



Shocklab

Code of Conduct

Department of Mathematics and Applied Mathematics

University of Cape Town

A living document — last updated March 2026

Why This Document Exists

Shocklab is growing, which is fantastic. We are creating a community, rather than just a disparate set of research students. But growth means that the informal norms which work in a small group can stop working in a larger one. This document exists to make our shared expectations explicit, so that nobody has to guess what "normal" looks like here.

The primary purpose of this code of conduct is to ensure that every person in Shocklab is **cared for** and **feels safe** — physically, psychologically, and professionally. Good research follows from good conditions for the people doing the research, not the other way around.

This document supplements the Science Faculty General Code of Conduct, which sets the baseline standards for all members of the Faculty. Everything here is consistent with and builds upon that code. Where the Faculty code or UCT policy sets a higher standard than this document on any point, the Faculty code and UCT policy take precedence.

This is a living document. It should be discussed and amended whenever we feel that it's necessary.

1 Core Commitments

Everything else in this document follows from three commitments:

Care. We look out for each other. Research is hard, and the people doing it matter more than the outputs they produce.

Safety. Nobody should feel physically unsafe, psychologically threatened, or professionally exploited in this lab. If you do, that is a problem with the environment, not with you.

Honesty. We say what we mean, give genuine feedback, acknowledge mistakes, and ask for help when we need it. This requires trust, which we build by honouring these commitments consistently.

2 Mental Health and Wellbeing

Research culture can be really corrosive to mental health. The combination of ambiguity, high expectations, irregular feedback, impostor feelings, and precarious career paths puts researchers at elevated risk of anxiety, depression, and burnout. This is not a personal weakness. It is a structural feature of the environment we work in, and we take it seriously.

What we expect of everyone

- Check in on your fellow students/research colleagues/friends. If someone seems withdrawn, overwhelmed, or unlike themselves, a private and kind question can make a real difference.
- Respect boundaries around working hours. Do not expect or pressure anyone to respond to messages in the evenings, on weekends, or during leave. If you choose to work at unusual times, that is your decision — do not make it someone else's obligation.
- Normalise talking about difficulty. You can say "I'm struggling with this" in this lab without it being held against you.
- Recognise that different people have different circumstances. Family obligations, health conditions, financial pressures, commuting from far away, load shedding, visa stress — these are real and they affect capacity. Extend good faith.

What you can expect of Jonathan

- I will never judge you for taking time to recover, deal with personal matters, or step back when you need to.
- I will do my best to notice when something is wrong and to ask, but I am not always going to get it right. Please tell me if you need something.
- If you come to me with a problem, I will not treat it as a performance issue. We will work out what support you need.
- I will be transparent about expectations so that ambiguity doesn't become a source of stress. If you feel that I have not been transparent, call me out.
- I am not a trained counsellor or therapist. I will always support you, but I may also suggest professional support when I think it would help.

A note on power dynamics

The relationship between a supervisor and a student or postdoc is inherently asymmetric. I control or influence funding, project direction, reference letters, and timelines. I take that seriously. The onus for maintaining a safe and fair environment falls disproportionately on me, not on you. If something feels wrong in our working relationship, the responsibility to fix it is mine.

If you are an international student or researcher on a visa, I want to be explicit: your immigration status will never be used as leverage, and concerns about visa implications should not prevent you from raising any issue with me or with the department. If your visa situation is causing you stress or affecting your work, tell me and we will work through it together.

UCT Support Resources

You do not need to manage everything alone. The following are available to all UCT students and staff:

- **Student Wellness Service (SWS):** Medical and counselling services at the Ivan Toms Building on Lower Campus. Phone: 021 650 1020 for medical, 021 650 1017 for counselling.
- **UCT Student Careline:** 24/7 telephonic counselling. Call 0800 24 25 26 (toll-free from a Telkom line) or SMS 31393 for a call-back.
- **Higher Health Crisis Line:** 0800 36 36 36 (24 hours).
- **SADAG Helpline:** 0800 567 567 (SA Depression and Anxiety Group).
- **Campus Protection Services:** 080 650 2222 (toll-free) for any emergency on campus.
- **Panda App:** Download and use promo code "SWSCares" for free one-to-one text-based mental health support.
- **UCT Transformation plans and policies:** Including statements of values, employment equity, anti-discrimination and inclusivity: uct.ac.za/main/explore-uct/transformation/plans-policies

3 Physical Safety

Even though we spend the vast majority of our time on computers and not in a wet lab, physical safety is still relevant.

