Dr. Noa Ofen to chair symposia at Biological Psychiatry meeting

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Noa Ofen, Ph.D.

Wayne State University faculty member Noa Ofen, Ph.D., will chair and speak at a major selected symposium at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biological Psychiatry, May 16-18, in San Francisco.

The two-hour May 16 symposia, "Memory Systems in Development, Risk and Disease: A Case-Study for R-DoC Applications in the Schizophrenia Diathesis," will highlight through 30-minute presentations the challenges and value of applying the National Institutes of Health's recent standard on Research Domain Criteria, or R-DoC, for understanding mechanisms underlying significant psychiatric illnesses.

National Institute of Mental Health Director Thomas Insel, Ph.D., announced in an April 29 post to the NIMH's Director's Blog that R-DoC will be the new standard by which the NIMH will assess funding proposals. He wrote that it launched the RDoC project to transform diagnosis by incorporating genetics, imaging, cognitive science and other levels of information to lay the foundation for a new classification system.

Dr. Ofen is assistant professor in the School of Medicine's Department of Pediatrics, WSU Institute of Gerontology and Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute for Child and Family Development. She joined the faculty in 2011 with the goal of translating her expertise in pediatric functional magnetic resonance imaging in normal development to the study of neurodevelopmental disorders.

As chair, she will present the framework for the symposia in her introductory session comments.

WSU's Vaibhav Diwadkar, Ph.D., associate professor of Psychiatry & Behavioral Neurosciences, also will present results from studies of disordered development of working-memory related brain networks in adolescent vulnerability for schizophrenia.

The studies are consistent with an R-DoC approach toward understanding disordered brain mechanisms and circuits that contribute toward risk and vulnerability for disorders, he said.

Dr. Ofen's achievement in constructing such a major symposium is notable because she is a recent entrant into the world of Biological Psychiatry, Dr. Diwadkar said.

"Until as recently as 18 months ago, she had been primarily focused on studies in human neurodevelopment. This success is very revealing of her significant talent, her drive and her translational vision," he said.

Dr. Ofen's long-range research goal is to understand learning and memory networks in the developing human brain. Learning and memory are severely impaired in schizophrenia, and "it became quickly clear that studying at-risk population offers a unique opportunity to expand my research interests in the service of an important clinical and developmental question," she said. "I am excited to present my new research direction in the Society of Biological Psychiatry and have already received excited advanced emails from meeting participants in anticipation of the symposium."

She initially approached the presenters, who include Dr. Diwadkar and others from the NIH and University of California at Davis.

"I was fortunate to get enthusiastic responses from the presenters and was delighted to learn that the symposium was selected among the few to be presented in the conference. Presentations will cut across various stages, including typical development, childhood onset schizophrenia, adolescents at-risk, and affected adults, and offer convergence of both

structural and functional neuroimaging methodologies," he said.