MINDS 2024 - Day 1 Panel - Transcript

Alison (chair)
I'd like to welcome our panel moderator today, Evgeniya Vorobyeva. Thank you, Evgeniya. The virtual stage is yours.

Evgeniya (moderator)
Thanks a lot, Alison, for giving us the guidelines for the sessions as well. Very important. Let's get started. I also welcome everyone who joined today's sessions. We'll have the panel discussion on the topic of mentorship in academia. I'll start with a brief introduction of myself, and then we'll continue with the discussion.

My name is Evgeniya, and now I'm connected from Switzerland. I live in Lausanne and work in a small startup in the area of green hydrogen and sustainable energy. I work there as a technical lead. Before joining the startup, I did my PhD at ETH in Zurich, and then I pursued my academic career with post-doctoral studies for two years. I switched the topic from thermal catalysis to electrocatalysis. Now I'm here combining both fields in my current job. In parallel to all of this, I'm also a co-founder of a mentorship program for early career researchers in STEM. That's why the topic of mentorship in academia is quite important to me personally.

What we will be talking about today is, of course, the whole discussion will be based on the personal and professional experience of the panelists and will revolve around the mentor-mentee relationship and how having a mentor could benefit mental health in academia.

We have around one hour and a half, and I encourage all the participants, all the listeners, the audience, to join our conversation. Don't wait until the end to ask your questions. Feel free to raise your hand and unmute yourself to ask what is on your mind. It would be cool to have it as an interactive session, not just us from our side talking to you. Usually, the most interesting conversations happen like this.

Let's get started. For the start, I would like to ask the panelists to tell us a little bit about yourself, your academic journey, and where you stand on the topic of mental health.

Who would like to start? Feel free to unmute yourself and go ahead.

Anny
I could start things off. Hi everyone, my name is Anny Reyes. I'm a postdoctoral fellow at UC San Diego and incoming staff at the Cleveland Clinic within the Epilepsy Center. By training, I'm a clinical neuropsychologist but also licensed as a clinical psychologist. Mostly, my research is focused on epilepsy and Alzheimer's disease. Mentorship has been a very important core center of not just my career but what I do and what I've gained from it.

I come from an underrepresented background in medical sciences and medicine—immigrant, English as a second language, coming from various disadvantaged backgrounds and multiple

identities. As the first person in my family going off to college and graduate school, mentoring really formed that core. We enter school not necessarily knowing what is it that we're doing, so having what we call a team of mentors—people in multiple stages—we think about mentorship as going up, but we could have peer mentors—throughout my career has been extremely important to me. For that reason, I have developed several initiatives centering on mentoring and providing this resource. Currently, I'm the co-founder and co-director of the mentorship program for the Society for Black Neuropsychology. That's one of the major initiatives I have going on.

Evgeniya (moderator)
Thanks a lot. Wow, you have also developed a mentorship program, that's amazing. Thank you. Who would like to continue? Melanie-Anne?

Melanie-Anne
Great. So, I warn everyone that I'm long-winded, so if I'm being extra abrupt, that's actually why. Hello everyone, my name is Melanie-Anne Atkins. My PhD is in educational psychology, and I'm currently the Assistant Director of Student Experience at the University of Guelph. I'm actually a neuroscience dropout, so it's really neat to be among the ones who made it. Anny, everything you say had me nodding my head furiously. Because if I had known about people like you and if I had known that I might possibly belong, I probably would have stayed.

I switched over to educational psychology because, when I was in my first year of a master's in neuroscience, I was told by the only—I actually don't want to out them. A person who matched my identity in one way—the only one that was in the department—that teaching is a punishment for being a bad researcher. I thought I was going to be a professor to teach university students—sorely mistaken. So I thought I got in okay with educational psychology and, in fact, I did.

In terms of mentorship, it's funny because I did drop out of my program, but my supervisor was great. He was always nice, always forgiving, but I had so much stigma around my own struggles with mental health, which I'll get into later. I also really had imposter syndrome, but it was 2006, so I hadn't heard that term. I was the only black person in the entire department of any kind. There was a lot of pressure.

I ended up doing my PhD on decreasing the stigma of mental illness in higher education. When it comes to supervision and mentorship now, in my role as the Assistant Director of Student Experience, among other things, I get to be in charge of leading an approach to supervision, mentorship, and coaching within this department. I recently created a 12-hour online course, which I'll put in the chat, about cultivating well-being in the workplace. I think I'll leave it at that. [chat: Here's my (free, creative commons-licensed) 12-hour online course about cultivating wellbeing in the workplace.created for graduate students but applicable to everyone: https://grad.uwo.ca/upskilling/wellbeing/index.html#/]

Evgeniya (moderator)

Wow, thanks a lot. That's an impressive background. Thank you. Andrea? Haley? Would you like to continue? Andrea, go ahead if you would like.

Andrea
Thank you so much, and thank you for the kind invitation today. I'm delighted to be on this panel and sharing this stage with esteemed colleagues and hoping to learn from you as well today. I am a medical doctor, the medical director of the Tropical Disease Unit at Toronto General Hospital, and I'm an associate professor in the Department of Medicine at the University of Toronto. In my clinical practice, I exclusively see patients who are ill after returning from travel or newly migrated to the country. My research is around interrogating the impacts on global populations of neglected tropical diseases, and much of that work has been situated in under-resourced and resource-constrained LMICs [low- and middle-income countries] abroad.

I undertook my medical training after completion of an undergraduate degree and then a graduate degree in parasitology. That was the impetus behind pursuing a career in the neglected tropical diseases—understanding how health disparities are driven by global inequities, and that every disease ultimately ends up being one of poverty and disadvantage, and really trying to appreciate how social location influences all aspects of one's existence, including health, healthcare seeking, health outcomes, etc.

When I finished my medical training at the University of Toronto and postdoctoral fellowships, I joined the faculty. During my early years as a faculty member, I noticed that the trainees who were coming through the clinical services and rotating, and the trainees approaching me for supervision and mentorship, didn't reflect our national fabric at all. There was very limited diversity in the trainee pool. Around 2018, I started to work very closely with Ike Okafor in the Office of Access and Outreach, as it's now named, but it was originally just a part of the Temerty Faculty of Medicine. He started a program called the Community of Support, which is a pathways program to facilitate mentorship, sponsorship, and opportunities for those historically underrepresented in STEM due to manifold factors, as you are all aware.

