Mental Health Issues and the Postdoctoral Training Environment

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Why is this topic important?

- Google search: “postdoc” “mental health”
  - ZERO hits on mental health issues in the postdoc population
  - 100’s of hits on postdoc positions/fellowships IN mental health-related disciplines

- BUT...
  - ~20% of the overall population suffers from mental health issues
  - Postdoc training environment highly stressful
Presentation Outline

- Introduction of Speakers/Personal Background
- Mental Health Issues and the Postdoctoral Experience
- Recognizing Mental Health Issues
- Open Discussion
- Small Group Discussion
- Feedback and Questions to be Explored
Context and Framing Thoughts

- High-Stress Environments
- Mental Health Stigma
- Invisible and Ignored
- Critical areas to be addressed:
  - Self-assessment
  - Awareness of signs of undue stress
  - Challenge as a disability
  - Needed resources
  - Best practices
  - Accommodations for a healthy workplace
The Academic Pipeline

- Undergraduate Education
- Graduate Education
- Postdoc Training
- Faculty
Postdocs Face Unique Challenges

- Establishing a professional identity
- Seeking balance
- Transitioning to independent careers
- Competing for grants
- Launching career
- Self-promotion
- Relating and working with supervisor
- Coping with perfectionism
- Getting adequate sleep
- Dealing with lab culture
Where can Mental Health Issues evolve from?

- Power dynamic between postdoc and mentor
- Culture shock and acclimatization/assimilation
- Separation from family and support network
- Isolation
- Imposter syndrome
- Earlier stresses (e.g., graduate school, undergrad, life events)
- Family situations
- “Confounders” (e.g., disability)
Mental Health

* Definition of “mental illness”
  * A broad array of conditions such as depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), panic disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
  * In all cases, people experience disruptions in: Thinking, Emotions, Behavior
  * Arise from a complex mix of psychological, social, and biological influences

See: www.accessiblecampus.ca
Prevalence of Any Mental Illness among U.S. Adults (2012)

NIMH: National Survey on Drug Use and Health (2012)

*AI/AN = American Indian/Alaska Native

Data courtesy of SAMHSA
Mental health is a major undisussed challenge within the postdoctoral community
Postdoc mental health is a high priority

- Mental illnesses often strike individuals during the years that they attend university, and can have “trickle down” effects at the postdoc level.

- Without treatment, the consequences of poor mental health for the individual and society may be substantial and could include:
  - unnecessary disability, disruptions of academic activities, unemployment, substance abuse, homelessness, inappropriate incarceration, suicide, etc.
Postdoc mental health is a high priority

- The best treatments are highly effective:
  - between 70 and 90 percent of individuals experience significant reductions of symptoms and improved quality of life.

- Early identification and treatment are very important
  - ensuring access to the treatment and supports can accelerate recovery and minimize further harm.

- Stigma erodes confidence that these conditions are real and treatable
The “Mental Health Continuum”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HEALTHY</th>
<th>REACTING</th>
<th>INJURED</th>
<th>ILL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Normal functioning</td>
<td>Common and reversible distress</td>
<td>Significant functional impairment</td>
<td>Clinical Disorder. Severe and persistent functional impairment</td>
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</tbody>
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This model was originally developed by the Canadian Forces, in cooperation with the United States Marine Corps.
Types of Mental Health Issues

- Depression
- Bipolar disorders
- Anxiety and panic disorders
- PTSD
- Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder
- Schizophrenia
- ADHD
- Autism Spectrum Disorders
- Eating disorders
- Self-injurious behavior
- Suicide
Role Play

- Speaking with a postdoc who has a mental health issue
Conversational Path

- Ask permission to discuss the problem.
- Practice active listening; let the student tell their story.
- Acknowledge and support their courage in disclosing a personal difficulty.
- Provide advice and suggestions.
- Emphasize that they do not need to deal with these issues alone.
- Close the discussion positively and leave room for further conversation.

See: www.accessiblecampus.ca
Recognizing Undue Stress in a Postdoc

**Workplace Indicators**
- Repeated absences
- Missed appointments
- Deterioration in productivity
- Disorganization
- Erratic performance
- Continual seeking of special provisions
- Pattern of perfectionism
- Disproportionate response to evaluation

**Behavioral Indicators**
- Statements of distress
- Difficulty controlling emotions
- Anger, hostility, yelling, aggressiveness
- More withdrawn or animated than usual
- Expressions of hopelessness or worthlessness
- Crying or tearfulness
- Severe anxiety or irritability
- Demanding or dependent behavior
- Unresponsiveness to outreach
- Shakiness, tremors, fidgeting or pacing
Recognizing Undue Stress in a Postdoc

Physical Indicators
- Deterioration in appearance or hygiene
- Excessive fatigue and exhaustion
- Changes in weight
- Statements about changes in appetite or sleep
- Noticeable cuts, bruises or burns
- Frequent or chronic illness
- Disorganized speech; rapid or slurred speech
- Confusion
- Unusual inability to make eye contact
- Arrival at work bleary-eyed or smelling of alcohol

Other Indicators
- Expressions of concern about a postdoc from their peers
- A hunch or gut-level reaction that something is wrong
Recognizing Undue Stress in a Postdoc

Safety Indicators

* Written or oral statements that mention despair, suicide, or death
* Severe hopelessness, helplessness, depression, social isolation, and withdrawal
* Statements to the effect that the postdoc is “going away for a long time”
* Written or oral expressions of a desire to injure or kill someone else

Emergency Indicators

* Postdoc is physically or verbally aggressive toward her/himself, others, animals, or property
* Postdoc is unresponsive to the external environment; s/he is:
  * Incoherent or passed out
  * Demonstrating a severe disturbance of cognitive, behavioral, or emotional functioning
  * Displaying disruptive behaviour that appears to be out of control
* The situation feels threatening or dangerous
Knowing When to Act

* Recognize
* Respond
* Refer
Stigma Exercise

* What are some of the stereotypes or perceptions around mental illness?
Do you know where to find mental health resources at your institution?
Adapting Resources from Other Contexts

- Resources for undergraduate and graduate students at your institution
  - Counseling services
  - Ombudsperson
  - Accessibility resource center

- Resources for employees at your institution
  - Health and well-being services
Adapting Resources from Other Contexts

- Community-based resources
  - Local/regional mental health agencies
  - Mental health resources for students and young adults

- National/International resources
  - NIMH
  - Accessiblecampus.ca (Ontario)

- There’s an app for that…
Example Useful Resources

* www.accessiblecampus.ca

* http://www.theroyal.ca/mental-health-centre/apps/healthymindsapp/
Model Programs

* Biomedical Research Education and Training [BRET] in the School of Medicine at Vanderbilt University
* The Faculty And Student Assistance Program [FASAP] at Johns Hopkins University
* ...
It is important that professional services be visible in multiple formats and venues so that postdocs are reminded of the resources at the time they need to make use of them.

Availability of the psychological services must be communicated through a Web page, brochures, participation of the psychologist in orientation activities, regular meetings of the leaders of the Postdoc Association [PDA], conducting workshops and seminars, and interaction with potential referral resources such as administrators and faculty.

In order to make the services user friendly, postdocs and graduate students may schedule appointments by e-mail, phone, or simply walk-in the psychologist's office if the door is open. The psychologist can be reached when out of office by cell phone.
Please share any resources that you know of, not already discussed?
Thank you!

- Take home messages
- Questions

- Feedback
  - Index card: list two important takeaways you learned, list suggestions for improving the presentation