

Psychedelics

OPEN

INNOVATORS & IDEAS: RISING STAR

Stephanie Knatz Peck: Novel and innovative treatment for eating disorders

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Dr. Stephanie Knatz Peck, Ph.D., is a practicing clinical psychologist and Associate Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD). Her career uniquely bridges clinical practice with innovative research, focusing on developing and evaluating novel psychiatric interventions, particularly for eating disorders. Dr. Knatz Peck's research journey began at the UCSD Eating Disorder Treatment and Research Center, where she skillfully translated complex neuroimaging and genetic findings into practical, innovative treatment approaches for anorexia nervosa (AN). This work culminated in the development and manualization of Temperament-Based Treatment with Supports (TBT-S), a groundbreaking behavioral intervention for AN. In recent years, Dr. Knatz Peck has expanded her research into the promising field of psychedelic-assisted therapies. She served as co-investigator on the first clinical trial evaluating psilocybin treatment for AN, marking a significant milestone in eating disorder research. Additionally, she contributes her expertise as a senior clinical consultant for Compass Pathways, where she leads training initiatives and plays a crucial role in developing psychological support models for psilocybin therapy across various psychiatric conditions. Beyond her academic pursuits, Dr. Knatz Peck founded and directs BrightMind Therapy, an outpatient practice providing evidence-based therapy for children and adolescents. Her comprehensive approach seamlessly integrates clinical practice with rigorous research, utilizing neuroimaging data, genetic findings, and hands-on clinical observations to develop targeted interventions for treatment-resistant psychiatric conditions. We are privileged to have Dr. Knatz Peck share her invaluable insights and experiences with our readers in this Genomic Press Interview.

Part 1: Stephanie Knatz Peck – Life and Career

Could you give us a glimpse into your personal history, emphasizing the pivotal moments that first kindled your passion for science?

I have always been fascinated by humans. In any setting I ever found myself in, I was always more interested in the people around me and their reactions than in the actual activity. This makes psychology a natural fit for me, albeit it took some time for me to understand that I could turn this curiosity for humans into a career involving clinical human subjects research. It was not until I had a personal mental health experience that I was able to turn this into a pursuit driven initially by personal passion. I, like many others who have devoted their careers to eating disorder treatment, recovered from a very severe eating disorder. I consider myself incredibly lucky, and, as a point of self-study, I often reflect on personal, social, and other factors that allowed me to be one of the lucky ones to achieve a full recovery from an illness that is often chronic and deadly. When I was initially treated, my parents voraciously consumed every book out there to understand more about eating disorders and were stunned to discover how well I matched up with the classic profile of those who



Figure 1. Stephanie Knatz Peck, PhD, University of California, San Diego, USA.

tend to develop an eating disorder. This gives me a good chuckle since much of my career to this point has focused on developing temperament-congruent treatments for those in recovery.

Because of this, I began graduate school with the aim of being a practicing clinical psychologist. My early training experiences working in clinical treatment research labs helped me discover an interest in clinical research, specifically treatment development. The scientific process was a natural fit for me, and I understand this to be due in some part to some of my early childhood experiences of being born and raised as a third-culture kid. I was born and raised overseas and lived in five different countries by the time I was nine years old. I like to believe (though we can never know) that these early experiences have afforded me a natural cognitive flexibility. As a third culture kid, I was not firmly embedded in cultural identity in ways that, for others, are implicit and unconscious. I was always aware of being different simply by virtue of being raised in cultures different from my own. Being extracted from this cultural framework allowed me to be consistently aware of how people and perspectives can differ throughout my life. Moving between more than one culture also allowed me to engage in frameshifts fluidly and inhabit different perspectives as I had to adapt to different groups of people. I am so grateful for these experiences, which allowed me to understand that I wear a lens through which I see things and to not take any of my perspectives as absolute





truth- an early form of personal scientific pluralism! I also came to understand through these experiences that our lens gave important structure to make sense of the world but was also limiting our ability to see the whole truth. From here came my fascination with accessing ways to “undo” or “remove” that lens, which led to an ongoing fascination with altered states of consciousness.