Through that work, I have trained and mentored many students in research and clinical medicine. More recently, last year, Ike and I collaborated to launch a program called the Mentor to Mentor program, which is a training initiative for other principal investigators to assist them with embedding the principles of EDIIA into their training programs and their research, as a way to diversify the trainee pool that they are serving. The idea behind all of this is to better serve the populations that we are being trained to serve in our communities. The best science and medicine has to offer is going to be so much more impactful when individuals are represented in the workforce. I will leave it at that and hand the mic over to Haley. Again, thank you so much for inviting me.

Evgeniya (moderator)
Thanks a lot, Andrea.

Haley

Hi, my name is Haley Vecchiarelli. I am currently a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Victoria, which is on unceded Lekwungen territory, including the Songhees and Esquimalt peoples. I'm here today because this is a topic I'm passionate about, and I'm very grateful to be on the panel with people who are also passionate and skilled in this. I hope to give some advice and learn from the rest of our panelists.

I was an international graduate student in Canada and a first-gen graduate student. It's been important for me to use whatever accidental knowledge I acquired throughout my training and give that back to community members who maybe also are navigating this for the first time. In my graduate and postdoctoral training, I've run a lot of workshops around demystifying the scholarship application process, and running equity, diversity, and inclusion groups at different levels. I'm always trying to help make everyone feel like they belong in these spaces, but we know these are capitalist, colonial enterprises, so there's a tension there. I'm excited to have some conversations today.

Evgeniya (moderator)
Thanks a lot, Haley. Thanks a lot for that brief introduction of yourself and telling about your journey. I see a lot of discussions about mentorship in the sense—to help other people and develop other people, which is very good and something that unites all of us. I would like to maybe ask, what, in your opinion would be the most important qualities of a mentor? Anny, would you like to start?

Anny
Yeah, I could start that. I think first, especially when we think about diversifying the field—whether it involves individuals from underrepresented backgrounds, women, all of the different facets of diversity—one of the important things that mentors need to understand is that, most likely, the mentees they will be working with may look very different from you. They may have very different walks of life and come from very different backgrounds.

Because of that, there is an aspect of flexibility and being culturally sensitive, particular to the needs of the trainee. Understanding that perhaps what you needed as a mentee—and people say that you continue to forever be a mentee, regardless of where you are in your career—may look very different from what you need. Even if you're working with multiple students, every student is different. We often have this idea of a cookie-cutter approach to mentorship, and I think that's probably where we go wrong. If we really get to know our mentees, our students we're working with, we are going to understand that they have very specific needs, and we may not know those needs until actually we ask them.

Being flexible about your approach to mentoring and making sure that the approach is specific to the student you're working with. Perhaps you're working with a student who is a parent and has responsibilities with caretaking. From a financial perspective, that student may need more support than another student who doesn't have caregiving responsibilities, who doesn't have responsibilities for taking care of the home, family members, and so forth. Or you might have

students with disabilities, some of which you may not know about until you are made aware. Having that flexibility is so important to making sure you meet the needs of the trainee.

Another thing in terms of the culturally sensitive approach to mentoring is understanding that every student is going to have a different path. There are a lot of mentors who known for wanting to create carbon copies of themselves and may get upset if a student decides to go into industry and not follow the academic route. Or, as Melanie was mentioning, there are some students who say, “Hey, this is not the path I’m taking, I want to take another path.” Making sure that you are supporting whatever your student decides to do, and looking for the resources.

Another thing I want to mention is that even as a clinical psychologist, I wasn't trained to address the mental health needs of my students. We think about all the other disciplines, a lot of mentors are not being trained in how to do that. A lot of mentors are not being trained to run a lab, how to run clinic. With that being said, it's essential to look for resources in order to do that, especially when it comes to the mental health piece. We’re not saying that mentors are supposed to be therapists, because we’re not (unless you’re a clinical psychologist, but in that sense, there’s also a conflict of interest), but knowing where to look for resources, because you want to make sure that you connect your students with the resources on campus, making sure that you connect the students with other mentors, that may perhaps be from the same identity as those students and are going to fulfill those needs. So seeing how every student is different and has different needs. This means you want to be flexible with your approach to mentorship, make sure you have as many resources as possible, and having support from your department and chair.

We want to make sure that we are encouraging students to follow paths in biomedical sciences and to increase diversity, that’s what’s going to have to happen, we need make sure we are building and creating a very inclusive environment that is open-minded, and open to students from different walks of life, backgrounds, and abilities, connecting them with the resources that they need and making sure that we’re supporting them with whatever path they decide to take.

Evgeniya (moderator)
Thank you, Anny. It's a very important point you brought up, being open to other people and not just teaching them how to live, but actually giving them the opportunity and resources for it. It's very cool. Thank you. Does anyone else have anything to add or relate to what Anny just said? Does it resonate with you? Just unmute yourself and feel free to talk.

Melanie-Anne
I'll just add that I'm going to put a section from that course in the chat again, just so it's accessible, the part about leading a team.
[chat: Scroll to Question #2: How do you get the best out of your team?
https://grad.uwo.ca/upskilling/wellbeing/index.html#/lessons/HnqNqHLl8N4GEw5gOhjWaJqaFitmEgli]

Evgeniya (moderator)

Thank you.

Andrea
I would just add that I agree with everything Anny said. In addition to meeting students where they're at, and not forcing a particular role or opportunity, understanding that individuals with varying family commitments, travel time, etc., are going to impact a student's ability to engage in traditional academic models, like courses, summer research projects that require full-time commitment, a PhD, for example, these are all things that have a pretty defined time commitment. Being cognizant of the fact that many students may seek opportunities that are more short-term or amenable to remote work-having the flexibility that Anny mentioned, to offer a range of opportunities, that is going to enhance your ability to diversify your training pool.

Within that, sort of maximizing opportunities for accrual of that academic currency. For example, research-based courses that have historically always been situated in wet labs, maybe there's a way to port that over to remote work, like a literature synthesis or a systematic review, something that the student can work on and chip away at from afar, especially if they have family commitments and cannot easily access, say, the downtown campus.

