

Outliers: Teaching & Learning Beyond the Norms

A zine by Mad and neurodivergent students and alumni
in North American post-secondary education

Note: Where not indicated via visible image description, alternative text is available for screen reader users in the alt text field of all images. A visually formatted PDF zine is available on [MacSphere](#).

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Welcome to the Zine: Outlining Outliers

This Zine invited contributions from Mad and neurodivergent students from wherever they were living and attending school to enrich debates and initiatives in the area of ‘student mental health’.

We welcomed discussion and exchange on the following questions:

- What are Mad and neurodivergent students doing to advocate, resist oppression, support each other, and/or to build community in colleges and universities?
- What has Mad and neurodivergent student organizing, advocacy, or community meant to those involved?
- How are Mad and neurodivergent students connecting to broader Mad/peer-based movements, communities, and histories beyond ‘campus’?
- How are Mad and neurodivergent students influencing what is taught about mental health, addiction, and neurodiversity and the ways colleges and universities address students’ mental health needs?
- Emerging from these creative alternatives, what inspirations, provocations and recommendations do Mad and neurodivergent students have for postsecondary/higher education learning and teaching, professors, staff, and fellow students?
- What do Mad and neurodivergent students want the future of learning and teaching to look like? What needs to change?

In this issue, you’ll find collage, drawing, painting, photography, poetry, song, and stories from 25+ students and alumni that reflect on these questions. Contributors speak to their identifications with madness and/or neurodivergence in a range of ways in their work and biographies.

We chose to title this Zine issue **Outliers** as this word holds multiple resonant meanings:¹

- A person or thing that is atypical, lies outside of, or stands apart from others of their group, class, or category as by differing behaviour, beliefs, or practices;
- A part of a geological formation left detached through the removal of surrounding parts by erosion;
- A fact, figure, piece of data, or observation that is very different from all the others in a set, well outside of the expected range of values in a study, and does not seem to fit the same pattern, and which is often discarded from the data set; and
- A place that is far from the main part of something.

These meanings of being an ‘outlier’ come alive in the Zine through the following themes:

- Contributors discuss Mad/neurodivergent student lives and practices that stand apart from the neurotypical, such as experiences of trauma and shame, resistance, entangled body-minds, being labelled and misknown, and longing for more fluid and open

¹ As adapted from Cambridge, Merriam-Webster, and Oxford Dictionaries and Dictionary.com.

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identities and interpretations.

- They identify the formative ways Mad/neurodivergent students are detached and removed from belonging in post-secondary environments through the corrosion of sanism, ableism, capitalism, whiteness, and shiny stories of 'inclusion' and 'resilience' that silence and erase narratives of struggle.
- Authors and artists draw on Mad/neurodivergent knowledges that do not fit the dominant medical model pattern, and which are often disregarded as forms of expertise.
- They desire and describe Mad/neurodivergent student spaces of community and mutual support away from the conventional surveillances of and services for students in distress.

Often outliers are represented visually as singular, lonely examples of divergence from the 'line of best fit'. We hope instead that this Zine draws outliers together by creating connections between Mad and neurodivergent student initiatives, documenting students' knowledges, and encouraging further student organizing! We call on post-secondary institutions and instructors to listen by enhancing accessibility, Mad Positivity, and respect for neurodiversity in teaching and learning.

We welcome your responses to the Zine and interest in creating a future issue within your local/national context. Read the rest of our "Origins of *Outliers*" at the end of the Zine and be in touch with us at mad.students.zines@gmail.com.

With Mad love and rage,

- The Mad Student Zine Team (Alise, Danny, Evonne, Vikita, and Lieve)

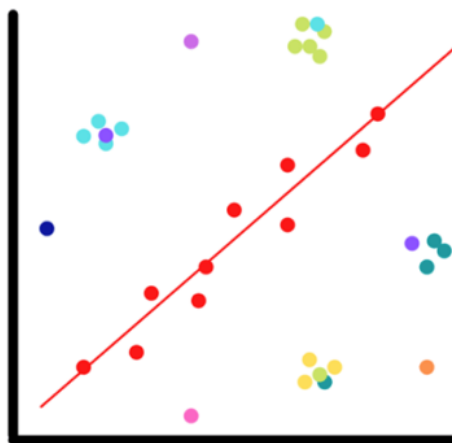


Figure 1: Graph with line of best fit and outliers

Misknown – Sam Shelton

Madness describes lived knowledge and experience
overflowing from the rigid

boundaries of compulsory cognitive discipline.

It is thought broken

free of psychological c o n s t r a i n t

to the point of becoming <disordered] pathology

in need of medicine, treatment, prescribed voltage to the system

sometimes voluntary, sometimes “for our own good”

Madness evokes fear – I am constantly afraid of those who fear me.

For I am much more subject to the **power** of their will

than they are to mine.

And I have been afraid of them for much longer

Their fear is a conditioned response – mine is a habit of being that I no longer

question

But, isn't knowledge always the greatest source of fear?

Fear comes from what is unknown

and also what is known wrongly, what is misknown

Madness can be knowledge, but sane people don't know that

They misknow it as something else – and that's what they are so afraid of.

The unmad world understands Madness through a looking glass -

reading it studiously from right to left when

the words are actually upside down

But people like to know where to look –

they believe that eyes are decent remedies,

yet it is only in the act of looking that a looking glass takes effect.

