

UAB's 2021 Brain Awareness Week has been reinvented

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COVID-19 has impacted events, holidays and even simple human interactions for more than a year. Many events have been either canceled or indefinitely postponed because of it. One event that was canceled at the beginning of the pandemic is the University of Alabama at Birmingham's annual Brain Awareness Week (BAW).

Before the pandemic ground the world to a halt, UAB'S BAW was led by Ph.D. students, staffed by volunteers and hosted by the McWane Science Center. 2020 BAW events were canceled last year because of COVID.

This year, four Ph.D. students, are refashioning 2021 BAW celebrations as a series of online, Zoom-based immersive science talks that will take place March 22-26.

BAW is the global campaign to foster public enthusiasm and support for brain science. The goal of BAW is to organize events and activities that share the wonders of the brain and the impact brain science has on our everyday lives.

During BAW, each day is divided into morning and afternoon sessions, each consisting of two 30-minute Science Shorts — 15- to 20-minute talks with a Q-and-A at the end. The morning sessions primarily target younger ages (grades K-5), while afternoon sessions may additionally attract students in higher grades. At 6 p.m. Monday-Thursday, there will be happy hour talks led by UAB neuroscientists. Links to each day's activities can be found on the event's Facebook page.

The happy hour talks will be on the following topics:

Monday: "Exercise & Epilepsy" – Dr. Jane Allendorfer

Tuesday: "How COVID-19 Impacts Your Brain" – Dr. Shruti Agnihotri

Wednesday: "Cannabis as Medicine" – Dr. Jerzy Szaflarski

Thursday: Neuroscience and Art" – Dr. Christianne Strang

"This is a chance to learn directly from scientists and even have your questions answered. Those who join us can learn about the brain's protective barriers, its tissue-repair cells, how it changes in response to both exercise and viral disease, and much, much more," said Ayushe Sharma, a Ph.D. student in neurology professor Jerzy Szaflarski's lab and one of the BAW leaders.

This year's BAW events have been planned by Sharma as well as three other Ph.D. students studying neuroscience: Genelle Samson, Kristen Buford and Emma Jones, as well as their faculty advisor, Kristina Visscher, Ph.D.

BAW was also officially supported by the Birmingham Mayor's Office as Mayor Randall Woodfin proclaimed March 22-26 "Brain Awareness Week" in Jefferson County.

"When I was growing up, medicine was the only career suggested by teachers and others when they saw I enjoyed studying the human body and science in general," Sharma said. "I never even considered being a scientist until much later in life. Events like BAW combat this type of narrative. My hope is that our BAW celebrations make kids realize that being a scientist is not the stuff of books and TV shows, but something they can actually aspire to and accomplish themselves."