

WORK-LIFE BALANCE FOR POSTDOCS

It's Friday. Most of your experiments for the week have tanked, and lab meeting is looming. Panic starts creeping in. You tell yourself there's still time to salvage something, so you set up that three-day experiment, knowing full well what it means. After all, you need data. You need something to show. Besides, plenty of your labmates routinely come in on weekends. You cancel your plans. The dinner with friends, the long-awaited weekend trip, the lazy Sunday morning—you push them aside, telling yourself there will be time for life later. You rationalize it expertly. Just this once, you say. But if this cycle continues, this is how it begins—the slow slide into a toxic work-life imbalance.

MAINTAINING WORK-LIFE BALANCE AS A POSTDOC

Most postdocs feel immense pressure to go above and beyond to craft a CV strong enough to secure the elusive academic positions. In this high-stakes race, personal life often feels like an inevitable sacrifice at the altar of PI ambitions. Moreover, a toxic work environment only compounds the stress. Maintaining a healthy weekend life becomes nearly impossible when your inbox is constantly flooded with demands from your supervisor, encroaching on both your time and mental well-being. In such cases, having an open and honest conversation about your preferred work style can help establish a mutually agreeable balance.

The professional anxiety is real—after all, competing in the world's largest market against some of the sharpest minds leaves little room for a laid-back approach. That said, research suggests that those with more well-rounded CVs often have better career prospects.

STRESS & ANXIETY AMONG SCIENTISTS & POSTDOCS

Research indicates that scientists and postdoctoral researchers experience significant levels of stress and anxiety. A 2016 survey revealed that 41% of PhD students and postdocs reported anxiety, while 39% experienced depression (Enago). Further studies show that up to 50% of graduate students report symptoms of depression, anxiety, or burnout during their training ([American Journal of Physiology](#)). Additionally, a survey of postdoctoral researchers found that 51% considered leaving science due to work-related mental health concerns ([Federation of American Scientists](#)).

THE BENEFITS OF WORK-LIFE BALANCE AND SHORTER WORKWEEKS

Regarding work schedules and productivity, evidence suggests that reduced workweeks can enhance productivity and improve work-life balance. A study by Autonomy found that employees working a four-day week were 20% more productive while reporting higher levels of well-being ([Forbes](#)). Trials in Iceland demonstrated that reducing working hours maintained or increased productivity and service provision, while improving workers' well-being and work-life balance ([Walden University](#)).

These findings suggest that implementing shorter workweeks and promoting better work-life balance could be beneficial in reducing stress and enhancing productivity among scientists and postdoctoral researchers.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MENTAL HEALTH

As postdocs, finding a balance between our roles as researchers and enjoying life outside of the lab is difficult. We work hard and deserve rest for the work we do, but we all know it often isn't that straightforward. There are experiments to run, grant deadlines to meet, data to generate before the next lab meeting... Sometimes it feels like it never ends, and sometimes there are variables outside of our control that make finding that balance feel impossible. Along with physical health and hygiene, maintaining good mental health and hygiene is of the utmost importance for quality of life, productivity in and out of the lab, and overall well-being. If you have a mental health emergency, go to the emergency room or call 911. If the situation is urgent but not an emergency, there are Massachusetts-specific and national [hotlines](#) available.

Mass General Brigham has a few different resources for employee mental health. The [Mental Health Connections Navigator](#) is a newer service that will help connect employees or their family members to the appropriate mental health treatment, both internal and external. This service does not require enrollment in an MGB health plan and is a great place to start. [Lyra](#) is an external mental health resource for MGB employees, but an MGB health plan is required. MGB also offers the [Employee Assistance Program](#) (EAP), which provides a plethora of resources (not limited to mental health). The EAP has a mental health awareness initiative, [R U OK](#), which encourages employees to keep an eye out for warning signs exhibited by colleagues and offers assistance if there are any concerns.

In 2018, Brigham and Women's Hospital launched the free and confidential [Faculty Trainee Mental Health Clinic](#). Since then, over a thousand trainees and faculty members have used this service. It's designed to provide a rapid-access (usually within 72 hours of first contact) virtual consultation with a psychiatrist. The program will provide up to six follow-up visits or a referral to an external provider or a different resource. If spirituality is important for your mental well-being, BWH offers interfaith spiritual care for both patients and staff via the [Spiritual Care Services Department](#).

If all of this feels overwhelming or you want to explore more on your own first, there are many other resources to check out. If you want to learn more about mental health in general, McLean Hospital offers [interactive webinars](#). EAP also offers [webinars and well-being programs](#). There are a handful of mental health mobile apps MGB endorses, and employees can download and access their services for free. These include [SilverCloud Health](#), a self-directed cognitive behavioral therapy tool, [Koa Care 360](#), designed to address anxiety and stress, and [Headspace](#), a mental health and meditation app.