Madness is so very shy that it often lashes out under direct observation

Why else would it need to be covered with tinfoil hats and silence

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Herein lies an important issue for educators: the academy envies the all-seeing eye
atop Barad-dûr – what power of sight it yearns for. Perception is a focal point of
control.

But it has rarely seen me within its walls.

Or my Mad, cripple kin.

And when it has, it has done so with fire,
burning mental illness on top of my Madness
as if I'd fall for the old bait-and-switch –

Forcing never-enough resources down my throat

when what I really need is an airway

clear enough to speak my reality for what it truly is, underneath the muck of a bad frame.

Because I am tired of the misknowing, of being wrongly known.

Higher education cannot relinquish its fear of me until it embraces me for all that I am

Instead of assuming I am a deficit to be filled, like a tire-popping pothole

on the highway of learning. That's not my metaphor. I need more than a shovel and some dirt to
be whole.

How can Madness, crudely translated as "mental illness" in academ-ese,
be a deficit

when it has empowered me to exist in my own resplendent world

filled with enough shiny, glistening things to make the goblins and dragons

feel ashamed of their hordes?

In truth, sometimes "deficits" are just things the namers cannot fathom or comprehend.

After all, a hole in the ground says as much about the land surrounding it.

So what? The academy has been a hostile place for Mad people – just ask Margaret

Price or Shayda Kafai or any of the countless students who have trudged their way
through sanist programs –

up the unforgiving stairs of the Ivory Tower

to bear witness to the splendor of hatred etched into its walls and benches and published
works collecting dust on its over-packed bookshelves.

I don't know if the academy can be saved or not for me. It has ripped me apart, left me suicidal
and depressed. I never thought I would be in an abusive relationship for so much of my life. But I
just can't seem to quit. Is staying another example of my Madness at work? Or is my Madness
the voices in my head pleading for escape?

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After a decade as an obedient student, I have become a teacher now.
I guide students in crip, queer, and feminist learning,
or at least I try to.

Much of my pedagogy is borrowed, carried forward as tradition
from those who taught me.

And much of it is a response to my longing
for what I was deprived of for so many years.
The failures of my learning process have become guideposts for my teaching practice
or so I tell myself.

I have been experimenting
with methods for letting
Madness guide my work in the classroom.
You could read some of the things I have published (blah), or you
could simply imagine how someone
who has longed for more than elitism and sanism
would dream up a classroom all their own. How would you do it?
What would you recommend?

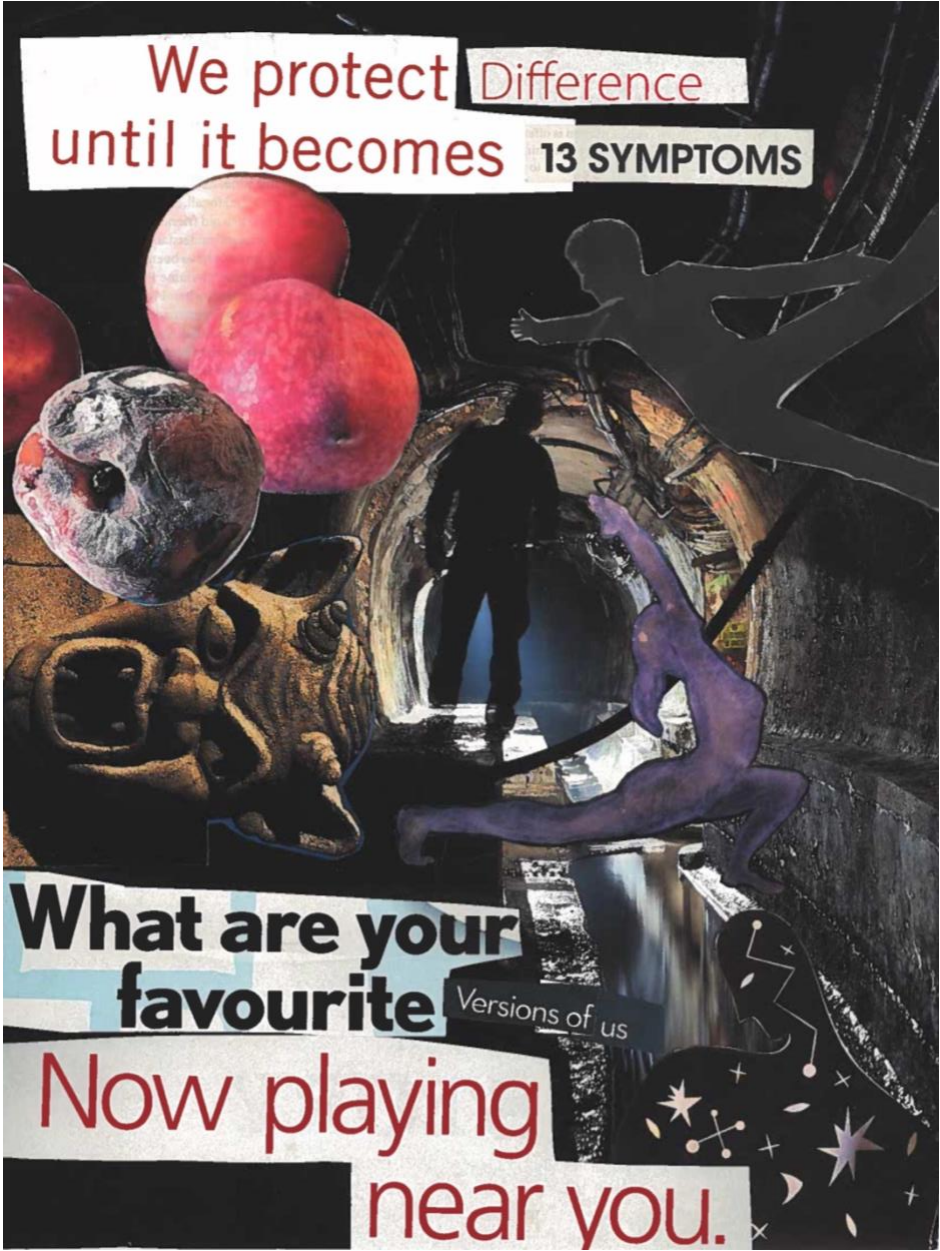
Get rid of attendance requirements or reimagine them in some way?
Center the voices of psychiatric and other trauma survivors and neuroqueers?
Share power with students to determine what kinds of learning go on in the classroom?
Make space for emotions, for bodies, for living souls instead of empty vessels?
Teach for justice and collective liberation instead of knowledge for knowledge's sake?
Madness has possibilities that the university refuses to recognize.
And so do i. So do we all.

