



# GROW

RESEARCHER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

In partnership with the Mental Health Mission

## 24-25 COHORT

# VARUN ARUNACHALAM CHANDRAN

I currently work as a postdoctoral research associate (funded by NIHR-BRC) on cortical myelin mapping related to learning difficulties in children with Neurofibromatosis type-I (NF1) as well as its phenotypic relationship with Autism Spectrum Conditions (ASC) based at the division of psychology and mental health, faculty of biology, medicine and health, University of Manchester. Previously, I worked as a postdoctoral researcher on a longitudinal structural brain MRI study in fragile-X premutation at the centre for mind and brain, University of California, Davis. I completed my doctoral study in Neurosciences at the University of Reading. My doctoral research was aimed to investigate the neural correlates (with the application of multimodal brain imaging techniques) of autistic traits across the clinical and non-clinical population using a dimensional approach. My career goal is to contribute to the development of neuroimaging biomarker in early identification of Autism Spectrum Conditions that could provide us better insights to understand the aetiology of complex neurodevelopmental conditions. I intend to participate in the GROW program and take it as a great opportunity in developing academic research skillset (like securing funding for research and building up collaborations).



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# JULIETA AZEVEDO

Julieta M. Azevedo has a PhD in Clinical Psychology and works as a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Exeter, working within the UK's Mental Health Mission, and serves as an Honorary Research Associate at Bangor University. Since completing her Master's in Cognitive-Behavioural Interventions and Psychological and Health Disorders at the University of Coimbra, Portugal, in 2013, she has dedicated her career to advancing mental health research and clinical practice, as well as exploring mechanisms of change in therapy.

Her Ph.D. research focused on piloting a group-based Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) skills intervention for individuals with Bipolar Disorder, assessing feasibility and developing targeted assessment tools to improve care. Currently, her research questions are around the treatment of more transdiagnostic presentations that fall in a gap in mental health services for individuals whose complex symptom profiles prevent access to primary care resources yet do not fully meet the criteria for secondary care. She is examining the feasibility and acceptability of a DBT-informed group intervention aimed at enhancing emotional regulation in this underserved population, drawing insights from consultations with clinical experts about the need and usefulness of this and those with lived experience.

Joining the GROW Mental Health Mission represents a significant opportunity for me as I navigate the pathways to independent research funding in the UK. Through GROW's network of peers, structured mentorship, and specialised workshops, I hope to build a foundation to lead future studies and advance intervention pathways to better serve individuals with complex mental health needs, and following routes that facilitate and potentiate my academic career in the UK.



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# MICA KOMARNYCKYJ

I am a mental health researcher with a focus on addiction and childhood trauma. My research interests lie in the identification of transdiagnostic mechanisms underlying mental health disorders. In the long term I am interested in the development of screening tools which can predict who will go on to develop mental health problems based on objective measures recorded during adolescence. I am currently employed at the University of Manchester as a Research Associate on a large-scale study investigating the impacts of adoption and early childhood trauma on brain structure and function, neurodevelopment, immune response and mental health.

I have joined GROW to connect with other early career researchers in my field, with the goal of sharing both our knowledge and skills, and also our personal experiences and difficulties we have faced during our research. I am keen to establish a diverse network of researchers working across mental health disciplines who could be future collaborators. I will bring to GROW a combination of analytical skills and experience of the practical assessment of mental health problems in research participants, including: Neuroimaging data collection and analysis (EEG, fMRI); Assessment of neurodevelopmental disorders (Autism & ADHD); Assessment of psychiatric disorders (SCID interview); Experience of running large scale imaging and neurostimulation studies.



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# ASHA LADWA

Hello! I am Asha Ladwa, a Mental Health Mission Research Fellow working in the Psychology department, University of Exeter. My research focuses on understanding how psychological treatments for common mental health problems (depression and anxiety) work, and how we can improve access, engagement and treatment outcomes in primary care mental health services. I am currently establishing a 'South West Practice Research Network' which will bring together practitioners (NHS, voluntary services) and researchers to co-design and deliver research to support the 'missing middle', who are individuals that may fall into the treatment gap between primary and secondary mental health services.

In my previous fellowship, I used NHS-Talking Therapies (NHS-TT) data to understand access, engagement and treatment outcomes for underserved populations. This built upon work I conducted in my PhD where I used NHS-TT and trial data sets to identify patterns of improvements and temporary worsening in depression symptoms, to understand how talking therapies lead to positive or sub-optimal treatment outcomes.

I would like to improve the impact of my research, and I am excited to network, understand different approaches used by other disciplines, and collaborate on new projects.



