Chapter 1
Practicing Holistic Health and Self-Care Throughout the Dissertation Journey:
Practical Applications and Self-Reflections for Doctoral Students

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the significance of holistic health and self-care practices throughout the dissertation journey and explores how health outcomes may impact academic success, longevity, and persistence of students in a doctoral program. The author examines graduate students’ health behaviors and uses a six-dimensional model of wellness to explain how dimensions interconnect and influence health outcomes. The chapter provides the readers with reflection prompts and resources to evaluate wellness dimensions and develop a self-care action plan to adopt strategies that support holistic health. The chapter also presents a case study to illustrate the personal journey of a doctoral student navigating the first half-marathon of the dissertation journey while reflecting on ways to improve or maintain holistic health and practice good self-care. The personal experiences this work shares provide valuable insight into successes and potential obstacles students may encounter and highlight strategies that may be implemented to overcome challenges.

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INTRODUCTION

Enrolling in a doctoral program requires an individual to transition into what many may consider to be a highly stressful experience that could negatively impact multiple areas of health. Individuals that understand the significance and interconnectedness of holistic health and the importance of practicing self-care prior to enrolling into a doctoral program may better prepare themselves to meet the health challenges which are associated with managing graduate coursework and the added demands during the dissertation process. Proactive students may potentially reduce the negative health outcomes which are associated with graduate students, such as poor nutrition, sedentary living, lack of sleep or mental health issues.

This chapter provides an overview of graduate students’ health status, and discusses the significance of holistic health and self-care practices throughout the dissertation journey. Holistic health is defined as an approach to life that creates wellness by considering a whole person and how he/she interacts with their environment, emphasizing the interconnection of all aspects of an individual (Walter, 1999). The author presents a six-dimensional model of wellness to illustrate how various dimensions of wellness may interconnect and influence health outcomes. The framework for the chapter utilizes the concept of two half-marathons to describe phases within the dissertation journey. Components of the first half-marathon are comprised of the program selection and acceptance phase, coursework, and comprehensive exams, while the second half-marathon includes the dissertation process.

A general Internet search on “how to prepare for a half-marathon” will produce a range of Web site results full of training tips and training plans for runners at varying skill levels. A common theme the author identified after reviewing numerous running magazines, blogs, and Web sites is that, in order to become a successful runner, preparation is key, and runners have a number of factors to consider (Carter & Runner’s World Editors, 2019). Many successful runners prepare to complete the 13.1 miles of a half-marathon by following a training program to build endurance, build resistance, maintain proper nutrition, and achieve personal training goals (Carter & Runner’s World Editors, 2019; Rosenbaum, 2018). Training programs vary and may be tailored based on the specific needs and objectives for each individual runner. Program components might include detailed training regimens, diet plans, and contingency plans to address issues that may arise, such as injury or schedule changes.

Preparation can assist students in successfully completing each half-marathon. Graduate students can benefit from the development, implementation, and regular reevaluation of personal action plans, similar to runners that successfully complete
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