The other thing I wanted to mention is my own personal philosophy around recruiting. It's recruiting for skills and attributes rather than adhering to the status quo. I don't even look at transcripts or GPAs. I recruit for skills. Many activities and life experiences that will impart the requisite skills of leadership, teamwork, and even teaching ability. If somebody's worked in the retail or service sector, perhaps they may have trained more junior employees on how to operate the store of whatever it is; coaching varsity or high school sports teams; tutoring; babysitting; these are all activities in which many people might have engaged because they have been remunerative, rather than being able to access closed networks offering paid research opportunities. I look for skills rather than recruit for status quo.

The other thing I will just mention again, it dovetails with something Anny was saying, is just building that trust with your mentees. For me, that's predicated upon expressions of solidarity, vulnerability, and sharing. Being honest and transparent about the hardships and the challenges, Anny, you mentioned having the support of the chairs, that is sometimes challenging. It exists in a patriarchal structure that benefits those in power. Sometimes, some of the things we are doing in this work are going to be antithetical to the maintenance of that power structure. Being aware that we are going to face some hardships and challenges, and being open and honest about it, demystifying some of these conversations, I think that's an important step.

Celebrating diversity in all its forms—just thinking about social location in all of its forms—the PROGRESS-CANDLS factors. PROGRESS was developed by the WHO, it's illustrated in their Handbook for Health Inequality Monitoring. It's an acronym, PROGRESS stands for Place of Residence, Religion, Ethnicity, Gender/Sex, Religion, Educational Attainment, Social Capital, and Socioeconomic Status. During my work with WHO in COVID, we expanded it to CANDLS, which includes Citizenship, Age, Neurodivergence/Neuroatypicality, Disability, Language

Fluency, and Size/Body Habitus. These are all ways by which individuals can be marginalized in an academic environment. Being aware of that and recruiting for maximum diversity, because your decision-making, outputs, and programs that you build are going to be that much stronger for it.

Evgeniya (moderator)
Thanks a lot, Andrea. One of the things that particularly resonated with me is the trust which is built in the mentor-mentee relationship. I'm also studying coaching, and this is actually one of the most important things, is to build a partnership relation and not just with a different status, and that is what, in my opinion, creates psychological safety to openly talk about which challenges you have and anything else they need to discuss. I fully agree with you.

Now, I would like to ask if you can share a particular experience or situation where this mentorship relationship significantly helped or pivoted your career. Could you share something memorable with me and the audience? Who would like to start? Melanie, would you like to?

Melanie-Anne
Sure, yeah.

So I'll start again with solutions and then talk about a time that it didn't happen and a time that it did. I'll say three things that I would say that anyone who wants to be a mentor or anyone who has been given the role of supervisor should do.

First, pursue diverse approaches to two things: supervision and feedback. When I say feedback, I mean both receiving and acting on feedback as well as giving feedback. A lot of folks don't realize that there are diverse approaches to those things, or that the methods they learned accidentally don't actually work for most people.

Second, cultivate two things: self-awareness and cultural humility. I have some books I can show—I'll put them in the chat as well.
[chat: 1) Concrete method to "seek self-awareness" from my course: https://grad.uwo.ca/upskilling/wellbeing/index.html#/lessons/0MafYSQf2wkH8uUR70N0KyYVifqf8O5t. 2) Another great source if you're seeking self-awareness about bias: Page 110 "Investigating and Responding to Bias in Ourselves and Others" in The Inner Work of Racial Justice by Rhonda V. Magee]

Third, as you just mentioned, find your people. If you are uncomfortable with that or it's not your discipline, you can think of it as modeling collaboration. We know that the number one predictor of happiness is a sense of social support. If you have been supervised by someone who is really isolated, it's really awful. But then you also learn that isolation is the norm. If you feel a sense of responsibility for the trainees you are leading, then you can think of it as modeling collaboration, modeling growing that support network. Your people may not be in your discipline or have the same role as you but have the same mindset about the work you are doing.

I think I already mentioned the one where it didn't go well; I ended up dropping out of neuroscience. I picked that example because my supervisor, like I said, was really nice, but my supervisor was also the dean, and I was very scared of him. I had gotten into the program late and I was carrying a scholarship, and therefore had a lot of guilt about what I didn't know. That's one of the stories that I tell.

Another story is that my project was about binocular vision, and we were trying to separate seeing in the left eye, pause, seeing in the right eye. We're trying to separate as far as possible, where can we still see things in 3D? That was great, except that I didn't know that I actually have really poor binocular vision, below average, because I have not one but two lazy eyes, which is 100% of my eyes. I didn't know that until much, much later when I did a different master's degree—actually no, it was a PhD, and I received an external scholarship, had a little money left over, and I said, I'm going to go get some laser eye surgery. They had me sign off to confirm I already knew I had one lazy eye, and I said, well I guess I know now, and then they gave me another piece of paper and said, just to confirm that you also know that you have another lazy eye, and signed off. And then it made sense to me! But because, without those diverse approaches to feedback were not established, even really nice people can make mistakes. I couldn't face the fact, especially when I was carrying the responsibility of representation in my community, that there was something I just couldn't do. I also didn't know the language of imposter syndrome, so it never occurred to me. If me, and my supervisor had had that kind of support, things might have turned out differently. Do I regret it? No, it's a great story, but for someone else who really wants that career in that field, I think it's a good opportunity.

The example of great supervision is my last supervisor. This was a VP Academic at Western University. She was so great that she lost me, and I'll tell you what I mean by that. A lot of you are starting to talk about the fact that the people you supervise might not pursue the same path as you. This supervisor was the first person in my life to not only recognize that and confirm that, but to actually help it happen for me. I remember when I explained what I wanted to do next, she said, "Oh, it sounds like you're kind of stuck, aren't you?" I said yes because, I had all the credentials, I had gone to all the professional development things, I had done everything and made those connections, and my CV was just freaking out over the weight of all the things I had on it, and yet, still I couldn't get where I needed to get. What that supervisor did for me was opened doors that seemed to be closed. That person, using their position to benefit somebody who wanted to do something differently, ended up being how I got into my current position that I love. It actually meant that I was turning away from academia. But because she affirmed that choice in me, and allowed me to make my own decisions about what was best for me and the impact I wanted to have, I was able to flourish and then give back to this side of the house by other things I do. For example, I do a lot of mental health literacy for supervisors, and a lot of intercultural leadership and anti-racist leadership work for all sorts of supervisors, including those who lead labs. But that's because I have that well-being, because I'm on the path that I actually chose for myself.