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# MARTA LITWINCZUK

My background is in cognitive and clinical neuroscience. I do computational modelling of anatomical and functional networks present within the brain. My interest is in understanding how adaptive cognition and wellbeing can emerge from or be disrupted by various properties of brain networks (e.g. architecture of the network, excitation/inhibition balance, information exchange). As part of the MHM, my work focuses on neural mechanisms of attention and memory processes that are critical for learning and daily function. Specifically, how they depend on excitation/inhibition balance and how we can apply non-invasive brain stimulation to modulate it in neurodevelopmental condition. I joined GROW, because I hope to apply for a Fellowship to explore modelling how prior beliefs, and environmental uncertainty and noise may impact attention in patients with neurodevelopmental conditions.



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# DOMINIC O'CONNOR

I earned my PhD in Psychology from the University of Leeds, with a thesis discussing sweet food preferences and appetite in the context of obesity. Following my studies, I transitioned into the pharmaceutical industry, where I interviewed individuals living with rare diseases to develop FDA approved conceptual frameworks. This experience enabled me to develop qualitative research skills to compliment my background in quantitative research, and provided me with experience engaging with vulnerable participants whilst researching sensitive topics, offering insights into how health and illness intersect with well-being.

Currently, my research centres on the neurocognitive development of adolescents following early life trauma. My particular interest is in identifying markers that can predict future health, especially regarding cognitive, neurological and immunological markers that can serve as early indicators of mental health and well-being, which could inform preventive interventions.

However, I have encountered several career challenges which have brought me to the GROW program. First, I am seeking to enhance my ability to communicate my research findings more effectively. I want to refine my skills to better translate complex scientific concepts into impactful messages that can reach broader audiences, including policymakers, clinicians, and the public. Secondly, I wish to gain insights into how to write successful grant applications and develop a strategic approach to identifying and applying for various funding sources. Finally, I am eager to expand my professional network. I hope to connect with peers, explore interdisciplinary collaborations, and engage with industry leaders to open new research opportunities.



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# SARAH REEVE

I am a clinical psychologist and researcher, currently I hold a lecturer post at UEA and a clinical post in the NHS working in an Early Intervention in Psychosis service. My research focuses on sleep and psychosis – currently I'm interested in sedation from antipsychotic medication, mechanisms between sleep and psychosis, and how to improve identification and treatment of sleep issues in NHS mental health services. I will shortly be moving from a 50/50 clinical and researcher role to a more research focused role (80/20), alongside submitting my first major grant application. I am looking forward to being involved in the GROW programme to help develop my longer term research strategy, identify ways to improve my skills as a clinician researcher, and to learn from others who are developing their careers in mental health research.



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# JACQUELINE ROBBINS

I did my undergrad in Neuroscience and went on to study for a PhD in Alzheimer's disease, investigating how amyloid caused neurodegeneration in a human induced pluripotent stem cell in vitro model. For this I learned gene editing techniques such as CRISPR cas9, differentiated the cell lines into neurons, and then performed genomics to understand the different pathways involved in neurodegeneration. I then did a short postdoc in neuroinflammation in neurodegenerative diseases, developing glial cell co-cultures using the iPSCs. I really enjoyed this research but I felt unsure about where my career was going and I made the decision that I wanted to study medicine. I have now completed my Foundation training and I am doing a year as a Clinical Research Fellow with the MHM working on the Early Intervention Mission, with 2 clinical days a week in the Early Intervention Service assessing First Episode Psychosis. This has been a great opportunity to move into clinical research and learn new research skills. I now have decisions ahead of me around how I want to balance clinical training and research, and what I want my research focus to be in, which I am looking forward to exploring more through the GROW programme this year.



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# MOURAD WAHBA

I am a consultant psychiatrist based in a mood disorder research clinic in Newcastle, focused on both patient care and clinical trial delivery. My primary interest lies in exploring novel treatments, particularly psychedelic therapy, as promising options in mental health care. I am particularly drawn to the qualitative and subjective aspects of psychedelic experiences and am curious about their potential impact on clinical outcomes. This intersection of psychology and biology fascinates me, as it delves into how different facets of consciousness interact and influence each other.

With experience in both clinical psychiatry and research delivery, and having supported studies as principal investigator, I have developed some understanding of both the practical and scientific sides of psychiatric research. This perspective has fuelled my ambition to shift towards leading my own research initiatives. I am especially interested in gaining the skills to help me secure funding to investigate the therapeutic potential of psychedelics further, with a focus on how their subjective effects may contribute to meaningful outcomes. As this field grows, I am excited to contribute to a deeper understanding of how novel therapies can transform mental health care.



# RACHEL SIPPY