

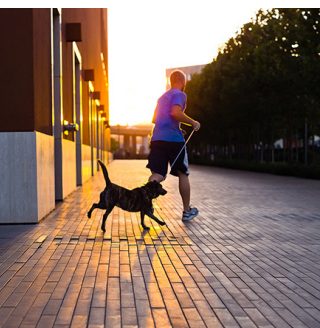


# Postdoc Guide *to* Caring for Yourself and Your Colleagues



Adapted from the work of the Mental Health Task Force  
sponsored by UCSF Student Health & Counseling Services

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## Rationale for this Guide

As a postdoc you are probably dealing with a number of major life changes, any of which could present significant challenges regardless of your prior academic achievements or successes. You are transitioning from the life of a student to the life of a professional. You are also probably at the age when many people get married or begin a family. Chances are, you moved to the Bay Area to do your postdoc from outside the city, or even from another country. All this change combined with the usual stresses of a demanding career and other aspects of your life can be difficult to manage.

You've worked hard for your advanced degree and you probably expect a lot from yourself, but stress affects everyone, and everyone has different methods of coping with it. Some methods are more effective than others. When the level of stress becomes too much to handle, things can start to break down. It may be your physical health that shows the first signs. It may be your memory and concentration that start to lose their edge. You may become more easily irritated. You may start to cope in less healthful ways, like drinking too much alcohol. Anyone can run into difficulties.

The signs of too much stress can manifest differently in different people. Such signs typically are visible to you early on (if you look for them) and to your colleagues (who might show signs of their own). Early detection of stress-related problems usually allows for an easier, more straightforward solution. Being mindful of your responses to stress and taking steps toward preventing such problems from happening in the first place is even better.

### Steps to Caring

The mission of the University of California, San Francisco entails educating the nation's most promising new scientists and students for careers in the health and life sciences, as well as delivering the best possible health care. To fulfill that mission, members of the campus community must lead by example, demonstrating the ability to care for themselves and their colleagues.

Some aspects of UCSF complicate achieving that mission goal. You are probably working with a broad range of colleagues, from students to well-established researchers and with people from all over the world. This can be fun and exciting, but miscommunications may occur, or you may find it harder to find colleagues you can relate to. Long hours in the lab may make you feel isolated.

The campus community has taken significant steps toward creating a culture of caring at UCSF. This guide is part of that effort. The faculty and staff have also received training about assisting colleagues in need, and they are available to help you with problems you may face while you're here.

This guide will help you care for yourself and your colleagues by providing:

- Ways to recognize early signs of difficulties - *see the table on the next page*
- Basic tools for preventing stress-related problems
- Resources available for care
- Ideas about how to help others

## Early Detection - do any of these indicators apply to you or a colleague?

Difficulties can manifest in five fundamental areas, affecting your work, relationships, thinking, feeling and physical well-being. Monitoring and assessing yourself in these areas can help to identify potential problems early on and enable you to prevent them from worsening.

Signs in any of the areas below may indicate a stress-related problem:

<p><b>Work</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Declining academic or work performance</i></li> <li>• <i>Trouble finishing tasks</i></li> <li>• <i>Poor attendance</i></li> </ul>	<p><b>Relationships</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Withdrawal from social interaction</i></li> <li>• <i>Increased defensiveness, sensitivity or over-reacting in discussions</i></li> <li>• <i>Disruptive behavior</i></li> <li>• <i>Inappropriate or odd behavior</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>Cognition</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Difficulty comprehending</i></li> <li>• <i>Poor concentration</i></li> <li>• <i>Indecisiveness</i></li> <li>• <i>Forgetfulness</i></li> </ul>	<p><b>Emotion</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Elevated or depressed mood</i></li> <li>• <i>Irritability</i></li> <li>• <i>Excessive worry or anxiety</i></li> <li>• <i>Negative outlook, hopelessness or thoughts of suicide</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>Physical</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Significant weight gain or loss</i></li> <li>• <i>Obvious fatigue</i></li> <li>• <i>Deteriorating personal appearance</i></li> <li>• <i>Increase in alcohol or drug use</i></li> </ul>	

A single sign from the table above indicates a need to assess your situation:

- How long has the problem been going on?
- Do I have a good idea why it's happening?
- Have I tried to fix it, and has that helped?

If the situation isn't changing for the better, and what you've been trying to do to cope hasn't yet addressed the problem, you should consider taking advantage of resources that UCSF makes available for postdocs (see page 8).

