

By Giovanni Camanni

From competition to collaboration

It was just like any other morning. I was at the bus stop, on my way to the lab where I was a postdoctoral fellow. But as I watched the people around me—headphones dangling from their ears, eyes cast down, unsmiling faces—something began to stir inside me. They looked unhappy. And, I realized, I was one of them. Suddenly, I could no longer continue with my work life. I turned around, went back to my flat, and booked a one-way ticket to fly home the next morning. I didn't know how long I would be away or what would come next. All I knew was that, even though I loved science and research, what I had been doing wasn't working.

Over the years, as I dealt with the pressures of finishing my Ph.D. and securing and starting my post-doc, I had grown more competitive. To prove that I was a valuable researcher, I pushed myself to be the first to generate sensational results and to publish in high-impact journals. Those who could have been collaborators became rivals I resented.

But the effect of this competitive streak was exactly the opposite of what I had hoped for. The pressure became overwhelming. When I encountered scientific problems, I thought I had to solve them myself instead of asking for help. I began to feel alone and lost. I became less and less productive. But the culture of academia—prizing competition and individual successes above all else—seemed to reinforce my approach. I was sure that this was not the right time to show any insecurities, so I persevered.

That day at the bus stop, I hit my breaking point. The race had to end.

I emailed my mentors, explaining that I had put myself second and the job first for too long. They came to meet with me that evening. They told me that I wasn't the first academic to feel that way, and that I wouldn't be the last. They agreed that I should take the time I needed to take care of myself. I had managed to put aside a small amount of savings, which could cover my expenses for a few months. So, with my mentors' support and an uncertain future, I left.

Back home, I spent time with family and friends and opened up about my struggles. At first, I was ashamed. But the more I talked about my demons, the more other people—including many friends who were early-career researchers—told me about their own. I also started to receive emails from my workmates. After a few lines asking how I was, many expressed worries about how they were managing the stress of



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competitiveness. I focused on maintaining my new perspective and being patient as I readjusted. With a bit of time, I understood that, although the place and position were the same, I had changed. I hadn't just accepted my vulnerability; I had embraced it and opened up about it to my colleagues.

As a result, collaboration has replaced competition. Working with others and seeking help doesn't diminish my value or contributions; it means we can all win. Now, when I encounter problems in my work, I frequently discuss them with colleagues, knowing that considering multiple points of view often leads to solutions. I have become more productive. Working relationships are now genuine human ones. I no longer feel like one of the lonely, unhappy people at the bus stop. ■

Giovanni Camanni recently completed a postdoctoral fellowship at University College Dublin and will be starting a new research position in Italy later this year. He thanks Joan Somers Donnelly.

academic life. Vulnerable researchers were poking their heads out of their shells. Our relationships deepened. I began to feel less alone. I had acknowledged that I was susceptible to the ups and downs of academic life—just like everyone else.

Three months after I left so suddenly, I was prepared to go back to work. I was excited to get back to the science that I loved, and I now had a foundation to be more open with my colleagues. I understood that we all struggle sometimes, and that vulnerability and collaboration can be more powerful than competition. It doesn't have to be a zero-sum game.

The first days were difficult. I had naively thought that, right away, everything would be different. But as soon as I was back in that workplace, I felt the stirrings of that old

Science

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Science **363** (6425), 422.

DOI: 10.1126/science.363.6425.422

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