

NEWS

# *Spectrum* Launch: Time management, job prospects and escaping the ‘holding zone’

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Greetings! Welcome to this month’s edition of *Spectrum* Launch, a newsletter providing guidance and resources for early-career autism researchers. We have a few new funding resources and recommended reads to see you through your final exams, end-of-the-semester grading, project wrap-ups or whatever else stands between you and 2022.

But first: How do autism researchers manage their time?

Many academics enjoy the flexibility afforded by their careers. They can often choose their research projects and shift their hours as needed. But with those perks come costs: Responsibilities easily bleed into one another, and the workday often has no official end.

The flexibility of academia can be “both a blessing and a curse,” says **Carrie Bearden**, professor of clinical psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Researchers must grapple with how best to manage their time under highly unstructured conditions. *Spectrum* reached out to autism researchers at multiple career stages — from graduate school to professorship — to see how they make it work.

“I find it helpful to treat graduate research like a traditional job,” says **Matthew Bruce**, a graduate student in **Judy Van de Water**’s lab at the University of California, Davis. He says he tries to put in at least eight hours a day, with some built-in flexibility for certain experiments. And though those experiment timelines sometimes require him to be in the lab on weekends or holidays, he’s trying to maintain a balance. “Burnout is a real thing, experienced by many at every professional level,” he says.

**Xiaoting Wu**, a postdoctoral researcher in **Robert Malenka**'s lab at Stanford University in California, says that she used to try to keep regular hours but eventually realized that a more flexible schedule suits her better. "Some days will inevitably be long and some days short, but in the end, I get more things done," she says.

Switching gears between different responsibilities — such as writing a paper and running an experiment — can be tricky, Wu says. "I'm still figuring out how to switch efficiently between these two 'modes,'" she says.

Even experienced researchers sometimes struggle with such challenges.

Bearden, a self-described night owl, says that she's still working on maintaining work boundaries. "I do end up catching up with emails and things that don't require as much 'brain power' at night after my family goes to bed," she says.

**Mallar Chakravarty**, associate professor of psychiatry at McGill University in Montreal, Canada, takes the opposite approach. "I have limited brain power after dinner," he says, so "I tend to wake up early, and I use the quiet of the early morning to get work done." Once his family is up, he shuts down the computer until standard work hours.

Chakravarty also tries not to work on weekends, but deadlines sometimes make that unavoidable, he says. And though he does check his email on vacation, he says he's stopped trying to sneak in actual work after realizing "how counterproductive that is and how much I resented doing that."

Figuring out how to not overcommit yourself is key, Chakravarty says. "You got into science because you love it. The problem with that is everything looks interesting."

Bearden also warns against stretching yourself too thin. She recommends blocking out dedicated days for writing, with minimal meetings. "It's particularly important early in your career that time doesn't get eroded," she says. "Protect your time for uninterrupted thinking!"

And she suggests not using your "best brain-power hours" — whether that's after your first coffee or later in the day — to do things such as reading email or browsing Twitter. "This is something I still have to remind myself of a lot," Bearden says.

Do you have any time-management tips for early-career researchers, or suggestions for other topics *Spectrum* Launch should cover? Please reach out to [angie@spectrumnews.org](mailto:angie@spectrumnews.org) with any thoughts about the topics that would be most helpful to you in 2022.

Happy holidays!

**Jobs and funds:**

- *JAMA Psychiatry* is **hiring an editorial fellow**. The two-year position, which offers a stipend, is open to psychiatrists and doctorate-level clinicians who are no more than 10 years out of their residency or clinical fellowship.
- Johns Hopkins University is compiling a (long and thorough!) list of **postdoctoral funding opportunities**.
- The International Society for Autism Research seeks applications for its **Research Internship in Autism and Cultural Diversity**. The program will fund undergraduate or graduate students who want to address topics related to cultural diversity in their research. The deadline is 7 January.
- And Joshua A. Gordon, director of the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health, tweeted out a link to **2022 funding opportunities from the BRAIN Initiative**. “Keep an eye on this blog space as additional funding becomes available,” the post says.

Check out these BRAIN Initiative funding opportunity announcements (FOAs) for fiscal year 2022! These awards focus on training, equity, and inclusion; neuroethics; and small business. <https://t.co/PSRlv0z2PB>. @NINDSfunding #studyBRAIN

— Joshua A. Gordon (@NIMHDirector) **December 16, 2021**

## Recommended reads:

- The pandemic has been particularly detrimental to the work of **women and early-career scientists**, according to a new survey by a multi-university team of researchers.
- More than half of 3,200-plus working scientists feel **pessimistic about their job prospects**, according to new survey in *Nature*. Those feelings varied significantly by race, gender, region and current position.
- That pessimism may be in direct conflict with the **passion and optimism for academic work** that many researchers say they must present to colleagues — or else risk missing out on job opportunities and support. Those expectations can ultimately be harmful for early-career researchers, according to one research fellow.
- Building a career as an academic physician-neuroscientist can be tough, and many who set out to do so don't complete their desired degrees. An article in *JAMA Neurology* offers advice for how aspiring physician-researchers can overcome **some of the most common challenges** — including getting out of the ‘holding zone’ and into a faculty position.
- And if you're looking to move out of academia, don't sell yourself short on **the ‘hard skills’ you've acquired**. The ability to write grants, analyze data and present your work translates well to non-academic roles, two researchers write in a new *Nature* career column.

And we'll wrap with some inspiration for new principal investigators from Twitter:

Being a **#newPI** [pic.twitter.com/65c5qavnub](https://pic.twitter.com/65c5qavnub)

— Shai Bel (@Mucus\_Man) **November 20, 2021**

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