STEPS TO MAINTAIN WORK-LIFE BALANCE AS A POSTDOC

Attending Social Events Organized at the Hospital. Various postdoc associations in Boston, including those at BWH and HMS, frequently host happy hours, cultural events, and academic mixers. These events provide opportunities to step away from research, meet new people, and discuss challenges with peers who understand the academic pressures. Networking Outside the Lab: Building relationships beyond your immediate research group can provide new career opportunities and mental relief. Attending conferences, alumni events, or meetups in related fields can broaden perspectives and reduce career-related stress. Emphasis on Physical Health: Exercise is a proven stress reliever and can boost cognitive function. Many postdocs benefit from joining running clubs, yoga sessions, or group fitness classes to stay physically active while socializing. Even a simple morning walk or a weekly group run can provide mental clarity and reduce anxiety.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE IDEAS FROM LOCAL POSTDOCS

Boston's vibrant academic environment hosts a large and diverse postdoctoral community across institutions like Harvard University, MIT, Boston University, and Northeastern University. While postdocs often face demanding research schedules, local universities have made efforts to promote work-life balance through structured support systems, wellness programs, and professional development initiatives. Many universities offer flexible work arrangements where possible, allowing postdocs to manage their time effectively between research, teaching, and personal commitments.

Postdoc associations, such as the Harvard Medical School Postdoctoral Association (HMS PDA) and MIT Postdoctoral Association (MIT PDA), organize social events, peer mentorship programs, and networking opportunities, fostering a sense of community and reducing isolation. To support mental and physical well-being, universities provide access to counseling services, mindfulness programs, and subsidized gym memberships. Family-friendly policies, including parental leave, childcare assistance, and lactation rooms, help postdocs with families balance their responsibilities. Career development programs, including grant-writing workshops, industry panels, and leadership training, ensure that postdocs are well-prepared for future careers while maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

Despite the inherent challenges of postdoctoral research, Boston's universities continue to create environments that prioritize well-being, professional growth, and personal fulfillment.

FAMILY-FRIENDLY EVENTS FOR POSTDOCS WITH FAMILIES

Although having emotional support and family time can be a great source of relief, many postdocs with families struggle to balance research and home life. If you have a partner and/or children, integrating family-friendly activities into your schedule can strengthen personal relationships while maintaining work-life balance. The postdoctoral associations at Boston's major universities (Harvard, MIT, Boston University, and Northeastern) actively organize a mix of religious and non-religious events, fostering inclusivity and work-life balance for postdocs and their families.

During Ramadan, postdoc communities host Iftar gatherings, allowing Muslim researchers and their families to break their fast together throughout the entire month. These events provide a welcoming space for cultural exchange and often include guest speakers, interfaith discussions, and traditional meals. Similarly, Eid celebrations bring together diverse groups to enjoy food, community bonding, and family-friendly activities. Other religious observances, such as Diwali, Christmas, Hanukkah, and Lunar New Year, are also recognized, offering postdocs a sense of belonging away from home.

Non-religious events include family-friendly outings, cultural festivals, and networking picnics in local parks. Many universities organize postdoc appreciation days, holiday parties, and summer BBQs, where spouses and children are welcome. Workshops on work-life balance, mental health, and career development also provide an inclusive environment for families to connect. By encouraging family participation, these events create a strong support system for postdocs, helping them build a sense of community while navigating their demanding research careers.

BENEFITS FOR BWH POSTDOCS

LIFESTYLE AND WELLNESS BENEFITS THROUGH BWH

Postdocs have access to lifestyle and wellness benefits as BWH employees, including discounts for transportation, entertainment, fitness club membership fees, and other services. Discounts are also available for mobile phone services, moving services, wholesale clubs and real estate services. Refer to the intranet Employee Perks for the most updated offers.

Transportation: Employees receive a 50% subsidy on MBTA passes, and passes are purchased through pre-tax monthly payroll deductions. Employees also get a discount for Bluebikes and Zipcar membership.

Childcare: Employees get 20 subsidized childcare backup care days per year through Mass General Brigham. These subsidized days can be used for center-based backup care at MGB-operated backup care centers, at many Bright Horizons locations, and for in-home backup care. MGB operates three backup care centers: MGH Backup Child Care Center, BWH Backup Child Care Center and Children's Center at Assembly Row.

