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Into the Unknown - Transitioning to Postdoc and Beyond

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One of the most terrifying aspects of the academic career path is that we very rarely know exactly where we are going. Not only is there uncertainty in terms of when, where or if we'll find permanent positions, we are also unsure of what those future positions actually entail. For people who spend a significant amount of time trying to control experimental parameters, we put up with a lot of potentially unnecessary chaos in the system that provides us with our livelihoods. Many of us deal with this by shelving our thoughts about the next phase in our careers until it becomes imminently relevant - after all, there are too many other things keeping us busy! But perhaps we should be taking a different approach and trying to redefine what this transition looks like. The first step in this process is to understand where the uncertainty lies.

The transition from PhD student to postdoc to group leader is shrouded in mystery.

I've thought to myself many times over the years, "I would love to eventually start my own research

group!". When I was working on my PhD, I assumed that one day I would hit the point where I just understood how this was done. Watching new group leaders present elegant stories at conferences and seminars during the first couple years of my postdoc, I came to doubt whether I had the ability to move beyond the postdoc phase. More recently, though, I have begun to get a better idea of what this transition might entail. Importantly, I have been able to witness the progression of experienced postdoctoral researchers transitioning to the independent fellowship phase. What we don't see at seminars and conferences are the presentations these individuals have given that were thoroughly scrutinised (and sometimes torn apart) by colleagues, the volume of grant applications that were rejected/re-written/re-submitted and the funding interviews that didn't go according to plan. Unless people share their experiences, more junior early career researchers may miss the many small refinements that ultimately culminate in the water-tight projects and research programs we see being presented.

The way we are currently trained often does not prepare us for the next stage.

One of the biggest contributors to transition-associated stress is the jump we all make between career phases. These are both conceptual jumps and skills-based ones. After finishing our PhDs, we progress from a system focused on milestones (comprehensive exams, committee meetings, preparation for thesis defences) to a much more fluid system which often focuses entirely on producing high quality publications as quickly as possible. Beyond the postdoc stage, young group leaders are then faced with responsibilities that fall outside the postdoc job description. Seemingly overnight, they are expected to deal with personnel, manage their lab's finances, write applications for large scale funding and set up an entire lab. Add to that teaching obligations and administrative tasks associated with the various institutes and universities we work in, and this has the appearance of a full-scale disaster waiting to happen. However, I've recently wondered about the origins of my own feelings of trepidation with respect to transitioning into a new role. Does my fear surrounding these leaps originate in my ability to pinpoint potential gaps in my training that are contributing to my stress? Or does this have more to do with a disconnect between what I perceive as the correct way to do the tasks set before me versus a more open-ended approach? Perhaps one person's journey in the post-PhD space doesn't have to mimic someone else's.

Losing work-life balance seems to be the norm … but does it have to be?

A lot of emphasis is placed on productivity in academic science. How many times have you heard someone around you talking about the extensive hours they spend in the lab? Without a doubt, occasional long days are an inevitability regardless of career stage as they are necessary for us to meet our goals. However, despite having the option to take a breather between deadlines, many of us get carried away with the idea of pouring all our time and energy into our various projects. This often comes at the expense of other parts of our lives. So many of us, myself included, have experienced the mental and physical manifestations of overworking. Looking in from the outside, the loss of balance only seems to get worse when scientists move into more senior positions. How do people manage their time effectively? What about those with childcare or caregiving responsibilities? Are there strategies to streamline the process of learning new skills on the job? Can this all be done while avoiding running yourself completely into the

ground? The most important factors to keep in mind when answering these questions are our own tendencies, goals and lifestyles. What we do in the lab is definitely important to us all but for me and a number of my colleagues, the time we spend at work needs to be tempered by other experiences that are completely unrelated to our day jobs. An important realisation I've made within the past couple of years is that for me to have consistently good or even great days at work, I need time away from science. This means I need to invest energy in hobbies and pursuits that have nothing to do with my vocation. Other individuals undoubtedly have different requirements but it's important to recognise that the life of a scientist varies hugely from person to person.

"For the love of science" will not always be enough and that's ok.

If I'm lucky enough to achieve my goal of starting a lab, one of my biggest fears is that I'll be tripped up and beaten down by the disappointments and frustrations that come with the job. Many of us have been carried through our early scientific careers by curiosity and a love of science. One view that seems to be prevalent in academia in general is that we should all be single-mindedly and obsessively in love with what we do. Most of the time this will hold true but what about those instances when we aren't happy? Papers and grant applications will be rejected, important experiments will fail, students will quit, pandemics will force us to drastically change our working habits. We might suffer discrimination in the workplace or find ourselves working with people whose values do not mesh with ours. Our personal lives also impact our jobs sometimes in ways that we wish they didn't. When we're PhD students and postdocs, those of us with effective supervisors find that these people often shoulder the brunt of these challenges or at least help us to navigate our experiences. Sometimes I wonder what will happen when I'm at the helm. Will I be able to weather the storms that land on my doorstep? These thoughts can become overwhelming. However, these challenges make up such a small proportion of our academic lives. Most days things will be great. Some days I know I won't love science. There will be a few more where I question everything and that's completely ok.

In the end, we need to spend more time demystifying academic career progression.

If there is one thing that the past two years has taught many of us, it is the huge value that people bring to our lives. When dealing with the myriad of challenges we all face along the academic career path, having the support of the people around us is essential. I will be forever grateful to the individuals, both past and present, who have provided me with different perspectives, challenged my ideas and helped me back up when I've stumbled. This list includes people from all stages of career development. For someone like me who eventually wants to start my own group, having enthusiastic and open early career researchers (PhD students, postdocs and more junior group leaders) nearby to talk with is amazing. There will always be pieces of advice given that don't fit with our goals or values but each story we hear adds to our own academic career progression. Ultimately, this will all contribute to helping us turn something that feels a lot like a leap of faith into an experience worth sharing with the bright and exciting scientists around us.

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