

# Project Hx

*2020: Relationships*





## Sophie Levis, MD/PhD student

### *How did your family dynamics change during medical school?*

I moved to Irvine from Colorado with my husband and kids. First year was pretty hard - not only were we transitioning to living in a new place, but I was also transitioning to being a student again. We were pretty naive about how medical school would change our family dynamics - we assumed that everything would be how it was before, just in a different state. My husband and I hadn't talked about what our expectations were for each other during medical school. Before, we had a very normal routine - I was working eight to five as a clinical trial manager, and he was working from home as a software engineer. It was a very predictable lifestyle - we would just get up, take the kids to school, come home, and have dinner together as a family. Then, first year of medical school happened, and I was gone all the time, and we had not talked about childcare - so all of a sudden, my husband was working from home, didn't know anyone, and was both the full-time parent and sole breadwinner. So obviously, that wouldn't work because it was so one-sided. Because we hadn't had those conversations beforehand, I had all

these expectations for him that he was not meeting - that he wasn't even aware that I had - and he had expectations of me and my time that obviously I couldn't meet either. So we made time to figure out why this was so hard, what the challenges were, and how we were going to move forward and support both our careers and also be there for each other as a family.

It's still a struggle to manage your priorities, and I think that's probably true for anyone in medical school or graduate school, because you're doing this thing that is so intense, and trying to do both demands 200% of your time. Having my family there as my support system is really important to me, but I also have to actively remind myself not to compare my performance against students who don't have the kinds of responsibilities to my family like I do, who are young or single and can choose to work those extra hours in lab or go to the anatomy lab after hours.

### *What are some strategies that helped you find that work-life balance?*

Because much of the first two years of medical school were podcasted online, I really took advantage of that and stayed home as much as possible. I tried my best, but I didn't try to honor anything, I didn't participate in the extra tutorials. That way, I could build my own schedule around my kids' school days and make sure that when we were all together at home, I didn't have any work hanging over me and I could focus on that. That worked well for the first two years of medical school, but now that I'm in the graduate phase of the MD/PhD program, I'm still trying to figure out a good balance.

Usually, I have a good idea of how long an experiment is going to take, and I try my best to plan my day around it, but sometimes it just doesn't happen. So I'd probably say my productivity is a little bit slower than I'd like, because I can't afford to stay those extra hours in lab because of my time constraints. I'm trying to learn how to be more efficient with my time, and I have pretty good time management skills, but there's still certain experiments where I can't anticipate how long things are going to take. I'm trying to be good about being efficient in lab, so that when I come home I can focus on my family. But oftentimes what ends up happening is that I won't get everything done in lab, so I'll take my work home with me. I tell myself that I'll just work on data at home, and that way I'm there and available. But really, I'm not - I'm totally disconnected. I've gotten to the point where I can acknowledge that, so I try not to do it very often, but that's another struggle - navigating how much time you spend on your family versus how much time you spend on your work.

### *How has your husband adjusted to the whole situation?*

He has to be fine with me being gone a lot, and that wasn't how it was when we first got married, or when we met. And when I am around, we're both focused on the kids, until they're in bed. It's something that he's been very gracious about. He's also really good about reminding me that - hey, you need a day off because we need to spend some time together, I care about you and want to spend time together. So he's very good at keeping me grounded and reminding me to join the real world again.

*Have you had conversations about the eventual timeline of the program?*

Yes, one of the things that we've talked about in the context of the future is where I'll apply to residency. My step-son will be halfway through high school at that point, so I want to prioritize staying in Southern California. My family already moved to a new state once for me, and I don't want to make them do that again. So that's a pretty limiting factor - it means that I won't be applying to very many residency programs, and that adds an interesting element to the whole training process. I don't dwell on it too much because it's so far in the future that it's difficult to plan for it. But it goes back to this whole idea of reciprocity, you know? My family made a huge sacrifice to move here for me to be able to pursue my dream career, and now that I'm in pursuit of that, I can figure out how to make sure I'm acknowledging and valuing their goals and lives, too, and not making these decisions for them.

