

Shining a light on mental health in the planetary science community

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Researchers test equipment onboard Zero Gravity Corporation's G-FORCE ONE aircraft. Credit: NASA

The severity of anxiety and depressive symptoms in the planetary science community is greater than in the general U.S. population, according to a study led by a University of Hawai'i at Mānoa scientist and published in [Nature Astronomy](#).

"After reading about so much [anxiety](#) and depression in academia, and as someone who loves both [planetary science](#) and psychology, I felt like I needed to do something because there are so many people suffering," said David Trang, an assistant researcher in the Hawai'i Institute of Geophysics and Planetology in the UH Mānoa School of Ocean and Earth Science and Technology at the time of this research and graduate student in the master's in counseling psychology program at UH Hilo.

Prompted by growing recognition of a mental health crisis within the academic and research communities, Trang and co-authors from Hawai'i Pacific University, UH Mānoa Shidler College of Business, Jet Propulsion Lab, NASA and U.S. Geological Survey, surveyed over 300 members of the planetary science community.

The survey requested demographic information and included commonly-used assessments to measure the severity of anxiety, depression, and stress symptoms.

Survey results showed that anxiety and depression is a major problem within planetary science, especially among graduate students and early career researchers.

The authors also found that anxiety, depressive, or stress symptoms appear greater among marginalized groups, such as women, people of color, and members of the LGBTQ+ community. And further, when examining the correlation between marginalized communities and

considering leaving planetary science, LGBTQ+ respondents were more likely to be unsure about staying in the field.

"Some of my colleagues have left the field of science because the academic workplace was hard on their well-being," said Trang. "This is so unfortunate because science would benefit from each and every person who is passionate about research, as they could contribute so much to the field."

The authors hope this work highlights issues that some suspected existed in planetary sciences.

"This work marks the beginning of the changes needed to improve mental health in planetary science," said Trang. "I hope to continue to unravel what is driving these mental health issues and collectively develop solutions that will improve well-being, which will in turn enhance research quality and productivity. Addressing mental health will inevitably improve diversity, equity, and inclusion, as they are linked together."

In the near future, Trang hopes to run psychoeducation workshops based on psychotherapy concepts to begin improving mental health in planetary science and potentially serve as a model to improve [mental health](#) in the rest of academia.

More information: David Trang et al, A survey of the severity of mental health symptoms in the planetary science community, *Nature Astronomy* (2024). [DOI: 10.1038/s41550-024-02293-w](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41550-024-02293-w)

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