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HOW TO JUGGLE DATING AND A PHD

Is lasting love more likely if you pair up with another scientist? Researchers share their experiences of romantic affairs. **By Gemma Conroy**

When Karen Arellano moved to Spain from Mexico in 2020 to start her PhD in cognitive neuroscience, she turned to the dating app Tinder, headquartered in West Hollywood, California, to meet people. But something strange kept happening when conversations on the app turned to her graduate studies: many of her matches disappeared without a trace. “I guess they got intimidated,” says Arellano, who is based at the Basque Center on Cognition, Brain and Language in San Sebastián, Spain.

That all changed in December that year, when she matched with Jon D’Emidio, a physicist who had moved to San Sebastián from Lausanne, Switzerland, to start a post-doctoral position at the Donostia International Physics Center. With bars and restaurants closed under COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, the pair donned their face masks and met for a takeaway coffee. The researchers clicked instantly as they discussed their scientific careers in the blistering cold. Now, they’re engaged.

Arellano says the best thing about being in a relationship with another researcher is the support and understanding that she receives from someone who gets it. “It was the first time I felt that someone knew the struggles I was talking about,” she says.

Arellano’s experience is just one example of the highs and lows that come with dating during a PhD. Finding a long-term partner is challenging for anyone, but it can be particularly difficult for early-career researchers to find time to meet people when there are experiments to run, papers to write and grants to apply for, says Laurie Santos, a cognitive scientist at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, whose podcast, *The Happiness Lab*, includes episodes about dating.

The deep and often solitary work of doing research can also make it more difficult to cross paths with new people, adds Marisa Cohen, a marriage therapist and relationship scientist who runs her own private practice in



Alexus Cazares (left) met Michi Nuesser when they were both early-career researchers.

Hempstead, New York. Many researchers also told *Nature’s* careers team that they avoid dating their colleagues because it’s emotionally and professionally risky, which narrows their options further. This means that researchers often need to go out of their way to meet like-minded people, which can be challenging to juggle with a gruelling workload (see ‘Dating tips for PhD students’). “It can sometimes be an isolated and very lonely process,” says Cohen.

But finding and developing meaningful connections has its benefits. Some studies have found that people who are in fulfilling romantic relationships are less likely to report burnout and emotional exhaustion at work¹. Other research suggests that being in a close

romantic relationship is beneficial to hitting career goals². “Taking time to develop strong connections needs to be prioritized,” says Santos.

Taking a break

Sometimes, workplace culture can make all the difference. For marine ecologist Trenton Aguilar, being part of a team that valued work-life balance made it easier for him to make time for dating during his PhD at the University of Florida in Gainesville. For instance, Aguilar and his colleagues made sure to schedule dinner or drinks together at least once a week. That regular social activity helped him to feel comfortable prioritizing dating and his personal

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life alongside his graduate studies. In 2021, Aguilar began dating his current partner, Julia Adams, a physician assistant at the University of Florida. “I was sure to allocate myself time to be a normal person,” says Aguilar, who is now based at the University of South Florida in Tampa.

Building a romantic relationship during a PhD can also encourage a better work–life balance, says Alexis Cazares, a biological oceanographer at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. Cazares met her wife Michi Nuesser, a linguistics researcher at the same university, on Tinder at the beginning of her PhD in 2020. They married in April 2024. Although Cazares admits that her blossoming relationship distracted her from her graduate studies, she

Dating tips for PhD students

Three concrete actions that can help researchers to find romantic partners.

Make the time. There’s no doubt that PhD students are often strapped for time, but there are ways to find a few hours here and there to schedule dates, says Laurie Santos, a cognitive scientist at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. One strategy is to schedule blocks of free time weeks in advance so they’re already prioritized, she says.

Don’t dismiss the apps. Dating apps such as Tinder, Hinge and Bumble can help researchers to “connect with people that you would otherwise not cross paths with”, says Marisa Cohen, a marriage therapist and relationship scientist who runs a private practice in Hempstead, New York. Research also shows that people connect better when they meet up in real life sooner rather than later⁴. “Try to go on a date as soon as you can,” adds Santos. “And on that date, ditch the small talk and get to know each other more deeply.”