*Have you tried to involve your kids into this discussion?*

Not really - they're a little too young right now to understand all the nuances. Right now, the most important thing for me is that they know we're there for them no matter what, even if I'm busy with school or if his dad is busy with work. Making sure that they know we love them and will support them, and won't just up and leave to pursue our careers. So I'm sort of building a foundation for them, so that if something happens where I do have to move away for residency, he'll be old enough to understand why I'm doing it, and not think that it is his fault or anything. But it's really a non-ideal situation.

*Do you have any words of advice?*

I was having lunch with a visiting speaker last year, and someone asked them - how do you balance everything? Because he was a program director but also a practicing clinician, and had young kids. And he said something that really struck me, which was that - your life is never really going to be in balance. And that's okay. When things are out of balance, the important thing is to make sure your priorities are in the right place. So sometimes that means going to your kid's sporting event instead of working on a grant application due soon, and knowing that your balance of productivity and family time is going to be off. But that you can make up for the time elsewhere, or delegate a task to someone else, or put something on the back burner, etc. I really appreciated that sort of advice. I think I often have a tendency to guilt trip myself when things are off-balance - like I feel that I should be home more often, or I should be doing more work - whatever it is that I'm doing, I feel guilty for not doing the other thing. And so hearing from someone else that it's a normal way to feel, and that it's fine to decide that your family is going to be your priority right now and not your work, or vice versa - it's reassuring.

Ultimately, medical school provides a unique challenge in navigating relationships. You can feel so isolated during medical school, so in that sense, it's really nice to have these external relationships with people outside of school, but on the other hand, balancing those relationships with school can create its own complications. I had this feeling a lot my first year, where you make these sacrifices in the time you can spend with your family, because at the end of the day, you both share this value where you're doing something for a greater purpose - something



that's really meaningful and impactful. I've been in relationships with men where they didn't like my ambition - they would ask me why I wasn't content with just having kids and being a wife. So it's nice to have someone that is supportive of your career and is willing to make sacrifices together with you. I think, at the end of the day, that makes your relationship so much stronger. I've heard of so many stories where people's relationships aren't able to withstand that sort of pressure - and that's completely understandable. I don't fault anyone for not wanting to be in a relationship with a medical or graduate student. So I'm really grateful and I think it's really special to have someone in my life whose goals and values align with mine.



## Anonymous

*Do you have any insights on how your relationships have looked like in medical school - if they've changed as the years have progressed?*

I lived with my parents all four years of undergrad. I took one year off where I lived on campus, but this year I moved back in with my parents. Compared to undergrad, I have a lot less time to spend with them, and they do a lot more for me now - they cook more for me and help me out with laundry. I really appreciate it, but at the same time, I think my freedom is more limited. I know my brother wishes I could spend more time with him. I normally use the weekends to catch up on material, but he comes up on the weekends to visit from San Diego.

*How has your approach to dating changed?*

Dating wasn't a priority for me in college. I was also more religious at the time, and I really was focused on getting into medical school - I put all my eggs in that basket, you know what I mean? But something really clicked halfway through 2019 where I found myself thinking - I really want to see what's out there. I did approach somebody that I knew in real life first - somebody I worked with over the summer. That didn't work out for various reasons - not necessarily related to my med school schedule or anything, so I decided to download some dating apps. The apps are really exciting, actually, because you get to meet people that you would never meet otherwise. I knew that it would be a challenge to make time for dating, but I would really try to finish my work early so I could go out on a date.

I met some really different, really interesting people. I think the longest time I've spent with someone was about a month - we went on maybe five dates. But he wanted someone who had time to go out with him - he was really into music festivals and he would always ask me to go with him to these events. This was pretty recent, actually, as I was looking at our third-year tracks, and I knew right away that, yeah, it's not gonna happen. We're working 60 hour weeks some months, you know? So we decided to keep things casual, but I haven't actually contacted him since because I've been so busy. That's a recurring pattern - where I just can't give these guys the time to build a relationship with them, so I have a lot of very short-term getting to know each other periods before I have to throw the towel in again.

