Meet Your Match: How to nail the virtual interview
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Meet Your Match | How to nail the virtual interview

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Hilary Fairbrother, MD, has been interviewing residents for a decade. An associate professor and the vice chair of education at UT Health in Houston, she offers tips on standing out during residency interviews in the virtual format.

Speakers

- Hilary Fairbrother, MD, associate professor and vice chair of education, UT Health in Houston
- Brendan Murphy, senior news writer, American Medical Association

Host

- Todd Unger, chief experience officer, American Medical Association

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Transcript

Unger: Welcome to Making the Rounds, a podcast by the American Medical Association. In this episode of the “Meet Your Match” series, AMA senior news writer Brendan Murphy interviews Dr. Hilary Fairbrother, associate professor and vice chair of education at UT Health Houston. Having done her fair share of interviews for residency selection, she shares her expertise on the do’s and don’ts of virtual interviewing. Here’s Brendan.
Murphy: Hello and welcome to Making the Rounds, a podcast by the American Medical Association. Today we continue with our “Meet your Match” series with Dr. Hilary Fairbrother, an associate professor and vice chair of education at UT Health in Houston. I'm Brendan Murphy, senior news writer at the AMA.

In her position, Dr. Fairbrother is heavily involved in residency selection and interviewing applicants. Dr. Fairbrother, thank you so much for being with us today. How are you?

Dr. Fairbrother: I'm well. How are you?

Murphy: I'm great. I'm very excited to begin this interview. Today, we're going to hear from Dr. Fairbrother on how to ace your virtual interviews, including questions to prepare for, mistakes to avoid in a virtual format and how an applicant can highlight their interest in passions.

I think a good place to start, Dr. Fairbrother, is for you to talk about your role in the interview process and residency selection on the whole.

Dr. Fairbrother: So, I am the vice chair of education for my emergency department. And in that role, I am responsible for the overall success of the emergency medicine residency. And a successful match, of course, leaves us with a successful intern class. And they graduate and go through our residency process. And that leads to a successful residency. And in that way, I'm very involved with the Match process.

Murphy: Great. I think we should start off by talking about, I don't want to call it the elephant in the room but it is obvious that virtual interviews have changed residency selection. Can you talk about how virtual interviews have changed residency selection from both the applicant and the program perspective?

Dr. Fairbrother: Sure. So virtual interviews have really changed the way that we interview candidates. And I think that it's also changed the way that candidates interview us. So, it's changed how we look and consider our candidates who are applying for residency. And the candidates themselves, they see a different side of things when they are not in person, and when they are doing and completing interviews in a virtual format.

I think the number one thing for both parties is that we don't get that in-person, non-verbal communication. Our candidates are not walking in the hospital and seeing how does it feel, what does it sound like, what does it look like, what does it smell like. All of these are things that resident candidates used to really get, at least, a snippet or an idea of when they were visiting in person and vice versa.
Are you the type of candidate that holds the door for the next person? Are you the type of candidate that rushes to the front of the line? And no one's getting these subtle non-verbal communications and that goes both ways.

And then from there, I would say, it is harder to get to what is real. And that's for us and for candidates themselves. And that's a pervasive theme that I see as I see people work their way through virtual interviews on any side of it that we're speaking about.

**Murphy:** I should point out that our third episode of Meet Your Match details the ways in which applicants can get a feel for program culture without actually doing some of those in-person activities that are a part of in-person interviews. But in advance of that virtual interview—and I think it's fair to say at this point in our culture. Many people are used to platforms like Zoom and Teams. Are we still seeing common missteps from applicants that are specific to the virtual format? And if so, what are they?

**Dr. Fairbrother:** Oh, definitely. So, I have a couple that are some of my favorites. So, one of them is not being in control of the noise and what's happening around you. And if you're like me, so when I'm at home, I have two dogs, and two little kids and a husband who love to wander into the camera. Sometimes, they make noise. It can be very hard for me to control all of the elements of my environment. So, I have to tell you, when I'm interviewing candidates or when I'm doing something that is really important to me, I go to my office and I would absolutely encourage everyone to do what you need to do, to take control of your environment. And if you're like me and you can't be at home, find a quiet place that you can control that has good and reliable internet for you to use.

