Joy Schmitz, PhD, has been named the Louis A. Faillace, MD, Chair in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at McGovern Medical School at UTHealth. Appointment to this endowed chair recognizes outstanding performance and influential contributions in the field, department, and school.

Schmitz received her PhD in clinical psychology from Auburn University and completed her internship training at the University of Mississippi Medical Center. She joined the Faillace Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences in 1988 as an assistant professor. Currently, as a tenured professor, Schmitz has a national reputation in the area of addiction research. Her longstanding research program has been supported by continuous NIH funding since the beginning of her academic career. Her primary research interests focus on developing behavioral interventions and medications for substance use disorders (SUD), and evaluating treatment efficacy using innovative clinical trial designs and statistical methods.

From 1995 to 2015, Schmitz served as project principal investigator and co-director of a multimillion-dollar medications development center grant funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). Since 2010, she has served as Director of the Center for Neurobehavioral Research on Addiction, a nationally recognized center of excellence. As a licensed psychologist, Dr. Schmitz is active in the training, delivery, and supervision of evidence-based approaches to SUD treatment.

Schmitz is passionate about the career development of new investigators, and has served as the primary mentor of numerous predoctoral and postdoctoral fellows and junior faculty, including seven career development awardees since 2005. She has been recognized for her training activities with mentoring awards, including the UTHealth President’s Award for Mentoring Women in 2003 and the Women Faculty Forum Clinical Excellence Award in 2016. Last year she accepted the nomination to serve as a mentor for the NIDA Diversity Scholars Network meeting. This year she was appointed standing member of the NIH study section, Interventions to Prevent and Treat Addictions.
“I am extremely honored to receive this recognition,” Schmitz said. “I'm grateful to Dr. Louis Faillace for his generosity, support, and inspiration as a leader in the field of psychiatry and in the treatment of mental illness.”

Faculty spotlight:
Shahani leads inpatient geriatric psychiatry unit

Lokesh Shahani, MD, MPH, is an assistant professor in the Faillace Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences. He is also the medical director of Inpatient Geriatric Psychiatry Unit at UTHealth Harris County Psychiatric Center (HCPC).

Shahani works with patients who are older than 60. In his role, he works with patients on any medical problems they may be having as well as treat any psychiatry issues that come up. He says it’s common for geriatric patients to have both and he is thankful he is able to treat both.

“Based on my education and skills, I always look for opportunities to use both my medical knowledge as well as psychiatry knowledge to improve patient outcomes,” Shahani said.

He started his medical training in 2000 in India. Upon completion of his program in India, Shahani moved to the United States in 2006 and completed a two-year graduate degree program at UTHealth School of Public Health.

He then did a five-year combined internal medicine and psychiatry residency at the University of Southern Illinois. In 2013, Shahani made his way back to Houston for a postdoctoral fellowship at Baylor College of Medicine and began as an assistant professor at UTHealth in 2015. He joined HCPC in 2018 for his current role.

Shahani believes strongly in self-care when he’s off work. Taking care of oneself is just as important as taking care of patients, he says. Shahani enjoys spending time with his wife and two kids. He is a certified scuba diver, taking a trip to the ocean every six months. Shahani also plays in a professional cricket league on Sunday afternoons.

Soares elected to NNDC executive committee

Jair Soares, MD, PhD, the Pat R. Rutherford, Jr. Chair in Psychiatry at McGovern Medical School and director of the Center of Excellence on Mood Disorders, was recently elected to the executive committee at the National Network of Depression Centers (NNDC).

The NNDC’s mission is to reduce suffering from depression through the power of networking. Through their network, the NNDC connects members to advance scientific discovery and to provide stigma-free, evidence-based care to patients with
depressive and bipolar illnesses. This allows the leading depression centers across the country to come together, working together to lift the burden of bipolar and depression disorders among their respective patients.

Through collaboration among the centers, innovations in both prevention and treatments are discovered, specifically for depression and bipolar disorders. In the end, the coalition’s goal is to provide everyone with effective, evidence-based care who requires it.

In 2017, the McGovern Medical School at UTHealth was named a Center of Excellence member of the NNDC.

Soares is honored to be a part of the NNDC, and to be on the executive committee and provide his insight to help others.

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**Research:**

**Soder uses postdoc grant to explore cocaine use disorder**

Cocaine use disorder (CUD) is a persistent condition with severe public health impacts. CUD is a complex, devastating disorder to treat. Currently, there are no FDA-approved medications to treat CUD; only behavioral treatments exist. However, only about two-thirds of patients do well in current behavioral treatments, suggesting one treatment may not be good for every individual. This emphasizes the need to improve individual treatment fit.

Heather Soder, PhD, received a postdoctoral research fellowship grant from the National Institute of Health to study biological predictors of treatment outcomes, specifically for those with CUD.

Soder, a postdoctoral research fellow in the Faillace Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, specializes in cognitive neuroscience, a field of psychology that studies the underlying brain mechanisms of human thoughts and behaviors.

Soder’s research uses electroencephalography, which measures electrical activity of the brain using a cap with sensors attached. Specifically, Soder measures the brain responses to drug-related and non-drug-related rewards using event-related potentials (ERPs). ERPs reflect the change in voltage in response to specific events, such as looking at drug-related images on a computer screen.

