



Session FIVE: Mental Health

Advance Preparation *question: will you ask students to do any workbook sections?*

Before this session, students will have been asked to watch scenes 1.3, 1.5, and 2.12 of A Tale of Two Labs.

- 1.3 The Heideberg Lab** - Harold Wendling, a third-year grad student, is struggling with replicating the work of postdoc Dr. Darren Novak synthesizing the compound used in the collaboration. Darren is disengaging as he prepares to leave the lab for a faculty position. Dr. Malcolm Heideberg directs Darren to put grad student Meena Anand in charge of collaboration under Darren's supervision. [4:46]
- 1.5 Passing the Torch** - Darren informs Meena of Dr. Heideberg's decision to move responsibility for the collaboration with the Sorenson lab to her, in a major blow to Harold [3:59]
- 2.12 The Worst News** - Elliot Barr, the Director of Graduate Studies for the Chemistry Department, visits Malcom to inform him about Harold's attempted suicide and departure from the university. Malcolm is dumbstruck and suggests Harold hasn't been doing well in the lab. Elliot Barr explains that the lab will start a program focused on healthy and inclusive labs. [2:59]

Session Goals *(introduce just a few concepts)*

1. Identify elements in an environment that make it safe to discuss/display emotions and mental health concerns
 - (a) Identify supportive and damaging elements in an environment
 - (b) Identify and practice ways to identify stressors in yourself and in others around you
 - (c) Locate and know how to access supportive resources
2. Tools and resources
 - (a) Personal scripts (build on content in previous section, expand applications)
 - (b) Chemistry Values and Expectations

Approaches

(awareness)

1. Review stressors that can occur in learning and working environments
2. Develop approaches and actions you can take to alleviate them

(introduce or build on tools)

3. Practice reframing stressors as challenges versus threats

Overview:

- A. Show videos (15 minutes)
- B. Full group discussion: awareness questions (10 minutes)
- C. Small group discussion: identify and awareness (10 minutes)
- D. Personal scripts as a tool: practice, connect to values and action (15 minutes)
- E. Chemistry values and expectations (10 minutes)
- F. Closing Discussion and Case Study/ies (15 minutes)



Possible Lesson Plan, Session Three

A. Show videos (1.3, 1.5, 2.12) (13- 15 minutes)

1.3 The Heideberg Lab	4:46
1.5 Passing the Torch	3:59
2.12 The Worst News	2:59

B. Opening Class Questions: Full Group Discussion (10 minutes)

1. How do you know that you are struggling or in distress? What are your clues?
2. During moments of emotional distress what strategies or behaviors have been helpful in decreasing your stress?
3. When stressed do you enjoy dealing with things yourself?
4. It is increasingly commonplace for environments to say positive things about mental health. These affirmations are often not followed in practice, even among the well-meaning.
 - How do you navigate mixed messages when it comes to mental health in labs? Do statements of support and urging self care match with cultural expectations around workload, for example?
 - Are you able to enforce boundaries in order to rest? Is there a pattern of constantly being praised for pushing those boundaries? (thanks for coming in on the weekend, thanks for putting in 16 hour work days to get that project across the line, etc)

People may experience momentary thoughts of hopelessness or passing thoughts that they would be better off in another situation. In scenes 1.3, 1.5, and 2.12 we see that Harold was unable to identify alternate ways to handle his distressing, overwhelming circumstances. The courage it takes to advocate and care for yourself is a strategy that will yield major benefits for you and others in the long run.

Take a moment to reflect upon these questions:

- Have you taken a step back from a professional task to engage in self-care, reflect, or cope with a difficult situation? If so, what was the circumstance that necessitated this break and what was the outcome?
- Besides finding another lab, are there other ways to address extreme workplace distress or discomfort in your lab? List other methods to care for yourself in the context of your lab. Put a check by the methods you have personally seen or have heard that have occurred in your lab.

B. Small Group Discussion (10 minutes)

1. What is the difference between experiencing a failure and being a failure?
2. Think about Meena's and Harold's response to not being able to make the compound. Can you identify any good or promising strategies? Can you identify any strategies that could have been effective had they occurred in a different environment?
3. In an ideal lab how would mistakes be handled such that lab members can learn and grow from the situation?



C. Introduce Tool: Personal Scripts (review and expand to topic) (15 minutes: introduce, think/pair/share; bring back together)

The pursuit of science, like life more broadly, will contain moments of failure. While it is natural (and perhaps wise) to actively try to avoid failure, it is important to realize that many scientific discoveries emerged through, or despite, mistakes. If we are open and thoughtful failure can teach us valuable lessons like what not to do, offer insight about how things relate/function, and provide clues about what could be attempted next. The way you respond to failure, including the way you cognitively frame disappointment, the behaviors you employ, and the people and systems you utilize for support make a difference in well-being, self-esteem, professional productivity, and the way others see you.