They have not defeated me yet, as close as they have come
I persevere down a crooked path
barbed with wire and soggy with mud

because I want to build a different path
for those who cannot make it through a trip
that wounds them so deeply
because it was not intended for us

Access needs and space-making come first, I say.
They are not just patches to sew on once everything else is built.
So, tell me, and tell them
that you are staging a sit-in for your learning
that you will not move until
there is a place for all of us to go.

Untitled Collage – Anonymous



A Girl and Her Bunny – Julia Clarke



This is a black and white two-dimensional photograph. The photo is a portrait taken against a large brick wall and a concrete floor. The wall has graffiti covering the span of it. There is a long piece of plywood being held up by supports about three feet off the ground. A girl in a black long-sleeved dress and socks sits on the piece of wood with her feet dangling down. Her hands rest on her bare knees and she stares blankly at the camera. A small stuffed toy rabbit sits to the left of the girl also on the wooden “bench”. Next to the rabbit there is a graffiti drawing of a smiley face with a penis on its head.

Being in front and behind the camera gives me full control over what I want to capture within my images. Being in front of the camera is a safe place for me to explore my trauma and past, allowing me to heal by turning my trauma and mental illness into something painfully beautiful. This photograph represents an innocence stolen; it depicts a young persona with a plush bunny rabbit, often seen as a comfort object amongst children. But there is a darkness to the photo that comes from the dilapidated surroundings and blank stares. My mental health issues and trauma are my main inspiration for my work. Ever since I was young I took my suffering and uncontainable emotions and expressed myself through art; it was a means of coping and understanding my experiences.

MAD AT SCHOOL (or, how to be mad amongst psychotherapists) – GNARLS

Mainstream colonial education systems are not designed to make space for Mad folks. we knew this already. somehow it gets weirder when you're coded as a "professional" within these systems. i think about how i am coded as "too much" to be understood as professional (or is it not enough? i really just can't pin it down), yet at the same time am still expected to use the same markers for "professionalism" as others might. like the rattling off of theories and other shit i know; like the unspoken/sometimes spoken exercise in language as social control — "we" are "professionals," "they" are in need of "fixing." these expectations come through in judgements, in disbelief, in the pushing against what i bring to the surface in conversations or interactions.

before i started getting paid to sit down with traumatized people, before i had the expensive piece of paper saying i was Qualified to do so, being Mad at school was a bit different. as much as i was still expected, by society and the institution at large, to be Sane Enough, (although this says nothing about the individual instructors who created spaces for us to be crazy as fuck) i was still allowed to be Mad. but as soon as I stepped into this other world, the expectations shifted, the understanding of Mad shifted, the understandings of my requirements as a professional shifted (again, this says nothing about the handful of coworkers and the one supervisor who are also crazy, who value and seek the knowledge from my madness). the notion that anyone in the room could be Mad, could be affected by shit we're discussing, was often overlooked. and in continuing education, it's like some folks just can't fucking fathom that anyone could be a traumatized trauma counsellor. "trauma-informed" only goes so far when it rarely considers the trauma of the workers themselves, their own Madness; and if it does, it's a matter of working around it, not with it. when will i get to be at school and be able to cite a dream i had, or be at work and get to center the time-travelling rage that borderline people can experience (there is so much deep knowledge within this that is denied and pathologized). can i go to a class called Borderline Personality Theories? can i get a textbook called Survivor Knowledge: Bodies & Minds? Read dissertations by drug users? can i learn about alternate realities only from the people who have been there, and never ever hear about the D\$M again?

until that day comes, here are some thoughts from one mad student/worker to another, about navigating the weird terrain of education, especially one largely inhabited by the kind of psychotherapists who want to pathologize your knowledge...

plan ahead. the university is far, and the drive is long. wake early, leave early, park by the exit and get yourself into the conference room early enough to pick your spot. where do you want to sit? towards the back, where you are closest to the snack. have easiest access to the door, can silently remove yourself from the table and lay down on the carpet when you want to rage? or at the front, where you can see better, have your back to the business casuals, and can engage more directly in conversation (disagreements) with the instructor? the room is hot.

