

# Navigating the Student-Supervisor Relationship

*Delivered in collaboration between the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Student Wellness Services.*

## Presenters:

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**UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY**  
FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES



We would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the traditional territories of the people of the Treaty 7 region in Southern Alberta, which includes the Blackfoot Confederacy (comprising the Siksika, Piikani, and Kainai First Nations), as well as the Tsuut'ina First Nation, and the Stoney Nakoda (including the Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Goodstoney First Nations). The City of Calgary is also home to Métis Nation of Alberta, Region 3.



Images from <https://pixabay.com/>

A decorative vertical bar on the left side of the slide, composed of various colored shapes (red, orange, yellow, green, and maroon) in different sizes and orientations, creating a vibrant, abstract pattern.

# Agenda

**Introductions** – Who are we and what can we do to support you?

## **The Supervisor-Student Relationship**

- Responsibilities

- Expectations

- Best practices

## **Scenario Discussions**

### **When things aren't going smoothly...**

- Resolution strategies

- Taking care of you

- Who can help

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# Learning Outcomes

- Develop effective communication skills for navigating challenging interactions with supervisors
- Develop strategies for managing the inherent power imbalance within the student-supervisor relationship
- Learn about resources that can help address problems within the supervisory relationship

# FGS Student Team



Dr. Clifton  
Cunningham  
Associate Dean  
(Student)



Michelle Drefs  
Associate Dean  
(Student  
Experience)



Yan Zhang  
Graduate  
Academic and  
International  
Specialist



Marisa Norona  
Graduate  
Academic and  
International  
Specialist



Graduate  
Student  
Services



# FGS Student Team

## What we can help with:

- Supervisor conflict
- Policies and responsibilities regarding supervision
- Issues impacting Graduate students
- Failed first attempt at candidacy or thesis defense
- Barriers to timely completion
- Procedures for leave of absence or extension requests
- Your rights as a student

<https://grad.ucalgary.ca/services/student-services/student-support>



# SWS Mental Health Team

Student Wellness Services seeks to support students in navigating their mental health, at all sections of the [Mental Health Continuum](#). The SWS mental health team consists of Counsellors, Sessional Counsellors, and Student Support Advisors.

As our team is quite large, I invite you to explore this link to learn more about specific team members and their roles!

<https://www.ucalgary.ca/wellness-services/services/mental-health-services/meet-our-team>





# SWS Mental Health Team

## Mental Health Supports:

- Counselling
- Coordinated Care
- Events
- Self-Help
- Peer Support
- Student at Risk Team

<https://www.ucalgary.ca/wellness-services/services/mental-health-services>





# What is a supervisor?

Supervisors help graduate students:

- Navigate hurdles
- Develop skills

Supervisors act as a:

- Mentor
- Evaluator
- Advocate
- Recommender

Supervisors are NOT:

- Your romantic partner
- Your employer

**True or False:  
Can your  
supervisor fire you?**

Refer to: <https://grad.ucalgary.ca/current-students/thesis-based-students/supervision/best-practices-and-guidelines> for best practices and guidelines for supervisors and students.

# What do supervisors appreciate in a graduate student?

- Self-motivation
- Excitement about the research
- Eagerness to learn and improve
- Responsive to feedback
- Organizational skills
- Good collaboration with others

Refer to: <https://grad.ucalgary.ca/current-students/thesis-based-students/supervision/best-practices-and-guidelines> for best practices and guidelines for supervisors and students.

# Driving on track...

- Meetings, agendas and minutes
- Timeline/work plan
- Supervisory committee meetings
- Annual Progress Report
- Student-Supervisor Checklist



# Scheduling regular progress meetings



# Asking for specific feedback

“...e-mailing a chapter to an advisor and saying ‘Give me feedback’ is like walking into a restaurant and saying ‘Give me food.’ You need to be a bit more specific. When handing over your work, identify the type of feedback you are looking for.”

