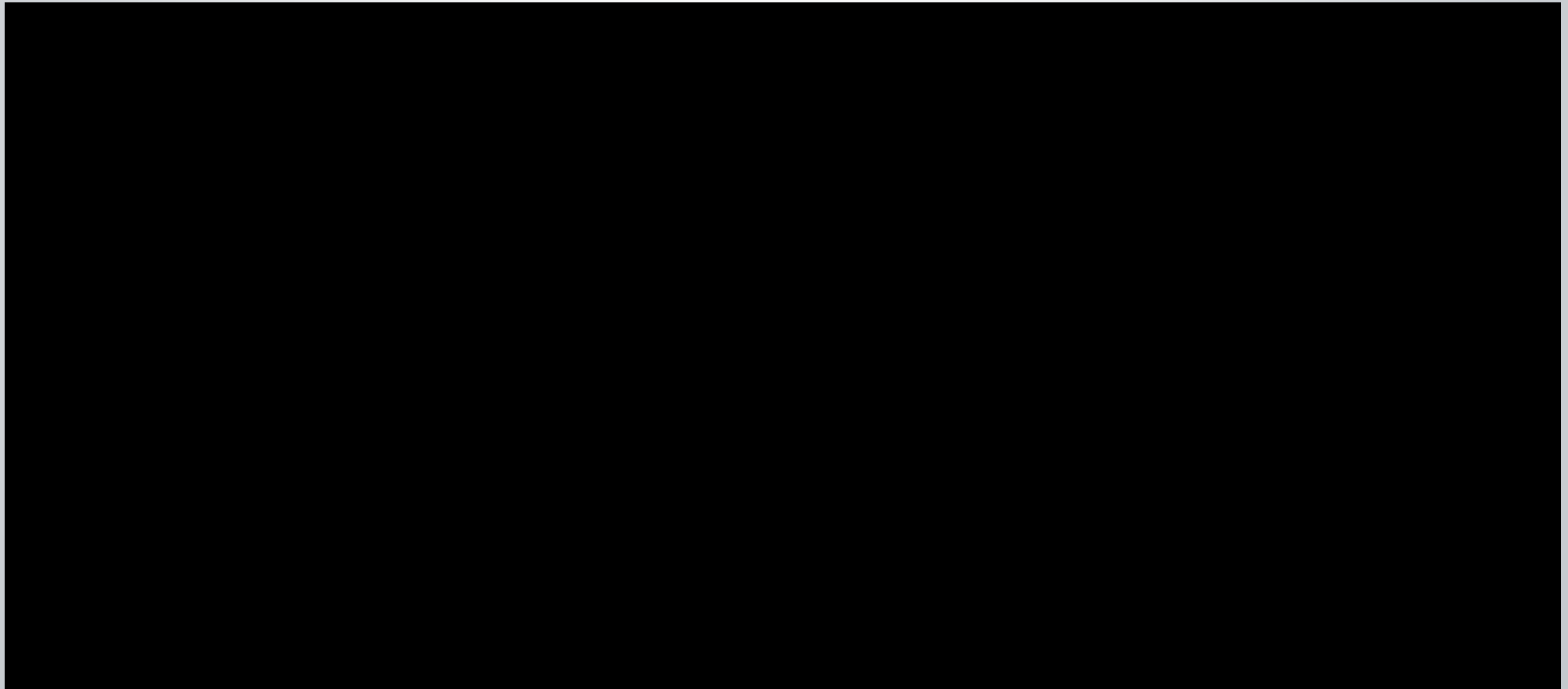


# MENTAL HEALTH IN ACADEMIA



The pandemic has intensified many stress points for faculty while highlighting existing issues with how academic work is structured. Often this has left many feeling that one must choose between productivity and their own mental health needs.

# FACULTY AND MENTAL HEALTH



---

# FACULTY AND MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health in higher education has never been so tenuous. During the pandemic faculty rapidly shifted to remote teaching exacerbated the impacts of pre-existing heavy workloads and increasing expectation around academic productivity. At times, it felt as though there was no relief in sight. Combined, there has been a negative impact on the mental health of university faculty. Now this problem did not begin with the pandemic: faculty has been raising concerns about faculty mental health well before this time.