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but then also very cold. dress in layers, with your loudest articles of clothing that you can find. make sure your shirts call out colonial violence and/or make sure your dress is too short and/or too mesh but above all make sure YOU are actually comfortable.

introduce yourself. state your pronouns and then when no one else does write them in bold marker across your name tag, and continue asking others and explaining what the fuck a pronoun is. set a big huge crystal on the table next to you if that's your jam. maybe bring 3 for good measure. forget credentials, the letters trailing your name are not actually your name and only tell a story about what part of the system you're engaged in. your table is an altar and drinks are necessary — take up space and do not require yourself to fit into the nice white professional lady category. you are not this. when people ask WhAt'S yOuR bAcKRoUnD and they want to *network* you tell them you are in the business of shifting codes of violence and that you do this by way of witchcraft. when they ask where you went to school you tell them everywhere/nowhere, tell them your school is just words on a page, tell them your school is in the forest, tell them you actually just studied french and are here for the lulz. talk instead to the weirdos the ones who talk too much or start crying or look like they've been up all night or seem like they just can't pay attention to this shit all day. find the queers. they are your friends and neighbours.

ask questions. take up space and use the word WE in the discussions about the people they think are only "out there," are only their "patients," could never possibly be themselves, or among them. fuck with the watered-down conversations about healing. fuck with anything they say about borderline experiences (and FUCK with DBT philosophies too, always keep centering the knowledge of people of colour and a whole culture that's being ripped off for white psychotherapists to "fix" "crazy" people). at the end, take only what fits and literally burn the rest. keep rewriting.

I'm Being Eaten by a Capitalist Structure – Danny P.

CHORUS:

I'm being eaten by a capitalist structure!
I'm being eaten by a capitalist structure!
I'm being eaten by a capitalist structure!
AND THAT'S NOT HOW SCHOOL SHOULD BE!

**

Oh no! My grade's so-so!! (Oh no! My grade's so-so!)

CHORUS

OH NO: My grade's so-so!! (Oh no! My grade's so-so!)
OH JEEZ: The student fees!! (OH jeez! The student fees!!)

CHORUS

OH NO: My grade's so-so!! (Oh no! My grade's so-so!!)
OH JEEZ: The student fees!! (OH jeez! The student fees!!)
OH MY: Tuition's too high! (ohhhhhhhhhhh MY, tuition's too high!)

CHORUS

OH NO: My grade's so-so!! (Oh no! My grade's so-so!)
OH JEEZ: The student fees!! (OH jeez! The student fees!!)
OH MY: Tuition's too high! (ohhhhhhhhhhh MY, tuition's too high!)
OH FLIP: I chewed my lip! (oh flip! I chewed my lip!)

CHORUS

OH NO: My grade's so-so!! (Oh no! My grade's so-so!)
OH JEEZ: The student fees!! (OH jeez! The student fees!!)
OH MY: Tuition's too high! (ohhhhhhhhhhh MY, tuition's too high!)
OH FLIP: I chewed my lip! (oh flip! I chewed my lip!)
OH FIDDLE: My notes are riddles (oh fiddle... my notes are RIDDLES!)

CHORUS

OH NO: My grade's so-so!! (Oh no! My grade's so-so!)
OH JEEZ: The student fees!! (OH jeez! The student fees!!)
OH MY: Tuition's too high! (ohhhhhhhhhhh MY, tuition's too high!)
OH FLIP: I chewed my lip! (oh flip! I chewed my lip!)
OH FIDDLE: My notes are riddles (oh fiddle... my notes are RIDDLES!)

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OH HECK: I'm a wreck (oh heck, I'm a wreck....)

CHORUS

OH NO: My grade's so-so!! (Oh no! My grade's so-so!)

OH JEEZ: The student fees!! (OH jeez! The student fees!!)

OH MY: Tuition's too high! (ohhhhhhhhhhh MY, tuition's too high!)

OH FLIP: I chewed my lip! (oh flip! I chewed my lip!)

OH FIDDLE: My notes are riddles (oh fiddle... my notes are RIDDLES!)

OH HECK: I'm a wreck (oh heck, I'm a wreck....)

OH BOULDER: It's a rollercoaster (oh BOULDER! It's a rollercoaster...)

CHORUS

OH NO: My grade's so-so!! (Oh no! My grade's so-so!)

OH JEEZ: The student fees!! (OH jeez! The student fees!!)

OH MY: Tuition's too high! (ohhhhhhhhhhh MY, tuition's too high!)

OH FLIP: I chewed my lip! (oh flip! I chewed my lip!)

OH FIDDLE: My notes are riddles (oh fiddle... my notes are RIDDLES!)

OH HECK: I'm a wreck (oh heck, I'm a wreck....)

OH BOULDER: It's a rollercoaster (oh BOULDER! It's a rollercoaster...)

OH DREAD: I wish I was dead (oh dread..... I wish I was dead.....)

****I'M BEING EATEN BY A CAPITALIST STRUCTURE, I'M BEING EATEN BY A CAPITALIST STRUCTURE, I'M BEING EATEN BY A CAPITALIST STRUCTURE**

And

That's

WHY

WE

NEED

CHANGE

****NOW. ******

Artist Statement for “I’m Being Eaten by a Capitalist Structure”

*“I’m Being Eaten by a Capitalist Structure” is based on the camp song “Boa Constrictor”, which was originally developed from a poem by Shel Silverstein (1974, published in *Where the Sidewalk Ends*).*

The lyrics are sung in a call and response style. The lyrics in brackets are repeated by the crowd after the leader sings them. The chorus is sung in unison. To hear an example of how this song is performed, [visit the YouTube video I made](#).

