

just keep swimming!

making your mental health a priority

by Philip Hawkins, director of financial aid, The George Washington University Law School

Financial Aid Director Philip Hawkins presented a session on mental health at NASFAA's National Conference in June 2018. In this highly personal account of his battles with stress and depression, he offers insights on "learning to breathe."

Several years ago, I took up swimming as a serious form of exercise. Learning how to swim for exercise taught me how little I knew about the favorite summer pastime of swimming. Learning how to swim correctly also taught me many basic life lessons. One very basic but essential lesson was to learn how to breathe while swimming. When I was young, I was told "don't breathe underwater!" which meant that I usually held my breath for as long as I could. Competitive swimmers can't do it that way; they must actually learn how to breathe while swimming, which means to inhale by turning their bodies so their mouths come out of the water ever so slightly for air at regular intervals, then to exhale through the water. Inhale and exhale, stroke and kick, all in smooth, fluid, repetitive motion. The basic lesson learned from this—breathe!! Breathing is foundational to living! After months of improving the art of basic swimming in a pool, I plunged into lake swimming, where there is no wall every 25 yards to take a break, and I found myself underwater singing Dory's song to Marlin from the Disney animated film *Finding Nemo*: "Just keep swimming! Just keep swimming!"

Sometimes life sneaks up on us and we forget to breathe—to turn away ever so slightly and take that slightest break from what surrounds us—so we can inhale and exhale that slightest bit of foundation-of-life breath to take us through the next set of responsibilities we must face, the next set of work priorities we must complete, the next set of family commitments we must fulfill. You see, without breath, we deprive our bodies of oxygen. Without oxygen, our bodies lose their ability to sustain life—we lose our ability to live.



Take a Breath:

Proactive Stress Management

Feel like you can't escape the cycle of stress you're in? Try some of these suggestions.

- Maintain a defined workweek (stop early/late days, working weekends, etc.)
- Take allocated vacation and sick time
- Take lunch break away from your desk
- Eat healthy and exercise
- Talk with a friend—really talk rather than texting or Facebook
- Seek assistance from a counselor or therapist
- Practice self-compassion
- Remember the movie “Frozen” and learn to “Let It Go!”
- Take one thing at a time, one day at a time
- Be selfish! Focus on yourself first (as airlines advise—put on your own oxygen mask before helping others)
- Laugh! Smile!
- Accept the love and support that others offer
- Accept yourself
- Find ways not to feel lonely, even when you may actually be alone
- Try journaling your feelings and identify feeling words
- Eliminate the word “failure” from your vocabulary
- End the day recalling successes/positives

Working in financial aid can be very rewarding—we help students find funding opportunities to pursue their next level of education. Often, the rewards can be overshadowed by the administrative burdens—compliance, deadlines, enrollment pressures, accreditation, adequate staffing levels, training—and it seems the list grows every year. Without that necessary breath, we often lose sight of the rewards; worse, we often lose ourselves.

In 2012, I began having symptoms of depression masked as anxiety/panic attacks. The symptoms progressed to a point where I was scared to drive anywhere, and I ultimately became scared to leave my house. Eventually, through the help of counseling and medication, I convinced myself that I was well enough to take on a new job at a new school. I poured more of myself than I could spare into that job, spending countless hours, early mornings, nights, and weekends working and never feeling caught up. Looking back, though, I had always followed that pattern in any job I ever held. “This is my normal,” I convinced myself. Using my metaphor, I wasn’t breathing. This wasn’t normal, and it was only getting worse.

By July 2015, I faced four staff vacancies that left the office down by 33 percent, an upcoming payment deadline with hundreds of students facing unresolved payment issues, and two missed federal gainful employment data reporting deadlines and subsequent notifications of my delinquency to my university president. I spent six consecutive weeks working seven 14-hour days, and all I could see in myself when I looked in the mirror was the word “FAILURE.” Finally, on the afternoon of September 1, 2015, with a crowded lobby of students and parents, my associate director came to my office to ask a very routine question that should have required only a routine response from me. Instead, all I could tell her was, “I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know! . . .” until I was crying and screaming at the same time. I was experiencing a mental breakdown. On this occasion as well as another just nine months later, I came face-to-face with this reality:

I was suicidal.

After two mental health crisis hospitalizations that year, I took a medical leave and entered a long-term recovery program in the summer of 2016. I continued under their care even after I returned to full-time work in the fall, becoming a sojourner with others who had similar stories and who had reached their own encounter with life’s dark realities.