Currently contingency management is the best treatment available for CUD. Though effective in some patients, contingency management does not work for everyone. Soder hopes to predict which individuals the treatment will work for based on their brain responses. Down the line, this will allow her to use “treatment matching,” which can get a patient into a program with a higher potential for success.

All postdoctoral research fellows are required to have a training plan in place. This two-year training grant will give Soder invaluable experience in several areas. She will learn how to study patients with substance use disorders as well as how to accurately use statistics for data that are collected over time.

Soder says this grant will help her learn some valuable lessons.
“Working in a clinical setting is instrumental to my training,” Soder said. “This will teach me how to become a good mentor and teacher, and how to transition into becoming an independent researcher.”

John, Teixeira, Arora, and Shahani passionate over geriatric program

The [geriatric psychiatry program](#) at the Faillace Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences provides care to adults 60 years and older who are struggling with changes in their lives, such as an illness that sets in later in life.

The outpatient geriatric psychiatry program is led by Vineeth John, MD, MBA, with Antonio Teixeira, MD, PhD,MSc, and Garima Arora, MD, as members.

Lokesh Shahani, MD, MPH, provides inpatient services for the geriatric program at UTHealth Harris County Psychiatric Center (HCPC).

Arora says it’s very common for patients to experience behavioral changes as they get older.
There are several underlying psychiatric illnesses that can cause different mood and behavior issues in the elderly, such as bipolar disorder, depression, or psychosis.

She says the most common cause for behavioral changes in older patients is dementia, a condition affecting memory and other cognitive abilities. Many times, the behavioral changes either predate the dementia or come with it. There are many layers to memory loss. It could be age-associated, mild cognitive impairment (memory loss but still functioning), or frank dementia (affecting memory and functioning).

“It can be frustrating,” Arora said. “If you’re able to do something fast like count change in a grocery store and you can’t do that anymore, sometimes people will react.”

Shahani provides inpatient services for patients requiring hospitalization. He says the patients he sees are in a crisis. Two things he has to do immediately is crisis stabilization and then taking steps to prevent the crisis from happening again.

Like Arora, Shahani says about half the patients he sees have been suffering from a chronic illness throughout their lives that has worsened as they’ve aged. The other half are new cases, mostly dementia, that patients are having trouble adjusting to.

At HCPC, Shahani uses the “Four M” model when treating patients – mentation, mobility, medications, and what matters most. By adopting the Four M model, HCPC can say they’re the first stand-alone psychiatry hospital to be accredited with the age-friendly health certification from the Institute for Healthcare Improvement.

Shahani, through his education and training, finds it helpful to use the model to balance out the use of psychiatry and medicine to the patient.

Arora and Shahani are passionate about providing care to patients. Both agree that educating family members and caregivers, as well as providing information to patients and caregivers, is important.

“You treat the whole family,” Arora said. “Sometimes, I have six people sitting here – patient, spouse, children, and caregiver.”

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**Psychology interns find out next step**

The 2019-20 psychology interns at the Faillace Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences have recently learned where they will be spending their postdoctoral training year. Each will pursue further training in clinical practice and research at one of a variety of excellent programs across the U.S. before attaining licensure.

Join us in congratulating our interns!
Publications

Accelerated aging in bipolar disorder: A comprehensive review of molecular findings

In the media

Deborah A. Pearson, PhD, was quoted in a story on msn.com about how to tell the
Managing Suicidality in Home-Based Telehealth
Daniel F Gros 1, Kimberly Veronee, Martha Strachan, Kenneth J Ruggiero, Ron Acierno

Elevated Neutrophil to Lymphocyte Ratio in Older Adults with Cocaine Use Disorder as a Marker of Chronic Inflammation
Soder HE, Berumen AM, Gomez KE, Green CE, Suchting R, Wardle MC, Vincent J, Teixeira AL, Schmitz JM, Lane SD.

Upcoming Grand Rounds speakers
Join us for the Grand Rounds in March on Wednesdays at noon at UTHealth Harris County Psychiatric Center:

April 4: Rebecca Casarez, PhD, RN, Associate Professor, Cizik School of Nursing

April 11: Melba A. Hernandez-Tejada, PhD, DHA, Associate Professor, Faillace Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences

April 18: Conor Liston, MD, PhD, Associate Professor, Feil Family Brain and Mind Research Institute/Psychiatry, Weill Cornell Medicine

April 25: Lucy Puryear, MD, Associate Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Meninger Department of Psychiatry, Baylor College of Medicine, Medical Director of The Women's Place - Center for Reproductive Psychiatry, Texas Children's Hospital

April 29: No Grand Rounds
The 2020 Geigerman Lecture Series
The Many Faces of Autism at Work

*Please note the 2020 Geigerman Lecture is being converted to an online stream only. The stream will start at 7 p.m. on Thursday, April 23 and will end at 8:30 p.m. A link will be shared to those registered closer to the conference date.*

Register now

Mark your calendars
October 9 and 10
The Faillace Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences presents

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

Feb. 6, 2021
Save the Date
12th Annual Psychiatry Update
Treatment Innovation for Veterans and First Responders

We appreciate your donation!

Louis A. Faillace, MD, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at McGovern Medical School at UTHealth
713-486-2500

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