In 2016, the first job I held after I finished my first undergraduate degree was camp counsellor

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at an overnight camp.

At the time of graduation, I felt utterly ashamed about this. I had graduated from a small, competitive, limited-enrollment science program and most of my peers had both graduated a year earlier than me and were already one year deep into graduate/law/medical school.

I was one of the oldest staff in my position because most people move on from low-level camp jobs as they gain academic/work experience. Even though I had graduated from a “prestigious academic program”, I felt like I didn’t have the skills or experience to do anything related to my field of academic study, which exacerbated my feelings of failure and shame. My program had been new at the time, and I felt like the worst, least capable student the program had ever accepted.

I had also embarrassed myself attempting to communicate the prevalence and severity of student mental health concerns to the teaching team of my program. Not only did the teaching team suggest that some people simply “weren’t cut out” for the program, but several of my friends also felt I had broken their trust in sharing these collective concerns. Due to this and my mental health difficulties at that time, my friendships broke down. I couldn’t stand the thought of interacting with any of my former peers or professors, which effectively separated me from my entire social circle.

While there were a few other people from my cohort who hadn’t immediately gone to graduate school, or who had also delayed graduation, I had felt deeply ashamed of the trajectory I had taken and the mental health-related antecedents that had placed me on that path.

My sense of self-worth was deeply degraded by the expectation that I would move on to immediate “success”, as defined by capitalism, by either taking the next step towards a “prestigious” career, or by finding a well-paid full-time job. Neither of these steps were realistic possibilities for me, and my mental health suffered because I couldn’t live up to these social expectations – expectations that had been explicitly reinforced by the culture of the program I had graduated from.

However, despite feeling ashamed of “still being a camp counsellor at age 22”, I **loved** working at camp that summer.

I might have seen myself as useless and stupid and embarrassing, but that wasn’t how the kids saw me.

For the kids, I was Zognoid, a space alien who had crash landed on Earth after leaving their friends and home planet behind.

Those kids didn’t care that I was graduating a year late, or that I didn’t know what I was doing, or that I had gotten a C+ on my thesis. The kids didn’t care that no one I knew wanted anything

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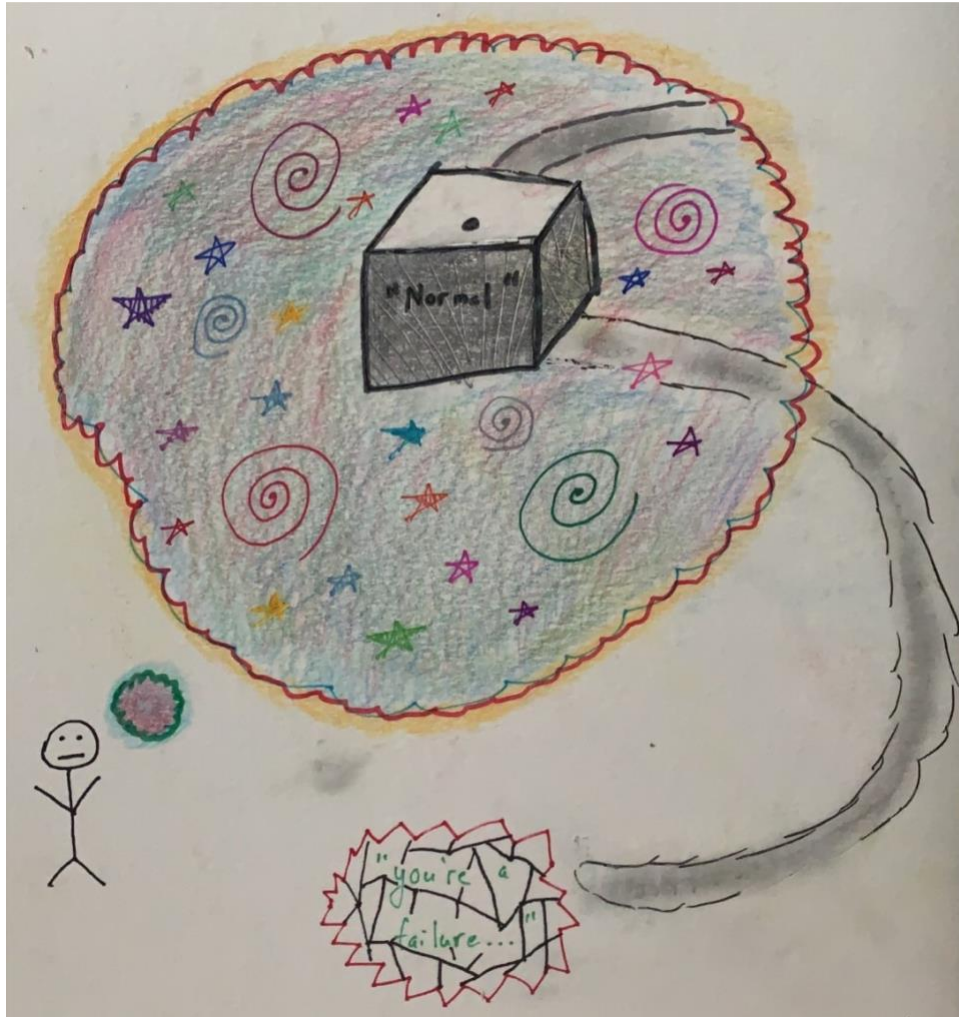
to do with me. I felt like an embarrassing failure, but I could see the value of the work that we were able to do at camp, and I could see value in myself through the work I was doing.

