

Emilio Bruna has the best job in the world: he is a faculty member at the University of Florida, but more importantly, he is a mentor.

When he was just starting off in the field of mentoring, his very first PhD student, Christine, became pregnant during her last year in the program. Understandably, she was concerned about finishing on time, if at all. But under Bruna's guidance, Christine was able to stick to a plan that worked for her, and navigate through the remaining fieldwork. She completed her PhD on time and, beyond that, won the Marianne Schmink Outstanding Dissertation Award.

Bruna has always been proud of Christine's accomplishment, but not because of his own role in it. His student faced a challenge and personally realized that she could overcome it. "And others saw her do it," he says, "and do it award-winning well. Christine has become a real role model for other students in our program."

Bruna is a firm believer in what he calls "Imposter Syndrome" – a condition where students think they won't fit in, don't deserve what they've gotten, or generally won't make it. He admits to suffering from the syndrome himself. "To this day I'm waiting for UC Davis to send me a bill," he laughs, "because they accidentally gave the fellowship to the wrong person. I always felt like I was the dumbest person in the room in graduate school." And because of his personal experience with Imposter Syndrome, Bruna knows how to handle it with his students: by sharing his own insecurities.

"We all have stories like that," Bruna says. Self-deprecating mentorship, if it's sincere, works really well, because it shows people that we suffer the same stress. More important messages are about the frailties that we all have." In fact, Bruna believes that a large part of his job is to make sure that his students can get feedback – not necessarily on their scientific studies, but on mental wellness, therapy options, and how to deal with the stresses in their lives.

In general, Bruna tries to treat his students like colleagues. "I've been very lucky to have students that I've learned a lot from," he says – and he's not afraid to admit when he needs to learn about something. "I'm really in tune with the things I'm good at, and also the things I'm bad at," says Bruna, adding that asking for help is better than struggling alone.

In fact, a cooperative atmosphere is what Bruna strives to provide in his lab. "We're here for each other as a family," he says, citing compassion and understanding as keys to mentoring success. "It's okay to be really proud and excited about your accomplishments, and to tell people about them. There's a lot of reflected glory in our lab." And it's also important, advises Bruna, to remember that there are many paths to an end goal – some take a bit longer than others, but the destination remains the same. "Let's not take ourselves too seriously," he chides. "We study bugs, people."

Bruna keeps a door-policy: when the door is open, students can come in to chat about anything; half-closed, and the appointment should be urgent; and if the door is closed, Brunna is usually battling a deadline. "So if you're going to faint, try not to hit the door on your way down," he laughs.

"Mentors are busy all the time," says Brunna. "We're stressed all the time, and we have no money for grants – but there is no place better anywhere in the world. If we can figure out a way that other people can enjoy this job as much as I do, then we should do it. This is an opportunity to tell people that this is the best job there is."