



Description

A PhD is a huge commitment. Beginning your PhD requires time, money, and most of all, motivation—all of which can run out long before you have finished. Most people who have done or are in the process of a PhD have experienced frustration, lack of motivation, and stress. But when is it time to quit your PhD? What will you do afterwards if you decide to take a different path? Coincidentally, I too had joined the course of PhD but ultimately [decided that PhD wasn't for me](#). Let me share my experience with you and additionally we can also look at the things to consider when quitting a PhD program.

A Major Realization

When I began my PhD, I [was full of motivation](#) and couldn't wait to get to class. Being paid (a minimal amount) to read, write, and discuss ideas all day seemed like the best position in the world to me. But by the time 2014 arrived, things had changed. I was in my third year of my political science PhD program, a newlywed, and experiencing some health problems that I just couldn't seem to overcome. Spending long hours at school was a necessity but threatening our marriage. I had aches and pains that just wouldn't go away. I struggled to focus on my research, and yet actively avoided my advisor in the fear of another scolding. One morning I looked at myself in the mirror and asked—what are you doing this for? You don't have to do this.

Just the idea of quitting my program terrified me. I felt like I had worked too hard to give up now, and for what? Who would want a PhD dropout to work for them? I would be back where I had started before I began graduate school, the tiring state of being underpaid and boring work. Embarking on a PhD was supposed to be my ticket to a new and exciting career. I felt scared, overwhelmed, and trapped. But underneath those feelings was one I hadn't expected—relief. What if I could just quit and spend more time with my husband? Get some true sleep, exercise regularly again, and follow up properly with the doctor? Once the idea entered my mind, I had a hard time shaking it. Finally, six months later, I pulled the trigger and left. The decision was one of the best I ever made.

Why Do People Leave PhD Programs?

In the six months between the first thought of quitting and when I actually did, I spoke to several people around me about the decision. I tried to figure out exactly what it was that was making this so hard for

me.

On thinking and re-thinking, I realized that part of it was motivation—what had seemed like thrilling research in the beginning had become grueling as time went on. I was spending hours isolated reading and writing, when what I wanted to be doing was networking and socializing with others. Even though I had the chance to present my research at several conferences, it [always felt like a letdown afterwards](#). The stress of my marriage and my constant exhaustion from my health problems made everything seem more difficult.

Financial considerations played a part as well—my husband was tired of feeling the pressure to subsidize my meager PhD stipend. But at the same time, I didn't feel like I could take a break or take on a part time job. Doing so would just prolong the process that was making me miserable. I had always wanted to be a professor, but the number of jobs available was few and far between. The more people I talked to, the more convinced I became that the future I wanted would require sacrifices I wasn't willing to make.

You Quit, So Now What?

When I told my advisor I was leaving, I was sure of my decision. But that didn't prevent me from feeling like a failure. I could tell he was disappointed, but not surprised. My classmates, on the other hand, were shocked. How could I throw all this away? What was I going to do?

For several months after quitting I sank into a depression. I felt lost, like my sense of purpose was gone. I began job hunting in earnest, and was pleasantly surprised to discover that even though I hadn't finished my PhD, the Master's degree I had earned [was still helpful](#) to my resume. While my passion for my PhD research had waned, my desire to make the world a better place hadn't gone away. I ended up landing a position with a tech company as a risk analyst. I found I both loved the work and could apply much of what I had learned in my three and a half years in graduate school.

After quitting, I reconnected with an old friend from my undergraduate days, who had also quit his PhD. He had started in biotech, but found his time in the lab boring and difficult. He quit after two years and [became a product manager](#), which was a career I had never heard of. Through our talks, I discovered that my story is in no way unique—many people have quit their PhDs and gone on to find fulfilling careers outside of research and academia.

Final Thoughts

Academia is a very insular world, and it can be hard to conceive of what options lie outside it when you are in the PhD process. My friend found his career by connecting with a recruiter on LinkedIn. The recruiter even coached him to tailor the skills he had acquired through research to land his job. He too was scared to leave his program. But his family and surprisingly some of his professors offered him important support and guidance in the process.

Ultimately, I learned that you don't have to keep making a mistake just because you have spent a long time making it. While my PhD program seemed right for me when I began, circumstances changed and so did I. Quitting was right for me, but I am still glad I tried. Who knows, [maybe I will try again](#) one day!

Have you thought about quitting or quit your PhD program? What are the factors influencing your thought process? Let us know your thoughts and experiences in the comments below.

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