If you notice multiple signs from the table on page 2 or a single sign that lasts a long time, this may indicate that you would benefit from some help in finding a solution.

Some of the signs listed in the table may indicate mood disorders (such as depression), anxiety problems, substance abuse, emotional crisis, recent trauma or exposure to violence. Because these conditions or situations can be helped or treated, early identification is important.

**Read on in this guide to learn strategies for prevention, more information on early detection, and numerous resources for self-care and caring for colleagues.**

## Prevention

Training for a scientific career includes performance under varying degrees of stress. Postdocs come to UCSF with a wide range of strengths and coping skills for managing stress. You may be well prepared to deal with stress or you may benefit from additional help in learning how to manage stress. Although studies have shown that a certain degree of stress enables peak performance, studies have also shown that excessive stress has significant negative physical, cognitive and emotional consequences. (For examples of these, please see the table on page 4.) Even the best prepared postdocs can have problems caused or triggered by stress.

You can reduce excessive stress with these steps:

- Know the stressors
- Balance your lifestyle
- Change the system

### Know the Stressors

*Types of Stressors for Postdocs:*

**Academic** – Fresh from past academic success and now faced with high expectations from your mentor and outstanding peers in your lab, you may feel as if you are faltering (or even losing part of your identity as “top of the class”). Even if you’re doing well, you can still feel significant pressure to perform. The academic culture often seems to reinforce competition, which can lead to undue stress.

**Developmental** – Taking on the responsibilities of an increasingly independent researcher can bring up issues such as handling uncertainty, wielding greater authority, and acting professionally.

**Financial** - The cost of living in San Francisco, loan burdens from previous academic study, and even taking on the new financial obligations inherent in starting a family may make it hard for postdocs to make ends meet.

**Social / Relationships** – The process of developing new social connections (with colleagues, mentors, faculty, etc.) and managing changes in existing relationships can give rise to stress. All new postdocs must adjust to idiosyncrasies of their labs and a new campus environment. Postdocs relocating here encounter the added stresses of being in an unfamiliar environment as well as separation from home, family and friends. Even postdocs from the Bay Area may face disrupted social networks and need to adjust to new living situations.

UCSF celebrates the richness of diversity on campus, and diversity in itself is not a stressor. Nonetheless, ethnicity, race, cultural background, physical abilities, gender, age, health status, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion/spirituality, social class, and other differences are all factors to be mindful of in interactions with others, especially when addressing conflict or stress.

### Balance Your Lifestyle

Maintain a balanced and healthful lifestyle despite the many forces pulling you to devote yourself almost entirely to your research. Make time for exercise, relaxation and fun. Bakar and Millberry Union fitness and recreation programs offer relaxing group exercise (e.g., yoga, Pilates), discounted massage services, Outdoors Unlimited weekend trips, and other activities.

Discuss coping techniques with your colleagues, mentors and peers in order to increase the number of tools you have for managing stress. Let yourself connect with and learn from others.

Use resources like the Faculty and Staff Assistance Program (FSAP) ([ucsfhr.ucsf.edu/assist](http://ucsfhr.ucsf.edu/assist)) and other well-being programs or seminars offered regularly on campus. FSAP is staffed by licensed professionals who provide confidential brief counseling to individuals at no cost.

### Change the System

Identify and act upon stressors that are within your sphere of control. Find ways in which you can limit the impact of stressors on you. For example, be aware of taking on too many responsibilities in the lab, and don't entirely cut yourself off from activities that help reduce your stress level. Also, during certain times of the year, it may help to let your friends and family know that you're particularly busy, enabling them to either provide additional support for you or give you more space.

Identify and act upon stressors that are beyond your individual sphere of control. Workplace issues creating undue stress should be brought to the attention of your mentor, staff, or the Office for Postdoctoral Scholars ([postdocs.ucsf.edu](http://postdocs.ucsf.edu)), so that change might be implemented. Look for opportunities to change the culture of your lab or department so it reinforces healthy living. In addition, since postdocs are represented by the United Auto Workers, you can also contact your union representative for assistance with workplace problems.