We would like to know more about your career trajectory leading up to your current role. What defining moments channeled you toward this opportunity?

Because of my personal experience with recovering from a severe eating disorder as a transition-aged youth, becoming involved in this subfield was a focal point of mine throughout my training. I was lucky enough to have a worldclass eating disorder center in my backyard at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) Eating Disorder Treatment and Research Center, which is now one of the largest academic treatment centers in the US and a prolific neuroimaging laboratory responsible for many of the major contributions elucidating the biological basis of eating disorders.

My first research experience was working in another UCSD lab that developed and tested novel treatments for pediatric obesity and disinhibited eating with a mentor who was truly exceptional in her creativity. This inspired me because it allowed me to discover the creative elements of clinical treatment research, which makes me tick. In my predoctoral internship and postdoctoral fellowship, I was exposed to clinical treatment research and worked on developing, manualizing, and delivering novel treatment approaches. I really enjoyed the creativity associated with translating new research findings into clinical models of care. This research niche suited me best, in addition to working directly with participants to see how these treatments came alive and to collaborate with these experts through lived experience to refine and develop something truly new and valuable.

I continued pursuing this niche as I progressed through my training at the UCSD Eating Disorder Center. Luckily, my fantastic mentor, Walter Kaye, recognized my desire and abilities for this type of work and carved out a unique pathway for this to be my focus. I received some private grant funding from the Global Foundation for Eating Disorders to translate neuroimaging findings into treatment approaches for EDs. This spurred a pathway for me to work on developing and testing novel interventions in the clinical program that I directed. The culmination of this work is Temperament-Based Treatment with Supports (TBT-S), which is a novel behavioral treatment approach for anorexia nervosa. My co-developers and I published a treatment manual in 2022 and continue to train people worldwide. More broadly, my interest has always been to find and develop new and better ways to treat chronic eating disorders. The next step towards this was the opportunity to get involved with psychedelics, which was a lifelong personal interest of mine and a dream come true for someone who was always fascinated with the subconscious.

Please share with us what initially piqued your interest in your favorite research or professional focus area.

My current favorite research topic is psychedelic treatments for mental health conditions. I have always had a fascination with mind states and consciousness. Before any formal study of this, I was unwittingly engaging in self-study and exploration by finding subtle ways to manipulate my consciousness. As a young child, I loved playing with the occult, and by high school, I was practicing breath-holding/restriction techniques, taking cold showers, and monitoring and recording dreams. In retrospect, it is clear that I was interested in finding access to alternative mindstates, and this was my way of experimenting with that. Throughout college and my early young adulthood, I found this through dance as another way to kick out of our typical ways of operating. In their origin, dance music and dance spaces were safe havens for people to express themselves freely. Tools that may bring out this ability, like psychedelics, are often used. This was my first introduction to psychedelics if I am being radically genuine, and what propelled me to grab at the opportunities that came before me as the resurgence of psychedelic treatment began. When I discovered that

psilocybin treatment research was occurring at UCSD, I was determined to get involved and did so quickly.

On a professional note, I had spent years working in clinical settings delivering “evidence-based treatments” to those with eating disorders, amongst other mental illnesses, and often to those who were highly “treatment-resistant.” It was clear that what I was delivering simply was not good enough. I was also struck by the secondary effects of treatment nonresponsiveness, which felt so deleterious. When people try their best to engage in available options to no avail, ironically, this can often enhance feelings of intense hopelessness, may result in negative therapeutic experiences, and can leave an internalized sense of failure. That felt unacceptable to me, and it made no sense to keep directing people to do the same things over and over, which is often the path people are directed to take in mental health. For me, the study of psychedelics represents a commitment to evaluating new models of care.

What impact do you hope to achieve in your field by focusing on specific research topics?

My hope is to support the cause to find better treatments for those suffering from treatment-resistant mental health conditions, especially eating disorders. I also hope to contribute to the development and implementation of high-quality standards for psychedelic psychotherapy and adjunctive psychological support. I deliver training and mentorship to clinical trial therapists related to drug-adjunctive therapeutic support. I have worked with Compass Pathways to develop and deliver psychological support models for psilocybin.