All employees with a BWH/MGB ID badge have access to Employee Perks, which can be accessed under Employee Offerings in the Ask My HR intranet. Tickets can be purchased at the BWH Cashier's Office in 75 Francis Street. Offers are monthly, so check out the intranet for the most updated information. Here we highlight a selection of the offerings:

Entertainment: Discounted tickets are available for movie theaters (AMC and Regal), museums (Museum of Science, Museum of Fine Arts, New England Aquarium, Boston Children's Museum). Discounts are also available on seasonal offerings to mountain and ski resorts. BWH employees can also join the external perks program Tickets at Work, which offers discounts for hotels, car rentals and amusement parks.

Health and wellness: Discounted membership to Bodyscapes Fitness (with a convenient location in Longwood at 77 Avenue Louis Pasteur). Discounts are also available to R3vive Fitness, The Handle Bar Cycling Studio, Orange Theory Fitness, Healthwork Fitness Centers for Women and other fitness centers. Discounts on prescription eyeglasses are available to BWH employees at Mass Eye and Ear and other vendors.

EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS

Consultation with a statistician: The [Harvard Catalyst Biostatistical Consulting program](#) supports all Harvard postdoctoral investigators at Harvard schools and affiliated academic healthcare centers undertaking clinical and translational research. Drawing on a team of highly skilled biostatisticians from the Harvard academic medical and hospital community, the program offers biostatistics consultations and expertise on a range of relevant areas to researchers. In addition, the program also offers bioinformatics consultations.

Harvard catalyst: [Harvard catalyst](#) offers a variety of courses for postdocs.

TUITION ASSISTANCE

Tuition Assistance via HMS: [The Tuition Assistance Plan \(TAP\)](#) assists with classes taken at Harvard. With TAP, the cost of classes at the Harvard Extension School is just \$40. TAP also covers tuition costs at other eligible schools, with employees paying only 10% of tuition. The Tuition Reimbursement Plan (TRP) assists with classes taken at other accredited schools. TRP reimburses employees up to 75 percent of tuition costs (upon the successful completion of classes at other accredited institutions. There is an annual maximum benefit of \$5,250. Classes must be job-related, unless they are taken as part of a program to earn a first undergraduate degree at an accredited institution. Note: there are eligibility guidelines for Tuition Assistance.

Tuition Assistance via MGB: MGB is offering tuition assistance of up to \$5,250 annually for full-time employees and \$2,625 annually for part-time employees.

FINANCIAL BENEFITS

Postdocs at BWH/HMS are offered a variety of financial benefits from tuition reimbursement programs to retirement saving plans. A selection of these benefits are introduced below. Note: we do not cover health and life insurance options offered by BWH as this is beyond the scope of this newsletter.

Savings accounts: MGB offers various types of savings accounts so you can save tax dollars and reduce your out-of-pocket expenses. These accounts include, but are not limited to: Health Savings Account (HSA): Made for saving tax-free dollars to pay for eligible medical, prescription drug, dental and vision expenses. MGB will contribute to your account. When you save enough, you can start investing these dollars too! Dependent Care Flexible Spending Account: Pre-tax dollars are used to reimburse the cost of eligible dependent care expenses such as preschool, summer day camp, before- or after-school programs, and child or adult daycare.

Retirement: MGB's retirement benefits include, among others, a 403(b) plan for eligible employees. 403(b) Retirement Savings Plan: Benefits-eligible employees are enrolled automatically at a 2% per-pay period contribution. Contributions will automatically default to the appropriate Vanguard Target Retirement Date Fund based on age, or you may choose from a range of investments available through Fidelity and TIAA. Once eligible for the 403(b) employer match, MGB will match 100% of employee contributions per-pay period, up to 2% of total pay.

Disability: MGB offers comprehensive leave and disability programs, with employees being automatically enrolled in employer-paid short- and long-term disability coverage that can be upgraded.

Consultation with experts: Employees, staff and immediate family household members have access to [financial education](#) and free 30-minute sessions with a financial expert.



BWH POSTDOC ALUMNI FORUM

DR. KELLY GEORGE

When were you a postdoc at BWH and in which department/lab?

I was in Jagesh Shah's lab in the Renal Department of BWH and in Systems Biology an HMS. I was one of the first postdocs in the Laboratory for Systems Pharmacology (LSP).

What was your research on?

In general, we were interested in building a quantitative understanding of 1. how cells signal through the primary cilium and 2. mitotic spindle checkpoint regulation. I dabbled in both of these topics, but the bulk of my postdoc work focused on using quantitative proteomics/phospho-proteomics/transcriptomics to investigate novel pathways of interest for polycystic kidney disease (PKD) and acute kidney injury. Part of this work was in collaboration with a group at Sanofi Genzyme to investigate the mechanism of action of CDK inhibitors in the suppression of cystogenesis in mouse models of PKD.

What was your first job after postdoc?

Another postdoc! This time it was in pharma at Sanofi Genzyme in 2016. My work focused on identifying novel biomarkers for a rare neuromuscular disease called Pompe disease. Luckily, I was hired full time a year and a half later.