Evgeniya (moderator)

Thank you. You brought up a very interesting point about the skill of a mentor: it's actually about opening doors and reminding you that you can make your own decisions and live your own life, not blindly following someone. This is very important. Sometimes we are in this—turbulence of events, blindly flowing without standing our ground and understanding—I want to do this. This is very precious. Thank you for sharing that.

Haley, would you like to continue?

Haley
Yeah, I think I want to follow through on the topic that was brought up in the last question about trust and building trust, and what happens when trust is lost between a mentor and a mentee. In this case, I was the mentee. One of my previous supervisors, when I was in grad school, I was by all accounts killing it—great CV, doing the work, really involved in my community—but I hated coming into work. I had to sit and think about why that was, and I realized it was because I felt unsafe, and I felt unsafe both intellectually and physically.

This was because there were other people in the research group who—so I'm allergic to laboratory animals, which is hard when you do laboratory animal-based research. My solution to the problem was, "Okay, tell me if you're going to have laboratory animals in the space, and I'll leave. Just let me know before you bring them in so I don't have to take a ton of allergy meds, which affects cognitive processing." There was a member of our lab team who refused, saying it was "too much of an onerous task on me." The solution ended up being, "Okay, you go study and write from home for three months." After that, the solution was, "Okay, we'll put you in this new, isolated lab space. It was just one of those things where I felt like I was already compromising, and then I was told to compromise even more to accommodate someone who showed no willingness to do that for me. And that's what had to be done, in the sense of being in opposition with someone who is not willing to move at all. It felt like my supervisor was always looking for the easiest solution, "What's the easiest solution?" And the easiest solution is that Haley, because she's accommodating, will make these choices.

At around the same time, a newer lab member had somewhat plagiarized writing of mine. We had some discussions about it, and then it happened again. I was like, this is not okay, but it was just brushed aside by my supervisor. I tweeted about it, obviously not naming anyone, just put it on social media, and someone in my field said, "Hey, that really sucks." It was so gratifying to hear from an outside perspective that this was wrong, as opposed to—maybe I'm wrong. I had a relationship with my supervisor where I could sit and have it out with them, but it took time and conversation. I'm still not at the place with this person that I was at the beginning of our relationship. That's because I initiated that effort. Your supervisors are inherently mentors throughout your career because that's the structure of academia. Sorry, Anny, you have a question?

Evgeniya (moderator)
Please continue.

Haley
So, having to come up with the fortitude to do that is something I learned, and I never want to put one of my trainees in that situation. So I try to either notice when something is amiss or create an environment, as mentors, and particularly with supervisory mentor relationships, because I think there are a lot of ways we can be mentors, and that structure looks different depending where we are, but when you're directly supervising a person, making sure that you're in a space where you can receive feedback about your mentorship Improving situations and workplaces is very necessary.

I started with that, and maybe to pivot to a better story, so it's not all doom and gloom: right now, I'm on the job market and I've had a few interviews. It's my first year, so I'm just feeling it out. I haven't had any offers yet, which is not a problem. But I love feedback, I love the study of feedback, and love receiving feedback, so it's been really great that at these different institutions that I've been interviewing at, multiple people at each of them have been willing and taken the time to give me feedback about my job talk and the structure of my research program. These are people I did not know, necessarily, before the interview process.

Thinking about mentorship, it can be like getting little bits of mentoring, like a flash in a pan, that can maybe build towards a future mentor-mentee relationship. Just thinking about even these little conversations that we can have with a person that can be so fruitful for someone's future career or life prospects is something that we have to keep in mind. I know this has been very helpful for me this year as I navigate this process.

Evgeniya (moderator)
Thanks a lot, Haley, for sharing this. I think I speak for all the panelists when I say we are sorry to hear that happened to you. I think Anny has something to say on this topic. Please, Anny.

Anny
Yeah, I actually just wanted to follow up with some of the things that Haley mentioned. I think that experience can highlight the importance of having multiple mentors, kind of having a village of people—and not just mentors in a sense, but also people at the same career stage within and outside your institution. This provides a sanity check, and you can say, "This experience happened to me. I feel like it was a microaggression. I'm not sure." It makes you actually check in and say, "I don't think this is what is expected, this doesn't feel right."

I think academia can be very isolating. We tend to be in very small programs, and if you're thinking about all your different identities, you may feel very isolated. We often move far from where we grew up or lived, sometimes to different cities or countries. Understanding that because of this isolation, we want to make sure that you have a very wide network of people you can confide in and check in with and say "This happened to me, can we talk about it, I'm not sure how to address it." It's not going to just be your mentor.

I saw a comment in the chat about what if the mentor you have, as a mentee, is not the right mentor for you. This is why it's so important to have different mentors. Those other mentors,

who may be at the same professional setting as your main mentor, could actually help you navigate and figure out what's going on. If you are in a formal program where you have to switch labs, for example—I mean, ideally, programs should have a committee that takes care of that, to ensure the well-being of the student is priority, and making sure they are placed into a different lab and so forth. If it's not a formal mentorship relationship, that's where your other mentors can help you navigate and figure things out.

Another thing that I wanted to mention is that in this process, yes, mentors are not perfect, and that's why—we talk about how to shop around for a therapist, you may need to shop around for different mentors at different points in your career. Your needs are going to change throughout your career. You also want to make sure you are not jeopardizing your well-being by staying with someone well-known in their field for career advancement. It's important to have that network of people you can confide in and check with to make sure that, when things are happening, you have a sounding board, and that you're not making this up. If something doesn't feel right, it's for a reason. I highly recommend having multiple people in your life—family members, friends, colleagues—who are there for you for that specific purpose.

Evgeniya (moderator)
Thanks a lot for sharing that. Andrea, I think you also would like to add something to this. Please.

Andrea
Yeah, just to further a point that Haley was making around the obligations for conformity. I had an experience that was a very positive illustration of mentoring across the philosophical divide. This was back when I was a graduate student, like 150 years ago—no, so like 1996-1999, that's when I did my graduate degree. So this is a while ago yet, long before many of these issues we are discussing today were part of the discourse and lexicon.

