaces and their universities. That could be somebody in the student services that they just feel comfortable saying this is my situation.

Go from there to suss out whether their advisor or who they feel that they need to talk to about this is going to be supportive. I think the majority of advisors are going to be as supportive as they can. There are some that are trained in this and are going to be really fantastic and not only support you but also act as an advocate for you. There are others that are going to be very uncomfortable but they will try their best. There are some that are not on board with this movement. I think I would be remiss to say that anyone should feel comfortable going and talking to their advisor. I do think that it's important to find someone on campus who knows the system, knows some of your rights, and has that person as an advocate that you can talk to.

Rachel:

Yeah, that's really helpful. To your point about faculties sometimes being uncomfortable but yet wanting to be supportive, that's something that I have heard from faculty that I've met with. They want students to be well-served and they want to do everything that they can to help but they're not always sure how. What advice would you give faculty who want to support but are just not sure what to do?

Susanna:

I think that I would tell faculty that if their student needs help finding a fellowship, they will probably Google a fellowship for that student. Or they might at least contact the Office for Student Affairs. They might contact someone who can help that student get a fellowship. I think that that's the same situation here where what faculty need to do is do their best to inform themselves. This is just another aspect of training. It's another aspect of mentoring which is realizing that you're not just training scientists, you're training humans who do science. You actually have this really incredible opportunity to make an impact on the rest of their life outside of their career even. You can teach them some skills. You can teach them coping mechanisms that are helpful and that they can go on and use to help others. I think that that's a really fantastic and powerful thing.

I would say that faculty are just as nervous about this as students, as postdocs because they feel like they have a lot of responsibility. I think that's really valid. All universities that I've talked to have some resources for students. I would challenge any faculty listening to this if you haven't already, go onto your university website and find both the office of Student Affairs and the student campus health and send them both an email saying what are the resources that my students and postdocs could use? Y'all send emails every single day. I send emails all the time. It's going to take you a short amount of time. Then that moment when someone does walk into your office, whether they're saying I'm having a hard time or hey, my lab mate hasn't been here for two weeks, I don't know what's going on. You don't have to take that into account right then. You have those resources and it shows your trainees that you have put time and effort into thinking about them and they're not burdening you with asking for this help.

Rachel:

For our last question for today, I wanted to ask you, as someone who is now almost done with your Ph.D. program, I know that you are very close to graduation. As you look back on your PhD experience, what kind of advice would you give to someone who is just starting out in their PhD program? Are there lessons that you learned along the way? Or maybe there are things you have heard from other people you have reached out to you through PhDepression or now PhD balance?

Susanna:

What would I tell myself when I started? I think I would tell myself that you can't avoid the problems in Grad school. You can't avoid issues that are going to come up and you definitely can't predict them. I think that so much of us spend time trying to avoid anything that could go wrong. Whether I was terrified that my boss was going to get mad at me because I hadn't done enough or I had done the wrong thing. Once I learned to get over that a little bit, it's been much better because the number of times that she has even said something strongly worded to me, she's never actually yelled at me. Even anytime she said something strongly worded, it cannot compare to the times that I have yelled at myself for the same exact thing. I would say that these problems come up, whether externally or internally. What's gonna make or break your success is how you can respond to them and the support network you have who's gonna support you through responding.

Another really big thing that I have relearned this year is that no advisor is perfect. There's a lot of things you can do, a lot of questions you can ask going into a program, and going into a laboratory that are gonna help you figure out is this the right fit for me? Is this the right space for me? Is this the right adviser? No matter who you have, even if you have the perfect advisor for you, they have their own limitations. I have found how important it is to have people outside of my advisor be truly advising me. I have a committee which means that once or twice a we meet to talk about my progress and I recently tried to build a stronger relationship with my committee chair and I did not realize I thought that was going to be useful because he is much more data driven and he's kind of a no bullshit kind of person. He's just like, did you do it? What happened? Okay, what's next? It is really good, it's a good thing for me. We had met just three times one on one when my boss in the middle of a lab meeting told the lab that she was moving to University of Massachusetts medical at Wooster and I'm down at UNC Chapel Hill. She said, we might, this was a couple months ago in May, she said at that time she was shooting to move in November and then it was January and now it's march. The truth is, that two years ago I would have totally panicked. I would've heard that news and just run around like a chicken with my head cut off trying to do all of the research in three days and just freaking out. What ended up happening is that I reached out to some people and some friends and said, I'm nervous about this. Then I reached out to that committee chair and said, this is what's happening. Can I have a meeting with you and can we reroute my game plan for graduation? I had no idea that was going to happen. I absolutely could not know that was going to happen. But because a support system that I had put in place when I was in a good spot helped me when I got to this next challenge.

Rachel:

I think that just again really brings home that idea again of balance as not being something where everything is in perfect alignment but it's this give and take, this shifting, and this flexibility. Curve balls will definitely come our way but we can respond to them in a way that doesn't totally throw our balance off so to speak. Thank you so much for being on our show today, Susanna.

Susanna:

Yeah. Thank you for having me here. I am always available to chat or if people have ideas. The coolest thing about the Internet is that people all over the world have not only been supportive but have been absolutely critical to rethinking things and giving me new ideas. If anyone wants to reach out to me, they can find me at Susanna L Harris. If you want to send me an email, it's that same handle, but @gmail.com and for Phd Balance it's Phd_balance. that's on Instagram and Twitter. It's also our website. if you email email@phdbalance.com you'll find us there. Great. we'll put all of this information in our show notes as well so you can check it out there. See you next time. Thank you.