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nature jobs

You've got to laugh...

When Jorge Cham started his PhD at Stanford in 1997, he felt the pressure familiar to most graduate students. But he dealt with it a bit differently — by starting his own comic strip. Cham says that the strip, called *Piled Higher and Deeper*, helped him to process his own "stress and anxiety".

It started out as doodles inspired by *Archie*, the perpetual comic teenager from the 1950s, and *Doonesbury*, the political satire that infamously featured US President George W. Bush as a talking feather sporting a cowboy hat. But it soon turned into a vehicle for empathy. "No one was really telling the story of the grad student," Cham says. Word spread as Cham uploaded the cartoon to the Internet during the embryonic stage of the web, when there was a great need for content, traffic was growing and there was little competition.

The unexpected impact of the strip connected Cham to other graduate students who were experiencing the same crisis of confidence, crowded lab conditions and long hours that had initially overwhelmed him. The strip was helping to ease the stress of readers and creator alike.

Cham says that most of the comments he gets fall into four categories: a thank-you for adding to their procrastination rituals; mock confusion over whether they should laugh or cry; a sometimes disturbing identification with one of the recurring characters; and the revelation that they no longer feel alone in being mired in grad-school stress.

Even though Cham has evolved from Stanford graduate student to California Institute of Technology neuroscientist instructor, he is still penning and posting the strip. He celebrated the 600th this year and published his second collection of cartoons in May. *Piled Higher and Deeper* will now be available on the Naturejobs graduate channel — where readers are free to use them for procrastination or decompression, as they see fit.



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