## Tip for Prevention

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### **Compete Less, Learn More**

*It took a lot of talent and work to get here. You may have come from a graduate program where information was a commodity to be hoarded in order to distinguish you from your peers. Now you need to rethink competition. You need to consider the benefits of collaborating and working cooperatively – your peers are valuable resources.*

*Statistically, the odds are slim that you will be competing with your new colleagues for the one final spot in the one place you desperately want to go next in your career. As your knowledge becomes even more specialized, you will realize even more and more the need for collaboration with other scientists whose specific expertise you must have to do your research effectively.*

*Establishing yourself as a collaborator in science will enhance your career and reputation by giving you the professional connections you'll need when you establish your own lab or move into non-academic professions.*

## Early Detection

Difficulties can manifest in five fundamental areas, affecting your work, relationships, thinking, feeling and physical well-being. Monitoring and assessing yourself in these areas can help to identify potential problems early on and enable you to prevent them from worsening.

**Refer to the table on page 2 for signs that may indicate a stress-related problem.**

A single sign from the table indicates a need to assess your situation:

- How long has the problem been going on?
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If the situation isn't changing for the better, and what you've been trying to do to cope hasn't yet addressed the problem, you should consider taking advantage of resources that UCSF makes available for postdocs (see page 8).

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### Tip for Early Detection

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**Timing Matters!** *Keep in mind that holidays and deadline periods are a common time for issues to surface. Try to be more attuned to yourself and to colleagues during these times of increased stress.*

## Resources for Care

UCSF is committed to helping its students, postdocs, faculty, and staff, and provides many valuable resources toward that end. It's important to realize that when you can't solve a problem yourself, there are people who want to (and can) help you. **See the list of campus resources on page 8, and a few off-campus resources on page 9.**

### Basic Self Care

Good self care practices are essential to handling stress. Good practices include:

- **Eat healthful foods.** Avoid high fat and high sugar foods.
- **Get regular exercise.** Maintaining physical fitness can make you more resilient to stress.
- **Avoid alcohol and drug use.** Alcohol and drugs, rather than relieving stress, can actually increase anxiety, depression and insomnia.
- **Limit caffeine and stimulants.** These may cause anxiety and increase the stress response.
- **Have healthy sleep habits.** Keep regular hours and get plenty of sleep each night. Alcohol and caffeine both worsen insomnia.
- **Balance work and play.** Take regular breaks.

*When you notice symptoms of stress in your life, try to:*

- **Use relaxation exercises.** Meditation, deep breathing, visualization (of a soothing scene) or deep muscle relaxation (tensing and relaxing muscles).
- **Reward yourself.** Do something nice for yourself or escape for a little while.
- **Talk about it.** Friends, family and peers can be invaluable support.
- **Change your environment.** Take a walk. Take a bath. Play some music.

## Tips for Caring for Colleagues

### **Keep confidentiality in mind**

It can be difficult to hear from a colleague that one seems stressed and may need some help, especially around issues related to work performance or mental health. Some people worry that they will be perceived as “weak” or defective. One-to-one, private conversations may better defuse worry or defensiveness. As much as possible, discuss confidential information with as few parties as possible.

### **Maintain some distance**

In helping, be careful not to ask too many questions. For example, it may be helpful to know your colleague is having family difficulties, but you probably do not need to know the difficulties in intricate detail.

### **Consider diversity**

Ethnicity, race, cultural background, physical abilities, gender, age, health status, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion/spirituality, social class, and other differences are factors that may influence how stress is shown. Individuals may also be subject to unconscious bias based on one or more of these factors. (You can learn more about unconscious bias at [diversity.ucsf.edu/resources/unconscious-bias](https://diversity.ucsf.edu/resources/unconscious-bias).) In some situations, it may be helpful to suggest diversity-focused services. See page 8 for a list of campus resources.

### **Know your resources (for students)**

If you see a graduate or professional student having difficulties, call Student Health at 415-476-1281 and ask to speak with a nurse to discuss concerns about how to approach a student in need. The nurse will help you or refer you to another staff member as necessary. (Monday – Friday 8 a.m. to 4:45 p.m.)

For more info: [studenthealth.ucsf.edu/healthcare-services/counseling-psychological-services](https://studenthealth.ucsf.edu/healthcare-services/counseling-psychological-services).

### **Know your resources (for faculty & staff, including postdocs)**

The Faculty and Staff Assistance Program (FSAP) can help you figure out how to best assist faculty, postdocs, and staff in your department or lab. If you're puzzled about what (if anything) to do, arrange a meeting to talk it through.

FSAP staff can consult with you about the problem or speak directly with the individual in need. Call 476-8279 and ask to speak with a counselor.



