

Checklist for living a good life as an assistant professor

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Some personal suggestions (via accumulated wisdom from experience and observation).

The first part is dedicated to physical health and well-being.

- **ZEN in your 30s.** You are probably in your 30s. A body that withstands a poor lifestyle in its 20s will start to show cracks in the 30s. The sooner you make physical health a central invariant, the better. My five metrics of physical health are energy, stamina, flexibility, strength and balance. The first three are key for academics in their 30s. ZEN: Zzzzs (sleep), Exercise and Nutrition are the three central tools in your control.
- **Energy.** Exhausted people are uninspired and uninspiring. Focus on ZEN. Do not compromise on sleep, at least not consistently (eg: I sleep 8hrs per day and prefer not to set alarms). Moderate exercise can *boost* energy levels (unless you're extremely unfit, in which case there may be an initial burn-in period); for example, I exercise a handful of hours per week. Know your body: know the quality, quantity and *timing* of food that works best for your body type (eg: two meals per day work better for me: brunch and dinner, coffee and alcohol hurt sleep so I have them rarely and in low amounts).
- **Stamina.** Stamina determines when your energy (after good sleep and food) dips below (say) 75% of your peak energy. If you have high stamina, you will be able to be more attentive, creative and productive. Developing high stamina requires sustained investments in exercise of only a few hours per week, but the return on investment in the long run is much more: at least an extra hour of focused work per day.
- **Flexibility.** Tight muscles will get knotted and unhappy over time. Nothing hurts productivity (and happiness) like chronic back or neck pain. Beginner yoga is the easiest route for the common person to develop, improve and maintain flexibility. Otherwise, simple loose stretching exercise going over body parts from head to toe will go a long way. Good posture is usually a consequence. Massages can help tremendously.

ZEN also strongly affects immunity: a serious side-benefit. But now onto mental health.

- **Actively counter loneliness.** Being an assistant professor can be more lonely than grad school (eg: you may be the only one your department hired this year). Join or form social groups amongst pre-tenure faculty. Finding (or keeping) a life partner can help a lot. Form friendships over commonalities (like shared hobbies).
- **Beating impostor's syndrome: from doubt to inspiration.** Your colleagues may be awe-inspiring. Let them inspire awe, but stop there. Remember that your awesome colleagues hired you, because they saw promise in you. Trust the process, trust yourself, and use their example to eke out your best.
- **Dealing with rejection constructively.** Our profession is filled with rejections: grants, journals, awards, etc. Try to learn the causes, introspect on the feedback, amend the product sincerely, and try again.
- **Use social media with care.** Social media is not for the faint of heart: it can be used responsibly to connect, learn and share. But it is well known that it can be time-consuming and affect mental health. Beware of success bias: you see the successes of others, but the only failures you know of are your own. I personally made it through PhD, postdoc and tenure without the benefits and dangers of social media.

The last part is dedicated to perspective.

- **Strive for excellence.** Think of each paper you write or lecture you give (and so on) as a work of art, like composers treat songs and artists treat paintings. Each piece of art should give you great joy to produce, and pleasure to revisit in the future. One reliable way to develop pride in your work is to strive for excellence: short-cuts taken or known loose ends tend to trouble you at the back of your mind.
- **Enjoy it.** You have what many covet. You have a wonderful platform to contribute to the world in many ways. Don't "struggle now, and enjoy after tenure". Enjoy now. These are precious years of your life: you only live them once and they're not coming back. Don't postpone your happiness, and live life well today. What's the point in getting (what may be) your dream job if you suffer your way through it?