

Rachel Dragas

BSc, MSc · Neuroscientist · Award-Winning Crisis Intervention Lead · Published Author

TORONTO, ONTARIO, CANADA

RACHELDRAGAS.COM · INSTAGRAM @RACHELDRAGAS

Mental health leader, neuroscientist and published author with nineteen years across crisis intervention, health-sector programme management and clinical research. Six peer-reviewed publications, eighteen further published features and interviews, fifteen research presentations nationally and internationally, and nineteen years of continuous community service. A consistent record of building programmes that did not exist before: identifying the gap, securing the partners, and delivering the outcome.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Platform Lead, Crisis Intervention

DEC 2022 – PRESENT

Kids Help Phone, in collaboration with the 988 Suicide Crisis Helpline

- Lead on the national crisis texting platform, working alongside clinical operational managers, supervisors, crisis support workers and responders on supervision, coaching, debriefs, onboarding and quality of service delivery.
- Assess and de-escalate imminent-risk situations including suicide, homicide and crimes in progress; engage the RCMP, provincial and regional police, emergency services, and child and youth protection agencies nationwide.
- Supported the launch and optimization of 9-8-8, Canada's suicide and crisis lifeline, and of Ontario's Good2Talk post-secondary webchat.
- Recipient, Q1 2026 Celebrate Out Loud Award, for embodying the organization's core values: courageous, collaborative, innovative, resilient and trustworthy.

Program Manager, Social Impact

MAY 2022 – APR 2023

Startup Canada

- Led the Social Impact Program, a consortium built with the Government of Canada's \$50 million Investment Readiness Program, through which 20 to 30 national partners funded social purpose organizations.
- Core member of the Investment Readiness Program leadership team, connecting partners to each other and to the wider social innovation and social finance ecosystem.
- Built a digital platform consolidating programme information for partner use, and ran webinars, convenings, media kits and campaigns generating **20 million interactions and impressions in under two years**.

Project Manager, Advance Care Planning & Health Care Consent

DEC 2019 – APR 2021

Hospice Palliative Care Ontario

- Led a **\$1.1 million** project funded by Ontario's Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care to completion, owning work plans, reporting, scope of work, budget and team supervision. Surpassed every scheduled goal while adapting strategy through COVID-19.
 - Delivered online training to **over 4,200 clinicians**, care coordinators and nurse practitioners, and reached **over 515,000 people** through targeted public awareness campaigns, with 41,718 going on to engage directly with the organization.
 - Represented the organization with Ontario Health, the Ontario Palliative Care Network, Health Quality Ontario and the Ontario Medical Association; led cross-sector and regional communities of practice.
-

Coordinator, Mental Health Initiatives & Special Projects

SEP 2018 – DEC 2019

Office of the Dean, Faculty of Arts & Science, University of Toronto

- Built mental health programming for the largest and most comprehensive academic division in North America, serving **over 30,000** students, faculty and staff.
- Created and delivered an inaugural Faculty-wide mental health and professional development conference, cultivating partners including Margaret Trudeau and Michael Landsberg.
- Assembled and led two multi-disciplinary committees, secured sponsorship, and led multi-media marketing initiatives.

Advisor, Graduate Conflict Resolution Centre

OCT 2017 – JUN 2018

University of Toronto

- Provided confidential conflict coaching and advising to graduate students across faculties and departments; assessed and de-escalated crisis situations.
- Led workshops on effective communication and dispute resolution for students, staff and faculty, customizing programming with partner departments.

Researcher, Department of Genetics & Development

MAY 2014 – JUN 2018

Krembil Research Institute, Toronto Western Hospital, University Health Network

- Investigated the mechanisms and efficacy of mesenchymal stem cells in cervical spinal cord injury, in collaboration with CreATe Fertility Clinic; improved efficiency and reduced operating costs through novel technique development.
- Secured authorship on **five peer-reviewed publications** and presented findings at institutional and international conferences.
- Served as a peer reviewer, applying FDA rules and regulations to the critical evaluation of scientific manuscripts.

Clinical Researcher, Department of Ophthalmology

SEP 2013 – MAY 2014

The Hospital for Sick Children

- Led a cross-sectional prospective study on biomarkers for retinal damage attributed to the anti-epileptic drug vigabatrin in a paediatric cohort.
- Worked directly with a complex paediatric patient population; performed full-field and multi-focal electroretinograms and carried out the statistical analysis.
- Published the findings as **first author** and presented at national and international conferences.

