Joy Schmitz, PhD, and Scott Lane, PhD, of the Faillace Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences are leading a new study at Center for Neurobehavioral Research on Addiction (CNRA) aimed at reducing cocaine use disorder by preventing the neurotoxic effects of this debilitating addiction.

The study is a four-year project that will test the neuroprotective effects of a medicine called pioglitazone. Based on prior research done at CNRA, the team expects that pioglitazone, when used in combination with evidence-based cognitive behavioral therapy, will facilitate the recovery of structural brain alterations associated with cocaine use and in doing so, improve cognitive functioning, reduce cocaine craving, and increase the likelihood of abstinence from cocaine.

Patients participating in the trial will first complete a five-day detoxification at Memorial Hermann Prevention and Recovery Center. Upon discharge, patients will enter the 12-week medication treatment phase of the trial, receiving either pioglitazone or a placebo, based on
Several tests will be used to evaluate the effects of pioglitazone, including brain imaging, computer-based cognitive testing, psychometric measures of cocaine craving, and urine drug screens. While the clinically important outcome is relapse prevention, the trial is uniquely designed to test the neurobehavioral mechanisms underlying effective treatment outcomes.

The team hopes to show that medications with potential neuroprotective effects, like pioglitazone, can prevent relapse by restoring healthy brain structure, as measured by white matter integrity. Since abuse of cocaine and many other drugs results in insult to brain white matter, if pioglitazone is successful, this model could be used as an adjunctive treatment to address a spectrum of substance abuse disorders.

Ultimately, the team believes success will be defined by the ability to help prevent relapse and develop healthy and adaptive coping strategies.

“From the idea and planning, through our initial pioglitazone study and publication, and now with this new grant award from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), our team has been working on this project for almost seven years,” said Lane and Schmitz. “It represents the culmination of many hours of mental and physical energy, refinements and restarts, and belief in the core ideas about the brain and addiction. We are optimistic this project will advance our field and one day help interventions for substance use disorders.”

Read more about CNRA here.

Faculty spotlight: Babatope's journey from resident to faculty

Taiwo Babatope, MD, MPH, MBA, joined the Faillace Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences as assistant professor immediately after the completion of her residency and fellowship training at McGovern Medical School in July 2020.

Hiring from a strong pool of graduating trainees is becoming common practice in the department. Babatope recalls her experiences during residency and fellowship training as very positive. She developed solid relationships with the faculty, many of whom mentored her. Being able to continue these relationships as she transitions to a faculty position allows her to leverage established networks and have access to resources she wouldn’t have elsewhere. This, and also recognizing Houston as one of the most diverse cities in the United States, made her decision to accept a position with the department an easy one.

Babatope holds other clinical and leadership positions at the department. She is the associate program director of the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Fellowship Program and director of the Autism Spectrum Disorders and Neurodevelopmental Specialty Clinic. She also provides telemedicine consult services to pediatricians and primary care providers through the UTHealth Houston Child Psychiatry Access Network (CPAN) program.

Babatope is passionate about working with young children and adolescents.
“I get to connect with them through conversations, art, music, poetry, play therapy, and patiently wait for them to give me permission to catch a glimpse into their world,” Babatope said. “It’s beautiful, messy, sometimes ugly, overwhelming, but rewarding work.”

She also has specific interests in working with young individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and intellectual or developmental disabilities. Her enthusiasm for working with children with ASD comes from her family members’ experiences with the condition. This fuels her drive to help families navigate challenging paths to help them find the best therapeutic options for their child.

Babatope is ready to apply all her training and broad range of medical, public health, and leadership experiences to work with the department, her patients, and the community.

“The greatest thing about this job is that I get to work in my chosen field and train the next generation of child and adolescent psychiatrists,” Babatope said. “What could be better than that?”

When she is not at work, Babatope is known to binge-watch home improvement shows to gain inspiration for several projects she has lined up. This helps her fulfill her other passion, architecture and interior design. She also enjoys traveling, and watching movies and Broadway shows with her family.