- Describe a situation in your career where you have been experienced a failure? How have you handled this experience? What were your thoughts and behaviors? (Separating thoughts and behaviors in a column format may make it easier to identify adaptive and maladaptive thoughts/behaviors)
- Looking back, how did you feel you handled this situation? What did you do well? In what ways would you have handled the situation differently? (This may be more helpful to allow participants to put answers in a column for comparison)
- What, if any, lessons did you learn from this experience?
- What skills might you need to employ or modify in order to be more effective in handling your previously disappointing situation? For example, might you need to improve your communication skills, ignore matters of insignificance, identify lab members roles and strengths, admit your weaknesses, and/or learn to ask questions?
- Do you have a good system or process in place that helps you better handle disappointments in your career? What is it?
- Who are the individuals that help you process, reframe, and/or recover from moments of failure? What do these individuals do or say to help you?
- Remember that the fourth step of the Decision-Making Framework (DMF) is to identify your resources. Where can you turn for support, advice, or working hard issues through? Identify resources available to you on your campus. (*Hint: do a search of the student services and graduate college websites.*)

Or:

The way we talk to ourselves is very important. And yet, often, our first thought is not our most encouraging message about ourselves or our abilities. Careful attention should be paid to our internal dialogue to make sure we are not inadvertently harming ourselves or undermining our professional efforts.

One method that can help make your self-talk more uplifting is to consider the acronym T.H.I.N.K. before you speak (to yourself). Ponder the self-statement, “I’m stupid and I will never complete this task”. Is this statement:

T= true?

H= helpful?

I= inspiring?



N= necessary?

K= kind?

Think about whether there is contrary evidence under true. For example, can you think about your previous accomplishments, degrees, and experiences when you completed tasks.

Next, examine whether this self-talk is helpful. Does saying this self-talk benefit you or add information that will help you complete the task?

Whether this self-talk is inspiring is related to whether this statement has the power to motivate you in a positive way. Be careful, here. While individuals experience relief when negative self-talk is eliminated, the presence of negative self-talk also carries damaging effects.

Contemplating whether your self-speech is necessary is related to whether this statement is essential. Could you motor on without this message?

And lastly, when analyzing whether your self-speech is kind you will need to consider whether your self-talk is uplifting.

Overall, considering whether you would say this statement to colleagues in front of your entire lab is a good litmus test to whether you should say this statement to yourself.

If they you cannot answer all of these questions in the affirmative then you are encouraged to stop yourself from thinking this thought or alter your self-speech accordingly.

Now, take some time to practice correcting these negative self-talk phrases.

- “What did I expect? I am terrible at writing papers.” ->
- “If I continue making this mistake I will be kicked out of the lab.” ->
- “I might as well not apply for this grant. I will never get it”. ->
- “Soon everybody will learn that I am a fraud.” ->

Now identify some scripts that you could practice when you find yourself in these situations:

- You were 15 minutes late to lab meeting and everybody is looking at you
- You continue to fail to replicate the finding of an important study
- Your lab mate wins a prestigious research award you were also vying for.

E. Chemistry Values and Expectations (10 minutes)

F. Closing Discussion: Case Studies and Discussion (15 minutes)

Supporting your colleagues can take on many forms depending on your personality, comfort talking about emotions and problems, history and experience with your colleague, and the needs and preference of your colleague. Therefore, helping someone is not a one size fits all endeavor. Nevertheless, there may come a time when it would be beneficial to lend a helping hand.

- What activities do you do outside of the lab that support your well-being?



- Which of these practices has helped you?
- Do you have friends, family, or peers who support your wellbeing? List them here.
- What is your lab doing informally to support your wellbeing?
- What informal workplace interventions, policies, or practices could be useful in decreasing your stress in the future?
- What informal resources should you and others have available in the lab to foster mental health and an uplifting research environment?

Now consider formal resources of your lab, greater organization/University, and your community. Can you identify formal resources available to you? Challenge yourself to write down at least one specific resource for each of the following categories.

Individuals who are your mentors or advisors:

Department or institutional resources:

Community resources:

Hotline phone numbers or websites:

If you see others around you struggling, think about your boundaries and comfort with emotional tasks. Put a + by behavior you would feel comfortable doing, - by a behavior you would not feel comfortable doing.

- Asking colleague if they are doing okay
- Noting to a colleague that they appear sad or distressed
- Noting to colleague that you are concerned about them
- Giving colleague the number of a trusted mental health resource
- Offering to go on a walk with colleague
- Bring colleague a preferred beverage
- Asking colleague out to lunch
- Giving colleague your personal number
- Telling lab manager about your concerns
- Discreetly giving colleague a kind note with mental health resources and contact numbers
- Asking colleague if there is anything you can do to help them feel better
- Increase talking to colleague about shared interests
- Offering to do some of colleagues work tasks/chores
- Smile at colleague
- Share with colleague what you appreciate about them/Give a compliment



Read the above list again. Can you identify other ways to support a colleague in distress that is congruent with your personality? Can you identify other ways to support a colleague in distress that is congruent with your current lab culture? Write them below.