- If you are working alone on campus outside of normal hours, let someone know where you are.
- Familiarise yourself with the emergency exits, assembly points, and Campus Protection Services contact (080 650 2222) for your building.
- If you are feeling unwell, stay home. Do not come into the office out of obligation. This applies to physical illness, mental health difficulties, or simply needing a day to recover.
- Travel safety: if you are travelling for conferences or collaboration, we will discuss any relevant safety considerations before you go. If you have safety concerns about any trip, raise them — no obligation to travel exists.
- Ergonomics matter. If your desk setup, chair, or screen is causing you discomfort, let's fix it. Small physical problems become big ones if ignored.
- Cape Town is wonderful, but we have to be aware of risks of walking around both at night, and even in the day. Be aware of your surroundings, don't have any obvious valuables on display, and avoid walking around the areas around Rondebosch at night as much as possible.

4 Respect and Interpersonal Conduct

The lab includes people with diverse backgrounds, identities, nationalities, languages, religions, and life experiences. This is one of our strengths. It also means we need to be deliberate about creating a space where everyone feels they belong.

This code applies to all Shocklab-related activity: in the office, at conferences, during presentations and poster sessions, in online communications, on social media when representing the lab, and at social events associated with the group.

Non-negotiable

- No harassment, discrimination, bullying, or intimidation of any kind. This includes verbal, written, physical, and online behaviour.
- No unwanted physical contact.
- No offensive comments related to gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, mental health status, physical appearance, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, age, HIV status, political opinion, or socioeconomic background. This includes sexist, racist, or other exclusionary language framed as "jokes." Humour that targets people's identities is not harmless, and it is not welcome here.
- Use people's preferred names and pronouns.
- If someone tells you that something you did or said made them uncomfortable, take it seriously. Defensiveness is a natural reaction but not a helpful one.

If you are ever uncertain about whether a behaviour or comment is appropriate, that uncertainty is itself a useful signal. You can ask a colleague, ask Jonathan, or consult UCT's transformation plans and policies. Asking is always better than assuming.

Encouraged

- Be curious about your colleagues' work. Ask genuine questions in lab meetings.
- Give credit generously and publicly.
- Offer help when you can. Accept help when you need it.
- Be patient with people who are learning. Remember that you were once a beginner.
- When disagreeing, engage with the idea, not the person. Intellectual rigour and personal kindness are fully compatible.

5 Working Hours and Sustainable Pace

Sustainable pace over the long term produces better science and healthier researchers than periodic crises followed by burnout.

- There is no expectation of fixed office hours, but you should be reliably contactable during some agreed-upon core hours, and attend scheduled meetings unless you let me know that you are not available.
- Overwork is not a badge of honour. If you are consistently working evenings and weekends, something is wrong with the workload, the approach, or both — and we should talk about it.
- Take leave. Rest is productive. Let Jonathan know when you are planning on being away.
- Deadlines sometimes require extra effort. That's acceptable if it's occasional, acknowledged, and followed by recovery. It is not acceptable as a default mode of operation.
- If Jonathan ever asks you to undertake a task outside of your main research and you feel that you don't have the capacity at that time, saying no will never count against you.

6 Reporting Concerns

If something in this document is being violated, or if you feel unsafe or unsupported for any reason, you have options:

1. **Talk to Jonathan directly.** This is always an option and will always be received without judgement.
2. **Talk to a trusted colleague in the lab.** They can raise the issue on your behalf if you prefer.
3. **If the concern involves Jonathan,** or if you feel that an internal resolution is not possible, contact the Head of the Department of Mathematics and Applied Mathematics, or UCT's Office for Inclusivity and Change (OIC). You can report incidents online at: casereporting.uct.ac.za
4. **For urgent safety concerns,** contact Campus Protection Services at 080 650 2222.

No one will face retaliation for raising a concern in good faith. If you experience or witness retaliation, report it through the channels above. Serious or repeated violations of this code may be referred to formal UCT disciplinary processes, in line with the Science Faculty General Code of Conduct. In such cases, the OIC will hear both parties involved on the shortest possible notice and determine appropriate further action.

7 Research Integrity

This section is deliberately brief because the primary focus of this document is the welfare of people, not the conduct of research per se. However, the two are connected: an environment where people feel safe is an environment where they are more likely to be honest about mistakes, ask for help, and maintain high standards.

- Be honest about your results. Fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism are career-ending and will be treated as such.
- Report mistakes promptly. We all make them. Catching errors early is far better than discovering them after publication.
- Use version control (Git) and document your work so that it is reproducible.
- Disclose any use of generative AI tools in your research and writing. Be transparent about what the tool did and what you did.
- It is always better to discuss authorship ordering at the beginning of a collaboration than at the time of publication.

8 Acknowledgement

By joining Shocklab, you are agreeing to uphold the principles in this document. You are also agreeing that this document may change, and that you have a voice in those changes.

This code of conduct will be reviewed collectively at least once per year. Suggestions for changes are welcome at any time.

Inspired by the lab manuals of the Aly Lab (UC Berkeley), the CLEAR Lab Book (Memorial University), the Kidd Lab (McMaster), and the KTH Division of Glycoscience welcome document, as well as the SIPS Lab Manual Template. Adapted for Shocklab at the University of Cape Town by Claude AI, and Jonathan Shock.