I am philosophically plant-based and have been since college days. My graduate supervisor happened to be a Midwestern Republican who was a hunter. You can imagine there's a potential there for philosophical disagreements. She had a particular type of felt pen that she really loved. I got one in the mail one day from PETA, I was a member of PETA, so People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, potentially inflammatory in some camps, you know, an animal justice and animals rights advocacy organization. So, I brought it in, excited to share, but she took one look at it and saw "PETA" right on it. In her world, that would be far too much of a Scarlet Letter on her person. So she put a little piece of tape over the "PETA" and still used the pen.

At that moment, just recognizing that you can have two individuals who are philosophically on the polar opposite ends of the spectrum can still have a productive and collaborative professional relationship, and even a personal relationship. She ended up being a very good friend of mine in years to come, provided lots of wonderful opportunities for me and was always a big sponsor of mine. In fact, she ended up being an advocate for me when I was a TA in the physiology laboratory, I was excused me from having to euthanize animals for the purpose of

experimentation. She was my advocate in that space, a true demonstration of solidarity with your mentee, even if, philosophically, you aren't on the same end of the spectrum.

This experience was very illuminating for me, and I wish more people in society would take it to heart as we see all the discourse that's happening globally.

Evgeniya (moderator)
Right, thank you. Thanks a lot also for sharing this and for bringing up that point.

If we go further with our discussion, maybe a question: how would you start or approach the mentoring relationship so that it can benefit mental health? Will you give maybe some tips or your experience? Andrea, would you like to start on that?

Andrea
Sorry, yes, I don't want to hog the floor here, but yes. I think everybody around the table will recognize that the most othering experiences that we encounter during training and professional lives are those that end up eroding our mental health the most. The word microaggressions has come up. These are ubiquitous. The need to conform to a specific model and approve specific types of academic currency, even if your passions are authentically aligned elsewhere. The devaluing of community-based and patient-centered research; the basic sciences are those that are very heavily funded as we all know. Our big granting agencies like CIHR and NSERC preferentially support basic sciences, in general, in our fields. All of these realities work to erode our well-being and sense of belonging.

I think ensuring that we offer a range of opportunities that individual mentees can accept or decline as their interests and time permits. I've heard other PIs state categorically they will never take summer students or they won't do this, that, or the other thing. That rigidity ends up excluding people from their training talent pool. Recognizing that the mentee ultimately will understand what the mentee has to offer. We run into challenges with mental health and the pressure to perform and conform when we are inflexible and adherent to the status quo. Recruiting for skills and attributes and having clearly established boundaries and expectations are essential. If we don't define, a priori, what the boundaries are, then it's up to the individual mentee's imagination. And usually, the stories we tell ourselves in our own heads are often worse, especially if we come from a place where our amygdala has been steering the ship rather than our executive functioning, particularly for trauma survivors.

Having that wherewithal to kindly establish boundaries and expectations is going to be most likely a relief. Boundaries are kind and generous; they are not exclusionary. They establish what is permissible and what isn't and what's acceptable. It puts a guardrail around the scope that ends up being deployed.

Demystifying conversations around challenges and being transparent about the challenges that I have had on my pathway to medicine. Many of the experiences that I have had will resonate with others. Being open and honest about it. Expressions of solidarity, and active expressions of

sponsorship, and seeing individuals for who they are, that builds that trust and enables you to become a sounding board in the event that your mentee encounters challenges or barriers, microaggressions, or instances of frank othering. They would need you to weigh in to help them navigate.

The final thing is speaking truth to power is, that is again, something that I'm very passionate about. Again, being transparent about the risks of doing that and understanding that there are potential repercussions to that. The final thing I would say about that—to foster mental health and safety within your—in my case, research and clinical spaces—is understanding the goals of your students, as we've heard around the table. So often, people try to please their superiors and think they know what their superiors are going to want or need from them, people are attaching their own values and expectations onto others. That erodes your mentees' authenticity. They are unable to conform to their own authentic passions and interests, that is going to be a tax on their mental health because it's a dissonance. Understanding the short-term and the long-term goals of your mentees will help you become a more effective mentor.

Evgeniya (moderator)
Thanks a lot for sharing that. It's actually very interesting what you said regarding boundaries and expectations. This goes for both parties, right? It brings self-awareness before entering a mentor-mentee relationship or actually any relationship. It's good to understand what you are willing to give and what you would like to receive, and to first understand this for yourself, and then clearly state this for your mentee or your mentor.

I think we've all been there when we weren't sure what we wanted or where our boundaries lay.

Andrea
Boundaries will actually help you position yourself to sponsor your trainee. One example I have is reference letters. I need at least two weeks' notice, and in very busy periods, four weeks is better. You want to help your students help you sponsor them. Establishing things like that, very clear expectations around communications. If you yourself as the mentor have blackout periods where you can't respond to texts or emails, be transparent about that. Some individuals are real night owls, while others prefer to work in the morning. People are introverts versus extroverts, so having that self-awareness, like am I an introvert or an extrovert? Introverts, remember, might find social interactions exhausting after a period of time and therefore need to retreat, and that retreat might be misinterpreted by a mentee as a withdrawal from them. It might just literally be that your mentor is an introvert and needs to refill that tank alone, by themselves. Remember, we live in an extrovert's world where about two-thirds of the population are estimated to be extroverts. Chances are, you're going to encounter extroverts in professional life. We all know that certain qualities associated with extroverted personalities have been quite adaptive in leadership roles, perpetuating certain structures that we encounter in the sciences. Again, having that self-awareness and being able to communicate those boundaries helps you place your students on the trajectory or pathways to success and sponsorship.

Evgeniya (moderator)

Yeah, that is very true. Thanks. Melanie added a link in the chat to that. Does anyone else have anything to share or add on this topic? Anny, please.

Anny
Yeah, I just wanted to emphasize the point Andrea made in terms of, as a mentor, having those boundaries and being able to communicate expectations. I think we have to keep in mind that we're going to be working with a lot of students who may be first-generation or come from different cultural backgrounds and values. These are social relationships, so being very clear about some of those expectations would facilitate a thriving relationship.

