

# How to Create a Supportive Space for Scientists to Share Stories of Struggles

**Brianna Bibel**

01 *We hosted a “Real Stories of Science” open mic night for scientists to share stories of failures and struggles in the pursuit of science to help destigmatize conversations around mental health.*

02 *Science is hard but we don’t have to go it alone.*

## **About**

*Based out of Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory in New York, CSHL WiSE is a network of scientists working to build a more supportive, collaborative, and equal scientific community for all. We provide a platform for professional development and empowerment through mentorship, career planning, and educational opportunities tailored toward issues disproportionately affecting women. CSHL WiSE was founded in 2015 by students, postdocs and technicians looking to create a strong and collaborative support system for women scientists at CSHL and beyond. You can learn more about our work on our website, <http://cshlwise.org/>. Brianna Bibel is CSHL WiSE’s Social Media Chair and a second-year graduate student studying biochemistry and structural biology at CSHL’s Watson School of Biological Sciences. She recently started a website where you can follow her alter ego, *The Bumbling Biochemist*, on a mission to make biochemistry fun and accessible <http://thebumblingbiochemist.com/>. The story below was published simultaneously here and CSHL WiSE.*

-----

Among biologists, Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory (CSHL)’s Blackford Bar is fairly famous – it’s the site of inspiration-striking conversations, the birthplace of collaborations and “aha” moments. Its history is memorialized with pictures and memorabilia of famous scientists lining the walls. On February 28, 2018, for their “Real Stories of Science Open Mic Night,” CSHL WiSE (Women in Science and Engineering) transformed this legendary room into a space of a different sort, but one that – for those who attended – will be even more memorable.

Like many great ideas in science, the inspiration for the event started with observations – stressed out graduate students, postdocs, and research technicians, privately sharing their struggles with one another began to realize that they weren’t alone. Through these interactions, they gained strength and hope and began to wonder: could these positive effects scale? Could sharing stories help reduce the stigma surrounding experimental failure and setbacks that might contribute to the prevalence of mental health issues in the scientific community, especially among trainees? Maybe the effects would be even more significant if young scientists heard stories of struggles and “failures” from successful early career researchers and established PIs.

To test out these hypotheses, Shaina Lu, a graduate student in Tony Zador's lab, had an idea: why don't we hold an "open mic night" for people to share stories of struggles and setbacks in a safe, supportive, and respectful environment? From there, the experiment took off. We put together an organizing committee including graduate students (Shaina Lu, Ally Noli, Tzvia Pinkhasov and myself), postdocs (Ashley Juavinett and Christine Scaduto), and research technicians (Alexandra Ambrico) and, like good scientists, we carefully planned out our experimental design. For the sake of reproducibility (and we sincerely hope others will replicate this experiment), here are our "methods" and "results".

When planning the event, we knew that the language we used for advertising would be crucial. We wanted to make it clear that we welcomed all stories of struggles – from failed experiments to embarrassing encounters with prominent scientists to life-altering battles with mental illness. It took us a while to settle on an appropriate name for the event. "Open Mic Night of Failures" was catchy, but we worried about putting too much emphasis on the term "failure." We often use this term loosely (e.g. this experiment failed), but it is important that people don't conflate experimental failure with personal failure. Additionally, we wanted to encourage all kinds of stories and definitely did not want to give the impression that having mental health problems is in any way a "failure." We ultimately settled on "Real Stories of Science: postdocs, students, and young faculty share their sad, uplifting and sometimes laughable stories of when science stops being polite... and starts getting real."

At the start of the event, we laid out some important community guidelines. We aimed to create a safe, non-judgmental, and self-contained environment. To this end, we asked that people respect the confidentiality of the speakers – what's said in the room stays in the room – no sharing other's stories, taking pictures, or recording without explicit permission of the speaker. We also requested that speakers only talk using "I" statements and not include names of other people in their stories.