## Campus Resources

- **Faculty and Staff Assistance Program (FSAP)**. FSAP is staffed by licensed professionals who provide confidential brief counseling to employees and postdocs. The services are provided at no cost to you. Visit [ucsfhr.ucsf.edu/assist](https://ucsfhr.ucsf.edu/assist) or call 415-476-8279.
- **Fitness and Recreation Services** offers yoga, and fitness classes, massage, and other stress-fighting activities. Visit [campuslifeservices.ucsf.edu/fitnessrecreation](https://campuslifeservices.ucsf.edu/fitnessrecreation)
- **International Students & Scholars Office** provides services that support the social, cultural, and immigration needs of the UCSF international community. Visit [isso.ucsf.edu](https://isso.ucsf.edu) or call 415-476-1773.
- **Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) Resource Center**. Services of this office include conferences, presentations, training, consulting, mentoring, advocacy, referrals and informal advising. Visit [lgbt.ucsf.edu](https://lgbt.ucsf.edu) or call 415-476-7700 x7.
- **My Family@UCSF** is a web portal that provides information for parents on child, youth, and older adult services. Visit [myfamily.ucsf.edu](https://myfamily.ucsf.edu).
- **Office of Affirmative Action & Equal Opportunity** ensures that every individual connected to or seeking interaction with UCSF receives fair and equal treatment and opportunity, and promotes diversity through specific affirmative actions. Visit [aaeo.ucsf.edu](https://aaeo.ucsf.edu) or call 415-502-3400.
- **Office of Career and Professional Development (OCPD)** serves the academic, professional and career development needs of UCSF postdocs and students. Visit [career.ucsf.edu](https://career.ucsf.edu) or call 415-476-4986.
- **Office of Diversity and Outreach (ODO)** is dedicated to building a broadly diverse faculty, student, trainee and staff community. Visit [diversity.ucsf.edu](https://diversity.ucsf.edu) or call 415-476-7700.
- **Office of the Ombuds** promotes a supportive learning and working environment at UCSF by providing alternative dispute resolution services that are protected from disclosure. It is a resource for all individuals of the campus community for mediation and facilitating communication. Visit [ombuds.ucsf.edu](https://ombuds.ucsf.edu) or call 415-502-9600.
- **Office for Postdoctoral Scholars (OPS)** can provide advice or direct you to other campus resources. Visit [postdocs.ucsf.edu](https://postdocs.ucsf.edu) or call 415-476-1558.
- **Office of Sexual Violence Prevention and Response** strives to create a campus community that is free of all forms of intimidation, exploitation, violence and harassment. It handles sexual harassment complaints and serves as a resource for questions about sexual harassment issues. Visit [shpr.ucsf.edu](https://shpr.ucsf.edu) or call 415-502-3400.
- **Osher Center for Integrative Medicine** offers mindfulness-based stress reduction classes that are open to postdocs. To register or for more information call 415-353-7718 or visit [osher.ucsf.edu](https://osher.ucsf.edu).
- **Student Financial Aid, Student Loan & Debt Management** can advise you in regard to managing debt and how to deal with student loan issues. Make an appointment or drop in for one-on-one counseling. Visit [finaid.ucsf.edu/student-loan-debt-management-and-repayment](https://finaid.ucsf.edu/student-loan-debt-management-and-repayment) or call 415-476-4181.
- **UCSF Police Department** is committed to making UCSF a safe place to live, work, study, and visit. Emergency phone: 9+911. Non-emergency phone: 415-476-1414. Visit [police.ucsf.edu](https://police.ucsf.edu).

- see a few off-campus resources on the next page -

## Off-Campus Resources

- **San Francisco Suicide Prevention Hotline:** If you or someone you know is in crisis call (415) 781-0500. Visit [sfsuicide.org](https://www.sfsuicide.org).
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** 24/7 free, confidential phone line that connects individuals in crisis with trained counselors across the United States. People do not have to be suicidal to call – reasons to call include: substance abuse, economic worries, relationships, sexual identity, illness, getting over abuse, depression, mental and physical illness, loneliness, and more. **Call 1-800-273-TALK (8255).**  
*What Happens When I Call The Lifeline?* First, you'll hear a message telling you that you've reached the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. We'll play you a little hold music while we connect you. A skilled, trained crisis worker who works at the Lifeline network crisis center closest to you will answer the phone. This person will listen to you, understand how your problem is affecting you, provide support, and share any resources that may be helpful. Remember, your call is confidential and free.
- **Lifeline Crisis Chat** is a service of the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. The goal of this service is to help you reduce stress and feel empowered to make healthy decisions. To start your chat go to: [chat.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/gethelp/lifelinechat](https://chat.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/gethelp/lifelinechat)