So that would be mistake number one is just not being able to control the environment and having some chaos erupt because of that. Number two would be muting, unmuting and camera on, off. I think we've all gotten really comfortable really only dressing halfway up.

I had a COVID baby. And honestly, people didn't even know I was pregnant than no less had a baby. And I would—I not only went through an entire pregnancy but even would feed this kid. And no one ever knew, because they only see the top portion of you.

It's really important to remember, if you're wearing something that might not be professional on the bottom, to really be mindful that you don't stand up and walk away and leave your camera on. And so just being mindful when your camera is on, when your microphone is on, when your camera is off, when your microphone is off.

The one that got me—and I didn't even know this was a possibility—when I was on my phone for various video conferences, you can usually control your microphone on and off through your watch, if
you have a smartwatch that's connected to your phone. And my child, I was on a— I was on conference, residency conference. All of my residents are in conference, a bunch of the faculty.

And I muted myself because my child was acting up and I was yelling at my four-year-old to get in line. And I yelled to the whole residency to get in line. And they all thought that this was wildly funny but you wouldn't want to make a misstep like that during an interview.

So be mindful of muting, unmuting, camera on, off. It's always better to go with off than it is with on. You can always turn things on. And someone can say, oh, you're muted, than to have the opposite be true. I think we've all heard the, “Oh, yeah, I'm on this dumb interview,” or something that might lead to the interview being more uncomfortable or just uncomfortable for the interviewer, and frankly, for the interviewees.

Other missteps, I think making sure your lighting is OK is important, making sure your face is framed. You don't want to be too close to the camera. You don't want to be too far away from the camera. You don't want there to be so much light on your face that it's really washing you out. And you don't want there to be light behind you so that you look like you're in the Witness Protection Program.

All of these are things that people ratchet up to an incredible level, buying ring lights and doing all sorts of things. None of that is really necessary. I do like the ring light. It does make everyone look better. But that being said, what you really just need to make sure is that your face is easily seen and framed well in your camera.

I do recommend getting an additional camera and microphone, if the one on your computer or on your laptop is really not that great. They are not that expensive and it really will, I would say, make a big difference in how professional you are appearing when you're on these video interviews.

Murphy: One thing I've also heard from program directors and staff is to make sure you have an emergency contact because at some point, you might lose your internet, circumstances arise, it's always good to have someone to reach out to.

But it does sound like, for the most part, you can usually stand out for the wrong reasons. Is there any ways you can stand out for a positive reason through the medium?

Dr. Fairbrother: Well, so I think everybody likes a nice background. So maybe it's a bookshelf and you've got some books up there that you really care about. And that might inspire some conversation. Maybe it's some sports paraphernalia. Though, you always want to be careful. You might also trigger someone into not liking you as much if they don't like your team.

But in general, having a background that is pretty clean, pretty fresh. A plant is always nice. People always say that there are positive emotions when people have plants growing behind them. I think it's
just showing that you can keep something alive. But just really maybe trying to have a little bit of personality in there without it being overboard does allow people to get a little insight into who you are. And I think can really provide a little bit of that non-verbal communication that we've lost by not being in person.

So that's the way I'd say people have used this medium to stand out. Again, I think it's also just—it's easier and it's a lot cheaper to be doing an interview from home or from some other quiet place that you have access to, like your med school study areas. It's far easier to do that than getting on a plane and handling, trying to get to a new location and renting a car, and all of these things that people used to do when they were going to interviews in person.

So, a lot of that—a lot of it is easier, a lot of it is leaving you in a more comfortable setting. So you can really, hopefully express who you are and not be as worried about all the logistics of trying to get somewhere, and also leave and get out of there again.

**Murphy:** So, we've covered the virtual facets of the interview. Structurally, and maybe in terms of the approach, that much hasn't changed. I think one thing that would be helpful to our listeners is to give applicants some insights on what type of research they should do in advance of their interview.

**Dr. Fairbrother:** Well, so I always tell everyone, when you're going to interview at a location or nowadays, when you're going to do a virtual interview for a residency program, go on their website and see what they're proud of.

