

By Katharina Maisel

Your peers are your pillars

Phone in one hand, steaming cup of tea in the other, I opened Slack and started to scroll through my favorite channels. In #food_drink, pictures of enticing culinary creations offered inspiration (and the opportunity to drool a little). In #humblebrag, success stories brought a morning lift. Checking the app left me feeling connected to my community and ready to start the day with a positive mindset. This was totally new for me. In the past, I had avoided connecting with other scientists through online platforms—preferring face-to-face contact. But after starting as an assistant professor shortly before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, I had a new outlook.

Beginning a faculty position was surprisingly lonely. As I was facing the challenge of learning to manage a lab, I knew I would benefit from frank discussions with colleagues who were going through something similar. But I was the only new junior faculty member in my department. I wasn't sure where or how I would find the peer support I needed.

Years earlier, as an undergraduate student, I had benefited from the support of peers in my “living and learning” dorm community, which was composed of women in science and engineering. Being able to walk down the hall and get help on math problems I was having trouble with or code I just couldn't wrap my head around bolstered my confidence in the classroom.

Later, when I was a graduate student and postdoc, I relied on my lab-mates. We spent long hours together not only doing research, but also during coffees, lunches, and happy hours, where we talked about confusing data, frustrations with assays not working, and successes to be celebrated. Sometimes knowing I was not the only one experiencing challenges was all I needed to keep going.

During that time, I also began to see how I could take steps to expand my peer mentoring opportunities. While having lunch with one of my Ph.D. classmates, she and I commiserated about missing the support from other women that we had enjoyed as undergrads. At some point the conversation turned to “why are we complaining and not acting?!” So we came up with a plan to connect with our peers and founded the Graduate Women's Empowerment Network. The group's board meetings and events deepened my connection with other women trainees at our institution and provided a forum for support when things got tough. Without this group, I would have been lost during the last 2 years of my Ph.D. program.



“Checking the app left me feeling connected to my community and ready to start the day.”

When I started my faculty position, I struggled at first because I was accustomed to having peer support but I didn't have anyone to connect with who was at the same level in my department. To try to fill the gap, I set up a regular informal meeting with my more senior women colleagues. I greatly valued their perspectives and support—but I still yearned to talk with researchers closer to my own career stage.

That's why I turned to New PI Slack, home of #food_drink, #humblebrag, and so much more. I had found the group through Twitter, which a colleague advised me to join shortly after I started my lab. After COVID-19 lockdowns began, I started to rely on it heavily, leaving it constantly running in the background on my phone and computer.

Connecting with others—whether swapping recipes, complaining about being tired of the same set of walks available near home, or sharing angst about how the pandemic would affect our careers—kept me sane, and was even invigorating and uplifting. I also learned from discussions about challenges at work, such as how to keep trainees motivated during a pandemic and ways to make research progress despite limited lab access. The support allayed any fears I had about wasting time online or struggling to connect with people I'd never met in person. The feeling of community was exactly what I and many others needed, and even led to new collaborations and friendships.

We often talk about mentoring from the top-down perspective. But I've learned that peer mentoring—whether virtual, in-person, or both—is just as important. Find your peer network pillars and lean into them. They will hold you up during the storm. ■

Katharina Maisel is an assistant professor at the University of Maryland, College Park. Send your career story to SciCareerEditor@aaas.org.

Your peers are your pillars

Katharina Maisel

Science, 374 (6567), • DOI: 10.1126/science.acx9414

View the article online

<https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.acx9414>

Permissions

<https://www.science.org/help/reprints-and-permissions>

Use of think article is subject to the [Terms of service](#)