For example, even something as simple as showing your mentee how to write an email. There are some things that, because we are so far along in our career, that we may forget that perhaps someone hasn't been provided guidance on how to do that. Thinking about soft skills that students may need guidance on, particularly students who are non-traditional, first-generation, all these cultural differences. When they go out into the world to interact with others in academia, we're helping them, setting them up for success.
[chat: 1) How to teach the skills Anny is describing: https://hiddencurriculum.ca/educator/. 2) https://www.boggildlab.ca/2018/12/22/mentorship-series-how-to-peer-review-a-manuscript/. 3) https://www.boggildlab.ca/2019/04/22/mentorship-series-crafting-effective-narratives/.]

I agree. I usually give my mentors a whole month for writing a letter of recommendation or if I want someone to review some sort of document. Giving them ample time. Having these expectations outlined is actually training, not just mentorship, it's training. Then the students are going to take that, and they're going to be more successful. But expecting students to know this, without understanding that we're not taught this in classes, these are skills we learn as we go along. The earlier you teach them, provide that guidance, those expectations, those boundaries, the more successful the student is going to be, and it makes the relationship healthier. Stress does not help everyone be at their best. So if you have a lot of deadlines, for example, "Let's plan ahead, let's meet." I tell students, have multiple meetings throughout the year where you sit down with your mentor. These are the things you want to accomplish. These are the deadlines that are coming up. I want to submit this grant, this scholarship, there are some requirements. Or reviewing research papers, I need letters of recommendation, can you read … So really having that open communication, because mentors are going to be quite busy. They have other responsibilities. Oftentimes, mentors don't get paid for mentorship. It might not even be part of the responsibilities in their faculty portfolio when they go for promotion. But they do it because they want to, and it's important for them to train the next generation.

I know there may be people who may be transitioning to themselves being mentors, advice I was given was that the first few years of your first job are really important. You're probably going to have to be applying for grants, you're probably going to be teaching courses that you might have to develop from scratch, you're going to be quite busy, and your promotion clock is ticking. Be very cautious about how many students you take in the beginning. Because, one, you want to make sure that you have the time to mentor students and really address their needs, but you also want to make sure that that is not impacting your own career development. You are still

very early career, you yourself are still a mentee. We want to make sure we're finding a great balance between being a mentor who's present and has the time, and not someone who's not going to be present because halfway through the year, you realize you're teaching three courses, you have all these responsibilities, you have to submit grants, you have to submit your portfolio. Just being very cautious about that to make sure that we are being present, addressing the needs of our mentees, but also making sure that we ourselves as mentors, regardless of the stage of our careers, are making sure that we have a well-funded lab and so forth. I just wanted to add that because I thought it was important to address.

Evgeniya (moderator)
Yeah, thanks a lot. It actually goes back to self-awareness of a mentor. How much he or she can spend time, how much energy he or she has—it all goes hand in hand. Being open about the time that we can dedicate to that work, particularly. Yeah, exactly.

Haley, do you have something to add, please?

Haley
And just thinking about—different people are going to know that it's okay to seek out mentorship differently. You're going to encounter mentees who ask for what they need, and then you're going to have people who don't think they can ask people for things. So setting yourself up to show that it's okay is part of that boundary setting of what can be asked for. Also, encouraging people who might need your mentorship, or who are in a place where you should be the one mentoring them, to utilize that. Particularly for people who might not feel like that is something they can do. It's hard. It's like pulling teeth sometimes, with some of my mentees, to be like, you can ask us for help. What can we do? So just being mindful to create these environments where it is both. Part of that boundary setting is letting people know that they can do that. And then also providing that in different contexts or ways where students or mentees maybe don't feel like they're taking too much of you, I think can help. Particularly for students who are unfamiliar that this is okay, or who are in different levels of potential crises. So I just wanted to add, I think that kind of bookends what we were talking about in the stream.

Evgeniya (moderator)
Yeah, exactly. It's actually a very good point because sometimes the mentee may not be afraid to ask, but sometimes they don't really know what to ask or how to ask or how to formulate or what to do if they want to achieve the goal. They don't know where to start. And this is again where that help is.

Haley
And offering the opportunities instead of having a student come to you and be like, oh, I want to learn this. So like, why don't we learn, like I saw someone post, like how to peer review manuscripts. It's like, why don't we go through that as part of, you know, this curriculum? Can be helpful. And then create that relationship where then students are able to ask more because you've established that, you know, this is how you mentor. This is the safe space. This is etc.

Evgeniya (moderator)
Yeah, fully agree. Melanie-Anne, do you have something also to add, please?

Melanie-Anne
Very briefly, that's why it's important when you're seeking that professional development, both formal and informal, to either, maybe use some words I might use are aiming for opportunities that have a lens either a trauma-informed lens or cultural humility lens or an intercultural lens, because in case folks are wondering, “Why wouldn't you like ask for help?” I think somebody said here like some mentee might be unfamiliar with the concept that it's okay to ask for help. And so I think that most of us know that it's okay to ask for help. But maybe you don't want to be okay. Maybe you want to be a person who isn't blocked from future opportunities because you asked for help that one time. And so just like I wrote in the chat about your identity—or, sorry a supervisor's identity—being, or feeling like it’s a threat when they are faced with a challenge, it is the same and even more because of a power differential when it is the mentee who is faced with a challenge. And so even though it seems so innocent, “Oh, just ask for help,” or to say something like “I'm always here for if you need it,” you have to understand that sometimes they don't because they are very aware of the consequences of that downstream. So maybe they do want to be just like you, but they've never seen you ask for help and therefore they're not gonna ask for help either because they are actually following your footsteps, right? Or maybe they also want to be like you, but they have identities, you know, more, for example, more marginalized identities than you may have. And so they've always been taught, and it's been proven to them, that you know, when they can't actually perform the same behaviors that you do, for example, asking for help, because it reflects badly right on them. So for you, asking for help means you are a very open person, for that person, asking for help means that they're not competent and they shouldn't have been admitted to the program or they shouldn't have received that job offer.

