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Post-Quals Let Down

What is it?

Many graduate students report a feeling of being adrift after quals. They are unable able to focus on their work and they have difficulty getting into any kind of work routine in the lab. They can spend their time in lab reading emails, talking with people and surfing the net while some students don't go into the lab at all. It shouldn't be surprising that someone would feel burnt out after having worked so hard preparing for quals. It's a natural reaction to having studied intensively for weeks on end in addition to managing everything else they have to do such as; course work, research, or TA responsibilities not to mention time for family and friends. While intellectually it may make sense that there be a let down, most students have a hard time accepting this phenomenon when it happens to them. Because most Caltech graduate students have a long history of working hard for extended periods of time they don't quite understand why they can't motivate themselves after quals. The passing of quals is a hurdle to overcome like many others but it also a symbol of moving along to the next step in your education. In a way, it's a natural time to ask the question, "is this what I really want to do?" and being unsure of your commitment to your career makes it difficult to push yourself to get back into the lab.

How long does this let down last, meaning.... What's normal?

It does vary, but many students find it can take as much as several weeks to get back to the level of work performance they are use to.

How do you get back into the lab and back to work?

Most people find they are much more motivated to work again if they've planned a break after quals. Is this an option for you? You might want to talk to your advisor or at least other grad students in your lab and see what they think about your advisor's receptivity to your taking a break. You may be surprised that your advisor is supportive of your taking a break knowing that you will be more motivated and have more energy coming back from one. If it's not possible to take a significant period of time off then consider taking an afternoon off or some smaller amount of time especially the first week after quals. Basically the advice is that it doesn't have to be a week in Hawaii or no break at all, something in between can be satisfying as well.

Another approach is to cut back on the amount of time you are in the lab the first couple of weeks post quals and then gradually increase the time you spend in the lab.

How do you know if you have gone beyond giving yourself a break and are actually avoiding work?

Graduate students have various stories about how they knew they were avoiding work. The stories usually have to do with how they were spending their time; watching soap operas, something they've never done before and telling themselves they'll go into the lab after they find out what happens to , having to read every book in a series by a particular author before they go back, filling out tax forms instead of working and somehow those forms take from January to April to fill out.

Most people know themselves well enough to know when they are avoiding work. They know because the things they do instead of work have relatively little importance to them except that they can consume all of time and they can help the person to avoid their work.. Another sign of avoidance can be the feeling of anxiety or dissatisfaction with yourself when you aren't in lab which makes it difficult to enjoy doing anything when you're not working. Also when you no longer feel deserving of the break but continue to find reasons not to be in lab then generally you've moved into avoidance

What can you do if you find yourself avoiding work?

First, ask yourself: do I still really want to do this work? It's a question people avoid asking themselves because it has such important implications but not asking it doesn't keep you from being effected by the answer. Answering the question whether you really want to continue is essential and if you can answer it in the affirmative it will provide you with motivation.

What if you do want to do the work but still find yourself avoiding it?

Generally people avoid the feelings associated with doing a task more than the work itself. What feelings come up when you try to work? For some grad students it can be a feeling of anxiety that comes from not knowing what to do next. Not being sure of where you are going with your research or how to begin it along with not being able to talk to your advisor is a potent combination with can lead to avoidance. The challenge then is how to talk with your advisor about the guidance you need. For other grad students they may be avoiding the feeling of being without choice. The thinking goes something like; if they start their research then they'll finish it and go on to a post-doc and then an academic position and then tenure and a life of more and more research, as if the one step of starting their post -quals research inevitably leads to all of this and they won't be able to stop it. The challenge for that person is how they can do their work and still feel in control of their future. These explanations may not ring true for you but understanding your particular reasons for being stuck is what is important.

What if you don't know why you can't work?

Sometimes it's difficult to know why your avoiding the work and it can help to get someone else's perspective on what is going on. If you think you are avoiding your work consider talking to one of the psychologist's at the Counseling Center to get a perspective on what maybe going on for you. It may also be helpful to check out an article on our web site on procrastination www.counseling.caltech.edu.

In the end, some amount of let down after quals is normal but if you find yourself not getting back to the lab even though you think it's time to, then maybe it's time to analyze what's going on and get some help with the problem just as you would with an experiment that isn't working. Come talk to us at the Counseling Center, we're here to help.

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