EDUCATION

Master of Science, Medical Science · Neuroscience specialization, Faculty of Medicine

U of T · 2018

Bachelor of Science, Neuroscience · Sociology & Physiology double minor

U of T · 2013

Graduate Professional Skills Program · including 10-week Mini-MBA

U of T · 2017

PEER-REVIEWED PUBLICATIONS

Dragas R, Hong J, Khazaei M, Ahuja C, Fehlings MG (2021). Hepatocyte Growth Factor-Preconditioned Neural Progenitor Cells Attenuate Astrocyte Reactivity and Promote Neurite Outgrowth. *Frontiers in Cellular Neuroscience* 15: 741681.

Vawda R, Badner A, Hong J, Mikhail M, **Dragas R**, Xhima K, Jose A, Fehlings MG (2020). Harnessing the Secretome of Mesenchymal Stromal Cells for Traumatic Spinal Cord Injury. *Stem Cells and Development* 29(22): 1429–1443.

Vawda R, Badner A, Hong J, Mikhail M, Lakhani A, **Dragas R**, Xhima K, Barretto T, Librach C, Fehlings MG (2019). Early Intravenous Infusion of Mesenchymal Stromal Cells After Traumatic Cervical Spinal Cord Injury. *Stem Cells Translational Medicine* 8(7): 639–649.

Ulndreaj A, Tzekou A, Mothe AJ, Siddiqui AM, **Dragas R**, Tator CH, Torlakovic EE, Fehlings MG (2016). Characterization of the Immunological Response After Cervical Spinal Cord Injury. *Journal of Neurotrauma* 34: 1–18.

Badner A, Vawda R, Laliberte A, Hong JYL, Mikhail M, Jose A, **Dragas R**, Fehlings MG (2016). Early Intravenous Delivery of Human Brain Stromal Cells Modulates Systemic Inflammation and Leads to Vasoprotection in Traumatic Spinal Cord Injury. *Stem Cells Translational Medicine* 5(8): 991–1003.

Dragas R, Westall CA, Wright T (2014). Changes in the ERG D-Wave with Vigabatrin Treatment in a Pediatric Cohort. *Documenta Ophthalmologica* 129(2): 97–104.

AWARDS & DISTINCTIONS

Celebrate Out Loud Award, Kids Help Phone	2026	U of T School of Graduate Studies Conference Grant	2015
Gordon Cressy Student Leadership Award	2018	Management Consulting MBA Case Competition · 2nd place	2015
James F. Crothers Family Fellowship · peripheral nerve damage	2016	Gamma Dynacare Medical Laboratories Scholarship · five-time recipient	2015
OSOTF Unilever / Lipton Graduate Fellowship in Neuroscience	2016	Governor General's Award	2008

LEADERSHIP & COMMUNITY SERVICE

HOSTING, CORRESPONDENT & MEDIA

VIP Red Carpet Host, “Couture for a Cause” JUL 2026

Rogers Media / CAMH · Yorkville, Toronto

Welcomed distinguished guests, conducted on-camera interviews and showcased the fundraiser’s mission for the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, elevating the guest experience while highlighting the community’s support.

Ambassador & Correspondent, Rosé Picnic JUL 2026

Canadian Film Centre · Toronto

Promoted awareness and support for Breast Cancer Canada, the event’s charity of choice, through event coverage, interviews and audience engagement, amplifying stories and inspiring charitable giving.

Event Host & MC, “Crown of Hope” Charity Gala JUN 2026

Living Luxe Magazine · Toronto

Official host of an evening in support of Autism in Mind, a charity working toward an inclusive society with no barriers for children with autism. Guided the programme, introduced speakers and performers, coordinated live segments and helped raise funds and awareness.

Journalist, Federal Party Leader Press Conference MAR 2026

Toronto

Covered a press conference for Pierre Poilievre, Leader of the Conservative Party of Canada, gathering information and asking informed questions on national developments, policy and public statements.

Correspondent, Canadian International AutoShow FEB 2026

Toronto

Reported from Media Day, interviewing manufacturers, exhibitors and attendees, and creating multimedia content on vehicle launches, industry developments and key announcements for a broad audience.

FOUNDING & ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Founder & Editor-in-Chief, *Elemental* Magazine MAY 2017 – AUG 2019

University of Toronto, tri-campus

Launched a multidisciplinary digital and print publication featuring emerging faculty research, stories of empowerment and mental health advocacy, with direct contributions from faculty, staff, students and community organizations. Recruited, trained and led an editorial team of over 20 journalists, editors, graphic designers and photographers; led content and marketing strategy; secured sponsorship and built partnerships with leading mental health researchers and with Sophie Grégoire Trudeau and the Hon. Michael Wilson.

Chair & Director, Grad Minds

SEP 2016 – AUG 2019

University of Toronto

Led the graduate student mental health body representing the concerns of U of T's graduate population to administration, advising on mental health programming and services and running anti-stigma campaigns. Interviewed, trained and oversaw a core team of 25 plus event volunteers; organized and hosted the annual Open Minds Mental Health conference, bringing in over 1,000 attendees; secured sponsorship and partnerships including Michael Landsberg.

UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE & ADVISORY

Member, Leave of Absence Committee

JAN 2017 – APR 2019

Graduate & Life Sciences Education, Faculty of Medicine, U of T

One of two graduate student representatives sitting alongside the Vice-Dean of Graduate and Academic Affairs and departmental chairs. Reviewed and adjudicated applications from students seeking medically legitimate leaves of absence, and worked with graduate coordinators and supervisors on successful reintegration.

Mental Health Intern, Dean's Mental Health Advisory Team

MAY 2017 – AUG 2017

Faculty of Arts & Science, University of Toronto

Selected to help develop Faculty-wide initiatives in response to the University of Toronto's Mental Health Framework recommendations. Scheduled and interviewed faculty, staff and students, transcribed and summarised findings, and presented to the core committee for planning and implementation.

Member, Research Trainee Advisory Committee

SEP 2015 – AUG 2017

Krembil Research Institute, Toronto Western Hospital

Graduate student representative supporting postdoctoral fellows, graduate students and trainees through scientific and social programming, most notably developing and organizing the Annual KRI Research Day and Summer Student Research Day.

Graduate Students' Union Representative

SEP 2015 – AUG 2016

IMS Student Association, Institute of Medical Science, U of T

Elected to the executive council. Attended bi-weekly council and monthly University of Toronto Graduate Students' Union meetings, voting on funding and academic-life issues and helping shape policy on behalf of the Institute.

MENTORSHIP & SCIENCE OUTREACH

Alumna Mentor, University College Career Mentorship Programme

SEP 2015 – SEP 2022

University of Toronto

Elected alumni mentor providing one-to-one support to third- and fourth-year undergraduates, offering insight into career paths, research opportunities and graduate applications over seven years.

Mentor, Collaborative Program in Neuroscience

SEP 2016 – AUG 2017

School of Graduate Studies, University of Toronto

Supported senior undergraduates applying to neuroscience graduate programmes with one-to-one advice on the application process, funding opportunities and research placements.

Breakout Session Leader, StemCellTalks Symposium

FEB 2015 – MAR 2017

Let's Talk Science & the Stem Cell Network · Toronto

Facilitated round-table discussions with high school students on stem cell science, practical ethics and case studies, as part of a national outreach initiative transferring knowledge between academia and secondary schools.

Mentor, Neuroscience Association for Undergraduate Students

SEP 2011 – APR 2013

University of Toronto

Advised second- and third-year neuroscience students on course selection, career paths and research opportunities, and supported their transition to university life.

WRITING & JOURNALISM

Journalist, Project Chimps

JUN 2022 – PRESENT

Blue Ridge, Georgia, USA

Remote journalist on the marketing and communications team of the newest chimpanzee sanctuary in the United States, founded to provide lifelong care to 200 former research chimpanzees across 230+ acres. Interviews staff, experts and board members, conducts research and writes features for digital publication to build education, awareness and engagement.

Journalist, *IMS Magazine*

NOV 2015 – AUG 2017

Institute of Medical Science, University of Toronto

Interviewed faculty about their research and wrote features placing their work within the broader context of scientific knowledge for a quarterly print and digital publication; copy-edited and reviewed articles by fellow journalists.

DIRECT SERVICE VOLUNTEERING

Community Support Volunteer, Visiting Hospice Programme

JUL 2018 – SEP 2018

Philip Aziz Centre for Hospice Care & Emily's House · Toronto

Provided compassionate community-based psychosocial support to adults, children and families facing life-limiting and terminal illness.

Child Life Volunteer

SEP 2011 – APR 2014

The Hospital for Sick Children · Toronto

Served on the Neurosurgery, Trauma, General & Thoracic Surgery and Infectious Diseases wards. Collaborated with physicians, nurses, social workers and child life specialists to promote a nurturing atmosphere, engaging patients in therapeutic play to support coping through hospitalization.

Events Coordinator

SEP 2007 – JUL 2013

Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB) · Toronto

Organized open houses and fundraisers advancing the CNIB and its members. Collected data from individuals with varying degrees of vision loss through experimental trials that informed new GO Transit signage and regulations. Coordinated summer camps and field trips for visually impaired children, adapting activities to individual needs.