See Babatope’s full profile here.

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**How patients with autism are adjusting during COVID-19**

Autism affects around 1 in 54 children, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. Although no two who have autism spectrum disorder (ASD) share the exact same characteristics, one generally accepted trait is the need for a structured and routine tends to help many children with ASD.

With COVID-19 disrupting everyone’s daily routines, how are children with autism adjusting to the changes the pandemic has caused?

Deborah Pearson, PhD, specializes in working with children who have developmental conditions such as ASD. She says these children are at risk for higher levels of emotional and behavioral problems that the general school-age population. These problems may be exacerbated by the increased levels of financial, emotional, and health stresses being experienced by many families during this time.

In addition to health concerns COVID-19 brings, Pearson says not being able to go to school is one of the big concerns for those who care for children with autism.

“Children have lost access to highly trained special education teachers, school nurses, and school-based meal programs.” Pearson said. “And—in many cases—these children and their families have lost access to some services that are offered for children with ASD through the school systems.”
Fortunately, many school systems have adjusted quickly to keep providing services to patients via telehealth, such as speech therapy, social skills training, and occupational and physical therapy, while educating the family on what they can do while schools are not in operation.

Pearson says child psychiatric research has changed as well. Normally, children participating in research studies are seen in a controlled environment, so they can be properly observed. At this point, studies have had to shift the way they collect data, including moving to a telehealth format and modified procedures.

"Our research colleagues - physicians, psychologists, and research staff - are doing yeoman's work, trying to get as much data as possible," Pearson said. "However, there is no substitute for having research professionals in the same room as a child. We can get some measures, but we can't get all."

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**Houston Mood Disorders Conference moves online**

![Image of conference poster](image)

The 2020 Houston Mood Disorders Conference, put on annually by the Faillace Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, will be held virtually this year. This conference traditionally draws more than 200 attendees, and we expect an even larger audience for the 2020 edition!

The presenters are made up from a combination of faculty from various departments at UTHSC as well as international speakers who serve as keynote speakers. Also, local companies as well as those from out of town come to exhibit their products and services to attendees.
This year’s conference is titled “Bipolar Disorder: Advances in Diagnosis and Management.” An in-depth look at various aspects of bipolar disorder and the latest research on treatment, causes, and how to manage will be presented.

We’d like to extend an invitation to join us for the conference from the comfort of your own home. Come be a part of the first ever virtual Mood Disorders Conference. We have great speakers and topics lined up, giving you the latest in bipolar disorder.

For registration information, please visit https://cpd.education.bcm.edu/content/1673

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Research:
Lima wins best poster award for project

Camila Lima, MSc, PhD, is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Faillace Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences. She was recently awarded the Best Poster Award for the 22nd annual meeting of the International Society for Bipolar Disorder (ISBD). Lima’s poster, titled “Oxidative Stress Does Not Predict Epigenetic Aging Acceleration in Bipolar Disorder,” was selected among the best posters out of 300 others submitted.

The poster presented results of an investigation conducted by the Translational Psychiatry Program led by Gabriel Fries, PhD, assistant professor in the department, funded by The University of Texas Houston Retiree Organization (UTYRO) and UTHealth Consortium on Aging last year through the UTHRO Endowment for Healthy Aging Geriatric Studies for Junior Faculty Program.

The study takes a look at bipolar disorder, a complex psychiatric disorder known to be associated with accelerated epigenetic aging, and the potential molecular mechanisms underlying this acceleration. Lima’s experiments focused on understanding the potential role oxidative stress markers may have on the aging process. The poster illustrated preliminary results, which suggests that oxidative stress markers do not predict accelerated epigenetic aging in patients with bipolar disorder and controls. This has prompted Lima and the team to look at new ways in which accelerated epigenetic aging is related to the pathophysiology of bipolar disorder, with new experiments currently being undertaken.