What is your current role?

Director, Global Medical Affairs for Pompe and Fabry

What were some of the biggest differences between being a postdoc and your first role outside BWH?

Not having to count every dollar! Since my first position was a postdoc, it was still a temporary position and the expectations were to publish a paper, but the timelines are much more condensed. If the work was not progressing, then it was dropped or pushed off to bring something else forward. Priorities change quickly in pharma and you have to be agile and be able to pivot to new projects (often in new diseases) with ease. The projects are much more team based and you work closely with colleagues with different skills and functions. All of the work does not rest on the shoulders of a single postdoc.

What were some key skills that helped you land the job?

My data wrangling skills from looking at proteomic/transcriptomic data were very useful when I joined Sanofi. I switched to a disease area that was completely new for me, but I could apply my skills to investigate novel biomarkers and pathways of interest. From there I learned about the disease biology and expanded my skills into pharmacology. I was very fortunate to have great mentors that gave me access to the full breadth of the drug making process – from research to clinical development to approval and life cycle management.

What advice do you have for postdocs looking to transition to similar roles?

Don't be scared to change disease/research area and apply your skills to something new. Think more broadly about what you can do and what you bring to a company. Even though your work may be in yeast or drosophila, you have still been well trained to think about and do good science.

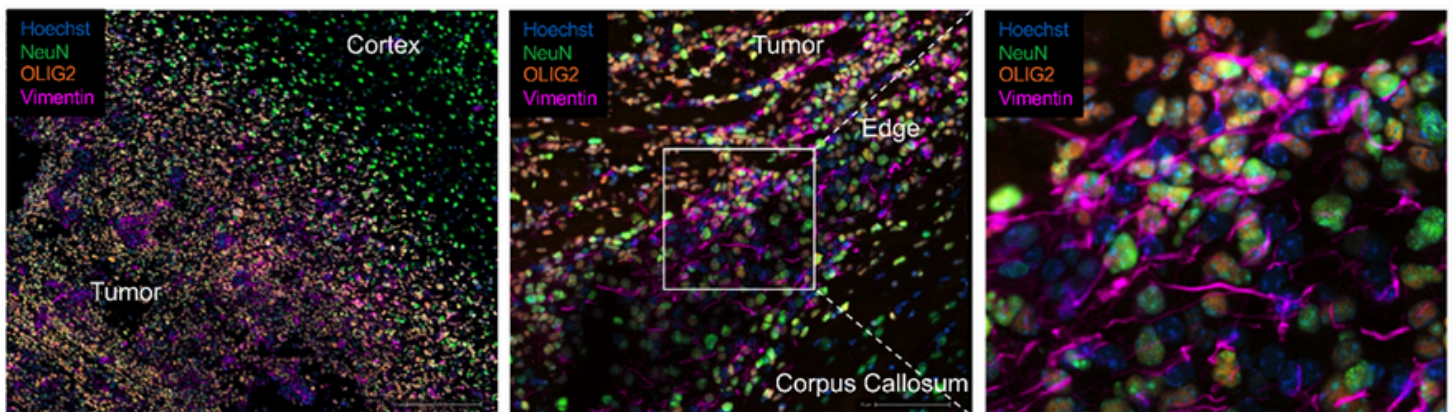
What are some skills that postdocs can acquire before embarking on a job search?

This is very dependent on the position one is looking for. If you are interested in continuing in Research, then developing technical skills and disease area expertise is important. There are also those soft skills that are very important when transitioning to industry. You have to be willing to step outside of your comfort zone and learn new skills. You have to be able to work well as part of a team while also delivering on your individual responsibilities. And you have to be able to communicate well with people across the spectrum of scientific training/expertise. Most people are not going to be as knowledgeable you are about your field and your work – you have to be the one to tell your story clearly.

Do you have any other advice for current postdocs?

Overall, the best thing anyone can do before starting a job search is to do those pesky informational interviews. Find people that are doing work in an area or position that you are interested in and find out what it is really like. This will help expand your network but also give you a better idea of what the job is really like. Make sure you have a good “elevator speech” about who you are, what you have done and what you want to do. Try to have a 30 second and 2 minute version that you can use at conferences, networking, the coffee shop, etc. Good communication skills go a long way!

BWH POSTDOC RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT



Immunofluorescence imaging of a glioblastoma tumor in the brain of a genetically engineered mouse. Hoechst staining (nuclei); NeuN (neurons); OLIG 2 (oligodendrocyte progenitor cells); Vimentin (mesenchymal cells).

Image courtesy: Dr. Jennifer Kathaleen Gantchev, postdoctoral fellow at Prof. Nathalie Agar lab.
