

practice methods, including a reliance on long hours of rote learning. Instead, her understanding of memory in the brain suggested that shorter but more varied sessions would challenge the brain to learn faster. The realization opened up a new career path, combining science with music. “All of a sudden, I saw a way in which my neuroscience training could benefit musicians and still be interesting to me,” she says, adding that she now accomplishes in a 30-minute practice session what used to require 4–8 hours of work. “I could hack my practice time with neuroscience.”

Turning a scientific lens onto outside interests sometimes helps to create new fields of science. Emma Redding began her career as a contemporary dancer and later started teaching, which led to an interest in how training methods could help dancers to meet the high physical demands of dancing. But when she did a master’s in sports science, she had to learn about the biomechanics and physiology of sports such as rugby and football. There was no one to teach her about dance. In 2000, she wrote the first master’s degree on dance science.

Now head of dance science at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance in London, where 25 graduate students enrol each year, Redding has watched the field grow to include as many as 10 undergraduate and graduate dance-science programmes around the United States and Europe. But her choice to merge science and dance required a leap of faith, and she still faces scepticism from people who think that dance is an art form that doesn’t belong in the realm of science. “I suppose I was attempting to study something that didn’t exist,” she says. “That’s why I had to start with it as an interest or hobby. Then when I got qualifications in science, I was able to start trying to develop the field.”

Studying one’s passion can lead to new opportunities, Viskontas adds. She has been using her performance skills to communicate science through online lectures and as host of two podcasts and a television series. In addition to neuroscience research, she works on a couple of musical projects a year, including an upcoming performance of a psychological thriller with a feminist twist that is being written for her voice. This year, she directed a version of an opera called *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*, based on an essay by the late neurologist Oliver Sacks, who was once her mentor.

Researching any type of science requires intense dedication and energy, Vuust says, adding that the best scientists are those who study what they love. “In order to be a really good researcher, it has to be a passion,” he says. “What you do has to be fun.” ■

**Emily Sohn** is a freelance journalist in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

## COLUMN

# Lab listener

**James Turner** extols the value of mental-health first aid.

**T**he Francis Crick Institute in London now has around 40 accredited mental-health first aiders. The two-day training course is run by our occupational-health nurse, covering conditions such as anxiety, depression, eating disorders and psychosis.

I volunteered because there weren’t yet any scientific group leaders among the first aiders. We should have them at all levels of the organization, and managers should be exemplars. Like anyone else, we experience mental-health problems. I had them in the past, and my experience taught me that things can deteriorate quickly — and that early intervention is key.

I studied psychiatry during my medical degree. We focused on diagnosis and therapy, but there was less emphasis on listening skills.

### COURSE BASICS

The Crick’s training course teaches you to listen in a non-judgemental way, to pay attention to negative signs and not be afraid of asking difficult questions, such as, “How are you? I’ve noticed you’re not quite yourself.” One point made during the training that isn’t always captured in textbooks is that two people can experience the same mental illness very differently. Another is that recovery is possible, but you have to give it time.

There’s also a strong emphasis on using the right terminology and avoiding inappropriate language. The phrase “committing suicide”, for example, implies that someone has performed a crime. “Completing suicide” or “taking one’s own life” are more appropriate.

The Crick’s mental-health first-aid network started in 2016 when the institute opened. At first, most volunteers were women. It took a while to get men on board, but now the network has equal numbers. Diverse representation is important because some mental-health conditions affect men and women differently. For example, in the United Kingdom, three-quarters of people that complete suicide are men, according to the Samaritans’ 2018 Suicide Statistics Report (see [go.nature.com/2rpp8du](http://go.nature.com/2rpp8du)). I work on sex differences as part of my research, and so find that statistic interesting. I hope that by making more men aware of and engaged in these initiatives, we might understand why they’re less likely than women to self-report mental-health issues.

My advice to someone with a mental-health problem is to remember that you are one of many going through this. The World Health Organization notes that one in four people



globally will be affected at some point in their lives. But don’t accept it as the norm.

The help we offer is confidential. Our contact details are available on our intranet and on notice boards throughout the building. We are ‘signposters’, there to listen, not to judge, and to refer people to an appropriate service. This could be their own general practitioner, or Health Assured — the Crick’s external-assistance-programme provider. External charity organizations, such as Samaritans, Mind and SANE, offer more sources of support.

The first aiders use a WhatsApp group to communicate and support each other. There is also a group debriefing session every eight weeks, and the Crick offers half-day courses to help individual employees look after their own mental health and to manage stress more effectively.

### WORKPLACE CULTURE

Academic science is a fantastic but challenging career choice. Competition for jobs is huge, expectations from scientific journals are high and a scientist’s role is ever-changing. Alongside research, we teach, raise funds and engage with the public and the media. Juggling these responsibilities can be tough.

Some scientists say that stress is part of the job, and wear it like a badge of honour. I want to debunk that myth. Mentoring schemes and health-awareness events, which we have at the Crick can provide scientists with day-to-day support. We senior scientists should also coach trainees on how to cope with the pressures of a research environment. I strongly believe that with great mental health comes great science. We should all get on board with this message. ■

**James Turner** is a senior group leader at the Francis Crick Institute in London, where he runs the Sex Chromosome Biology Lab.