And then the second thing I'll say is from my experience now being a supervisor, I said I—because of that experience, I, from day one, wass always like telling my mentees, “Oh, I'd love to help you.” Every meeting would be, “Oh, and how can I support that?” And at this new role they were very threatened by that. They had no idea, “Who is this person,” you know, because I'm also a strength coach by training, you know, “Why is she always asking how she can support me?” And what I realized, months and months later, after developing a trusting supervisor relationship, was that what they were hearing is, “You must not be competent, which is why I'm here now. So what part of your job are you not really able to do and that, from my experience, I can do better and help you with.” And so that's because, for some people, they've had experiences with micromanaging—micromanaging disguised as helping. So when you have that intercultural lens, to what these very simple and, you know, neutral behaviors look like, then you get more insight into why someone may not be acting the way that you expect or even that you decided together how you would.

Evgeniya (moderator)
Yeah, for sure, it's absolutely, it's also—I see in the international environment that every action is seen differently in every culture, and that is sometimes difficult to align with the other team members how we should talk, how we should ask for help, how we even should make jokes and

everything like this. We have just a minute for the last question, and Andrea you would like to add something.

Andrea
Yeah, and I just wanted to again echo the sentiments of Melanie and Haley and Anny. You know, again, every mentee is going to bring their own lived experience to the table, and that lived experience might have involved a long history of walking a very thin line without facing reprisal, and they might not feel worthy or empowered enough to impose. Some of your mentees will have significant imposter syndrome, as we've heard, feelings of inferiority, feelings of non-belonging, and therefore are just trying not to be placed in a box. They might have been tone policed for interacting with individuals in the past who don't share their social location. So again, just having that open-mindedness and that understanding of how communication styles will differ across all of the strata of social location. I see this—one example is mentees using a first name, for example, with a PI. That is one I hear a lot. You know, some people take great umbrage to being addressed by their first name, and really in many cultures, it would be overly formal to address someone who is really in a very close mentee-mentor relationship by anything other than their first name, right? Or, you know, in many cultures, it's so common to just pick up the cell and call someone, right? And I've heard it's awfully empowering to be calling up the dean of blah, blah, blah. So these, you know, this understanding that everyone comes to the table with their own lived experience and that differs, as we've heard, across social locations, and you know, sort of checking our own privileges when we encounter somebody who is engaging with us in a way that other trainees perhaps have not. But again, just also recognizing, that this "Oh, why didn't you come forward sooner? Why didn't you do this? Why didn't you do that?" That's all going to be determined by one's own sense of safety and knowledge of what repercussions might be coming down the pipe. And again, just the understanding that those who are marginalized by their social location will have necessarily been walking a much thinner line than those who are more empowered.

Evgeniya (moderator)
Yeah, that is also very true. And what I found helpful for me is to observe how people react when you're also in this intercultural communication. So you just see how the people behave, and you try to ask, "So, I saw that you did like this, you said like this, you looked like this. What happened, actually, here?" And that again opens up this transparency and the partnership relation.

I think now it's time to move to the questions from the audience. So I would like to ask if there are any questions and maybe just feel free just to raise a hand so we can see you first on the screen and just unmute yourself. Let's have a conversation. I saw there were a lot of messages in the chat. I didn't follow all of them, but also if anyone who already wrote in the chat would like to bring it up and to say in words, that would be super cool.

Melanie-Anne
We're just on it, we're on the chat, we're answering this.

Evgeniya (moderator)
Yeah, me too, me too. I'm trying to follow over all the discussions. It's a very vivid conversation. Lucia, could you just unmute yourself and say?

Lucia
I'm really sorry if someone already mentioned this and I missed it, but I've been to a few, usually mandatory, intercultural trainings in universities, and they're always well-meaning but quite strange and probably more offensive than helpful, ultimately. I wondered if any of you've seen a good version of this because, as somebody just commented, it's not about learning the quirks of specific cultures, but about learning the skills to not have it be a problem that people are from different places.

Melanie-Anne
I can repeat, so yes, I became an intercultural trainer because I also didn't like the way that other people were teaching it. I'll repeat because I just realized that if you're watching this on YouTube, you can't see the chat, so I'll just literally repeat. So, hello, YouTube audience, if you are watching this and you're a mentor and you want to do the right thing and you're feeling extremely overwhelmed because all these people keep talking about all these situations that make you more and more confused about what your next step is—now I'll read what I wrote.

If you're feeling overwhelmed, remember, your job is not to become an expert of every single culture or every single mentorship strategy. It's impossible. Plus, people actually hate to be stereotyped, which I think is what you're talking about, where you're saying like when you sometimes even hear something about one of your own identities, you say, "Oh, please don't assume that that's me," or you know, or please don't this, or maybe you just want to go in a different direction, maybe that has been me and now I'm looking for something else. And so, what your job is; actually, I think what our job is as humans, is to recognize when something is not going as planned, and to use curiosity and open communication to figure out at least two things with the mentee: what might be going on and what next steps can be. And Andrea has added to that, assume positive intent, and be curious.

Evgeniya (moderator)
Does anyone wants to add something to this before we jump to next question? More thoughts on this topic?

Lucia
So, would the takeaway kind of be to let your mentee know that if you're like, let's say, ignorant of something that's culturally significant to them or their habits, that they can bring it up as a subject?

Melanie-Anne
Yeah, I have. So, there's a book by Minda Harts called "Right Within." It's very much more about a white collar workplace, but there's something at the end called the Manager's Pledge, and that I think could help a lot of folks. So, again, if you're watching on YouTube, you can Google

Manager's Pledge Minda Harts, and you'll be able to find it, and I'll put it in the chat for folks here.
[chat: https://www.fastcompany.com/90682076/diversity-at-work-starts-with-concrete-goals-this-managers-pledge-provides-an-easy-starting-point]

Evgeniya (moderator)
Cool, thanks a lot. Sasha?

Sasha
Anny also had her hand up, I don't know if she wanted to add to the previous question. No? Okay.

Thank you so much. I kind of have this question, first of all, maybe seeking mentorship and also not getting overwhelmed with being the mentor. And I think, like a lot of people in this panel probably would relate to a degree to the experience I've had, but I feel like people who do come from a very outside of academia kind of journey, like they're either first-gen or they're newcomers, they have to learn these things from scratch. They tend to empathize more with people who also go through similar situations, and I feel like we take on a lot of these duties. And, like seeing these people, and I think sometimes, I feel like I found this way of mentoring others as also a way to mentor myself in a way. I was kind of curious, like, how do you not overwhelm yourself with those duties, but also find really great mentorship elsewhere? Like, how do you balance these things?

