

Henry Nasrallah Award for Excellence in Clinical Psychopharmacology Education Awardee



Interview with Dr. Jenessa Johnston

Stephen Stahl, M.D., Ph.D. is a household name amongst clinicians and researchers, a legendary psychopharmacologist who has dedicated his career to not only quality research but educating the next generation of clinicians and scientists. His courses and award-winning teaching materials are used by psychopharmacology teachers and students worldwide, and his founding of the Neuroscience Education Institute (NEI) which has changed education across psychopharmacology. Before the acceptance of the inaugural ASCP Henry Nasrallah award, I got the chance to sit down with him and discuss the breadth of his work – while also appreciating his humor.

Stephen Stahl, M.D., Ph.D.
University of California
San Diego

2025 Henry Nasrallah Award
for Excellence in Clinical
Psychopharmacology
Education Awardee



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Awardee



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JJ: What inspired you to have teaching be such a focal point in your career?

SS: I think it was really an accident – I was going to win a Nobel Prize and transform the scientific sphere and then I realized how difficult that would be.” – a break for my own laughter and assurance the Nobel Prize is still within grasp here – “But I started to be more interested in more practical things in general. I’ve always had a visual understanding of mechanisms and disease states, and those sketches that help me understand – they turned out to help others as well. I realized that I had the ability to impact the field. With good teaching you can have a huge impact in fairly short periods, having people understand a little better how the brain works and rationale behind drug choices helps improve clinical practice broadly. The book I wrote became a best seller – they say that if you’re somebody like Obama, the person makes the book – however if you’re unknown, the book makes you. So that started a career.

JJ: And what a career it has been – Dr. Stahl has written innumerable books and chapters, including multiple best-sellers such as his Prescriber’s guides and Stahl’s Essential Psychopharmacology. With over 2 million copies sold in 11 languages worldwide, he has no doubt made a massive impact on clinical practice and the field of psychopharmacology.

JJ: Obviously you’ve taught so many different groups of people, such as aspiring clinicians, researchers, and even patients and families – how do you approach teaching these varied groups?

SS: The short answer is participant focused teaching. There are three elements of any learning environment whether it’s lectures or books: the content, the presenter (or author), and the participant. In most medical education, content is king. The second most important in medical education is the presenter – the lectures will be at convenient times for them, and the purpose is to make the presenter look good themselves. At the end of it, learners will be saying “I don’t understand a thing he said, but boy is he smart.” The participant focus means you must know your participant. There are four stages of learning: unconscious incompetent, conscious incompetent, conscious competent, and unconscious competent. You can only move up one level in a single exposure, so knowing your audience is key – if you don’t know them, you’ll lose them.

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JJ: Did you teach yourself how to teach, or were there mentors and advice along the way that you followed?

SS: For years, I just figured if you're smart, and you know the content it's automatic, but I had to actually study. The idea of audience response keypads I stole from – you're not going to believe this – a business that was training car salesmen. The principles of adult education have been much better applied in a corporate environment than they are in medicine. We get away with bad instructional design because people are highly motivated, and you know they will figure it out even though it's badly presented. I don't like to stand behind a podium because you can't get your body language across – your ability to portray sincerity and enthusiasm comes across much better when your whole body can be viewed. So, the answer is I taught myself some of these principles of adult education. I'm trying to change behaviors, and you don't change behavior until you're confident of new materials.

JJ: What would you say to those who are considering prioritizing teaching within their career?

SS; I think that it's based on your own values. If you teach 10 people, all of whom have 100 patients, you're impacting 1000s of people already. If you write a book and it's well-read, there are millions of people you're affecting. Realistically you might want to get grants, and you might want to write publications, and you might want to get promoted all or all true but when you look at it and say, what did my sum of my life's research add up to – what did I really change in the world?

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JJ: And I think we can all safely say that Dr. Stephen Stahl has changed the field of psychopharmacology for the better and improved psychiatric care across the world. His empowerment of learners is evident - introduction of this award by Dr. Joe Goldberg and Dr. Henry Nasrallah further emphasized his many varied achievements, and questions afterwards were filled with gratitude for Dr. Stahl and his teaching. In his own words:

"It is interesting getting some recognition for teaching, which is usually much less glorified than research, so I'm very thankful to Henry Nasrallah, for putting his name and his resources towards endowing this award."

Congratulations again, Dr. Stahl, on your well-deserved inaugural Henry Nasrallah award.

Jenessa Johnston, Ph.D.

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