Since my 2016 graduation, I've been working with children and youth in various camp and recreational programs. In the fall of 2019, I enrolled in a Bachelor of Social Work program in hopes of gaining academic credentials that aligned a bit better with my work interests and experiences. Ironically, these work experiences with children and youth that previously felt shameful and unrelated to my field of academic study have felt very relevant as I've moved through my social work program.

With all this being said, if I had to boil down the reasons why I wrote this song, they would be as follows:

1. Working on the Mad student zine team to conduct outreach for and curate this zine inspired me to (re)connect with some neurodivergent friends I made when I worked at a camp in England in 2018. I initially wrote this song to sing with two of my U.K.-based friends. Unfortunately, I was unable to use the audio we recorded due to lag, but we did have a lot of fun trying.
2. Songs and song writing were a big part of the student culture in my academic program – we used to have coffee houses and talent shows all the time. I was too shy to participate, but I still remember one of the songs that a classmate of mine wrote when we were in first year about the stress of our program. I think having these artistic outlets for our experiences was part of why we had such a strong sense of identity and community. It would be great to see Mad student community also developed through shared songs, poetry, and artwork.
3. I chose a call-and-response song in order to reflect the idea of community – this song can't be sung by an individual. Other Mad/neurodivergent students have been a huge source of support for me, and the collaborative nature of the song is intended to reflect this.
4. Singing camp songs in a group is fun, and I hope that people who might be inclined to hate themselves (particularly for academic reasons) will be able to find a friend (or a group of friends) and sing this loudly instead of internalizing the idea that our value is determined by how well we can succeed academically and/or monetarily.

An Outsider's Perspective – Anonymous



In the bottom left corner of this drawing there is a stick person with a neutral expression. They have a colourful thought bubble with no words in it.

To the right of the stick figure is a larger thought bubble outlined in red with a shaded yellow border that takes up about half of the page. The bubble has been shaded in with many overlapping colours of pencil crayons, with a predominant purple and blue hue. There are many stars and spirals of different colours on top of this colourful backdrop.

In the middle of this colourful thought bubble there is a dark grey cube labeled "Normal". The cube is connected to a grey path that leads out of the thought bubble and towards a jagged red shape with additional black lines to create a shattered effect. In the middle of this shape, written in green text, are the words, "you're a failure".

The Madness of Mirrors – Erin Leveque

When I look at myself in a mirror, what is shown? Often, I see a sad expression, the outline of my body, and I might even notice that I do not exist in straight lines. Every part of my body is curved, soft, with gradual dips and gentle swerves. It reminds me of figure skating. For such a harsh word, ‘edges’ in figure skating is a soft experience: leaning in to the curve with bent knees and a trusting sense that the edge will take you to where you need to go if only you just lean in. This is probably the kindest I’ve been to my body in all my life. It’s still hard to look at myself for a long time. What else does the mirror show? I see the gentle rise and fall of my chest and shoulders with each breath. I see my comfy knits wrapped around my shoulders in soft colours. I see my background: a twin bed with many pillows, and a tapestry of constellations. The colours are identical to the knit sweater – soft like a watercolour painting, and calm.

But what does the mirror not show? The mirror does not show the control that I have over the carefully timed breaths to seem “normal.” The mirror does not show that my heart is beating faster. The mirror does not show the thoughts about my body or that *I hate this exercise*. The mirror does not show that I am counting down the seconds until I can look away. It does not show that I did this exercise with my therapist in the hospital: I stared at myself until I wasn’t myself and I had to calm the rush of panic because this was the *only way* I’d learn how to stop panicking. They told me that I had to practice this.

The mirror does not show what I like to do, what my strengths are, my weaknesses. It is unlikely that someone would know that I made my sweater unless I told them. The mirror does not show my passion for learning, or the frustration that I feel when I do not understand something right away. The mirror does not show the many people that I have loved, the ones who fill my heart full enough to burst. The mirror does not show the many different people that I have been in my life.

Perhaps the mirror can make judgments about what it shows. Perhaps it can assume that I’m wearing comfy clothing because I’m taking the day off, spending it in leisure. Perhaps it can assume that I am sad because it is cold outside. Perhaps it can assume that I am female, that I am young. Perhaps it can assume that I am healthy.

The re-presentation of me as this soft, even-breathing female wrapped in comfort is only part of the picture. The mirror can only see the object of me, the symbol of my person. I think back to linguistics, of signifiers and signified. The mirror is like a word, the symbol of what that word represents. But the signified is the whole picture – the actual presentation of the subject. The mirror is missing the inside, the biggest part of me, and what makes me who I am. The mirror only sees what I show it.

I can choose to talk to the mirror. To tell it who I am and what I stand for. It may take my words into consideration, but things may get lost in translation – pieces of me misunderstood or not quite thrilling enough to stick out in memory. Only I can present myself as the whole person

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that I am. Everything else is simply a piece of me, taken, repackaged, and re-presented.