Lima’s research focuses on mood disorders, specifically bipolar disorder. The ISBD conference brings together researchers, clinicians, and professionals who study and treat bipolar disorder. She says winning this award for this event is a huge boost to her career and will give her the opportunity to develop independence, improve technical skills, and focus on research interests.

“I feel motivated and encouraged even more to do my best,” Lima said. “Also, it is a great honor and privilege to win this award.”
Meet our 2020-21 psychiatry residency chiefs

Brandi Karnes, MD
Wellness Chief

What made you choose UTHealth?
I chose to rank UTHealth No. 1 because of the welcoming faculty and the diverse training environments in the Texas Medical Center.

What is your specific area of study?
I am interested in inpatient psychiatry, so learning at one of the largest stand-alone inpatient psychiatric facilities in the nation was ideal.

What are your plans after you finish your training?
After training, I plan to work in academic psychiatry to continue to teach students and residents.

What's your favorite part of the program?
As someone interested in clinician educating and wellness, I have received the support of program leadership through the Clinician Educator Track and the Wellness Committee to lecture to our medical school students and residents about these important topics.

What are some activities you like to do outside of work?

Kim Grayson, MD
Outpatient Chief

What made you choose UTHealth?
I chose to complete my residency here partly because of the breadth of clinical experience I knew would get working in the TMC. The most appealing part of the program for me were the amazing educators that I met while completing my psychiatry rotation here while in medical school. It just seemed like the residents and faculty were such a good fit for me.

What is your specific area of study?
I have loved getting to learn how to form therapeutic alliances with my patients and focusing on honing my psychotherapy skills during my training.

What are your plans after you finish your training?
I would like to work at an academic center and continue teaching medical students and residents. I plan to work primarily in an outpatient setting, possibly in some combination with consults or inpatient.

What's your favorite part of the program?
I love how dedicated faculty are to our education and how supportive they are in helping residents achieve their ambitions.
When I am not at work, I spend most of my time relaxing with my husband and my two dogs.

What are some activities you like to do outside of work?
When I’m not working, I enjoy exploring the theater and art scene in Houston and you can often find me seeing a show at the Hobby Center. Since the pandemic, I have definitely been enjoying more media that is available online, including recordings of live performances.

What made you choose UTHealth?
I really resonated with the faculty and the "can-do" culture here at the program. I was impressed by the level of autonomy residents and medical students enjoyed while rotating at HCPC.

What is your specific area of study?
I enjoy treating patients with SMI, personality disorders, severe trauma. I also enjoy studying forensics and psychopathy.

What are your plans after finishing your training?
I plan to complete a forensics fellowship program. Afterward, I plan to work on a subacute unit treating patients with SMI while teaching residents and medical students. I would also do private forensic assessments that opine on criminal

What made you choose UTHealth?
Simply, people are happy! During my training here before residency, it was obvious that residents are happier than other places. The program has this special family-like feeling where residents and faculty care about each other, which is a huge advantage in my opinion.

What is your specific area of study?
I am interested in mood disorders, TRD, and neuropsychiatry with a special interest in the innovative research applications in the field.

What are your plans after finishing your training?
Being a research track resident, I consider research an integral component of my future career, thus I would prefer to be in an academic

Morgan Deal, MD
Inpatient Chief

Sam Salem, MD, PhD
Research Track Chief
What made you choose UTHealth?
When rotating through psychiatry as a medical student and interviewing for residency at McGovern Medical School I was impressed by the diversity of patients that were treated through their many different facilities, and thought that working at UTHealth would provide me with a breadth and depth of experience that I desired while training to practice psychiatry.

What is your specific area of study?
My areas of interest are treatment of adults with SMI, advanced psychopharmacology, and personal and professional development.
neuropsychiatry, and anxiety disorders.

**What are your plans after finishing your training?**
Currently I am considering multiple opportunities for employment post-graduation including inpatient, outpatient, and locums.