So, if you go on most residency websites, you might see a Twitter feed, you might see some things that have landed them in the news, you might see some recent publications. You're going to see things that they are proud of. You're going to be seeing things that they remark on. Maybe it's the city that they work in. They're really proud of the diversity. Maybe they’re really proud of their relationship with a local sporting event that they cover.

There’s all different things that someone or a residency might put on their website. And you want to review that. Now you don't need to spend 10 hours doing it but going on the website and taking some notes, looking to see what is the basic information that someone could get by reading the website. Because you don't really want to ask that as questions, when you're given the opportunity to ask as a question.

So, a good example of that would be if you look on a website for residency A. And it says that they rotate at three different hospitals. And they give you the demographics of those hospitals, whether they’re a county hospital, a pediatric hospital, a level three trauma center or level one trauma center. Whatever it might be, they describe those things to you.
Well, you wouldn't want to be then asking in your residency interview, so what kind of hospitals are you based in? Because that's really easy and accessible information that they've put on their website for a reason. They want people to know about that kind of information.

So, you can use the website in that way to really gain access to the information the residency wants you to have at your fingertips and also lets them, again, looking for things that they might be proud of. Because it tells the residency program, when you are interviewing, if you ask a question like, “Hey, what hospitals am I going to rotate at?” They might have the impression that you're just kind of showing up for this virtual interview. You really don't care about them. They are another one of maybe 60 programs that you've applied to. And you don't really know who they are or what they stand for and what makes them special.

And everybody wants to feel special, both the programs want to feel special and our candidates want to feel special. Candidates tell me all the time how disheartening it is when they're interviewing and they feel like someone really didn't interview—didn't review their application before interviewing them and doesn't seem to know anything about them as an applicant.

Well, programs are the same way. They want to know that you've learned something about them that you have read up on what they care about and what they stand for. So, it's far more impactful to someone that is interviewing you to say, “Well, so I saw that there are three different hospitals that we cover with your residency program, which is your favorite hospital and why.” That's a much better question than, “Oh, what hospitals will I rotate if I go to residency at your program?”

Murphy: That's very helpful, demonstrating interest actually does require a little bit of legwork before the interview.

In terms of preparation, there are people that advocate for mock interviews. Are you an advocate for that? And what does a helpful mock interview look like in your eyes?

Dr. Fairbrother: So, I'm a huge advocate for everyone to complete mock interviews before they actually interview. There are some people that are really natural. And they are natural in person, they're natural on Zoom and they do really well. In fact, I would say, they interview above their rank, right? They just have a very easy time of it. They answer questions very easily. They're very personable. But that's not everyone. And I want all candidates to really be putting their best foot forward.

And so, in order to do that, just like if you were trying to run a race, you wouldn't just go run the race that morning. You would be practicing. And interviews are just like any other element where you want to really succeed and do well, you get one shot. And in order to really do, put your best foot forward. You need to practice. And practice is mock interviews.

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I also think that it really makes candidates examine who they are, and what they're looking for. You might learn a little bit about yourself and what you're looking for in a residency with your mock interview. You really might—it's a nice way to self-analyze and do some self-reflection. That's very deliberate self-reflection.

So I think—I'm a big fan of mock interviews. And the nice thing about mock interviews is that with this being all online, you could do mock interviews with anyone across the country. It doesn't have to be someone who's in person.

In fact, I would suggest that you do at least one set of mock interviews that's online if you're going to be completing virtual interviews, which almost everybody is.

I've seen a lot of students do mock interviews with each other. A lot of times, your home institution might offer mock interviews with educational specialists. Or you can always ask for people in the field that you're going into, to get their perspective on your sample answers.

Murphy: So, when it comes to the interview themselves, formats vary, but speaking generally, because we have a general audience here, many interviews will consist of a few types of questions. Those are behavioral questions, situational questions, and the word of the day, general questions. How should students prepare for each one of those categories in your eyes?

Dr. Fairbrother: So, I always think that you want to keep your responses to a few minutes. You don't want to speak for 10 minutes at a time when someone asks a question in an interview. So, I think timing is important. And then you can go online. There's a bunch of different resources for sample interview questions.

