

Post-Candidacy Slump Timeline

What Can I Expect?

What Can I Do About It?

Immediately Following the Exam

TAKE A BREAK! The process of preparing for candidacy exams is physically, intellectually and emotionally exhausting. You will need some time to recuperate and decompress.

Common Reactions: Excitement, fatigue, emotional "let-down", lack of motivation, lack of focus, run-down immune system and the onset of colds/illness.

Things to Do: Schedule a vacation. Stay out of lab and consider leaving town. Simply "cutting back" at work won't allow you to fully re-charge. Most people will need at least 1 week and depending on the intensity of your exam and the time since your last break, you may need up to 3 weeks.

- Don't keep it a secret. It is important to discuss your vacation plans with your advisor, or you may risk damaging that relationship by "disappearing" from lab.
- If you think your adviser won't agree, consider ways to make a convincing argument. Ask senior members of your group for advice or talk with an ombudsperson if your situation is particularly tense/difficult.
- Remember to schedule a definite date to return to work so it doesn't become an "extended" vacation.

If You Can't Get Back to Work: Enlist friends to help hold you accountable for showing up in lab. Schedule a meeting with your advisor to establish immediate work goals. If you continue to feel paralyzed, consider consulting with someone at the Counseling Center.

The Next Several Months After the Exam

Many students will feel that they are drifting at this stage. While there may be a sense of relief that courses are behind you, you might also feel some uncertainty or anxiety about how to organize your time and develop a research plan.

Find Structure: This is probably the first time that your life hasn't been structured by classes and other responsibilities. Develop a personalized schedule that works best for you. You may feel unsure about what your advisor expects from you. Sometimes students begin to feel insecure or guilty if they aren't sure they're doing enough. Do a reality check with friends, a lab mate or your advisor. Research can be slow and

grueling, so it's often difficult to assess progress on your own.

Define the Scope of Your Project: This may be a real challenge if you are continuing the work of another student or if you are one of several people working on a very large project. You may feel that you are lacking the necessary skills to develop a research question. This is a good time to meet with your advisor, post docs or other collaborators in the lab to get feedback. You might also focus on the first publication that you'd like to work toward and the data and analysis needed to reach that goal.

Set Goals: People tend to work most effectively if they set goals for themselves. It is useful to set long-term goals (months/years) as well as smaller short-term goals (days/weeks) to get you there. It's likely that you will initially overestimate what can be done in a given day. If this happens and you start to feel overwhelmed, consider breaking your goals into even smaller steps. Depending on how much you've overestimated, you may need to break goals down several times until you are able to accomplish MORE than you planned in a given day.

Bumps You May Encounter Along the Way

Questioning a Life in Science: Some of you may have worked so hard at getting into college and graduate school and being successful students that you haven't really had a chance to evaluate your career path. Perhaps you've realized already from your graduate experience that you don't want a traditional position in academia. It can be difficult to stay motivated if you don't have an idea of where you're headed. This is a good time to explore various career options to clarify your professional goals.

You're Still Overloaded: You've finished classes, but still feel overwhelmed. Perhaps you are overloaded with tasks unrelated to your primary project. You're working on several projects? Perhaps your enthusiasm (or that of your advisor) has gotten you spread too thin. It will be important for you to identify your priorities and then to negotiate with your advisor to meet your group responsibilities, as well as your need to make progress towards graduation.

In Another Slump: There is a long road between candidacy and graduation and there are few milestones to motivate you along the way. This is a time to find a way to jumpstart your research.

- Present your work. Participating in a symposium or attending a conference may not only give you a deadline to work toward, but you can also feed off of the energy and exchange of ideas. Talking with others about your work may help you get excited about your project again.
- Update your curriculum vitae. Yes, even if you don't need it right away. It will save you time when

you do need it and it can serve as a "pick-me-up" to remind you of your recent accomplishments. Remember to include new skills acquired, new job responsibilities, masters degree, conference posters/presentations and publications.

- Get involved with other activities, such as committees, student government, sports or hobbies. Some people thrive on a busy schedule and having commitments helps them make the best use of their time. You may also feel more motivated to work when your other interests are being satisfied.
- Maybe it's time for a 4th year meeting where you can check-in with your thesis committee for a progress report and to develop a timeline for completion of your project.
- Evaluate the severity of your problem. If it feels like none of these strategies will work for you or they have already failed, you may have a serious problem in your relationship with your advisor or some other personal issue may be affecting your work. Consider getting input from your labmates, the Graduate Office, the Ombuds Office or the Counseling Center.

Resources

Counseling Center x8331

Ombuds Office x6990

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