**What's your favorite part of the program?**
The people. I have so much enjoyed working with the residents, faculty, nurses, and support staff who work in our facilities. The support and mentorship I have received from fellow residents and supervising attendings has been invaluable to my education, training, and personal well-being.

**What are some activities you like to do outside of work?**
When not working I enjoy going for walks, listening to true crime podcasts, learning new recipes to cook (shout out to delivery meal prep kits), engaging in strength training workouts at home, reading, spending time with family, and finding new shows to stream.

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**Take the COVID-19 survey**

![Scott Lane, PhD, and Salih Selek, MD](image)

Please take a few moments to take a survey on how you've been doing during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was put together by Scott Lane, PhD, and Salih Selek, MD, to explore how the pandemic has affected the UTHealth community's mental health. All results will remain anonymous. To start the survey click [here](#).

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**Clinical trials**

The following clinical trials are also back in operation, following all necessary safety guidelines. If you're interested, contact the appropriate study.

**Targeting Stress-Induced Alcohol Relapse Risk with Doxazosin XL**
Contact: 713-500-DRUG (3784)
Assessment of Diverse Biological Indicators in Gulf War Illness: Are They Replicable? Are They Related?
Contact: Deborah M Little, PhD, 713-486-2524

Effect of Systemic Inflammation Effect on Mood and Cognition
Contact: Valeria Cuellar, 713-486-2523

To see all open studies, visit our website

Publications

The anti-aging effects of lithium in lymphoblastoid cell lines from patients with bipolar disorder and controls
Gabriel R Fries, Madeline J Zamzow, Gabriela D Colpo, Nancy Monroy-Jaramillo, Joao Quevedo, Jodi G Arnold, Charles L Bowden, Consuelo Walss-Bass

‘Meeting Kids Where They’re At’: Usability and Acceptability of a Substance Use and Sexual Risk Prevention Program via Telemedicine for African American Girls
Cristina Lopez; Amanda Gilmore; Angela Moreland; Carla Danielson; Ron Acierno

Association of polychlorinated biphenyls and organochlorine pesticides with autism spectrum disorder in Jamaican children
MacKinsey A. Bach, Maureen Samms-Vaughan, Manouchehr Hessabi, Jan Bressler, Min Jae Lee, Jing Zhang, Syndonne Shakespeare-Pellington, Megan L. Grove, Katherine A. Loveland, Mohammad H. Rahbar

Risk of Depression in the Adolescent and Adult Offspring of Mothers With Perinatal Depression
Vaishali Tirumalaraju, MBBS; Robert Suchting, PhD; Jonathan Evans, MD; Laura Goetzl, MD, MPH; Jerrie Refuerzo, MD; Alexander Neumann, MSc; Deepa Anand, MD; Rekha Ravikumar, MD; Charles E. Green, PhD; Philip J. Cowen, MD; Sudhakar Selvaraj, MBBS, DPhil

In the news

Lokesh Shahani, MD, MPH, was interviewed by the Houston Chronicle about how anxiety and depression are on the rise due to the pandemic.

Ron Acierno, PhD, was interviewed by The New York Times about how people process taking risks during a pandemic.

Zeshen Wu, MD, spoke to Men’s Health on Instagram live about the importance of having therapists of color.

Sudhakar Selvaraj, MD, PhD, was interviewed by the wire service UPI about a study he led revealing that the risk for depression doubled in children born to mothers with the condition.

Upcoming events
Registration is now open!

The Feilman Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences proudly presents

2020 Houston Mood Disorders Conference
Bipolar Disorder: Advances in Diagnosis and Management

October 9 and 10

*The conference will now be held online via Webex*

Register now
Save the Date

Feb. 6, 2021

12th Annual Psychiatry Update

Treatment Innovation for Veterans and First Responders

The Faillace Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences proudly invites you to the inaugural

2021 Houston Addiction Disorders Conference

April 9 and 10, 2021

Registration information coming soon

Join our mail list

We appreciate your donation!

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