The online *Book of Life*, by the London-based “School of Life,” includes the chapter “Self: Virtues of Character” where they discuss “the importance of having a breakdown.” Within this discussion, which sounds so very similar to many of my personal experiences, they suggest the following:

The reason we break down is that we have not, over years, flexed very much. There were things we needed to hear inside our minds that we deftly put to one side, there were messages we needed to heed, bits of emotional learning and communicating we didn’t do—and now, after being patient for so long, far too long, the emotional self is attempting to make itself heard in the only way it now knows how. It has become entirely desperate—and we should understand and even sympathise with its mute rage. What the breakdown is telling us above anything else is that it must no longer be business as usual—that things have to change.

(*Book of Life*, <https://www.theschooloflife.com/thebookoflife/the-importance-of-having-a-breakdown/>).

Flex? Change? In the financial aid profession? I mean, aren't we a profession grounded in laws, regulations, and accountability? Flexibility gets us into trouble, right? If we think of the School of Life's perspective regarding the capacity to "flex" solely within our professional context, we miss the point. "Things have to change..." brings the human piece of ourselves into our professional context. We can only do so much in our lives without taking a breath to keep going. Otherwise, without that breath, we stop moving forward in the water.

We stop moving.

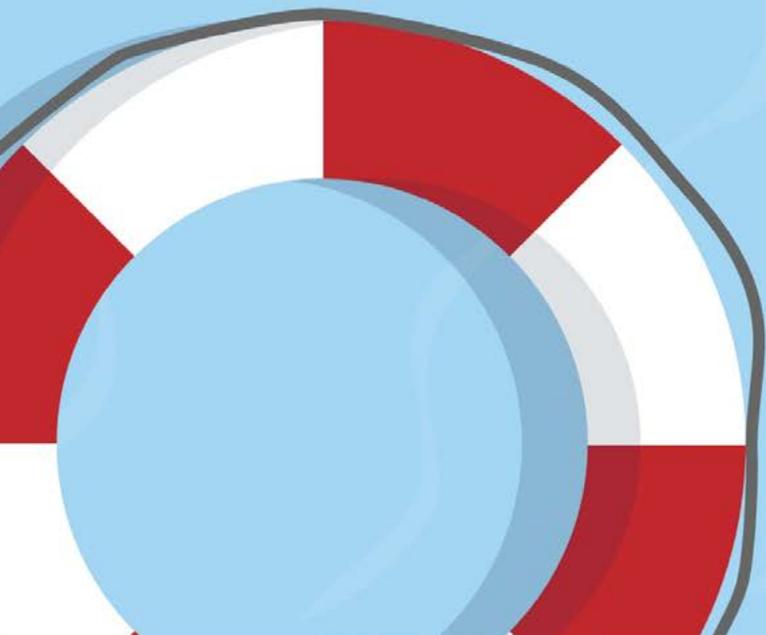
We...stop.

So, how do we take that momentary breath while still moving forward in our high-pressure profession, as swimmers do? I recently presented on "Mental Health in the Financial Aid Profession" at three conferences, including the 2018 NASFAA Conference. Each time, I asked for very informal feedback from the audience regarding the use of vacation time and lunch breaks. Although there were only 60 respondents across the three events, their responses were revealing. Forty-six percent indicated they take an annual loss on their vacation time to some level, 30 percent indicated the financial aid calendar makes it impossible to take all their vacation time, and 4 percent indicated they have no idea how many vacation days their employer allocates to them and how many they have taken. Regarding lunch habits, only 13 percent of the respondents indicated that they routinely leave their desk for a lunch break every day; 19 percent indicated they routinely skip lunch entirely. The middle ground (65%) indicated they combo work/eat at their desk during lunch on a regular basis.

Vacation time and lunch breaks are just two examples of a limited resource we already own that can help us take that much needed metaphorical breath—our TIME!

Sometimes that metaphorical breath we need to keep moving forward comes in other reminders that we are persons who have value and worth. Practice self-compassion, especially during the difficult times. Engage in positive self-talk, even out loud. Hearing it reinforces it. Don't stuff your feelings; talk them out with a friend or journal them. Use your phone to talk with a friend; don't just rely on texting or social media. Spoken words and listening are quickly becoming a forgotten art of communication. When needed, seek help from a professional listener.

I continue to learn many valuable lessons on my recovery journey, most notably that each day is brand new, and no matter how much I plan, it takes resilience to maintain enough personal flexibility so I do not break (again) during the stressful times. By managing the opportunities to turn and take my breath and to exhale that breath as I move forward in life's waters, I choose to accept myself as a successful person who has worth and value.



Find Help When You Need It

National Suicide Hotline
1-800-273-8255 (TALK)

National Alliance on Mental Illness
<https://www.nami.org>