The repackaging process is not gentle. During it, pieces of me are bumped, bruised, and broken. I scream out repeatedly, “you’ve got me all wrong, *this* is who I am!” And still, the mirror decides what I can and cannot handle; it schedules my routine and hands me a set of rules that I must follow. The rules tell me how to dress, how to smile, how to hold my shoulders back, and take a deep breath before speaking out. When I falter, they hand me a little yellow bottle of pills, and instruct me to take them as directed. They tell me that I will be successful if only *I take them as directed*.

The pills sometimes make me fuzzy, but worse if I forget them. The routine makes me tired, but I get a gold star when I follow through. Every piece of me feels heavy, yelling at me to go back to bed, to take a break, to turn around, and to go home. Inside, the bumped, bruised, and broken repackaging of my pieces are held together... mostly. Reminders scrawled across the repackaged pieces instructing me “this side up! :)”

They tell me I will be successful if only I take them as directed.

Soon, I lose the presentation I had of myself. I become the re-presentation of what the mirror sees – what the mirror shows to the outside world. When I look at myself in a mirror: I am female, I am young, I am healthy.

Author Statement for “The Madness of Mirrors”

In the discussion of presentation and re-presentation held in my Bachelor of Social Work classes, I began to think about the people who are re-presented within our systems – over and over again. Those who are spoken over, for, and about are packaged and repackaged into an assumption that has been filtered through dominant stories about the world and its construction. Dr. Yahya El-Lahib’s lecture still rings true in my mind: *where only I can present myself, others can (and will) re-present me*. We are asked as social work students to engage in critical thought to make sure that we do not contribute to violent and harmful dominant narratives through re-presenting someone in our practice. This is especially important in our case notes that we take, the way that we talk about clients, in social movements, and in the projects that we develop. But what is the *experience* of someone who is re-presented, time and time again?

I started to think about how I have experienced this in the ways that I have interacted with mental health systems as a service user. How do mental health professionals who do not know me view me? What could they think they know just based on looking at me and judging or assessing my abilities? How would this translate to service use, systems, or access? If determined that I am not performing at an expected level or set of behaviours for my age, my gender, my race, my disability, my Madness – perhaps they medicalize my experience; they diagnose me, they prescribe medications for me, and they direct me on how to fit within society. My body and mind suddenly become a site of political discourse, surveillance, and policing that I had not realized when I first entered mental health systems with all their

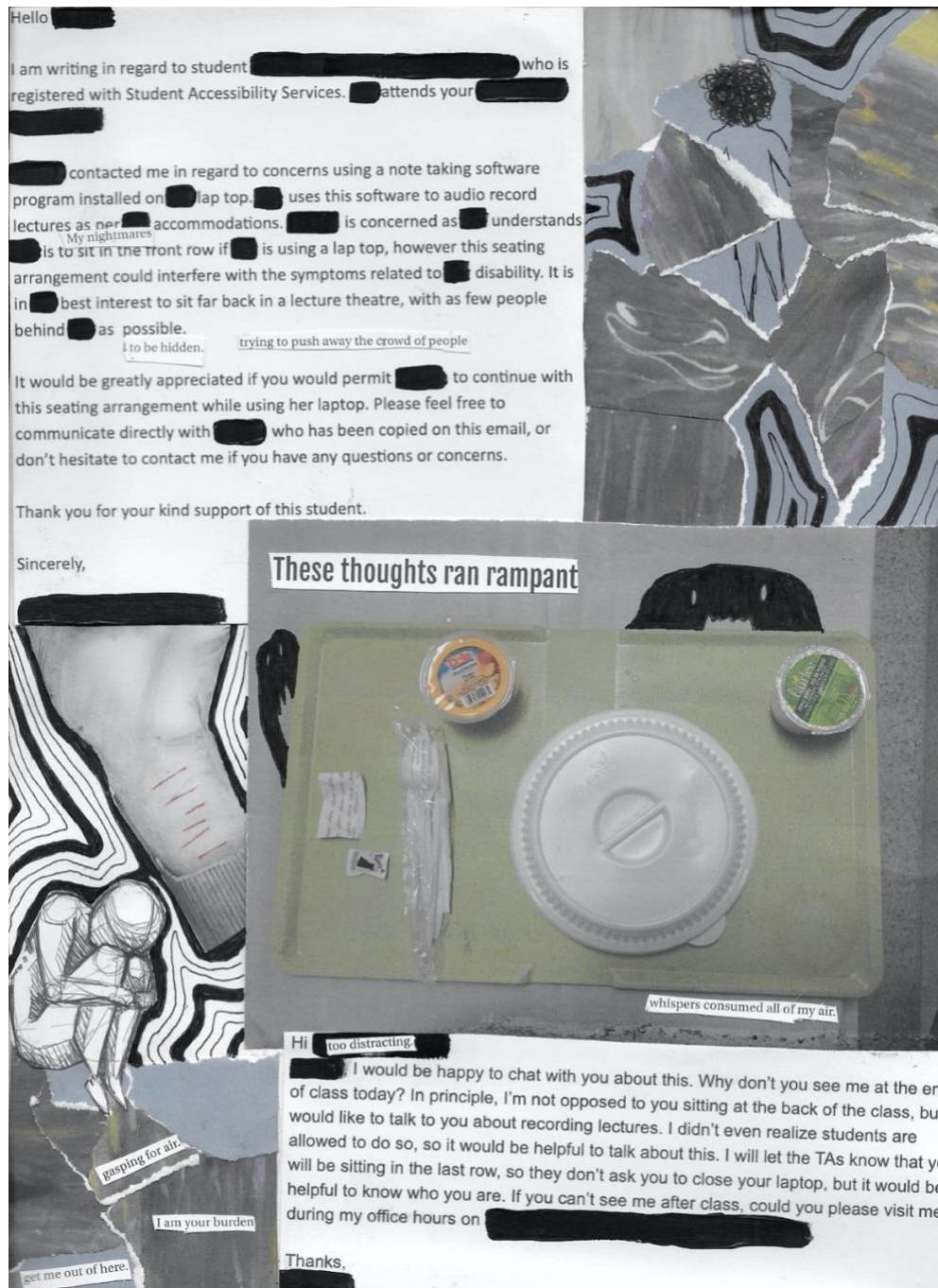
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promises of having the answers that would truly *fix me*. And yet, *there is nothing broken within me*.