Think values, not metrics. It’s easy for researchers — and everyone else — to treat dates like job interviews and focus on the facts, such as a prospective partner’s salary, career opportunities and life goals, says Santos. But she adds that external metrics don’t always equal compatibility. And although researchers don’t necessarily need to date another academic to be fulfilled, finding a partner who has a similar drive and passion for what they do can go a long way, adds Cohen. “You’re more likely to understand one another,” she says.

knew that it wasn’t something to feel guilty about. “If it were not for my relationship, I would probably just be grinding away working,” she says. Cazares adds that although there’s no perfect career stage to start dating, the flexibility of a PhD has its benefits. “Even though it feels like you’re so busy and everything’s so important, the stakes still are fairly low,” she says, in reference to the responsibilities and workload.

But other researchers struggle to find the time and energy to meet potential partners while they are graduate students. Some studies have shown that even just feeling strapped for time can make it harder for people to connect socially, be it romantically or otherwise, says Santos.

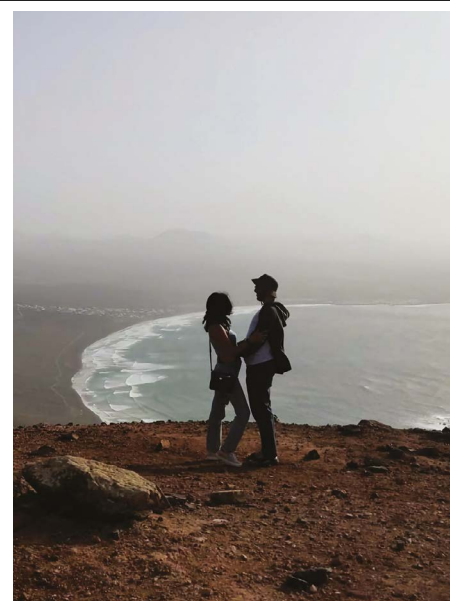
It’s a challenge that Peter Chiknas, a systems biologist at the University of Pittsburgh in Pennsylvania, knows all too well. After facing several career setbacks in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, Chiknas says he is pouring all his energy into his master’s degree, which focuses on how cells process information, to make up for lost time. He plans to move straight into a PhD and has chosen to remain single because he feels that he wouldn’t be able to devote his full attention to a relationship while juggling the demands of graduate school. “I just don’t have the bandwidth,” says Chiknas.

Distance challenges

The uncertainty of what comes after a PhD can also make dating complicated, says Sam Neuffer, a molecular biologist at the biotechnology company Bloodworks Northwest Research Institute in Seattle, Washington. In the final stages of their PhD, Neuffer stopped dating because they didn’t know whether they would need to relocate for a position a few months later. Neuffer felt it wouldn’t be fair to build a new relationship when their future was so uncertain. “It’s really hard when you don’t have any stability,” says Neuffer.

Such uncertainty and geographical hurdles can be particularly pronounced among scientist couples. Arellano and D’Emidio are now in a long-distance relationship because D’Emidio landed a postdoctoral role at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville in September last year. Meanwhile, Arellano is still completing her PhD in Spain and plans to find a job in the United States after she graduates. The key to staying connected is making a commitment to text or call every day, says D’Emidio. “If that doesn’t happen, you’re just living separate lives,” he says.

Dating people outside academia has its own set of challenges. When dating people without a science background, Neuffer often downplays their own accomplishments to seem more approachable and relatable. “I just think about all the people who don’t talk to me because I put on my dating profile



Karen Arellano (left) and Jon D’Emidio are now engaged.

that I’m a scientist,” they say. Neuffer has also noticed that people assume that they are only interested in talking about science on dates. To navigate this, Neuffer makes a point to be curious about the other person — something that research has shown to be beneficial for building connections with people³.

Many people aren’t familiar with the amount of work and dedication it takes to complete a PhD and build a career in research. When Adams started dating Aguilar, she had a hard time understanding what his research involved and why he was sometimes too tired to go out with her. Although Adams was also a graduate student at the time, her programme involved going to classes, taking exams and caring for patients. “I was not familiar with what it meant to be a PhD student,” says Adams. But things became clearer when Aguilar began explaining to Adams what his days and weeks involved, which helped the couple to establish clear expectations. “It made it a lot easier for us to make our schedules mesh,” says Aguilar.

Although juggling the stress of a PhD and a relationship is no easy feat, being with a supportive partner can make academic life easier to navigate, says Arellano. “Having someone at home who would encourage me, listen to me and support me was absolutely priceless,” she says.

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