

Salma Omai on Meeting New Stroke Participants

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- SALMA OMAI: 00:07 Always looking forward to meeting new participants. They're actually the highlight of my work also.
- JOAN BANKS-SMITH: 00:19 Welcome to our podcast series, my life as a research assistant. This series is brought to you by Kessler Foundation, where we are changing the lives of people with disabilities. I'm your host, editor, and producer Joan Banks-Smith, creative producer for Kessler Foundation. Research assistants are on the frontlines of our research studies collecting data, conducting interviews, testing subjects, and are the face of Kessler Foundation to our research study participants. In 2020, Kessler Foundation was ranked among one of the Best Nonprofits to Work For and Best Places to Work in New Jersey. Throughout the series, we'll meet up with research assistants from our mobility, spinal cord injury, stroke, traumatic brain injury, and neuroscience and neuropsychology centers who have been with the foundation for over a year and some that are now senior research assistants, nurses, MD-MS candidates, postdocs, and those that have entered into many more professions. In this episode, I met up with Salma Omai, a former research assistant from our Center for Stroke Rehabilitation Research. In 2019, Salma received an MBA from Rutgers Business School and is now a marketing associate for Tefal Cookware. What brought you to Kessler Foundation?
- OMAI: 01:41 I was always very interested in research, in general, but most importantly, in clinical research and opportunities that allow me to directly communicate and work with participants, versus just being and doing regular research, like we did an undergraduate and just labs with tubes and all of that, or with animals because working with participants has this very interesting components where you get to communicate, get to see their behaviors as you're doing the assessments, and you also get to learn a lot with them.
- BANKS-SMITH: 02:17 Are there any particular studies that you can share with us that you're currently working on?
- OMAI: 02:22 I'm working on two projects. The main one right now is the special neglect study. That's an in-patient project. So basically, I screen and recruit patients who come into the Kessler Rehabilitation Institute, especially stroke participants, and see those who qualify for our study. We do paper-pencil assessments to screen if they have spatial neglect. And through that process, we also communicate with their therapist
- BANKS-SMITH: 02:53 Now, for our viewers who aren't familiar with spatial neglect, can you tell us what that is?
- OMAI: 02:57 Yeah. Definitely. So what spatial neglect is, most patients who have a stroke in the right brain and the right hemisphere, they have a tendency to have something which is called a spatial neglect. This what means just from the name itself, you hear spatial and neglect. So the patients who had a stroke in the right brain, they have the tendency to ignore stimuli or objects in their left side of space. And that is something

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that we usually detect using paper-pencil assessments, like a cancellation task or line bisection tasks, and those are simple assessments that we can do at bedside. And just, for example, put them in the center in front of the patient and ask them to locate objects on the piece of paper or cancel them. And then you can see if the patient is only paying attention to objects on the right side of the paper and ignoring the left side, or if they're not.

- BANKS-SMITH: 03:52 For those who are interested in learning more about spatial neglect and the work that we're doing at Kessler Foundation, go to the kesslerfoundation.org. How important is it that we have research participants?
- OMAI: 04:04 It is actually very important, especially for projects like the one we're doing for spatial neglect. It is known as a hidden disability. It often goes very undetected, and the patient may be discharged from their settings without even knowing that they have that disability. So having those participants allow us also to develop assessments that help us easily detect and show which ones are more effective with some patients versus other patients. So they contribute a lot, regardless of whether they're healthy controls or just actual stroke survivors.
- BANKS-SMITH: 04:44 If I were on the fence about becoming a research participant, what could you say to me that would help me make that decision?
- OMAI: 04:50 Well, first of all, in that case, we'll go with the concerns that the participant has in terms of if it's regarding safety or confidentiality or things of that nature. Then, we will - sorry - address those concerns and make sure that the participant fully understands what they are getting involved in. And then also we go through the consenting process. As you may know, every research protocol has a consent. So in that, during that consenting process, we go explicitly and explain every little detail, making sure that the participant is well aware of what the project is all about and to make sure also to cover that all the information that we obtain is confidential.
- BANKS-SMITH: 05:33 For parting thoughts, is there anything else that you would like to share with us about the work that you do here at Kessler Foundation?
- OMAI: 05:38 In about two weeks it will be exactly a year that I've been here. And honestly, it's been a great time. I have loved working here. I'm always looking forward to meeting new participants. They're actually the highlight of my work also. They're very nice. Always sharing a lot of things with me. And I've been learning a lot from them as well as from all the team that I'm working with.
- BANKS-SMITH: 06:02 So it really makes you feel like you're contributing and helping--
- OMAI: 06:06 Exactly.
- BANKS-SMITH: 06:07 --folks that have spatial neglect or other hidden disabilities?
- OMAI: 06:10 Exactly. Yes.
- BANKS-SMITH: 06:11 Well, thank you very much for coming.
- OMAI: 06:13 Thank you.
- BANKS-SMITH: 06:13 We really appreciate the work that you do here. To learn more about career opportunities at Kessler Foundation be sure and check out the program notes for

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