*Has that been hard for you? Are you interested in more long-term relationships?*

Definitely. If I meet the right person, I definitely want something long-term. But at the same time, school is my priority. I know other people are very good at multitasking, but for me, if my focus shifts even a little bit away from school, there's an effect on my academic performance.

One on hand, I don't want to wait because I'm 25, but I might have to just because I don't want to jeopardize my career. I still do like meeting people, but I don't want to get my own hopes up, or get his hopes up.

*Has your family pressured you to be in a relationship?*

My parents would like me to get an arranged marriage - they've actually sent me pictures and stuff like that. Once I was studying for an exam over the weekend and they mentioned oh this guy's parents are in town and want to come right now to meet you. And like - I was not in any position to meet potential in-laws. I'm not even ready to get married. It was a lot. And so that's the kind of idea they have in mind for me you know, a very conservative traditional route, like arranged marriage. They know that I don't have a boyfriend right now, but I don't think they would have a different approach even if I did. But they also know that it was a struggle for me to find someone, so I think they're trying to do this to be helpful, not out of disapproval of me dating.

But I also wouldn't tell them that I'm actively dating - I did share with my mom that I got out on a date with someone - but I went on so many more that they don't know about. They know that I'm looking but they also aren't okay with me getting physical with guys before marriage, and they just have a very different point of view. I can't be open and honest with them about my experiences dating, unfortunately.

*How do you judge if someone you are dating is worth getting to know better?*

Yeah, that's a good question. I do have an internal checklist of what I want in a long-term partner, but it also comes down to a feeling - how does this person make me feel at the moment? If I meet someone who makes me feel really happy when I'm around them, then I think it's worth that time investment. Sure, it takes a chunk out of your studying time, but if something makes you happy, then I think you're also able to study a little more effectively, more efficiently. That's what I'm trying to do, at least. But I haven't really found anyone that was really worth spending the time on you know, just because school is so important to me. Which is unfortunate but it is what it is.

Ideally, I'd like to date someone from my own ethno-religious background, but those guys aren't easy to find. I did meet someone I really liked - he was a plastic surgery resident - but he wanted something casual, and I didn't agree, because with him, I'd want something more long-term.

*Has your view of relationships impacted how you view your future? Especially which specialty you'd like to pursue?*

I think anybody you talk to has to have given it thought, especially the women in our class. Personally, when I was entering medical school I thought that I wanted to get married within five years. Based on that, my top choices for specialties were psychiatry and pediatrics, because



they didn't seem as competitive to get into, and I felt there was more of a possibility for a work-life balance, and spending time with my family would be very important to me. But as I've started dating, I've realized that it's going to take a lot longer than five years to find someone for the rest of your life, and so I've come to feel that I should probably just go for a specialty that I really want to do - even if that means I'll be busier in the future. Especially since I don't have a partner right now, I think it's kind of silly of me to make that decision about my career based on a hypothetical family I might have in the future. So right now I'm considering something more along the lines of surgery.

*How else has your opinion of relationships changed since you've entered medical school?*

Before, I was actually seriously considering an arranged marriage, even getting married during medical school. But once I started dating, I actually really liked it - that sense of control and agency in choosing a partner - so I think I'll continue going along that route. Even though that means I don't have things planned out as well as I had before, I think it'll be worth it. I can't really explain or understand why, but I think my personality has changed quite a bit since getting into medical school. I think a large part has to do with the fact that I'm much less religious now. But I also think we have so little free time now that it really makes you value your time more. And I realize now that I'd rather invest that time into finding someone that makes life a little more palatable.



Ruby Yoakim, MS2

*What's your current relationship status?*

I've been in a relationship for the past year and eight months. We met on Tinder, and just met up for coffee one day and started studying together. We started off as friends first and then moved forward into a relationship.

