

Dear Graduate Gauchos,

As everyone, globally, is grappling with the impact of COVID-19, the disruption of students' academic plans, milestones, and advancement is significant. CAPS understands that within this environment, graduate students face unique challenges. Research and data collection may be placed on hold and funding can become uncertain. Meanwhile, financial obligations to support children, spouses, and families continue. And if spouses are a part of a financial safety net, the added stress of unemployment can loom large.

As graduate students, you have long been a crucial part of making the higher education system work—something that has been spotlighted with the COLA strike. And now, as teaching assistants, you find yourself at the forefront of the sudden switch to online learning. You are being leaned on heavily for technology assistance from both faculty (who have varying levels of technical abilities) and confused students turning to you for guidance. Being pulled in multiple directions can feel overwhelming and untenable. Suddenly the future you have worked toward for years feels uncertain.

This sense of overwhelm can show up in impatience, anger, feelings of injustice, a sense of loss, grief, and even terror. If you have experienced other significant events such as the fires and mudflows or other personally destabilizing situations, it can have a cumulative effect and alter your sense of safety overriding your usual resilience. These are normal reactions to an abnormal situation.

Research shows that resiliency - which is essentially finding effective ways to cope with adversity, difficult emotions, while maintaining supportive connections—helps individuals get through distressing periods of their life. A recent article in the Washington Post discussed how Sir Isaac Newton was studying at Cambridge in the 1600s during The Great Plague of London. In his early 20s at the time, he had to leave campus and isolate much like all of us are doing right now as part of recommended physical distancing. It was during this year of isolation that he developed his theory of gravity and various mathematical equations including some of the early calculus concepts still used today. His year of isolation has since been referred to as his, “year of wonder.”

So how can you cope with physical isolation while also developing your resilience during this time? It may not be a time of “wonder,” like Isaac Newton, but how can we make it more manageable? Here are some suggestions:

- **Maintain a routine.** Envision what your day from home may look like. Set times for breakfast, work, research, lunch, class, sections, dinner, and self-care.
- **Practice self-compassion and kindness.** You didn't ask for this. Allow yourself the reality that work will look different. Some days may be productive and some days just won't.
- **Give yourself permission to have variable emotions.** Above all *extend kindness and compassion to yourself.* You don't have to be perfect.
- **Check-in with yourself daily.** How are you feeling today? At this current moment? What is your current bandwidth? Being intentional about checking-in with yourself can heighten self-compassion and acceptance.
- **Have a conversation with your advisor/supervisor.** Practice honesty and transparency about how you are doing professionally and personally. What are you needing from them? What changes might you need for your current well-being? We may be practicing physical distancing but it's important to maintain social contact.
- **Be intentional about connecting with others.** Stay connected with other grad students. Call a friend, family member, or partner. Check-in with and share what was a highlight of your day. There is still good out there. We can choose where we focus.
- **Practice soothing techniques/Connect with your senses.** Notice your breath, sound, smell, touch, and vision. Is there a sense that helps you feel grounded and present? Listen to music that inspires you.
- **Identify where you have control.** During these times it may feel we don't have control which can heighten feelings of uncertainty, fear, and worry. Identify what you can control. Focus on each day, what you can do in each moment rather than getting too far into the future.
- **Make meaning.** All things pass as will this pandemic and physical distancing will end. When we look back on this time, how do you want to remember it? It may not be a “time of wonder,” but it could be a time of self-evaluation, renewal, or discovery.

Main point here: we didn't choose this. But we do know that we can make choices about how we spend our time.

That is where our resilience and power lies.

Keep in mind: if you would like to talk with someone and get support, CAPS is open and available for virtual appointments – please check caps.sa.ucsb.edu for more information. We may be physically apart, but we are in this together!