



# EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOLOGIST MONTHLY MEMO

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## MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR (DR. NAOMI EKAS)

Welcome back to academic year 2025-2026. The spring and summer months were exceptionally busy and there are all kinds of changes in the department. Since the last time you heard from me, we have welcome 5 (!! ) new faculty to the department. Over the next several newsletters you will be introduced to each of them and if you see them around Winton Scott, be sure to welcome them to the TCU family!

I look forward to the new academic year, well....minus all of the parking woes! We have fun student-centered events being hosted by Psi Chi and the Psychology Club. The infamous Halloween Contest will be here before you know it! In the spring semester we have some new undergraduate courses being offered for the first time.

## INTRODUCING ASSISTANT PROFESSOR DR. MICHELLE CHEN

The Department of Psychology welcomes one of our new faculty members, Dr. Michelle Chen. Dr. Chen began at TCU in January and has been busy teaching graduate courses and setting up her research lab. Dr. Chen is a Texan (Houston) who completed her undergraduate and PhD degrees at Rice University and did postdoctoral training at Northwestern University. We caught up with Dr. Chen and asked her a few questions!



**What are your current research interests?** As a developmental psychologist, I am interested in understanding how stress and trauma in childhood can impact mental and physical health across the lifespan. For example, I look at biological mechanisms (e.g., inflammation) that may explain this relationship and psychosocial risk and resilience factors (e.g., self-regulation, social relationships) that can impact this relationship.

**Are you working on any exciting projects right now?** Some projects I'm excited about include a few papers looking at how neighborhood conditions can impact cardiovascular health. A few examples of these include research demonstrating links between exposure to neighborhood violent crime and cardiovascular-related health problems, including increased metabolic syndrome in adolescents and increased hypertension in adults.

**Why were you interested in joining the faculty here at TCU?** I was excited about the health-related research initiative, and I was also excited about how my work investigating the impact of childhood trauma overlapped with the work at KPICD. When I visited, I also really enjoyed meeting the faculty and students here and thought everyone was very kind of supportive. Finally, I was excited to come back to my home state and be closer to my family.

**What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?** I enjoy spending time with my family and finding fun activities to do with my 3.5 year old, going to concerts, and drinking boba/matcha/coffee ☺

## TCU FACULTY AWARDS AND HONORS

Dr. Cathy Cox's research team was selected to compete for research funds through the Duke Veteran Transitions Research funding competition. Renee Castillo will be traveling to Duke University in September to present a pitch for funding (e.g., panelists from Amazon, CVS, etc.). We wish your team the best of luck!

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## TCU PSYCHOLOGY IN THE NEWS

Dr. Qinxin Shi was invited to appear on the Association for Psychological Science's podcast, Under the Cortex. The episode was called [Heart Rates and Step Counts: A Novel Approach to Eating Disorders](#). In the episode, Dr. Shi delved into the transformative potential of everyday devices, like smartwatches, in the management and treatment of eating disorders. The collaborative work highlights how passive data signals can uncover new insights into complex behavioral patterns like binge-eating.

Tune in to the podcast to hear more about their findings and the implications for the future of Just-in-time Adaptive Interventions!

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## TCU PSYCHOLOGY PUBLICATIONS

Dr. Qinxin Shi and colleagues used the Recovery Record app on iPhones and Apple Watches to log the eating behaviors of over 1000 participants with binge-eating symptoms in real-time. Apple Watches simultaneously recorded heart rate and actigraphy. We used ideas from dynamical-system theory and modern health technology to see if patterns in heart rate and steps could signal when a binge-eating episode might happen. While average heart rate and steps didn't change much before a binge event compared to the control period, how movement patterns of heart rate and steps became less stable was a potential warning sign. [doi: 10.1177/21677026241280728](https://doi.org/10.1177/21677026241280728)

A collaboration between three labs led by Carmen Torres (U of Jaen, Spain), Marta Sabariego (Mount Holyoak College, MA), and Mauricio Papini (TCU) resulted in research demonstrating that a region of the mammalian brain known as the dorsal hippocampus is involved in reward downshift, but selectively in situations that require free choice. Hippocampal malfunction leaves behavior less flexible in the face of environmental changes. [doi: 10.1002/hipo.23642](https://doi.org/10.1002/hipo.23642)

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## UPCOMING EVENTS

Psi Chi will be hosting an event on September 23<sup>rd</sup> at 6 PM in Winton Scott that is focused on sharing information about all of the graduate school options available for psychology majors.

The Psychology Club is open to any student interested in the area of psychology. There is no membership fee; however, everyone should submit a membership request in TCU Engage.



## UNDERGRADUATE AND GRADUATE STUDENT NEWS

The TCU Psi Chi chapter was the recipient of two competitive awards earlier this year. First, they received an Activity Grant and were recently selected as a Model Chapter. Out of 1,150 chapters, only 40 were selected for this award!

Melissa Brillhart, a graduate student in Dr. Hill's lab won the Southwestern Psychological Association's Graduate Student Showcase Poster Award! Congratulations Melissa!!

The Department of Psychology recently awarded doctorates to Sara Bond (Mentor: Ken Leising), Kevin Diegel (Mentor: Tim Barth), Matthew Espinosa (Mentor: Cathy Cox), Sarah Madison (Mentor: Naomi Ekas), Raya Shelashka (Mentor: Danica Knight), John Solorzano-Restrepo (Mentor: Ken Leising), Stephanie Villaire (Mentor: Kevin Knight). Congratulations to each of them as earning a doctorate is