*How has going into med school changed the relationship?*

Well, we got into a relationship when I was already in school, so that helped in terms of understanding commitment. Once I started med school, it started getting a little more difficult because the amount of time I needed to put towards studying was just way more. I guess you go through that period where you're like, I don't know, when can I take a break? And you're like never, you can never take it. And then you're just like, well, I have to or else I'm gonna die.

I think that is where it's been difficult - in terms of maintaining that sort of relationship that we would want, you know? But we're very open and communicate. It didn't just happen like that - we had to fight for that. You know, trying to get each other to communicate about what we're going through and seeing it in a way that's not hurtful to the other person. Being sure to communicate efficiently and effectively. Yeah, that was the difficulty.

*Did knowing you were entering medical school change how you felt about starting a relationship?*

Maybe, in the back of my mind. But it's been helpful that he also wants to go into medicine so he is really very understanding of my schedule, which kind of took me by surprise. I'm always afraid to tell him these kinds of things, but he's always been really understanding. So even



though I still feel stressed sometimes, his understanding really helps me and gives me confidence that this is a good relationship.

*How has it been in a long-distance relationship?*

Right now, he's doing a post-bacc program at UC Davis. We used to be closer - he was in Long Beach, which was only a 30 minute drive away, so we would see each other fairly often. Now we see each other maybe monthly, or longer. It still works - I went and saw him this past weekend and the weekend before that, which was nice. But it's definitely changed things. I think it has helped make our communication even stronger.

*Do you think about the possibility of him staying in NorCal for longer?*

Yeah, I've thought about it a lot. Just about when the long-distance will end. We haven't formally discussed an end date, just because there's so much uncertainty in terms of applications and residency and timing of things. He's applying next cycle to medical schools, so he'd be a first year while I'm going into my Master's year. And I'm not even sure where I would go for my masters year - I'd really love to go to New York. But that means it'd be even longer-distance.

*What are the barriers unique to being in healthcare that you have faced in terms of entering or maintaining this relationship?*

The uncertainty, definitely, is the biggest challenge, I think for all of us. We don't know where we're going in the next five years, and we're not even sure which specialty we're going to pursue. You can't force a certain timeline on someone else, and you don't want to change their career path just for your relationship. It's best to be supportive versus pseudo-manipulative, like guilt-tripping. As much as I would love to have him come back down here or come to UCI...if it happens, it happens, but I'm not going to make him feel bad for his decision. Ultimately, I want him to succeed in his dream.

*What have been the benefits to being in a relationship during medical school?*

The major benefit is having that kind of support. We all have our classmates that can be really great friends and fun to hang out with, but there comes a point in time where you can't really talk to friends. That's something that's really comforting about being in a relationship. It's like having an extra layer of support and you know, having someone to lean on. And I mean that's definitely the biggest important thing.

*Are there any memorable moments or lessons you've learned from this relationship?*

I think communication is like the big one. I know it's cliché, but it's one of those things that you never really get down perfectly. You always have to work on it. It always changes, like what you need to communicate and how you need to communicate it. For me, I've learned to be very open and honest. If I'm not communicating the things I'm going through, it's unfair to him. I've learned to be vulnerable with him, which can be hard sometimes!

*How has this relationship been different from your previous ones?*

This is my first same-sex relationship. And so there's a lot of differences, in terms of dynamics, especially being out in public. How comfortable do each of us feel about PDA? Is PDA holding hands or just touching at all? How comfortable are we both with that in public settings? That was a pretty big challenge. Personally, I would tend to be more okay with PDA, whereas he tends to be a little more reserved. At first I thought I was understanding, but then I realized I had all these unreasonable demands. So I had to take a step back and realize that what I was asking for was too much, especially if it makes my partner uncomfortable.

*Is there anything you would have done differently regarding this relationship?*

Other than very specific things regarding how I handled certain situations, not really. But even that, if we had gotten into an argument or a disagreement and I didn't respond correctly or in a good way, I don't know if I would do things differently. It would've made things easier, sure, but I don't think I would have learned as much in terms of how to deal with conflict you know? So yeah, I think that conflict was like hard to go through, but sort of necessary for us to grow together and learn from each other.