FEATURE WRITING & PUBLISHED INTERVIEWS

The Doctor Is In: Meet Project Chimps' Veterinary Medical Director · Project Chimps	2025
Remembrance Garden Sculpture: From Concept to Creation · Project Chimps	2025
Bruce Wagman: Inception to Actualization of Project Chimps · Project Chimps	2024
Rocking in the New Year with The Coverups · Project Chimps	2024
The Gift that Gives Back: An Interview with Laurie Seligman · Project Chimps	2023
Internships at any Age: An Interview with James Haworth · Project Chimps	2022
Behavior Training Journey: Big Things Have Small Beginnings · Project Chimps	2022
Mural in the Making: If There's a Will, There's a Wave · Project Chimps	2022
Mental Health and the Power of Starting a Conversation: An Interview with Sophie Grégoire Trudeau · <i>Elemental Magazine</i> , Issue 2	2018
Engineering Mental Health Solutions for Graduate Students: An Interview with Dr. Julie Audet · <i>Elemental Magazine</i> , Issue 2	2018
Making Moves at the Mental Health and Physical Activity Research Centre: An Interview with Dr. Catherine Sabiston · <i>Elemental Magazine</i> , Issue 2	2018
Food for Thought: Advancing our Understanding of Eating Disorders: An Interview with Dr. Allan Kaplan · <i>Elemental Magazine</i> , Issue 1	2017
Developing a Mental Health Advisory Committee in Arts and Science: An Interview with Professor David Cameron · <i>Elemental Magazine</i> , Issue 1	2017
Advancements in University and Workplace Mental Health in Canada: An Interview with the Hon. Michael Wilson · <i>Elemental Magazine</i> , Issue 1	2017

Rising to the Challenge: Expanding and Improving Mental Health Resources at U of T: An Interview with Janine Robb · <i>Elemental Magazine</i> , Issue 1	2017
Recognizing and Treating Pediatric Sleep Disorders: An Interview with Dr. Indra Narang · <i>IMS Magazine</i> 18	2016
Treating Central and Peripheral Vision Loss: An Interview with Dr. Martin Steinbach · <i>IMS Magazine</i> 17	2016
Early Surgical Intervention to Improve Vision Outcomes: An Interview with Dr. Agnes Wong · <i>IMS Magazine</i> 17	2016

RESEARCH PRESENTATIONS, NATIONAL & INTERNATIONAL

Hepatocyte growth factor-preconditioned neural progenitor cells attenuate astrocyte reactivity and promote neurite outgrowth · National Neurotrauma Symposium · international, Canada	2018
Hepatocyte growth factor-preconditioned neural progenitor cells attenuate astrocyte reactivity and promote neurite outgrowth · Krembil Research Day · Toronto Western Hospital, UHN	2018
A combinatorial treatment strategy for reducing astrocyte reactivity using neural progenitor cells and hepatocyte growth factor · National Neurotrauma Symposium · international, Utah, USA	2017
A combinatorial treatment strategy for reducing astrocyte reactivity · SpineFEST · Dept. of Surgery, Faculty of Medicine, U of T	2017
A combinatorial treatment strategy for reducing astrocyte reactivity · Combined Canadian Spinal Cord & Ontario Spinal Cord Injury Research Network Meeting	2017
A combinatorial treatment strategy for reducing astrocyte reactivity · Krembil Research Day · Toronto Western Hospital, UHN	2017
Combinatory treatment with hepatocyte growth factor and neural progenitor cells reduces astrogliosis and pro-inflammatory microglial activation in vitro · Society for Neuroscience · international, California, USA	2016
Combinatory treatment with HGF and neural progenitor cells reduces astrogliosis in vitro · SpineFEST · Dept. of Surgery, Faculty of Medicine, U of T	2016
Combinatory treatment with HGF and neural progenitor cells reduces astrogliosis in vitro · Institute of Medical Science Research Day · U of T	2016
Combinatory treatment with HGF and neural progenitor cells reduces astrogliosis in vitro · Collaborative Program in Neuroscience Research Day · U of T	2016
Combinatory treatment with HGF and neural progenitor cells reduces astrogliosis in vitro · Krembil Research Day · Toronto Western Hospital, UHN	2016
Reduced astrogliosis and modulation of pro-inflammatory microglia by combinatorial treatment with HGF and neural progenitor cells in vitro · International Symposium for Neural Regeneration · California, USA	2015
Changes in the ERG d-wave with vigabatrin treatment in a pediatric cohort · Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology · international, Florida, USA	2014
The retinal origins of toxicity attributed to vigabatrin: can the ERG d-wave serve as a potential indicator? · Child Vision Research Society Conference	2014
The retinal origins of toxicity attributed to vigabatrin · U of T Dept. of Ophthalmology & Vision Sciences 9th Annual Research Day · oral presentation	2013

TRAINING & CERTIFICATIONS

Crisis Response Training, Kids Help Phone (2022)	Project Management Foundations (2022)	COVID-19 Level A, Film & Video Production (2020)
COVID-19 & Grief for Healthcare Providers (2020)	Advance Care Planning & Health Consent (2019)	SafeTALK Suicide Prevention (2019)
Identify, Assist, Refer Mental Health Training (2018)	Conflict Resolution Training (2017)	