

By Emily Ashkin and Michelle Atallah

## Full disclosure

“I stood in front of my entire lab and told them I had made zero progress in the last year,” Michelle declared. At the graduate program’s annual retreat, presentation after presentation had highlighted students’ successes. But Michelle, Emily, and two other Ph.D. students were taking a different approach, sharing our most painful failures—disappointed principal investigators, rejected fellowship applications, being one signature away from dropping out of grad school, you name it. The audience of Ph.D. students sat in silence, apparently shocked. But we weren’t ashamed. Quite the opposite—we were proud to be sharing our full selves and building a foundation for authentic relationships.

It began a few months earlier, when Emily was applying for graduate fellowships. Michelle, a previous National Science Foundation (NSF) fellowship winner, was tapped to help her through the process and was floored by how good Emily’s essays were—beautifully written, and describing achievements and experiences that made Michelle feel inadequate. So Michelle was surprised when Emily said that she felt applying wasn’t worth it because she was certain her poor undergrad grades were going to send her straight to the rejection pile. Michelle took a deep breath, smiled, and said, “I won the NSF with a GPA just like yours.” For both of us, this was our first time openly confessing our shortcomings to a colleague.

Setbacks are an inevitable part of grad school, but too often we try to hide them. By sharing our whole selves, including our failures, the two of us went on to build a deep, meaningful relationship. And we wanted others to experience that openness, camaraderie, and support.

We thought our program’s annual retreat would be a good opportunity to help set our peers on that path. We weren’t sure the organizers would be interested in a nonscientific session, but they were encouraging. So with excitement—and some nerves—we got to work preparing, joined by two classmates who also wanted to share their experiences.

The four of us began the workshop by presenting our stories onstage. Then we invited the audience members to turn to one another and share their own significant failures. An awkward silence followed—as we had expected—but it only lasted a few seconds. Soon the students jumped into engaged and enthusiastic conversation. Two first-year students began to cry when they discovered they both felt overwhelmed by impostor syndrome. Older students opened up about switching labs halfway through their



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more honest and less perfunctory, and several students have mentioned they feel closer to their classmates. Students are asking one another for help not just on technical challenges, such as where to find a reagent or how to do a protocol, but also about how to handle the personal challenges that are part of grad school. When one student felt unprepared to give an important presentation, for example, they messaged the program-wide Slack channel for help. Several students replied, sharing advice, stories of similar experiences, or simply words of affirmation and encouragement.

It’s hard to relate to someone when all you know about them is their accomplishments. Talking about failure normalizes it and proves it’s nothing to be ashamed of. To lead by example, Emily notes that she did not win an NSF fellowship. It’s a disappointment, but she is proud to share it. ■

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# Science

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