-Kearns & Gardiner, 2011

# Supervisors: humans after all!

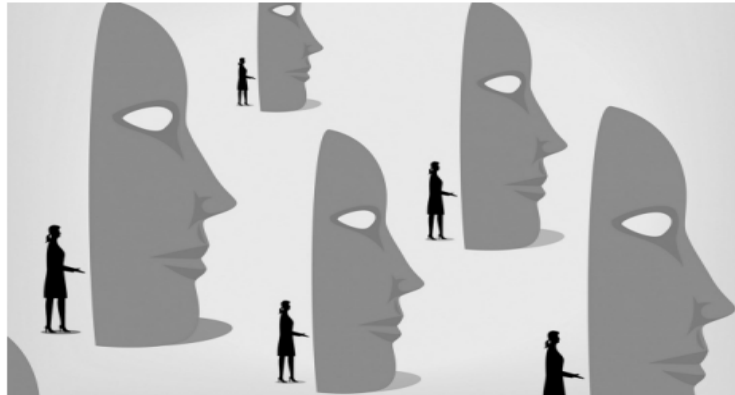
5/6/2019

Your Graduate Adviser May Have Impostor Syndrome, Too - The Chronicle of Higher Education

THE CHRONICLE  
of Higher Education

ADVICE

## Your Graduate Adviser May Have Impostor Syndrome, Too



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By Jay Daniel Thompson | APRIL 10, 2019

I'm sitting in the university cafe, playing with my phone, when my graduate-student advisee appears. My heart begins pounding wildly as she weaves through the tables. She's going to want my advice on something. Is this the moment when I'll be revealed as a know-nothing?

Impostor syndrome is, by now, a well-known term used to describe that feeling many scholars get that we are frauds in our particular field and about to be exposed at any moment. This "syndrome" has been known to affect researchers of all ages and ranks, from graduate students to department chairs.

At its mildest, impostor syndrome can entail persistent and discomforting feelings of self-doubt. At its worst, it can cripple careers.

# Top five student concerns related to supervisors



1. Unclear expectations: feedback, timelines, milestones
2. Difficult circumstances: personal or academic
3. Intellectual property or authorship issues
4. Difficult interpersonal student-supervisor rapport
5. Lack of engagement or access to supervisor





# Realities of student-supervisor relationships

- Power imbalance
- Everybody is busy
- Cultural differences
- Individual communication preferences and styles
- Every relationship is unique
- Bound to be some degree of conflict



# Scenario discussions

- Read the scenario
- Comment
- Propose possible strategies

## Notes:

- For some cases, the context might not be sufficient.
- You can question the scenarios and make them specific.
- There may be more than one approach to solve the problem.



## Scenario discussion

Yoona submitted a draft of her thesis to her supervisor months ago. As always, her supervisor was late in reviewing the draft. When they finally provided feedback, they commented that Yoona's writing was not clear and asked her to do more research and resubmit. Yoona feels discouraged and doesn't know what to do.

*What problem(s) do you see from this scenario?*

*If you were Yoona, what could you do?*

A decorative graphic in the bottom-left corner consisting of several overlapping diagonal bars in green, yellow, orange, and red, with rounded ends.

## Scenario discussion

After three years in his Master's program, Luke thinks his thesis is finalized and he is ready to prepare for defense, but his supervisor insists that he needs to publish at least one more paper before graduation. However, Luke does not have much time to write the paper because he is assigned too much work to finish in his supervisor's lab.