And I recommend that people go through lots of different sample questions because you don't want to have a rehearsed answer to a question. That's going to sound false to whoever you're speaking to. But if you've thought about a bunch of different questions and you really—you've contemplated, what is the time in my life that I've been challenged? And how did I work through it?

You are going to have some answers to some of those behavioral questions or some of those general questions and says—somebody says, well, tell me about yourself. You want to have a nice two-to-three-minute insight into who you are. And it shouldn't read just like your personal statement. Because hopefully, whoever is interviewing you has already read your personal statement. So, you want to use this interview to really augment your application with the personal touch of who you are.

You need to practice. Practice with a wide variety of questions and limit your time of your answers so that you can hopefully answer questions in a pretty concise and reliable format. But that way, you can do that without being too rehearsed.
Murphy: So getting into specifics, are there a few questions applicants should be prepared to answer?

Dr. Fairbrother: I think so. I always think that there are a couple of questions that reliably, students will be asked in this process. One of them is that “Tell me about yourself,” or “Tell me why you're interested in X specialty.”

And I think that there should be—there should be an answer to that. What is bringing you to the specialty you're interviewing for or the residency—the type of residency that you're interviewing for. Who are you? What makes you, you? Being comfortable telling some personal information about yourself. And you should never feel pressured to answer any of the illegal questions. I don't know if we're going to go into those.

But I'm not talking about anything overly personal. But what you feel comfortable sharing with the interviewer that gives them a little insight into who you are.

Then there's always the “When something bad happens, what have you done?” And people love knowing what's going to happen and how are you going to behave or how have you behaved when you've been challenged? There's that old saying that we are—you're really figure out who you are when something's really challenging or when something's really tough. We rarely do spend too much time figuring out who we are when things are really easy.

So that tell me a time when you failed. Tell me a time when you've been challenged. Tell me your biggest regret. Things like that. People are asking you that question because they want to know something that you're either not proud of or that wasn't great that happened and they want to know how you learned from that experience and how you're not going to just repeat the same mistake or the same experience ad nauseam, over and over.

So, whenever somebody asks that question about that negative thing, you just want to make sure that you answer it clearly, and make it something real. It shouldn't just be like, people just say I'm too giving. When people say like, what's your greatest handicap or what is a personality trait that you're least proud of? It should be something real. And you should also, in the next breath, tell them about how you have grown from that or how you approach and problem-solved based on that.

So, I can give you my example, if it would be helpful. If somebody said, tell me about a challenge that came before you. And tell me what you did. So, I would tell you that my first test in medical school, I passed, but barely. And I was receiving a scholarship for school. And so, I had to maintain a certain GPA that was far above my first test scores. And I was not going to be able to keep my scholarship or be successful in school and move on to the next year if I didn't really improve my grades from the first—from the first test.
And I was—I had always been a really good student. I had never really failed, honestly, at anything I had done. And I had to really take a harsh look at how I was studying and what I was doing. And I had to change my behaviors. And so, I did. And then I was successfully—I tested better and better with each subsequent test.

So here, I've given you a time when I was challenged, a time when I failed. And then what did I do to make sure that failure doesn't just keep happening or that I just keep having academic struggles. And that's what those questions are asking for.

And then I think there's always some questions where people really want you to dive into things that you've done, whether it's leadership experience, or they want to talk to you about your research or anything that you can really take something that's in your application and expand on it. And that's a very common form of question, so know your application.

If it says that you did research on circular electron rings, you had better be able to speak about it. You should not be really poorly knowledgeable about that topic, because someone might ask you to explain your work in that area.

**Murphy:** That's interesting. I would like to follow up on something you said. What are the illegal questions? What should students do if they come up? I think that it's certainly interesting and certainly something students should know.

**Dr. Fairbrother:** Well, and students need to know this because these are some of the protections that are really in place for very good reasons. So, an illegal question would be asking a woman if she's pregnant, asking about family planning. If someone volunteers that they're married, saying, “Oh, are you planning on having kids anytime soon?” Asking about your sexuality. Asking about who you're partnered to, if you are partnered.