Evgeniya (moderator)
Who would like to take this question? Anyone?

Anny
Yeah, I think, Sasha, what you're describing, there's multiple terms. So, one of them is the minority tax. When we are one of few or the only one, we tend to try to take on, because otherwise, no one else is going to mentor that student from that other background. And oftentimes, it might be that the only mentor who is first generation or the other person of color in that department takes on all the students who are, because what's happening is the student body is becoming more diverse, but at the faculty level, it's still not as diverse. So oftentimes, that person—and then that person might actually be early career—is the one who is asked to be on committees, diversity committees, who is asked to work with these students, and so forth. It could quickly become overwhelming, what that mentor is being asked to do.

But I think this goes back to what we mentioned earlier about having a team of mentors. Oftentimes, granting organizations, so take the National Institute of Health here in the US, when you or a student applies for a fellowship, they have to put together a sponsoring team, a mentoring team, that is not just going to address different needs when it comes to the research or the clinical work, but also different needs that that student may have. So, in that sense, we're not expecting one person to be able to provide every aspect, every need that the student has,

it's going to take a team. And that's for a mentor as well. When you feel a little bit overwhelmed, you could think, okay, this is probably not my area of expertise. I don't have life experience in this area. But I do know someone who actually identifies this way or who may be able to provide, let me connect you with that person. So, that's how we could offset, as mentors, a lot of those responsibilities.

In terms of looking for mentorship, Twitter is a great example—or X, I don't know, they changed the name—is a great example of actually connecting with people. Oftentimes, people are very open to meeting over Zoom for 30 minutes or an hour and having a more informal mentor relationship. I have students reach out to me all the time, and I'm very open to meeting. So that's one of the ways you could have formal mentorship relationships, but also informal, where you meet at conferences, for example, and grab coffee or over Twitter and so forth. It can be open that the mentor relationships are going to look very different, but that gives you the opportunity to actually reach out and not think that it's going to be that the mentor feels like it's going to be huge expectations, it could just be informal, call, emailing, and so forth.

Sasha
Thank you so much.

Evgeniya (moderator)
Thank you.

Melanie-Anne
I just want to quickly add that before you connect a mentee with somebody who shares a particular identity, ask the question, is that what you're looking for? Just because sometimes what can happen is that it's not what they're looking for at all. They're actually looking for you to grow in that area. So that's a great, again, a great curious and human conversation to have. You're never going to know every identity and if you do, you still have it wrong anyway because you're just assuming too much and people grow and change. So, having that conversation is really important before connecting them.

Evgeniya (moderator)
Thank you.

Haley
I was gonna say something very similar, that, as people with many different identities, we do want some of our mentors, some of that relationship to be people who share some of these identities. But also, that doesn't mean that we can't mentor people who—and can't be great mentors to people—who we don't overlap completely across these identities and marginalizations. And it is also incumbent on us who have some marginalizations but have privileges and other things to do that work and also call in our colleagues who are not doing that. One, because we know that the burden of mentorship, internal mentorship in academic institutions, in organizations, falls primarily on women, and that that burden among women is not shared equally across all women. And so, one, we need to make sure that all of our

colleagues, and particularly when we think about the construction of departments, are doing that. And it can sound so crass to be documenting that. But if you're meeting with students, it doesn't have to be like—put that in your calendar, for your bi-yearly meeting with your department head, your dean, say “These are the number of hours that I have spent mentoring students in the department, and this is going above and beyond my service amount, service dedication in my contract. One, I need to have this recognized on like tenure and merit committees, and I need you to go to bat for me for that. And also, we need to discuss that culture in the department of how we need to all be better at that. We need to be able to successfully—all of our mentees should be able to go to almost anyone in the department and get mentorship from them.”

Oftentimes, we with marginalized identities are often asked to find commonality in the status quo which often are older, cis, straight, white men, and ask for the reverse. To have people who make up the predominant part of the department, make them do the reverse as well. If we're expected to find commonality with these people, they need to be able to find commonality with our mentees, with our students.I think we talked about how this looks different for different people pushing for this, and so if you have privilege in that regard, using it, then, to improve the department in that regard can be helpful. Because then it's also not one person in the department is taking on all that extra mentoring because they might share an identity with the students who want that affiliative identity mentorship relationship.

Not that that's not important and can't be, I think as Melanie-Anne said, is that what they want? Or do they feel like that's the safe person to go to? How can we change departments in that regard? But I think also—I don't have good boundaries in this regard, I give a lot to my mentees, and will take on mentees. I think it's having your mentor, then, be like, “You got time for that? Is that okay? What can we do?”

And then also just thinking about who you can connect them to, what resources you can connect them to, can help—not offload, but maybe you're not the best person to do all of it, but you're the best person to talk to them and be like, here's where you need to go. You can't solve everything but I think it just comes with practice. When you're starting like your graduate school journey, your academic journey, not trying to solve it all at once, but one at a time, one person at a time, until you kind of learn—this is what I'm doing, this is what it takes, and then as I'm balancing all the things I do, how much more can I give in that regard? Where I'm still taking care of myself and my mental health. But I acknowledge that it is a hard and delicate balance to mentor many people.

Evgeniya (moderator)
Yeah, yeah, I guess we’ve all been there, we're still there, we give a lot to our mentees because we just like the reward, or at least for me, I just like the reward, how it goes, and to be part of their success. That is for me it's very important. I also wanted to add to what Haley just said that it's not the role of the mentor to know all the answers. We don't need to do that. It's actually fun to discover something together with the mentee, and to learn something together with them, and

to have this collaborative environment, and to show them that it's okay not to know something—you show it by example, to ask for help and to learn something together.

I think we don't have any more time for questions. I would advise if there's still some questions you can post them in the chat and then share among the panelists and we can reply it in written form if it is something else. And on this, I also would like to thank all the panelists for sharing their experience and talking to us and giving so much piece of advice. And for audience for being so active in the chat. Still messages appearing, it's so cool to see all the activity and interest in this topic. I hope all together we could help the next generation to be as they want to be.