



## **“I CAN’T BREATHE”: A DOCTORAL STUDENT PERSPECTIVE TO COVID-19**

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### **— ABSTRACT —**

Motivation and mental health can be worsened when doctoral students try to maintain productivity and meet graduation requirements during a deadly pandemic. This perspective discusses the impact of COVID-19 on motivation to complete educational responsibilities within in a doctoral program. “*I Can’t Breathe*” is used as a metaphor to illustrate the feelings of the added pressures and demands that COVID-19 placed on educational expectations.

“*I Can’t Breathe.*” These were George Floyd’s last words when he was wrongfully murdered by police and also used as the primary symbol for on-going protests denouncing police brutality against Blacks. In like manner, *I Can’t Breathe* describes the feelings of doctoral students when the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) forced university campuses to close early, paused research studies, and transitioned classes to online only. It forced us into self-isolation and increased the pressures of finding the motivation to complete educational responsibilities with limited to no face to face social interaction. These actions exacerbated mental health challenges faced by some graduate students in conjunction with the demands and pressures of challenging programs.

*I Can’t Breathe* is symbolic of these students’ cry for help with balancing their mental health while also finding the motivation to be productive graduate students.

It is not surprising that graduate school has been consistently linked to negative mental health outcomes for students obtaining advanced degrees. Every student has a unique combination of motivating factors, motivation that generally drives them to complete their personal and professional goals (Hegarty, Brasco, & Fang, 2012). While graduate school’s constant educational responsibilities can decrease mo-

tivation, this can be worsened when students try to maintain productivity and meet graduation requirements during a deadly pandemic. Communication Sciences and Disorders (CSD) doctoral students such as myself are not immune to these challenges (Crais and Savage, 2020). We are subject to maintain a progressive work-life balance that can decrease motivation and while at the same time creating a façade of perfection that prevents us from addressing personal challenges that can delay or prevent our graduation. Unfortunately, a pandemic could be a catalyst that further weakens or destroys student motivation and productivity.

As a CSD doctoral student, my motivation was wavering before COVID-19 because obtaining a doctorate often increases anxiety and exhaustion. However, my motivation remained steadfast from working on campus and interacting in person with my peers, advisors, and mentors. I valued the connectedness I had with peers and faculty and being able to use on-campus resources and research labs to complete my work. Moreover, daily schedules of on-campus meetings and events increased my motivation and productivity. Crossing daily meetings, projects, and tasks off of my schedule made me feel accomplished and successful.

When COVID-19 hit, it hindered my success and

productivity by decreasing my motivation. I was forced to work remotely. Classes and meetings were held only online and access to on-campus resources and labs was forbidden. Uncertainty surrounding this new illness elevated my mental anxiety and exhaustion. Instead of my cherished in-person interactions, I had to find a sense of connectedness through excessive screen time from Zoom study sessions, WebEx meetings, and Microsoft team chat threads. My decline of motivation to complete my educational responsibilities required additional time than normal and I battled completing tasks with the pressures of maximizing “extra” time.

Although quarantine was necessary, it has dampened doctoral students’ productivity, mental health, and motivation. Professors and advisors need to recognize this and act. Without this acknowledgment, graduate students will continue to scream *I Can’t Breathe*.

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## References

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