*Do you have any advice for current medical students regarding relationships?*

Being yourself is very important. Don't try and hold yourself back for someone else. If someone's going to love you or appreciate you, it needs to be for all of you or at least... no just all you. If you compromise yourself, that's never going to go away. It's going to be bottled up. And it's gonna explode later on, and no one's going to like that at all. You want to put your best foot forward. And if someone's not going to appreciate you for all of you, then they're not worth your time. That's where the communication comes in.



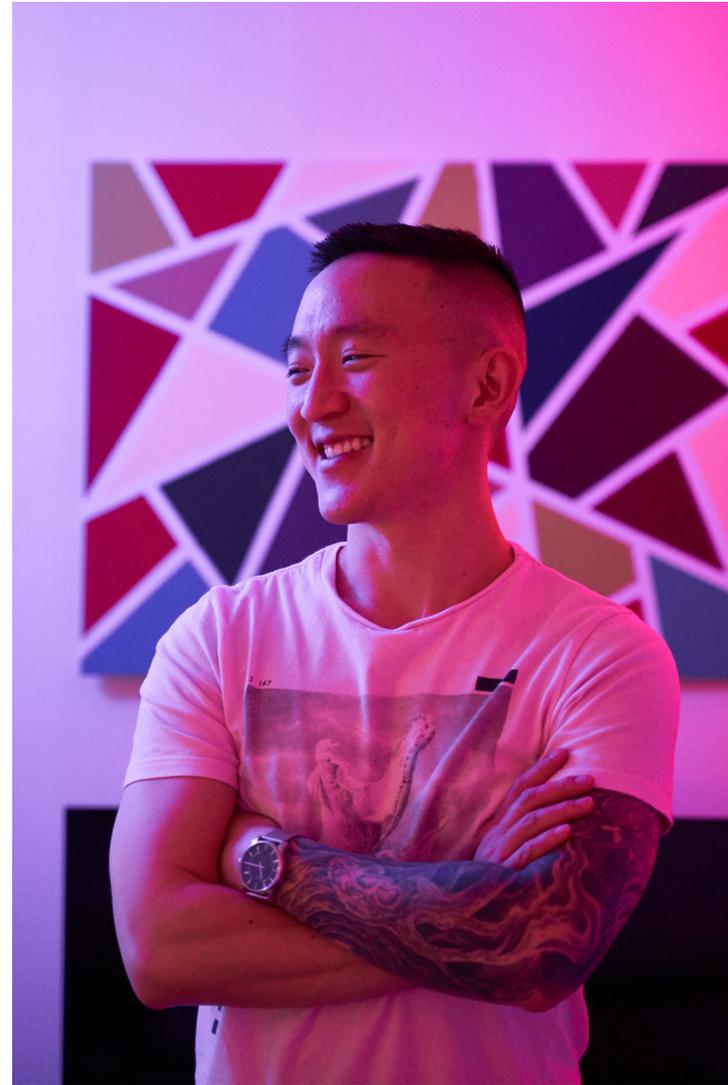


## Joohan Kim, MS2

*How have your relationships been in medical school?*

Medical school is a hard time for relationships - whether that was with my partner, my friends, or even myself. There's definitely been times where I've felt spread thin. In those times, I've been open about it with my partner and support systems, and I've gotten a lot of reassurance that I was being a good partner/friend. However, I don't think I ever fully believed them and I sort of carried this negative perception of myself. That definitely put strain on the relationship. Don't get me wrong - I had wonderful friends/classmates and it was so nice to have someone who loves you at home. It's weird though, because even though it was a source of love, it was also a source of stress at times.

It was difficult to navigate that. What I really appreciated about my partner was that he made a concerted effort to integrate himself in my social group at school - I never had to choose between hanging out with my friends or my classmates. But ultimately, I never felt fully present in any part of my life in med school - whether it was with my partner or school. It definitely started to wear on me as the year went on. It came to a point at the end of the year where things just didn't work out. It ended up being good for the both of us - he deserved someone who could give him the attention he - anyone, really - deserved. We're still really good friends, and he's a part of my support system, but now I don't feel so stretched thin or guilty anymore.



