Let's talk about it

We are launching a new column to talk about science with our readers from a broader perspective. Our first topic is mental health in academia.

he pages of *Nature Materials* have featured a very broad range of science-related topics, from fundamental scientific discoveries and their technological transfer to the latest trends in science policy, funding and publishing. We are now going a step further, creating a space where our readers can also share their views on the many other aspects of academic life that are important to them. In their own words, they will tell us what they enjoy or have experienced in their scientific career path, in our new feature Why it Matters.

Often, winding down at a coffee break or at the end of an intense day packed with meetings, conference talks and lab visits, we have had refreshing exchanges with researchers about their interests. We have discovered curious minds, amateur science historians, environmental activists, heartfelt defenders of race and gender equality, masters of advertising, brilliant communicators, as well as caring parents, partners and children. These passions permeate the scientific career of these researchers too, sometimes acting as a motivational boost to carry on after a failed experiment, as inspiration for unconventional thinking, or as a bonding tool for team building. Other times, the contrast between these passions and the reality of the academic environment has pushed them towards different careers, or to raise their voices to make academia change. The personal stories of successes and struggles, initiative and happiness, have resonated with us and a large number of other scientists. As such, we have asked to share some of these experiences in Nature Materials, hoping that they will give some food for thought about the many possible directions that the life of a scientist can take.

The first of these features, published in this issue, is a reflection on mental health in academic environments from Donata Iandolo and Gonçalo Silva — members of the UK Chapter of the Marie Curie Alumni Association (MCAA) who were among the organizers of a one-day workshop on this topic held in Cambridge, UK, in April 2019. What matters to them is the increasing number of PhD students, postdocs and early-career researchers feeling high levels of stress¹. Competition, job insecurity, high workload and the



obnoxiously famous 'publish or perish' credo are some of the factors that can create a toxic environment in many research institutes. This can only get worse without a close network of friends and loved ones that can help mitigate some of the tension — a not so rare situation for academics, who often relocate multiple times during their career to chase temporary contracts around the globe. Individuals suffer, exposed to high risk of depression, and science doesn't flourish, losing contributions from brilliant minds.

Speaking openly about how a misaligned research culture can take a toll on mental health is certainly the first step needed to raise awareness of the situation and defeat the personal stigma. The second necessary step is finding feasible solutions to change the status quo, which is the aim of initiatives such as the workshop organized in Cambridge, or the recent International Conference on the Mental Health & Wellbeing of Postgraduate Researchers2 held in Brighton, UK, by the Universities of Sussex and Portsmouth with the support of Nature Research and the UK Council for Graduate Education. From online international counselling services, to trainings for supervisors on team management and mental-health related issues, various strategies are being suggested to 'cherish the scientist and safeguard the science, as Iandolo and Silva plead.

Academic societies and science funders are also stepping in, as discussed in a Correspondence in this issue by Ben Bleasdale, policy adviser at the Wellcome Trust. Last year, foundations such as the Wellcome and Cancer Research UK have launched initiatives to ensure universities

address bullying and harassment³ — for instance, the Wellcome policy now makes the disclosure of any bullying allegations, disciplinary warnings or sanctions related to the lead applicant mandatory for a grant request, and these are considered in the decision whether to accept the application. Further sanctions may be applied to funded organizations in case the policy is violated4. Bleasdale also envisions the possibility of taking into account, in the assessment of grant candidates, the degree of wellbeing they are able to create in their working environment. Moreover, he calls for a long-term, broad conversation with researchers on ways to change the current research culture.

Through the pages of Why it Matters, we also want to be part of this conversation, highlighting these and other initiatives to improve mental health in academia to our community of materials scientists. More broadly, we hope to give space to ideas and experiences that could be of inspiration to our readers, beyond their next experiment or grant application. The content of Why it Matters will be mainly commissioned, yet we will be happy to consider suggestions you may have for interesting contributions — send us your e-mails to materials@nature.com or come and talk to us at the next coffee break.

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References

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