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LETTERS TO YOUNG SCIENTISTS



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Academia needs a reality check: Life is not back to normal

By June Gruber, Jay J. Van Bavel, William A. Cunningham, Leah H. Somerville, Neil A. Lewis, Jr. | Aug. 28, 2020, 12:00 PM

Academic scientists are facing an ominous start to the academic year. Some universities are welcoming students back to campus with detailed COVID-19 testing and prevention guidelines. Others have suddenly retracted in-person plans, moving to fully online courses as coronavirus cases spiked. "We all should be emotionally prepared for widespread infections — and possibly deaths — in our community," a professor at Yale University wrote to students in a **1 July email**.

The problems don't end there. Many academics are also grappling with ongoing racial injustices and associated protests, wildfires, and hurricanes. We continue to see widespread effects on mental health, with **roughly one-third** of Americans reporting symptoms of clinical depression or anxiety. June and her colleague recently described the escalating mental health crisis as the **next biggest coronavirus challenge**.

We have struggled with our own mental and physical well-being—as well as challenges associated with canceled vacations, lack of child care, the illnesses and death of people close to us, and the mental weight of difficult conversations about racial injustices. We've also been worrying about our trainees and the undergraduate students in our classes. The academic and nonacademic job markets have cratered, and some of our colleagues and students have lost internships and job offers as organizations have been forced to cut expenses.

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To be absolutely clear: This. Is. Not. Normal.

And now, with the start of the semester upon us, we continue to receive a massive influx of emails from colleagues detailing service expectations, urgent meetings, new teaching expectations, research disruptions, and complex new policies. We are expected to create malleable teaching plans for in-person and online instruction, oversee the safety of in-person activities, and carry forth with our normal research programs and service duties.

All of this can feel incredibly overwhelming. That's why we feel strongly that the scientific community needs to take a step back, once again, and recalibrate our expectations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some universities may be reopening. But with all the grim statistics and uncertainty, one thing is clear: Things may not be back to normal for many months to come (if ever). As we adapt our expectations for ourselves and others, we suggest three principles for facing reality during the upcoming semester:

Acknowledge that things are not normal

This is a moment for empathy and understanding. Don't pretend that things are normal or that your lab can go back to "business as usual." It's important to openly discuss what is going on with your group members. As June noted in an **earlier column**, it is essential to support your own mental health, as well as that of your trainees and colleagues.

If you're in a position of power, you may want to remind those in your research group that this is a stressful and unprecedented pandemic and that it's OK for work to be slowed down or postponed altogether. You may also want to advocate for early-career scientists who are afraid to ask for extensions or remote options to reduce their risk of infection.

Consider changing your email signature or syllabus to acknowledge these issues and provide as much flexibility as possible for assignments, lectures, and meetings. Several of us have adjusted our email signatures or created automatic email responses as a small way of reminding people that things are not normal. For example, Jay's autoemail reply reads, "Due to the coronavirus pandemic and a significant loss of childcare, I will not be able to respond to most requests without losing sleep or my sanity until things return to normal." In her courses, June has implemented a **COVID-19 adjusted syllabus statement** to explicitly acknowledge the stressful times students face.

We cannot fully understand everyone's experiences during this period of crisis. However, by sharing our own vulnerabilities and challenges, we can open the door for discussion. Even a small amount of empathy and accommodation can go a long way.

Respect child care and other personal needs

Six months into the pandemic, many parents are still dealing with the need to care for children at home full-time and to serve as homeschool teachers. Recent research indicates parents may be one of the **highest risk groups** for mental health distress during these times. This may be especially true for women, who often assume more household or child care duties.

June, Wil, and Jay have young children, and we've all been struggling. We consider ourselves to be comparatively privileged parents, with stable and flexible jobs. Our experiences underscore how hard it must be for scientist parents who are in more precarious employment situations.

Be kind to students and colleagues who have children, and who may be barely holding things together. Brainstorm flexible work schedules, provide explicit or default options to turn off their cameras on Zoom calls, and offer frequent check-ins to let them know you are there to support them during this challenging time.

Triage what work is essential and reasonable

Don't hold yourselves, or your students, to the same standards as 2019. Be reasonable about what you can and cannot accomplish during this tumultuous time. Consider making a list of all your projects and responsibilities; then look that list over and identify what items can be either pushed back or dropped.

After Jay lost his child care and faced a tsunami of additional responsibilities at work, he had to recuse himself from four projects and defer a number of other projects until 2021. June let her lab know that she might be slower than usual in email responses while homeschooling her two young children. There is no shame in saying no to something you simply cannot handle under the circumstances. Indeed, saying no may be the only thing that allows you to focus on and accomplish your more urgent priorities.

We also suggest flexibility on the part of those in power. Faculty members and university administrators should think about changing their expectations for students, postdocs, and others who work under them. If possible, create individualized deadlines that meet people where they are.

Expecting the same output as in previous years, even though many people have less time and more stress than ever, is not a sustainable or humane solution. The world is not normal—so the way we do science cannot be normal either.

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