# TOO HIGH A PRICE TO PAY

The life of a professor is a constant balancing act where we try to juggle personal and professional responsibilities under the pervasive stress of managing expectations in an often hypercompetitive culture. There is always a fear that we may drop the ball, a sense that if that were to happen, we would be alone and the only one to blame. The system assumes that we should be old enough, experienced enough, and tough enough to withstand all the pressure that comes with the job. Being a faculty member in a university can be one of the most fulfilling career paths, but it has also become one of the most stressful jobs.

Most of us quickly learn that we must project an image of always being in control and unshaken by all the storms of academia. We feel the need to 'fake it', until (hopefully) we make it. In reality we, like our students, frequently experience stress, fear and insecurity as well as anxiety, depression and burn out. As faculty, many believe that admitting we are stressed or going through a mental health crisis would be a mistake; that if we do, no one will see us the same way, and that it may compromise our relationship with our students, our colleagues and our superiors. In the absence of a collegial and supportive culture, and with many professors spending most of their time in their office only surrounded by computers, a faculty position can be emotionally, mentally and physically draining. It should not be this way, and no one should suffer alone.



# THE STATE OF MENTAL HEALTH IN ACADEMIA

Research on academic stressors and strains (Wray & Kinman , 2022) pointed out that faculty members across the globe consistently report high levels of stress, anxiety, and other mental health issues.

Researchers found that almost two-thirds of academics reported experiencing mental health concerns, such as anxiety, psychological distress, depression, ad burnout, at some point in their career (Bourgeault et al., 2021).

In contrast to those in tenured or tenure-track positions, those working as contract faculty experience mental ill-health due to their job insecurity, compounded by uncertain or unfair hiring practices, poor financial compensation, and a marginalized status in the academic community.

Precarious work is a major source of stress for contract faculty that women and persons of color wre more likely to report high levels of stress.





AUTONOMY IS ONE OF THE MOST ENTICING FEATURES OF BEING A FACULTY MEMBER. YOU HAVE FREEDOM TO CHOOSE YOUR WORK AND THE TOPICS YOU RESEARCH

THE PARADOX IS THAT THERE IS AN INCREASED REQUIREMENT TO BUILD A MORE IMPRESSIVE CV TO SECURE TENURE, PROMOTION, AND RESEARCH FUNDING-EVEN IN THE FACE OF BUDGET RESTRAINTS.

# STUDENTS AND WELLNESS

- Recommend that students attend campus events that focus on wellness
- Encourage students to eat healthy, sleep, exercise, and socialize
- Provide office hours via Zoom or in-person specifically for the discussion on wellness with students
- Add a section to course syllabus that provides extra credit for attendance in wellness event
- Refer students the counseling and wellness centers
- The Mental Health Early Action Campus Act 2020
  - Mental Health First Aid, online resources, peer support services





# INVISIBILITY

The onset of anxiety or an increase of may occur when a faculty member is under constant evaluation. Faculty are evaluated by students peers, universities , granting agencies, and sometimes in the press.

For women, identifying work life balance, family care, self-care affects their overall mental health negatively.

The dialogue within academia is clouded by significant stigma, disclosure debate, taking a leave of absence, avoid burden on colleagues, faculty choose to work while ill.



# ACADEMIA AND FLEXIBILITY

- Chicago State University has mental health initiatives that are supportive and more focused on individual coping behaviors
- Providing individuals with a mechanism for managing their mental health when they are not feeling well is required. Working from home is seemingly a solution, however faculty can hide their distress and receive the support that can most benefit him or her.
- *“My mental health has been so detrimentally affected by my career that I don’t know how I’m going to make it to the end of my career. I don’t know how I’m going to survive that long... it’s hard to survive in such a competitive environment. The anxiety over that is huge... I have a really uncomfortable time at work despite the fact that I’m really successful in what I do. My publications are fine. I’m successful, but the cost is just too high.”*

# STRATEGIES

- Admit that you are not a superhuman
- Seek help and see a therapist
- Avoid suppression of your feelings and thoughts
- Pay attention what is happening to your body physically when you feel stress
- Say “Not Now” or “No”
- Make more time for yourself, family, research, students
- Give up certain grants and consolidate research efforts
- Be okay with feeling uncomfortable when discussing challenges with colleagues
- Yoga and mindfulness

## REFERENCES

Siobhan Wray, Gail Kinman. (2022) The psychosocial hazards of academic work: an analysis of trends. *Studies in Higher Education* 47:4, pages 771-782.

Bourgeault, I., Mantler, J., & Power, N. (2021). Mental health in academia: The challenges faculty face predate the pandemic and require systemic solutions.