Any of those questions are really not allowed. They are considered illegal questions. And if you're in an interview and you are asked them, this is always a quandary for students, because I think when those questions are asked, often, they make candidates feel really uncomfortable and for good reason. And that's one of the reasons that they are illegal.

Everybody has to deal with them their own way that they feel the most at ease with. There are some people that are going to say, I don't feel comfortable answering that question. I don't think that that's a question that the ACGME allows, or something to that effect. Some citation like hey, that's an illegal question.

There are many people—there are many candidates that don't feel comfortable saying something like that. And they might either answer the question really broadly or skirt the question but not answer it or even answer it and feel really uncomfortable when they're answering it or in retrospect, feel like, oh,
that was really—that felt really inappropriate.

So, I realized that during an interview process, even if you've been wronged, you may not want to bring it up. So, I encourage people to report any transgressions. But when and how they report is really up to them. So, if someone felt comfortable in the moment, reporting it to that individual residency, I think, is absolutely an option.

But I understand that for many people, they really don't want to be associated with it. They don't want any of this to put their match in their interview process in question or at risk. And for students, they really need to know that they are protected. They can anonymously report. You can wait till the end of interview season. You can wait till after rank lists are in and after Match Day is done in report.

There's no clock on the reporting structure. And I think it's really important that students have a protected way, that doesn't compromise them in any way to report and to feel safe that they have a way of reporting bad behaviors or inappropriate questions.

**Murphy:** So, we've talked about the question students should expect, the question students shouldn't hear. Interviews are certainly a two-way street and part of that is for the student to understand if a program is a right fit for them. What types of questions should students be asking?

**Dr. Fairbrother:** So again, I think it's all about for the different programs that you'll interview at, what are they proud of? Now almost every program is going to tell you that they're proud about their residents. And it's because it's true.

When you talk to people in residency leadership, they spend all of their time educating and taking care of residents. So, if you ask program leadership what they care about, it's the residents, it's the residency, it's training the next generation of physicians in their field.

So, it's not an uncommon answer but I would hope that programs would give you a little bit more than just what I'm really proud of my residents. Or maybe they might explain why. So, I could tell you, here in my residency program, what I'm most proud about is I really think that we train exceptional physicians to go into the world and be emergency physicians all over this country and the world.

And one of the things that I really think is just beyond amazing about our residents is their level of grit and hard work. They just are some of the most resilient and gritty people that I've met and how it makes them successful no matter what they do.

And I'm really proud that year after year, we really seem to make these classes of residents that really are gritty, and hardworking and successful.
We don't have a specific playbook that our residents follow. Some of our residents go into really academic and really high-level fellowships. Some of our residents want to graduate and go straight into the community. My goal is to make sure that anybody who wants to do whatever it is that they want to do after residency, has the necessary tools and training to do so.

So hopefully, if you were interviewing with me, you'd realize, “OK, well, they are a strong residency but they're really looking to make me into what I want to be. They don't really have an explicit vision for what their residents should do or what their residents should follow.”

And maybe that really speaks to you. Or maybe you're like, listen, I need—I want more guidance than that. I want to really be developed because I feel like I want some more guidance in my future than what they're offering. There might—there are different elements of each residency, and some are going to speak to you and some will not, and your job is to find what works for you and what you think will work for your learning style, what—honestly, one of the biggest things for residents or for students is where they want to live.

Geography is a really important consideration when taking into account where someone’s going to train and how they’re going to train, and what kind of patients they’re going to see.

**Murphy**: That's all very helpful. In that arena, I think one thing we'd like to touch on is how can a student make sure that their passions and interests, it could be something like research, it could be furthering health equity, how can they make sure that those are reflected in their interview performance? Those questions might not come up.

**Dr. Fairbrother**: Sure. So hopefully, someone will ask—be asked about what they're passionate about or something that allows them to bring that passion out. But you can always use the time—most residency programs are going to allow for times for you to ask questions.

And you can always say, “One of the things I've spent a lot of time and work on is diversity and inclusion. And so, can you talk to me about the work that you're doing in that arena?” And you can put in that carrot of, “This is something that I've spent some time on. I want to know what you're doing.”