*What problem(s) do you see from this scenario?*

*If you were Luke, what could you do?*



## When things are not going smoothly

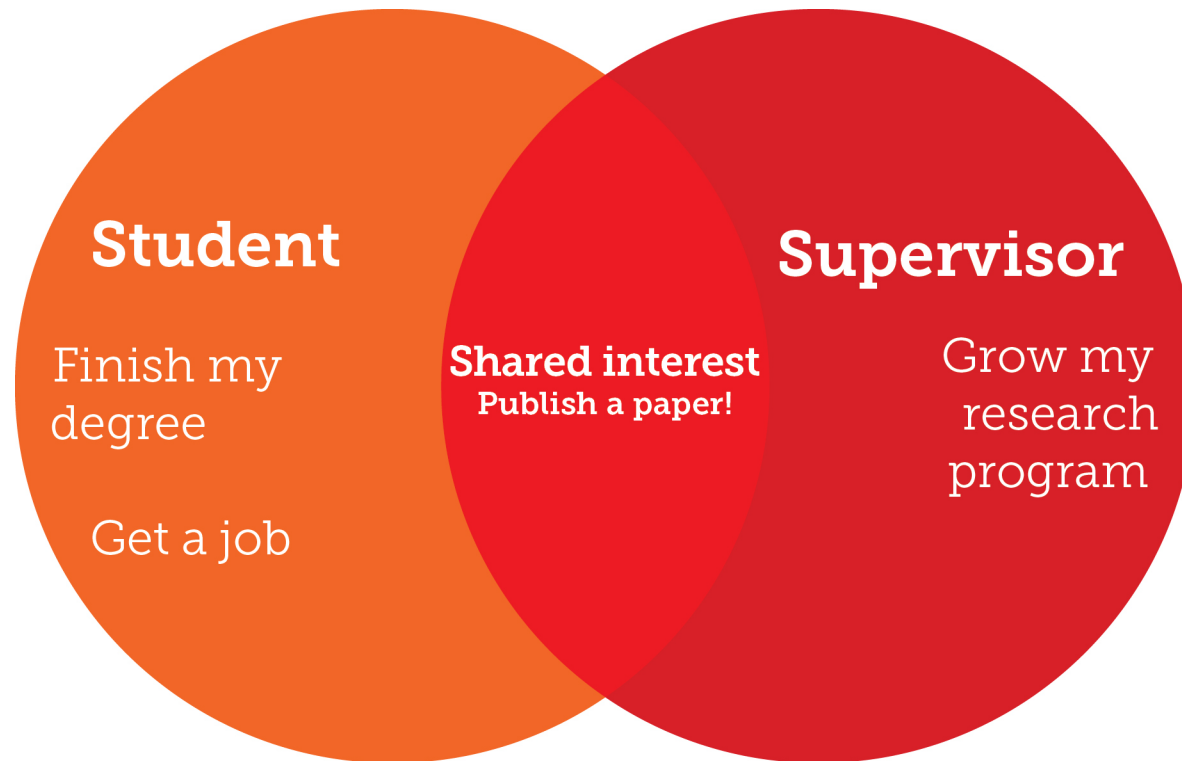
- Identifying shared interests
- Shifting from assumptions to information
- Communication, communication, communication!

Also don't forget!

- Seeking help
- Managing mental health



# Identify your shared interests!



# Shifting from assumptions to information

## How to read a Professor's door



JORGE CHAM © 2014



# Some Words on Effective Communication

- Assumptions prevent clear communication.
- Increase your self-awareness.
- Practice taking others' perspectives.
- Build assertiveness skills (polite, respectful).
  - "I'm okay, you're okay."
- Demonstrate willingness to compromise and negotiate.
- Practice responding to criticism with curiosity.
- Act according to your values and morals.

Source: <https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/docs/Assertiveness.pdf>

# DEARMAN: Objective Effectiveness for Making Requests

- **D**escribe the situation
- **E**xpress your emotions and thoughts
- **A**ssert by asking for what you want/need (or saying "no")
- **R**einforce through rewarding
- **M**indful – focus on the present issue
- **A**ppear confident
- **N**egotiate – Offer or ask for alternatives

# Communication Strategy: "I Statements"

- Describes how one is feeling, while tactfully explaining the problem.
- Step #1: I feel \_\_\_\_ (use a feeling word)
- Step #2: when \_\_\_\_ (you do or don't do)
- Step #3: because (explain why this matters)
- Step #4: How can we solve this? (you could invite a discussion about compromise)
- Very different from "blaming" (you statements).



## Communication Strategy: Use Descriptions

1. Decide on your priorities.
2. Describe the situation non-judgementally.
  - Use facts.
  - Note the need to problem-solve.
3. Describe your thoughts and feelings about the situation.
4. Clearly ask for what you need/hope for.

Source: Van Dijk, S. (2012). DBT Made Simple.



# Communication Strategy:

## "Assertiveness Sandwich"

- [Positive -> "Negative" -> Positive]
1. Thank you so much for reading the draft of chapter #3. I know you are very busy, and I appreciate you taking time to offer feedback.
  2. I am just confused about your comments on page 10. I did not understand what you meant by \_\_\_\_\_. Could you please explain this further.
  3. I look forward to incorporating your feedback and continuing to prepare for my defense.



# Pillars of Mental Health and Resilience

- Practice self-care (not always things you enjoy)
- Be mindful of your thinking
- Remember your values – What are your priorities and goals? Your "WHY"?
- Good nutrition
- Adequate hydration
- Quality sleep
- Regular physical movement
- Social connection
- Self-awareness – What is the purpose of the thought/feeling?



