

Invited Speaker Interview

Dr. Nicole Alberts



Dr. Nicole Alberts is an Associate Professor and Canada Research Chair (Tier 2) in Behavioural Health Intervention at Concordia University in Montreal. Following her graduate and post-graduate training at the University of Regina and the University of Washington School of Medicine respectively, she joined the Department of Psychology at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis (Tennessee) as an Assistant Member and Attending Psychologist. In 2020, she joined the Department of Psychology at Concordia University.



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Dr. Alberts has established herself as an expert in pain and childhood cancer as well as in the use of digital health interventions among medical populations. She has been recognized through a variety of awards and honours including the Childhood Cancer Survivor Study Career Development Award, and the Canadian Association of Psychosocial Oncology Early Career Investigator Award. To date, her scholarly work has resulted in 50 publications, 3 book chapters, and 10 invited talks.

Dr. Alberts' research program aims to improve behavioural health and psychological outcomes among individuals across the lifespan – with an emphasis on those diagnosed with catastrophic and chronic diseases. She also leverages digital health approaches to answer key research questions and to develop and test innovative interventions targeting pain and psychological outcomes.

Interests Outside of Academia

I am a pretty big sports fan. I recently attended the World Figure Skating Championships in Montreal – which were amazing. I also love going to Major League Baseball games and try and make it to a game whenever I am in a city that has a team. I have been fortunate to take in games in Toronto, Seattle, Boston, Dallas, Atlanta, and Chicago.

What are you working on at the moment? What do you anticipate you'll be working on over the next five years?

At a high level, my program of research focuses on improving behavioural health and psychological outcomes across the lifespan, with a focus on youth and adults diagnosed with a catastrophic or chronic illness. Within that, I aim to better characterize pain among individuals impacted by childhood cancer and sickle cell disease as well as to leverage digital health to develop and test engaging and effective interventions that can target problems such as chronic pain and psychological outcomes (depression, anxiety).

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I am currently working on a few different projects including examining the psychosocial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth on cancer treatment, young survivors, and their caregivers in Canada, investigating neuropathic pain in adolescent survivors of childhood cancer, examining the prevalence and risk factors for fear of cancer recurrence in adult survivors of childhood cancer, and examining sickle cell disease related worry in youth with sickle cell disease.

In the next five years, I plan to expand upon this work including conducting multi-site trials to expand the impact and reach of our current studies, including conducting larger studies that will help us better characterize chronic pain in childhood cancer survivors, and intervention trials focused on developing and testing digital health interventions to help us better target specific pain conditions.

What do you love most and least about your job?

As a clinician scientist, I love being able to help people both on a more individual level via clinical work with patients and other health care providers, and on a larger scale and societal level via research and work with policy makers. I also love being involved in the training and mentoring of the next generation of clinician-scientists (e.g., undergrads and grad students in my lab) and being a part of their academic journeys. What I love least: administrative tasks and work that inevitably also come with the job and that can take time away from some of the bigger tasks (supervision, mentoring, grant and manuscript writing, etc.).

What project, output, or achievement are you most proud of?

I am most proud of our work bringing attention to the problem of chronic pain in childhood cancer survivorship. This has involved two main outputs: 1) Topical review published in *PAIN* in 2018 where we aimed to bring more attention to this problem and where we presented a developmental model

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of pain across the childhood cancer trajectory. Here we also proposed that the prevalence of chronic pain has likely been severely underestimated. 2) In a recent manuscript, "Characterization of chronic pain, pain interference, and daily pain experiences in adult survivors of childhood cancer: A report from the Childhood Cancer Survivor Study," we found evidence to support exactly that. Specifically, results indicated 41% of adult survivors of childhood cancer experience chronic pain – which is significantly higher than previous estimates **and** estimates of the prevalence of chronic pain in the general population (20-30% range). Importantly, given these results, it is clear we need increased efforts focused on screening and intervention.

What do you ultimately hope to achieve in your career?

In general, I hope that my research will have a tangible impact on the lives of youth and adults living with a chronic or catastrophic illness. We know that pain and distress are common and often debilitating symptoms experienced by individuals living with these conditions. Despite this, our understanding of who is most at risk for experiencing these symptoms and associated disability is limited. In addition, we know there is widely varying access to psychological treatments used to target pain and distress. Through my work, I hope we can help fill these knowledge and treatment gaps for youth and adults living with medical conditions.

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What advice would you give to someone starting a career in health psychology?

Stay open to different opportunities and challenges – Health psychology is a **huge** area with so many subspecialties and you never know which new area(s) may spark your interest and/or be a great fit for your skills and interests.