What was good about our relationship is that we were always open and communicative about how we felt.

*Are you worried about dating in the future?*

Well now, coronavirus definitely makes dating difficult, but I'm pretty busy with my clinical rotations. I'm not particularly worried, because I'm starting to understand that there's never a good time to meet someone, so when an opportunity presents itself, I think you should grab it. I think that, if I were to use being busy as an excuse, then there's probably some other underlying reason, and I'm just using "being busy" to hide that. Also, if I were to enter a new relationship, I don't think I'd put as much pressure on myself and be a little more forgiving. I'm only human, after all.

*How do you decide what relationship is worth pursuing?*

The important thing is to be real with yourself. Is this relationship giving you joy? Is it worth your time and attention? Being with someone for a long time is never a good reason for continuing the relationship. You need to check in with yourself to see if the relationship is really making you happy - and everyone needs to decide what that means for themselves. There's no standard definition - some people really value loyalty, or consistency, or comfort. There's also no prescribed timeline. It's a personal decision. So check in with yourself - but make sure that the criteria that you're setting for your relationship isn't being based on social expectations, but ones you set for yourself.



## Anonymous

### *What are some of the difficulties in dating?*

When you have limited time, at least for me, you know - you want to spend it with people that you already know you enjoy being around. When you're dating, you spend a lot of time doing things that might not necessarily be that enjoyable - going on a random date with a stranger isn't exactly at the top of my list of things to do. Sometimes, it's hard to find someone who you'd get along with, who you'd be interested in - because our interests during medical school become so niche. We basically go to school, study medicine, and sleep. Sometimes I forget I'm a normal person, especially when people ask me what my hobbies are... Maintaining a balance is hard.

It's difficult to feel connected to people when you only talk to them through apps for the most part. Texting has never really been a great way of communication for me, but that's the norm these days.

### *What motivates you to keep dating?*

Societal expectations. Partially kidding! I know love is something that is important, and hypo-

thetically speaking it'd be nice to have someone to come home to, especially now, when everyone is physically distancing. But that's not enough of an incentive to overpower my distaste for dating. It'd be easier if we could date not just virtually, like those in-person speed dating rounds. At least, you could get to know someone for five minutes and not have to worry about what you're going to text them. But even those are pretty surface-level conversations.

### *How are you balancing dating now?*

I play it by ear. I'm open to more dates, but it's hard to work them into my schedule. We have these four-week rotations, and I'm screwed because I feel like I haven't done any work but I'm already preparing to take my shelf exam next week. You never know when you're going to get out each day, so what can I say - I'll meet you for dinner at nine? I'm on weekend calls, too, so that's hard. But that's the life we choose, I guess.

It's hard to spring this kind of information on someone you're just starting to date, too - because some people just want to have a normal life, with regular nine-to-five hours. It's a little different when people are dating going into medical school, because you've already gotten a chance to know each other a little bit and now they're stuck with you. I guess the benefit of starting to date now is that your partner knows what you're getting into - the expectations are set from the beginning.

But overall, I think I'm pretty happy - there are some people who need to be in a relationship, but I'm pretty happy being independent. I have good people in my life, and I'm capable of doing a lot of things that I want to do. So if it happened - a relationship, I mean - I wouldn't be unhappy about it. But I'm not sad either.

This year's Project Hx features stories surrounding relationships - how relationships with our families and loved ones have helped us through medicine, and the trials of those who find entering new relationships difficult given the constraints of medical school. We hope that, by highlighting these stories, readers will appreciate that medicine truly requires a community. As always, we are grateful for those who form our support system - we could not have done this without you. A special thank you to our faculty advisors Dr. Johanna Shapiro and Dr. Tan Nguyen - this journal would not have been possible without their continuous support and guidance. We hope you enjoy this year's copy of Project Hx: Relationships.

2020 Editors in chief: May Hui (MD/PhD student) and Janani Prasad (MS2)

 Project Hx