

Ray Ruben: Recruiting and Motivating Participants for TBI and MS Research-Ep7

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JOAN BANKS-SMITH: 00:03 [music] Welcome to another edition of Life at Kessler Foundation. This is your host, Joan Banks-Smith. Today, our guest is Ray Ruben. Ray is in our center for neuropsychology and neuroscience. Welcome to the show, Ray.

RAY RUBEN: 00:17 Thanks for having me, Joan.

BANKS-SMITH: 00:18 Let's get started with a little bit about your background, where you went to school, what you studied.

RUBEN: 00:25 I went to Rutgers University in New Brunswick and got my BA in psychology. While I was there, I was part of a social psychology lab, actually getting ahead on my interest in research and kind of wanting to gain some experience and discovered that I really liked it. So I decided to go further with psychology and research.

BANKS-SMITH: 00:48 How did you find the foundation? I mean, we're not an academic institution.

S2: 00:52 Right. So that's kind of a funny story, actually. I was sending out applications or emails to local colleges or professors at colleges that had labs that I was interested in. And one of the labs was Dr. Joshua Sandra's lab at Montclair. They didn't need any help there, but they were just starting the research study at Kessler because Dr. Sandra does a lot of work with Dr. Dobrik over here. So they were just starting their study, and he wanted to interview me for that. And here I am, still working on that study.

BANKS-SMITH: 01:34 You and I had talked maybe a couple of weeks ago. And being a longtime employee myself, you came just-- were hired two weeks before the lockdown. Can you tell us what that was like for you? Because, obviously, you were new. You didn't really know anybody. And then you had to work from home.

S2: 01:52 Right. It was a very weird experience. The first two weeks in office was great. Everybody was extremely welcoming and friendly, which I greatly appreciated and very willing to help me out. But it was definitely a bit of a struggle going immediately working from home after only two weeks because I had hardly started my training. I had so much more I had to do. But that made it quite difficult because a lot of the training involved shadowing other research assistants, I just kind of had to hold off with that, be patient, and kind of learn as much as I could while I was at home.

BANKS-SMITH: 02:33 That being said, I know shortly after the lockdown, all of a sudden, there was this real push to do studies remotely. Were you involved with any of that work?

S2: 02:42 No, actually, because the nature of the study I'm involved with, there's an MRI component that's required. So none of our study could be done remotely. That just made it a little bit of an extra challenge since people had to come in for our study.

BANKS-SMITH: 03:00 And so what were you able to do?

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- S2: 03:01 I mean, a lot of it was surprisingly in the beginning. There were a lot of MS people who I think felt very kept-up at home, and they wanted to be able to get out. Surprisingly, large amount of MS people wanted to come in to help in the beginning. And then when some of those folks were a little bit more wary, we started to recruit more healthy participants who weren't as concerned about the virus because they were a little bit better off in that sense. So it's kind of a little bit of a balancing act or a timing thing as well.
- BANKS-SMITH: 03:38 Since dealing with participants, is there any particular participant that stands out in your mind that maybe has helped motivate you, learn new things as part of the job?
- S2: 03:48 Oh, yeah, absolutely. There have been several MS participants who have just really surprised me with their positive attitudes, even some MS people with a pretty severe amount of disability and hardship that they've gone through in their lives. And I've heard their stories. And just even with hearing those stories, you would just expect some people to be so down and frustrated about their situation. But some of those people, it's really surprised me how well they've kept such a positive attitude. And that really encourages me to continue with this work and do other things to help people and motivate me in my own life.
- BANKS-SMITH: 04:37 We've been back to work for a while. What does your typical day look like with testing or meeting up with participants?
- S2: 04:45 Aside from the general recruitment of participants, my study is pretty long. That's like four and a half to five hours. So it usually takes up most of the day when I am testing somebody. So they'll come in. We actually meet over at 11:99. I'll go through and explain the study again to them. They'll get a chance to practice what they're going to be doing in the MRI because they have a cognitive task that they do in the MRI. I then walk them through the task and the MRI, make sure they're comfortable and everything. And then we go through a large number of neuropsych testing after that. It's always a great experience working with those folks and hearing about their experiences. And they're always more than welcoming when it comes to sharing that information as well.
- BANKS-SMITH: 05:37 Are you still currently recruiting for any of your studies?
- S2: 05:40 Yes, we are absolutely still recruiting for the study called consolidation and encoding and MS and TBI. I do the MS recruitment, and my colleague Denise does the TBI recruitment. But we are recruiting for both. And healthy participants as always.
- BANKS-SMITH: 05:59 Well, we'll have that link in the program notes so that if people want to look into it further, they can reach out and go through our process. So hopefully, maybe you'll get-- yeah, maybe you'll get some additional folks for the study.
- S2: 06:12 Yeah, that would be great.
- BANKS-SMITH: 06:14 What would you say is your favorite part about working for the foundation?

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- S2: 06:16 My favorite part about working for the foundation is probably the environment. Everybody here is extremely welcoming and friendly and always very willing to help fellow colleagues. And the research scientists are always very willing to help teach the RAs, which is great. So that's something I really love and appreciate about Kessler.
- BANKS-SMITH: 06:41 At this stage of your career, where do you see yourself, say, in the next three to five years?
- S2: 06:48 I would say, hopefully, in graduate school. Still trying to determine if that'll be a master's or PhD program. But hopefully, somewhere along those lines.
- BANKS-SMITH: 06:59 As I wrap this up, what makes you the proudest about the work you're doing here at the foundation?
- S2: 07:03 Probably having people thank me at the end of testing when I'm testing research participants. They're really very thankful for the work that we're doing here, and those are the moments where I really see that because you can tell that they're struggling. They really want to see their situation improve, and they know that that's what we're trying to do here. So it's really cool being able to see that in those moments.
- BANKS-SMITH: 07:32 Well, that's always a nice feeling. That's for sure. That's for sure.
- S2: 07:36 Yeah, yeah, absolutely.
- BANKS-SMITH: 07:38 We wish you the very best as you decide on your future and your work here at the foundation. We thank you for it.
- S2: 07:44 Thank you.
- BANKS-SMITH: 07:46 Tuned into our podcast series lately? Join our listeners in 90 countries who enjoyed learning about the work of Kessler Foundation. Be sure to subscribe to our SoundCloud channel, Kessler Foundation, for more research updates. Follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Listen to us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, SoundCloud, or wherever you get your podcasts. This podcast was recorded remotely and was edited and produced by Joan Bank-Smith, creative producer for Kessler Foundation.