And sometimes, that can take the interview and make it into more of a conversation. While we're doing this, tell me what you've done in the area or tell me what you've done in this subject. Or maybe it's your research. Research is really important to me. The work that I've done with determining social determinants of health and how they factor into gun ownership in the State of Texas has been a passion of mine. What kind of research have residents completed while they're in residency with you?

You can put in a little tidbit about something that you've done and maybe see if an interviewer picks up on it, if you feel like it's not being part of your interview and you really want to get a little bit of information in. I would be gentle with that. I would not spend two minutes talking about yourself and
then ask a question. But just mentioning a topic does allow for a little bit more conversation back and forth, when you're given the—when you're given the option of asking your interviewer some questions.

**Murphy**: So, we have touched on this a bit but in your eyes, can you define or outline what a standout interviewee does?

**Dr. Fairbrother**: I think a standout interviewee really is able to connect me to who they are. So, they give me a window into the type of student they are. They give me a window into why they're choosing their specialty. They give me a window into what is really important to them and what drives them.

And it allows me to really make as educated opinion as possible, whether I feel like they'll be successful at my residency or not. I think most residencies are really—they're looking to see who they think is going to be really successful in their program. And so, the more information that you can share, the more honest the information is, is really going to make a difference and allow for someone to make an educated decision about whether they feel like you will fit in their institution.

I think the reality is—and I tell this to all the people who I interview for residency—the fact that I am interviewing means—interviewing you means you've got all the necessary numbers. You've got all the necessary elements that we look at that spells out success. So, there's no more proving that you are successful enough to be a resident at my program.

Now it's about sharing who you are, sharing what makes you tick and really creating a story. Human beings love stories. And creating a story of who you are, and why you picked this specialty and why you want to train at my residency program.

**Murphy**: So, we can flip the script a little bit and look at the opposite end of the spectrum. In terms of interview performance, how can students stand out for the wrong reasons? And how can they avoid doing that?

**Dr. Fairbrother**: So, I think just like in medical school, the number one way to stand out in a negative fashion would be unprofessional or disrespectful. So, to use any words or terms that are disrespectful, to be disrespectful in your pre-interview email communications, to be disrespectful or rude during any kind of communal time.

And I say these things because these are all things that I've either heard reported happen or seen during interview days myself. And I think that all of our behavior has changed in this online remote world that we live in. We would never be standing in the hall, speaking negatively about the program where we were—where we were interviewing. But when we're on a Webex and we think we're muted, we might behave differently. We might say things differently.
And this is a grueling process. It frays everyone. So, everyone gets tired. Everyone gets frustrated. Maybe the communication wasn't amazing from the program you're interviewing at. And you're frustrated that you didn't get the right link.

You want to really behave professionally and respectfully, be kind, be patient at all times. Being rude to a program coordinator is a really fast way to get written off. It's not true at every shot but I can tell you that at most residences, if the program coordinator says, I don't want to deal with this young person as a future resident here, then you're probably not going to match there. That's just the reality of it.

Murphy: Do you have any other insights on the interview process that will be helpful to applicants?

Dr. Fairbrother: Again, I would make sure that you're prepared. I think you hit on a really important thing about having redundancy in electronics. Have a backup. And I would have that backup be your phone. Because the nice thing about your phone is it doesn't depend always on the WiFi in your house or at your school. So, you have a backup that you could use cellular data for, whatever that might be, maybe that's an iPad or a phone. But having a backup that uses a different type of data service, I think, is always helpful.

Making sure that you have your space set up so you are comfortable, so that you have a nice, quiet environment where you can feel at peace, and feel professional and feel controlled. Knowing that you are here to learn about the programs and they really want to learn about you, and feeling secure that if they're interviewing you, that you check all the necessary boxes for going to residency at that site.

Murphy: That was such great insight. Thank you so much for your time, Dr. Fairbrother.

Dr. Fairbrother: Oh, it's my pleasure. And I hope you have a great day. Good luck, everybody.

Murphy: This has been Meet Your Match on Making the Rounds, a podcast by the American Medical Association. I'm AMA senior news writer, Brendan Murphy. Thanks for listening.

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