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ONE TIP

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Not One, But Three Tips for Surviving Academia with Your Sanity Intact

One Tip, September 2026 - Presented by Dr. Mimi Bong

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I know the title of the series is "one" tip, but I would like to give you three tips today.

The first is to try not to lose sight of the phenomenon that brought you to the field in the first place. It will keep you going through tough times and serve as the driving force behind a lifetime of research.

I am the product of the Korean education system from kindergarten all the way to college. And, like many Korean students in my generation, I decided to come to the U.S. for graduate school. One day, in Richard E. Clark's Human Learning Theory course (he later became my dissertation advisor), I learned about Carol Dweck's work on what was then called *the implicit theory of intelligence*. As he explained the distinction between learning-goal-oriented and performance-goal-oriented students, I realized that I, and almost every Korean student I knew, fit the definition of a performance-goal-oriented student almost perfectly! Obsession with test scores, constant social comparison, reliance on surface-level learning strategies, high levels of anxiety, self-handicapping—you name it, we were doing it. It felt like being hit on the back of the head with a hammer. At that point, I was already three years into my Ph.D. program in instructional technology. But the experience was so powerful that I changed my field from instructional technology to educational psychology and began studying motivation. I have been doing motivation research ever since, and I have never grown tired of it.

The second is to become an expert on the theory that best explains the phenomenon you're interested in, but without becoming so dogmatic about it that you dismiss other viable theories.

This, however, is easier said than done, because developing a deep understanding of even a single theory requires a great deal of time and effort. I sometimes find it unfortunate when I see people trying to apply a wide range of theories based only on a

superficial understanding of them. At the same time, earning a Ph.D. is, in my opinion, a declaration that you intend to stay in this field for at least the next few decades. So, I would encourage you to take your time and gradually expand the range of theories you feel comfortable working with. If you lose sight of the phenomenon itself and become too fixated on a single theory, you may eventually find the theory less intellectually stimulating or begin to feel anxious that you are running out of interesting research questions to ask. Believe me, no psychological phenomenon is simple enough to be fully explained by a single theory.

The third is to avoid comparing yourself or your publication record with those of others at all costs. It does not help you grow and only takes a toll on your mental health.

After all, the reason we do research in this field is to better understand the phenomena we care about (in my case, students' academic motivation) and to find better ways to help those who are struggling. It is not to prove that we are doing better than others.

For those of you who know me, I admit that I am not the best example of this advice (I haven't been able to completely rid myself of the performance-goal orientation that, sadly, remains in me). But hey, just because I'm not particularly good at it doesn't mean that I can't encourage others to do better. And I'm still constantly working on it myself.

Hopefully, these three tips will help you survive academia and continue to enjoy, for many years to come, what you set out to do when you first decided to enter the field. Cheers!

For recommendations or suggestions, please contact Dr. Serena Shim, Division 15 ONE TIP Editor, at sshim@bsu.edu

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