

Ghosted

Melissa L. Langhan , MD, MHS

I've been ghosted. We've been in a serious relationship for years, and now they won't even answer my emails. When we first met, it seemed like a perfect match. We had similar interests. They were enthusiastic and wanted to try new things, and I was ready to start a new relationship. And it was great for a while—we were doing everything we set out to do, overcame obstacles, communicated, and celebrated our successes. But now, just as I thought we were ready to take the final step together—poof, gone. They've moved out, moved on, and are not looking back.

No, this is not the story of my dating life or a swipe right that went wrong. This is what sometimes happens when you mentor a trainee on a research project and they graduate, leaving you hanging in the balance and trying to publish a paper that is languishing in a file folder somewhere.

When I look back, it all started out so well—your typical “meet-cute” in the movies. We got along well when they were rotating in my department, and I just happened to have this new idea. There were benefits for us both. They were interested in my subspecialty, and being involved in a research study would be a feather in their cap as they applied for fellowship. Having someone to share the workload meant that I could launch this project sooner rather than later. My promotion was looming on the horizon. I made the first move; they accepted the invitation. The beginning was exciting—we had conversations about expectations, ownership, authorship, and what the project entailed. We made it official and were happy. Most likely, we both eagerly entered the relationship with rose-colored glasses about how this project would unfold and with dreams of its impact. Our family grew—we formed a team that was excited to work with us. I gave them a high-five when they got our institutional review board approval and celebrated our first accomplishments. It wasn't always easy. We griped to each other about snafus in data collection, and there was a lot to do. We were both putting in the work and we were successful—beautiful graphs of our data, prize-winning abstracts, and they matched at their number one program! And then it fell apart. As time went on and it was time to write up the manuscript, I transitioned from cheerful mentor to nagging

parent or demanding boss, pleading for closure. “Please send me the draft.” The days turned into weeks as I stared at my screen. “How about you just send me what you have done so far?” The bargaining turned into desperation. “Please, let me submit the paper!” But no response. Emails, texts, deadlines, offers to help ... it was like they had disappeared.

Soon after, it got worse—we officially separated. Their new fellowship was far away. Finding somewhere to live in a new city takes time, and they were travelling a lot. Graduation came and a new year started. They were making new friends and being offered new opportunities. I knew that things had changed in our relationship, but the project wasn't finished yet. Instead of coffee dates, I was lucky to catch them on Zoom occasionally. I tried to remind them of what we set out to do together, what was left to accomplish, and the rewards that come with publication. They agreed; they wanted to finish this study, and I was quickly fooled again. Soon they went back to repeatedly missing deadlines and not responding to me.

Since they were not close by, I started to wonder, what if something awful happened to them? Here I was complaining about not getting an email, and they might have experienced some terrible life event. I checked social media posts, but there was nothing to report. I scrolled through the faculty list at their new institution, found a colleague, and reached out to do a welfare check to make sure they were okay. They were okay. Now that I had a closer point of contact, should I disclose the situation to my colleague? Ask them to intervene on my behalf? Tell them that this person is not to be trusted? Even though I felt utterly ignored and exasperated, that wasn't the answer. This was my mess and I needed to find a way out.

We've all been there and we'll probably all end up here again, because as academicians and educators we are dedicated to helping our trainees. We have committed our careers to mentoring, engaging in research, and advancing their careers. My feelings of frustration were real. To stumble so close to the finish line was maddening. On top of that, it was not just me they were letting down and stringing along, but a team of our mutual colleagues and friends. When they asked me repeatedly what was going on with the paper, what was I supposed to say? Maybe

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4300/JGME-D-24-00126.1>

we were never on the same page. Maybe I needed to be more explicit early on. These relationships don't come with a manual, and I've been out of the dating scene for quite some time.

I've had several wonderful projects that trainees have left abandoned in the project junkyard, never to be seen by a peer reviewer. I understand that trainees are well-intentioned, and it is hard for me to admit defeat, leading to months or even years of delay. At some point I realize that these empty promises and prolonged deadlines won't magically yield a manuscript. These silent breakups are painful. I'm still watching them from afar, wondering what happened, why we failed, why I was ghosted.

With each failure, I am learning. The next time I put myself out there and ask a trainee to be in a research relationship, I will be more explicit. While it may be awkward to talk about one's past relationships and open yourself up to rejection, it's an important discussion to have. Maybe we'll think twice before we cement our relationship. I'll have to be clear on the type of commitment they are interested in—something casual or serious? When it comes to the research, what am I looking for and what do they want to do? Do they want to be a

leader, a contributor, or an observer? If they are new to research relationships, I'll need to openly describe the time and effort involved in each stage of the project, as well as how that fits in with the rest of their activities and commitments. Like a prenuptial agreement, I will follow up with something in writing that everyone agrees to including concrete timelines.

In the end, I submitted the paper myself. I took care of the communications, the revisions, the rest of the work. They were the first author, the last to respond, and I felt lucky that they agreed with the final product. When it was accepted in a great journal—silence. It's a happy sad ending. Even if I try a new approach next time, perhaps my future research relationships still won't end well, but I will learn something from every single one of them. Just like research in progress, I will revise and try again.



Melissa L. Langhan, MD, MHS, is Program Director, Pediatric Emergency Medicine Fellowship, Departments of Pediatrics and Emergency Medicine, Section of Pediatric Emergency Medicine, Yale School of Medicine, New Haven, Connecticut, USA.

Corresponding author: Melissa L. Langhan, MD, MHS, Yale School of Medicine, New Haven, Connecticut, USA, melissa.langhan@yale.edu