Promoting Mental Health and Wellness in the Postdoctoral Community
Mental Health and wellness for postdoctoral and graduate trainees are acknowledged by most universities as important issues that need to be addressed. These needs became exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic during 2020-2022, which disproportionately affected postdocs, who repeatedly report high levels of isolation.

The body of literature on the seriousness of mental health and wellness issues and their impact on the well-being of graduate students and postdocs is growing, especially in wake of the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, several studies indicated an increase in the incidence of anxiety and depression among college students. One survey examined the links between positive emotions, resilience, and adaptive strategies for moderating anxiety and depressive symptoms in postdoctoral fellows. Of the 200 postdoctoral fellows evaluated, 13 percent were flourishing, 58 percent were languishing, and 29 percent were depressed.
The authors concluded that “in order to optimize resilience among postdocs, it is important to implement programs that would aim to increase individual use of adaptive coping strategies, decrease use of maladaptive coping strategies and increase experiences of positive emotions” (6). In other words, increasing positive emotions through acknowledgment for work well done or promoting feelings of value and inclusion helped combat clinical levels of anxiety and depression. A survey conducted by the University of California, Berkeley aimed at understanding life satisfaction and well-being of trainees identified similar issues. The top concerns for students included career prospects, financial stability, social support, and feeling valued and included (7).

Despite these recent efforts, more specific surveys that address the mental health wellness of the postdoctoral population are needed (4, 5).

A joint effort by the University of Kentucky and University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio sought to do just that; gathering more data on the impact of stress, anxiety, and depression on postdoctoral and graduate trainees nationally (8). In 2018, this team published a stunning study showing that 39 percent of graduate students suffered moderate to severe depression and 41 percent of graduate students suffered from moderate to severe anxiety (9). Data like this is key information in highlighting what is needed to support trainee health and career preparation; however, recent information specific to postdoctoral trainees—particularly international trainees with a unique set of professional demands—is still lacking. Utilizing the data from these surveys, evidence-based interventions to promote mental health wellness among postdoctoral and graduate trainees are crucial as part of a more preventive strategy.
Recommendations from Studies

RELEASE INFORMATION
Release information about your university’s mental health facility, OMBUDs office, and confidential counseling services several times a year! These services provide a safe and confidential mechanism for sharing frustrations and talking through difficult situations. A recurring concern among all of the surveys conducted was that postdoctoral fellows were not aware that these services were available to them.

PROVIDE OUTLETS
Provide outlets for physical, mental, and social wellness without placing fees or limiting access to a particular subset of trainee, faculty, or administrative staff. Offering recreational or extracurricular activities provide opportunities to get out of the work environment as well as bond with co-workers or expand your personal network.

EXPLORE TRAINING
Encourage faculty to explore training opportunities about positive mentorship and advising to increase healthy dialogue between mentors and mentees.

PROVIDE MEANS TO SOCIALIZE
Provide means for postdocs to socialize with one another within their institutions as well as across institutions in an effort to fight isolation, which can exacerbate mental health issues.

ENCOURAGE SELF-ADVOCACY
Encourage graduate and postdoctoral trainees to take an active role in their training and learn how to advocate for their needs productively.

PROMOTE FURTHER RESEARCH
Institutional surveys are an important step to identifying the specific needs of trainees and provide a method for obtaining institutional support.


Although there will always be stress in the workplace for postdocs, graduate students, faculty, and staff, the goal should be to create an environment where people can seek help without stigma. Postdoctoral offices can help facilitate a more receptive environment by providing postdocs with the tools and programs that address their concerns.