

Panel Discussion

From CPA Meeting June 2024



Pathways for Success: Insights for Early Career Professional Development in Health Psychology and Behavioural Medicine

The panel, which took place on June 22nd, explored key professional development topics, short-term and long-term career development plans, navigating research funding, and fostering collaboration. We are fortunate to have Dr. Joshua Rash and Dr. Rachel Burns provide answers to the various questions explored by the panellists.

Joshua Rash

Dr. Joshua Rash is an Associate Professor in the Dept. of Psychology at Memorial University of Newfoundland, Director of the Memorial University of Newfoundland – Behavioural Medicine Centre (MUN-BMC), and Senior Research Fellow at the Duke University Center for Health Policy and Inequalities Research (CHPIR). He is a clinical, health and rehabilitation psychologist who completed his PhD in Clinical Psychology at the University of Calgary, and Clinical Residency at The Ottawa Hospital. Dr. Rash has expertise in behavioural medicine, health behaviour change, chronic disease management, and cardiovascular psychophysiology.



Rachel Burns

Dr. Rachel Burns is an Associate Professor of Psychology at Carleton University. After completing a Bachelor of Arts & Sciences degree at the University of Guelph, she earned a PhD in Social Psychology from the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities and completed a postdoctoral fellowship in mental health epidemiology at McGill University and the Douglas Mental Health University Institute. Her research focuses on psychological processes linked to health behaviour change and the comorbidity between mental and physical health conditions. She is an Associate Editor for the British Journal of Health Psychology.





Question:

How did you navigate the transitions between your degrees and/or professional positions (i.e., challenges related to supervision, tasks and other jobs, funding competition, etc.)?

Joshua:

I transitioned into an Assistant Professor position following completion of pre-doctoral residency in clinical psychology. Good or bad, transitions are inherently stressful periods of time. One way that I coped with the stress of this transition was to give myself permission to relax my standards and personal expectations as I moved provinces, changed institutions, and learned new systems, policies and procedures. Perhaps more importantly, I sought advice and guidance from the many fantastic supervisors and mentors who I had the privilege of collaborating with throughout my career. I sought targeted advice for specific obligations (e.g., lecture materials for courses similar to those that I would be teaching; how to balance research with teaching, supervision and service; identification of potential funding streams within the institution that I was transitioning to), and general advice (e.g., how to effectively foster cohesion within the lab; how to strike the right balance between responsibilities of my new position with extra-mural clinical activities).

Rachel:

My family and friends did not have experience with the academic scene, so a lot of my navigation involved trial and error (and was probably quite clumsy at some points). I was fortunate to have an amazing, terrific, and kind graduate supervisor mentor who shepherded me along. During all of my transition points, I tried to learn as much as I could, ask questions, and leverage my strengths.

Question:

What have been the most meaningful or rewarding aspects of your work thus far (i.e., what experiences would you like to see more of)?

Joshua:

While I love making data-driven discoveries that have clinically-relevant implications, the aspect of my work that I have found most meaningful has been supervising and mentoring bright young trainees. Their curiosity inspires me to approach difficult dilemmas with creativity. Their motivation drives me to persist during times of stagnation and frustration. Finally, it is through the collective efforts of everyone involved in the lab that clinically meaningful research is made possible and achieved to its full potential.

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Question:

How do you balance the many competing demands inherent in a career in Psychology?

Rachel:

I am so lucky and happy to be an Associate Professor of Psychology, but there are many competing demands on my time. To strike balance, I try to maximize my efficiency. I schedule my time during the week very carefully. I make a list of things that I want to complete. When I am working on tasks that require a lot of focus, I silence my phone. For me, it is amazing how much more efficient I am when my focus is not being interrupted by text messages and alerts. I'm still practicing saying no to some things.

Question:

Knowing what you know now, what advice would you give to a former version of yourself completing training?

Joshua:

I think that I would tell my former self not to sweat the small stuff. There are many aspects of training that feel incredibly important when you are in the moment, but that do not have a large impact in the grand scheme of things. I would remind myself to take advantage of opportunities presented, but to prioritize what precious time that I had. I would tell my former self to really revel in the training and just do the best that I can. No one can ask for more, and this should be all that is needed.

Question:

How have you imagined your short- and long-term career development plans? What was your process?

Joshua:

I would love to tell you that I took a methodical approach to my career development plans. An approach that involved careful consideration of my strengths and weaknesses, weighed against what I felt was most meaningful and the opportunities available. Unfortunately, life does not often allow for such thoughtful decision-making, and I have found that serendipitous circumstances have played a large role in my developmental plans. When I reflect on my trajectory, I feel as though I devoted substantial time during my training to hone a diverse array of skills (e.g., cardiovascular psychophysiology, systematic review, GRADEing of evidence, advanced statistical analysis, clinical trial design), and have opportunistically accepted collaborations that have allowed me to contribute my skillset to clinically meaningful projects.

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Question:

How was the job searching? Have you hesitated, or are you hesitating between academia, clinic or industry (or a combination of these three)?

Rachel:

Job searching can be quite the process! I did my PhD in the USA. Despite some job offers there, I decided that I wanted to return to Canada. Although academia was my first choice, I was happy to work for government or industry if the Canadian academic scene did not work out for me. I was fortunate to land a postdoc in Montreal that allowed me to expand my skillset, which helped me on the job market. I was also lucky that several Canadian universities were hiring health psychology faculty when I was on the job market.

I encourage graduate students to **enjoy and savour their training time**. Learn as much as you can! It is very rare to have such a long block of time during which your only job is to learn! — *Rachel*



Focus on work that you find personally and professionally rewarding; **Let your motivation drive you** to reach heights that you never thought possible. — *Joshua*