Please tell us more about your current scholarly focal points within your chosen field of science?

I was so pleased to have come into the opportunity to formally evaluate psilocybin treatment for anorexia nervosa after receiving funding from Compass Pathways. Our small phase 1 trial was the first ever published clinical trial evaluating a psychedelic drug for eating disorders. From here the hope is to continue to contribute to the study and evaluation of new forms of drug therapy and novel models of psychotherapy for eating disorders. I was involved in delivering care and adapting a treatment model for Compass’s Phase 2b trial for AN. I hope to continue that pathway to learn whether these treatments may make a marked difference in a subset of people in desperate need. In the meantime, I also continue to train and deliver Temperament-based Treatment with Supports (TBT-S), which is a behavioral treatment that I co-developed for those with AN. Its novel features include delivering a more intensive outpatient model of care (40 hours of treatment over five days versus standard weekly outpatient therapy), including support persons across the age spectrum, and working with the specific temperament profile of those with AN. I am proud to say that this treatment has been disseminated throughout many countries in the world and is being used in hospital and outpatient settings in various countries. My colleague and partner Kristin Stedal is currently engaged in a randomized controlled trial to evaluate TBT-S for adults with severe anorexia as a step-down from inpatient hospital settings.

What habits and values did you develop during your academic studies or subsequent postdoctoral experiences that you uphold within your research environment?

I am so lucky to have had exceptional mentorship in Walter Kaye. My mentor always said, “Perfection is the enemy of the good” and “It does not need to be perfect; it needs to be done.” My biggest productivity hack is letting go of perfectionism and engaging in non-evaluative flow. I do best at this very early in the morning before my day-to-day responsibilities compete for my attention.

I am fortunate that my mentor also lived by foundational principles of science. While learning more specific skills for science through experience, I also absorbed foundational principles of science modeled by my mentor, particularly *logos*. There was much un-boundaries open-mindedness to new ideas on display, along with a commitment to letting science determine your opinion, not vice versa.



At Genomic Press, we prioritize fostering research endeavors based solely on their inherent merit, uninfluenced by geography or the researchers' personal or demographic traits. Are there particular cultural facets within the scientific community that warrant transformative scrutiny, or is there a cause within science that deeply stirs your passions?

Per the above, in our current sociocultural context, there needs to be a greater emphasis on explicit teaching and mentorship on foundational principles of empiricism and science alongside the more specific and material experiences in scientific research that most get trained and learn through. Questions that feel current to me are: How do you recognize your own bias, which none of us are immune to? How can you engage in civil discourse and understand that scientific pluralism gets us closer to the truth? How do you engage in topics with logos versus ethos and ensure that interests don't convert to zealotry? Scientific thinking is a discipline that requires effort.

What do you most enjoy in your capacity as an academic or research rising star?

I really enjoy mentorship and leading by example. Again, because I was lucky to have excellent mentors, it feels essential for me to make a contribution by setting a good example and leading through the principles described above. I also enjoy having my expectations and beliefs consistently violated and being proved wrong because, for me, this is simply an indication that I am learning and growing.

Outside professional confines, how do you prefer to allocate your leisure moments, or conversely, in what manner would you envision spending these moments given a choice?

I continue to love dancing in the community, and I love being outside, especially at the beach surfing and swimming. I am lucky to have access to all of these things in San Diego. If I am not interacting with people, I am definitely listening to music alongside almost every other activity I am engaged with!

Part 2: Stephanie Knatz Peck – Selected questions from the Proust Questionnaire¹

What is your idea of perfect happiness?

Knowing and loving myself fully, and trusting others.

What is your greatest fear?

Death of my loved ones. I have never really lost anyone very close to me, and I have both fear and fascination about how I will experience that.

Which living person do you most admire?

