

TRANSCRIPT: DEALING WITH ISOLATION (Suman Varghese, R. Psych.)

SUMAN VARGHESE: “Hi, my name is Suman Varghese. I'm a psychologist with Counseling & Clinical Services. I also work with FGSR in supporting graduate student mental health.

“I'm going to just chat about isolation for a few minutes – mainly talking about how grad students might be feeling and a few tips that could help.

“We know that grad school on its own is already a bit of an isolating process. Students are often working by themselves for extended periods of time on specialized work. On top of that, people around them often don't really know what they're doing or don't really get the research so they may not have a large cohort of people that understand what they're going through. So we've already got a certain level of inherent isolation.

“You add the pandemic into the mix, and it can make it even harder. Students no longer have that chance to go into work. They don't have their colleagues around them. They don't have their supervisor nearby. So that lack of structure, that lack of connection can get even stronger when they're on their own.

“It's a difficult mix. We know isolation can be tough on our mental health. It's often linked to irritability, stress, anxiety, feelings of depression, trouble sleeping. There can be all kinds of detrimental effects when we're feeling isolated.

“So here's a few tips.

“First of all, I would just say check in. It sounds obvious, but even just talking to students in therapy over the past few months, it's surprising to me how many of them say they haven't talked to their supervisors in weeks, months, since the pandemic started, and they're having limited contact. Some people started strong and it fell off the rails over the months. So now that we don't have the opportunity to have those informal interactions, it becomes even more important to intentionally check in. It can help students stay on track and it can also help them feel like they're not alone in the process.

“Number two is in those check-ins, try to have supportive conversations. Give them a little space to talk about how they're doing. What that might mean is just asking a few open-ended questions like how have you been doing? What's been going on for you? Just giving them space to maybe tell you if there's something that's bothering them. You're not expected to be a counselor. You're not expected to be their emotional support. People have very different

boundaries on what they feel comfortable with, and that's totally okay. But if you do notice a student is struggling, it can be helpful to connect them to the right resources.

“Coming to the third point, I would just say – never hesitate to recommend to a student to seek the help they need. If they're struggling with loneliness and isolation or maybe other mental health aspects, you can absolutely refer them to Counseling & Clinical Services. Typically, they can get in within three days and just have a supportive conversation with a clinician, potentially get resources, potentially get counselling. It really depends what they need. Students also have access to counseling and other support through their graduate student health plan. So, there's a few different ways they can get support. Sometimes just a nudge from their supervisor can encourage them to take those steps if they need it.

“The last thing I would just say is build community. This is a lot harder when we're not all together in the same room, but we can do it in virtual ways, as we've discovered over the last few months. That might be hosting happy hours virtually. It might be having virtual celebrations of defenses; it might be creating accountability groups. Anything that connects people together or gives them a reason to come together can be really helpful. It's nice when these things are student driven, but also it sends a message when a supervisor does that, as students may feel more connected, more cared for.

“So, again, you're not expected to be experts on this. You're not expected to be a big emotional support for them, but just showing that you care, just showing that you want to check in and also being able to connect them to the right resources can go a long way in helping students dealing with isolation.”