This summer, I spent 10 weeks participating in research at the Center for the Treatment and Study of Anxiety at Penn under the mentorship of Dr. Anu Asnaani. The CTSA, a world-renowned treatment center in Philadelphia, manages both clinical and research practices for anxiety disorders.

Since the clinic’s environment is extremely conducive to a hands-on and exploratory learning experience, I was able to gain a valuable understanding of both areas of the clinic over the course of my internship.

In the clinical facet, I learned the different methods used to treat social anxiety disorder (SAD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and general anxiety disorder (GAD). On several occasions I was invited to assist in exposures, which are situations designed to help patient overcome their fears by facing them gradually. I was invited to attend Dr. Edna Foa’s OCD Exposure and Ritual Prevention Workshop held to train therapists from around the world on the latest treatments for OCD. In this workshop, I learned how exposure and response prevention (EX/RP) treatment is carried out for OCD patients, the methodology behind this treatment, the session-by-session agenda, and the hierarchical organization and implementation of exposures into treatment.

Dr. Asnaani also taught me how to manage a research project from start to finish. I first learned how to utilize the REDCap program for collection and clinical data management, as well as SPSS statistical software for various data analyses. Dr. Asnaani then taught me how to generate research questions, draft IRB applications, consent forms and protocols for future studies.
Finally, after several weeks of training and preparation, I was able to conduct my own research on how baseline expectancies about treatment and therapeutic alliance effect symptom improvement in patients with anxiety disorders. After conducting a literature review, organizing the data in SPSS, scaling the variables for proper comparison, and finally, analyzing and interpreting these findings, I was able to formulate conclusions about my study and construct a poster write-up on the project.

Overall, I learned many things from my summer research experience at the CTSA. I set weekly goals to help manage my time most effectively and balance research and clinical responsibilities. I learned the importance of collaborating with others to address issues and problem solve to reach viable solutions, and I learned how important multidisciplinary skills are for success on the job. To be a successful researcher, clinician, or both, one needs the ability to write, work well with others, problem solve, analyze, view a situation through multiple lenses and make decisions with good judgment.

By the end of the summer, I realized several things about my own interests as well. Ideally I would now like to go into a field that encompasses both research and clinical components, as the intersection of these elements provides a lot of variety and excitement for learning in the work place. I look forward to continue assisting Dr. Asnaani in the fall!