My daughter is my greatest teacher (see Figure 2). Seeing the world through a child's eyes feels like another step closer to seeing the truth outside of our conditioning. That is my cliché answer. My other answer is certain current female musical artists—Chappell Roan and Queen Herby,

¹In the late nineteenth century, various questionnaires were a popular diversion designed to discover new things about old friends. What is now known as the 35-question Proust Questionnaire became famous after Marcel Proust's answers to these questions were found and published posthumously. Proust answered the questions twice, at ages 14 and 20. In 2003 Proust's handwritten answers were auctioned off for \$130,000. Multiple other historical and contemporary figures have answered the Proust Questionnaire, including among others Karl Marx, Oscar Wilde, Arthur Conan Doyle, Fernando Pessoa, Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Cézanne, Vladimir Nabokov, Kazuo Ishiguro, Catherine Deneuve, Sophia Loren, Gina Lollobrigida, Gloria Steinem, Pelé, Valentino, Yoko Ono, Elton John, Martin Scorsese, Pedro Almodóvar, Richard Branson, Jimmy Carter, David Chang, Spike Lee, Hugh Jackman, and Zendaya. The Proust Questionnaire is often used to interview celebrities: the idea is that by answering these questions, an individual will reveal his or her true nature. We have condensed the Proust Questionnaire by reducing the number of questions and slightly rewording some. These curated questions provide insights into the individual's inner world, ranging from notions of happiness and fear to aspirations and inspirations.



Figure 2. Stephanie Knatz Peck and her daughter looking for sea creatures at the tide pools near their home in southern California.

to name a few—who are so bold and unapologetic about their femininity, almost to the point of audacity. I really love to see a truly embodied female who isn't abiding by inhibition.

What is your greatest extravagance?

Clothing, costume, and fashion. Choosing clothing deliberately is also an expression of self-care and self-love. As a hobby, I subtly manipulate my identity through clothes, and I am always in touch with the sense of being in a daily costume. I also love any chance to design and wear a costume. Right now, I am working on three of them, one of which is highly conceptual and comes alongside a vision board and a written commentary because I am so nerdy! Last year for Halloween, I spent about 25 hours gluing thousands of dots in distinctive patterns on a piece of clothing so I could be the artist Yayoi Kusama because, in her words, "Dots are the way to infinity."

What are you most proud of?

I am proud that I maintain a fulfilling life with many other interests and activities outside of my professional identity.

What is your greatest regret?

I am highly agreeable by nature and like to go along with things. But I also recognize that I advocated for myself and went out of my way to get something in many of the pivotal moments. Sometimes, I wonder if there were missed opportunities for more of this since it is only sometimes in my nature to grab at things that do not come naturally, though I am deeply grateful for this ability. This tension is something I often think about.

What is the quality you most admire in people?

Currently, I am appreciating stoicism.



What is the trait you most dislike in people?
Loquaciousness.

What do you consider the most overrated virtue?
Modesty.

What is your favorite occupation (or activity)?
My friends know this about me, but my retirement plan is to waitress at a very high-end restaurant. Other careers that come to mind that I think I would have enjoyed and thrived in are journalism and public relations.

Where would you most like to live?
In San Diego, where I currently do! Based on my childhood, I have thought about this a lot as someone with an ingrained feeling of needing to move. I am really relishing feeling a cultural identity, being deeply embedded in the community, and marveling at my daughter growing up with these things that I did not!

What is your most treasured possession?
My passport.

When and where were you happiest? And why were so happy then?
I am now the happiest I have ever been. I hope this forward trajectory continues as I get older and wiser.

What is your current state of mind?
A touch of hypomania.

What is your most marked characteristic?
Flexibility: my greatest asset and greatest weakness.

Among your talents, which one(s) give(s) you a competitive edge?
Creativity.

What do you consider your greatest achievement?
Maintaining a full life and identity outside of my professional one while still being invested and successful in my career.

If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?
I would love to have greater sustained attention.

What do you most value in your friends?
Genuineness.

Who are your favorite writers?
Roald Dahl and George Saunders.

Who are your heroes of fiction?
Winnie the Pooh, though I most identify with Tigger.

Who are your heroes in real life?
All the intellectuals who are currently freely sharing diverse perspectives and opinions, with logos and respect, even when they are unpopular and against the current zeitgeist.

What aphorism or motto best encapsulates your life philosophy?
Do nothing, and all will be well. This goes back to my intuitive nature, which allows me to move through life with more flow than force.

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