HOW TO HOLD ON TO YOUR SANITY IN ACADEMIA

Be pretty, but not too pretty. Wear make-up but not too much. Wear lipstick but not the wrong colour. Do your hair but don’t wear it too short or too long or too curly or to voluminous. Colour your hair the right kind of average. Exercise but not too much. Be fit but not too muscular. Be skinny but not too skinny. Don’t be fat.

Be feminine, but not too feminine. Wear skirts, but no shorter than knee-length and no longer than knee-length. Wear skirts, but nothing tight or playful. Wear blouses, but button up and no thin fabric. Wear shirts, but nothing that shows your form. Wear heels, but not movie-lawyer high and not sandalwood-burning-hippy low. Walk the tightrope. Don’t lose your balance.

Be white. As a woman of colour, you’ll be exoticized or the ‘diversity hire’. Sometimes both. Be middle class. As woman from the working class, life in academia will be lonely.

Be more competent than every man but don’t show it. Read everything but don’t be a know it all. Prepare everything but share the praise. Cooperate but not just with women. Men can work with just men but not you, sister. You need to work with men and women and genderfluid people.

Be more than prepared for teaching. You need to know everything and some. Don’t show weakness, don’t ever be unprepared for whatever students throw at you. Be accommodating to your students’ special demands. Be gentle, you are a woman after all. Be strict but flexible. You will be questioned about your marking. Students will expect you to meet with them and discuss everything from grades to essay projects and their personal blog. They will ask for your personal phone number. Remember, no matter what, your course evaluations will be 0.4 lower than those of your male colleagues (Mitchell & Martin, 2018).

Be interested in the ‘right’ (manly) topics. Use the ‘right’ theories. Quote the ‘right’ (white, male) academics. If you are in a field dominated by women, you are looked down upon. Men do the ‘important’ research. They will be invited to all-male panels and they will be invited as keynote speakers, because you are not qualified enough or there aren’t any women in the field.

Be prepared to wait up to six months more during the peer-review process (Hengel, 2017) even though your writing is more readable. It’s called the ‘time tax’ and there is no tax refund.

You will feel incompetent. People will use any and every chance they get to tell you privately and publicly that your thoughts are incoherent, your arguments unconvincing and that you really shouldn’t be so emotional at work. That emotions really have no place at work. They will conveniently ignore that they cause the distress in the first place. If you seek help or advice from other faculty members, they will make sure to tell you that no one talks about those issues at work. Divide and conquer is a winning strategy.

When you receive a scholarship, or grant despite everyone else’s best efforts, your efforts are belittled. Responses to such announcements are ranging from “You just received this because you know X” to “You just received this because you are a woman” to “This is how life as a woman in academia is nowadays. Handouts and freebies.”

Men in academia will harass you. Sometimes sexually, sometimes they’ll just bully you. Why didn’t you report it, they’ll ask you? Take it to the head of the school but don’t expect the man to be sanctioned. There are no repercussions for men in academia. Make sure you are never alone in an
office, hall way, copy room, kitchen, etc. with a man cause men’s behaviour is your responsibility, they’ll say. In this world, it’s always your fault.

You must change the system. You must refuse to attend those male-dominated conferences to make a statement. You must sit on every committee to offer the ‘diversity perspective’. You must mentor female/genderfluid/trans students to change the system bottom up. You must demand pay transparency because you will be underpaid and it is your job to fix the problem. You must make sure that you won’t have more teaching and more administration than your male colleagues. You must make sure to never be alone with a man in a room because you must take responsibility for men’s behaviour. You can’t trust the system to treat you fairly.

This isn’t the Handmaiden’s tale. This is every woman’s tale. You want to quit? #metoo

Don’t quit. For the sake of diversity in research and teaching. Higher education needs your brilliance, persistence and creativity. But I am going to be honest, I need you to stick around and don’t quit. For me and all other women and transgender people’s. We need you to stay and change the system.

References
