Support is available to buffer postdoc stressors

We’re here for you
Cornell’s Faculty and Staff Assistance Program (FSAP) has provided services to postdoctoral associates and fellows ("postdocs") since its inception. Our professional staff understand the pressures many postdocs experience while at Cornell. We also are familiar with the academic environment in which postdocs function.

Postdocs may benefit from FSAP by:
• meeting one-on-one with a counselor for consultation and referrals to campus and community resources (e.g., the Cornell wellness program, private practitioners, etc.)
• accessing FSAP’s online information and resources

We understand the postdoc culture
At Cornell, postdocs strive to further their expertise in a specialty area, develop their professional identity, and/or advance a career. While there can be many benefits of completing a postdoc appointment at Cornell, there also can be stressors that impacts one’s well-being.

Postdocs have talked with us about:
• The pressure to establish “a name” in your field: You may be striving to develop a program or focus of study that will lead to valuable discoveries, subsequent publications, and name recognition. As a result, you may feel you need to be highly diligent, and produce noteworthy outcomes, as well as publish in prestigious journals. Intensely pursuing these goals can be productive but can also leave you feeling consumed and off balance. FSAP clinicians can help you establish a healthy lifestyle that allows for professional productivity and personal satisfaction.
• Great efforts do not necessarily launch a career: Even the best of research efforts may not generate the desired publication impact or job security. Given the reality that there are no assurances that “time in” and “work done” will launch a career, learning to develop a network of colleagues and supporters will be important to your long-term success.
• The working relationship with a supervisor: The best relationships between postdocs and their supervisors (or principle investigators) happen when the obligations and expectations are clear, and based on mutual respect. Cultural and language differences as well as poorly matched mentoring styles, can adversely impact this working relationship. In addition, your emerging independent thinking may naturally lead to disagreements with your designated advisor. Balancing your need for independence and proper guidance, while still being a good team member and group leader is an important skill to develop. Talking with a counselor can provide private opportunities to role play conversations and develop your communication style.
• Competition for grants: The highly competitive process of securing grants make careers in academia exceptionally stressful and unpredictable. Postdocs invest much energy and time in completing grant applications in hopes of securing funding to support their research and secure a salary. Establishing a solid sense of self-worth can help counter rejected proposals.
• A difficult lab culture: Many postdocs will spend the bulk of their time within a lab. Lab cultures can be challenging and stressful due to experiments not working, equipment problems, power struggles, hierarchies, language barriers and competitiveness. Learning to negotiate work relationships and cope with the unexpected are key skills for postdocs. The FSAP can help in further developing these skills.
• The tendency to strive for perfectionism: Postdocs are under substantial pressure to achieve academic or research success. As a result, striving for perfection is common as is the fear of making a mistake. Subsequently, not achieving goals on set time tables, unexpected mishaps, and unfunded grants can result in the postdoc feeling anxious and depressed. These feelings are compounded by the perfectionist belief that anything other than perfection is failure. Exploring with a counselor the common myths and thinking errors surrounding the practice of perfectionism can be a helpful strategy in increasing productivity and soothing anxiety.
• The importance of promoting oneself: The competitive nature of
successful scientists often involves self-promotion. This social posture is not always comfortable for postdocs who have strong interests in home, family and the community. Adding to this conflict is coping with demands that careers of spouses/partners may bring. The promotion of self as a scientist can also be challenging when English is not a postdoc’s first language, or when one’s cultural ideals emphasize modesty and humility. The FSAP can assist postdocs in clarifying or reconciling professional practices with personal values, interests or customs.

- **Maintaining family and personal relationships:** It’s true postdocs may have limited time available for personal and family relationships. And, some postdocs have relocated away from family, friends and familiar territory. Learning to make the most of the time you have together (in real or virtual connections) is a powerful antidote to stress. The FSAP can help you develop strategies to further nourish and sustain your nearby or long-distance relationships.

- **General stress management:** Although postdocs face some unique stressors, they also face the common stress of having too little time and/or energy to devote to life’s challenges. Make time each day to support your physical and mental health with quality sleep, exercise, and quality nutrition. This can go a long way toward fueling your important efforts as a postdoc. Gannett Health Services provides information about stress management on its website (www.gannett.cornell.edu/STRESS). Cornell’s Wellness Program also offers workshops and events in support of health and wellbeing.

**In summary**

The FSAP is ready and able to assist postdocs navigating the successes and demands of their position. The FSAP staff can provide both brief counseling as well as referrals to campus resources and community services including private practitioners. As with all our counseling services, consultations and referrals are addressed in a manner that upholds confidentiality and privacy.