# Stress and Mindset

## *“Stress is Harmful”*

- Stress depletes my health and vitality
- Stress debilitates my performance and productivity
- Stress inhibits my learning and growth
- Stress effects are negative and should be avoided

V/S

## *“Stress is Enhancing”*

- Stress improves my health and vitality
- Stress enhances my performance and productivity
- Stress facilitates my learning and growth
- Stress effects are positive and should be utilized





“What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him. What he needs is not the discharge of tension at any cost, but the call of a potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled by him.”

-Viktor Frankl

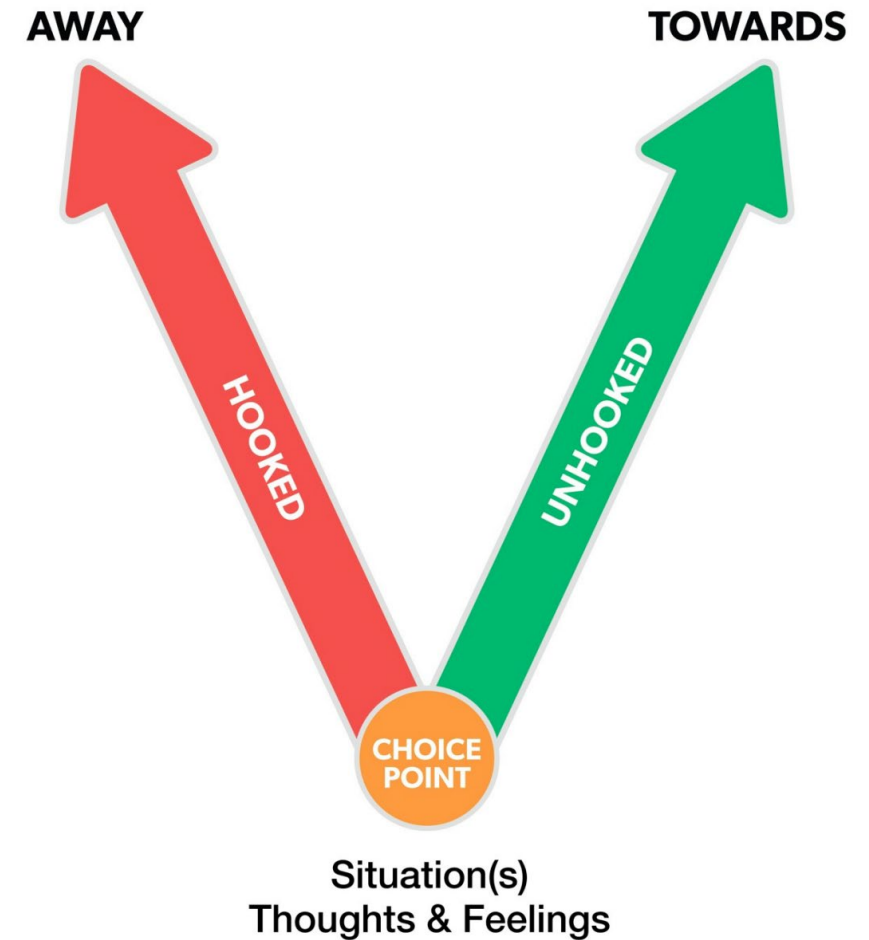


# Reconnect with What Matters

What is one small "toward" move that you can do today?

(Something important that fits with your values)

Harris, R. (2021). ACT for beginners. *Psychwire*.



## Recap: Do vs. Don't

- Replace assumptions with information
- Delay communicating/submitting work until things are “perfect”
- Document: agendas, minutes, progress updates
- Be transparent re: setbacks, challenges
- Lose sight of your strengths, motivations
- Seek advice whenever needed
- Remain curious
- Strive for open communication
- Enhance your mental health and resilience

**True or False: You are expected to solve any challenges or misunderstandings with you supervisor on your own.**

# What can be done? Who can help?



# Thank you!

Questions or comments?

Reach out if you need help.

We are here to support you!

## Contact FGS:

- [grad.advisor@ucalgary.ca](mailto:grad.advisor@ucalgary.ca) or
- [grad.ucalgary.ca/services/student-services/student-support](https://grad.ucalgary.ca/services/student-services/student-support)

## Contact Student Wellness:

- [kaitlin.vangeel@ucalgary.ca](mailto:kaitlin.vangeel@ucalgary.ca)
- [SWSMentalHealth@ucalgary.ca](mailto:SWSMentalHealth@ucalgary.ca)



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