The premise of the event was an open mic format, where people could sign up to speak at the door or even mid-event when they got inspired. However, to ensure speakers from various positions along the academic hierarchy, members of WiSE's mental health committee reached out to individuals we thought might be interested. In this way, we were able to confirm seven speakers ahead of the event. Additionally, we felt that some people might want to share something anonymously. As such, we provided a link to a Google survey, blind even to the organizers, where CSHL community members could submit anonymous stories to be read by our MC, Juavinett. With two anonymous submissions and three attendees signing up during the event, there were a total of twelve stories (not bad for a small institution like ours!).

It doesn't take much in the way of material cost to hold such an event. We recommend renting out a room and trying to create a relaxed, cozy, environment. To create a "café-like" feel, we rearranged the tables in the bar and dimmed the overhead lights, choosing instead to light up the room with votive candles and holiday string lights (free for us since Juavinett had a 15-foot Christmas tree last year).

We set up a table with cookies, cupcakes, coffee and pizza. If you are familiar with academics, you probably know that one of the best ways to bolster attendance at an event is to offer free food, but given that almost everyone who came stayed for the entire event (without us even advertising the pizza), we're pretty sure that the food was just an added bonus and not the primary motivating factor for attending. Nevertheless, participants confirmed that the snacks were appreciated.

The bar is a popular evening gathering spot for lab workers, so we put up signs on the bar doors the day before the event, as well as table placards, giving people a heads-up when the event would be taking place and that, while they were more than welcome to stay and participate, we asked that they please respect the event and its guidelines.

We posted an envelope on the bar door for each speaker, next to a table stocked with note cards and pens. We encouraged people to write messages of gratitude and support for the speakers and leave them in the envelopes. At the end of the night, the speakers retrieved their envelopes and the positivity they contained. These notes not only allowed for people to submit anonymous messages of support, but they also provided mementos for the speakers to look back on in times of struggle.

Turn-out for the event was fantastic – the bar was packed, mainly with students, but also with postdocs, technicians, early career researchers, and other lab staff. Despite having a large crowd, there was none of the background chatter you might expect. We likely didn't even need the microphone because, while our speakers were talking, you could hear a pin (or a tear) drop.

While we allowed for clapping after each talk, we encouraged the audience to snap support throughout when things resonated with them. Snaps were widespread as listeners, hearing the stories, realized that science really *is* hard and full of failure - for everyone. Even the most successful scientists have made mistakes, have felt that they're not good enough: obstacles along the way aren't signs of personal inadequacy.

I, too, decided to share a story. There were lots of stories to choose from – failure and I know each other well. In fact, permission to fail has always been one of the things I liked most about science. I love that you could try out new things which might not work, and that is okay. I can usually externalize experimental failures, realizing they are part of the process. But personal failure, that’s a different story.

So, when I went into my thesis proposal defense feeling scientifically prepared, then cracked under the pressure, that hit deep. Coming out of the meeting, I should have been relieved – I passed and could start working full-time on my proposed project – but instead it felt like a huge failure. And not an experimental failure, the kind I could handle, but a personal failure. Over time, however, through talking to other grad students, post docs, and my PI, I came to realize that my experience wasn’t unique and that it really wasn’t as big of a deal as my mind was making it out to be. I decided to share my story in hopes that, by doing so, I could “pay it forward.”

It was a hard decision to speak, especially since I am very uncomfortable talking about personal topics. but I am so grateful that I did. I have a much easier time expressing myself and communicating through writing than face-to-face, so I wrote up my story ahead of time. Before my talk, I was incredibly nervous, but my colleagues provided encouragement and helped convince me I could do it; during my talk, their snaps pushed me forward; and after the talk, the envelope of support provided me with reassurance that I had done the right thing by speaking and supplied me with hope for moving forward. In the days following the event, I have frequently looked back at these notes of encouragement when I’m feeling less confident. I spoke out in hopes of helping others, but found that I was also helping myself.

We are incredibly grateful for everyone who attended – either to speak or listen - and proud of the CSHL community for helping make this event a success. We hope that similar events will follow, both here and at other institutions. By sharing our stories, we will come to realize that, while unique, we are not alone. And by shedding light on our shared struggles, we can help begin to address the shared structural factors contributing to the high prevalence of mental health problems in academia. Science is hard. Life is hard. Science and life together are *very hard*. But we don’t have to go it alone.

Event Photos