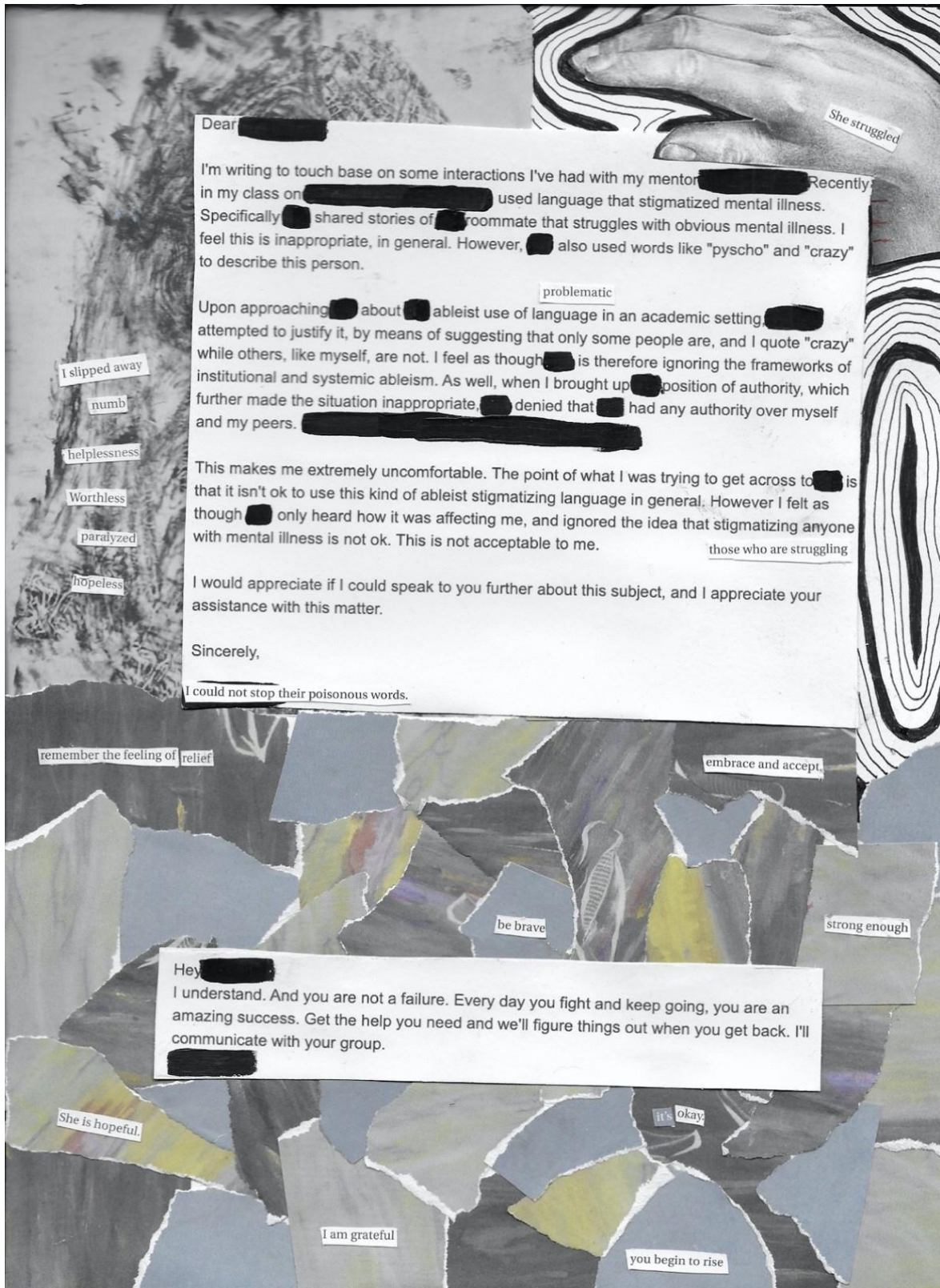
If I can apply this experience to practice, the most important thing for me is to remember that I am only looking at a reflection of the person. The reflection only shows me what is on the outside, and only what the person feels safe enough to show me. There is an entire person behind the diagnosis... the circumstance... the "*non-compliance*," and however they decide to present themselves is something that should be celebrated, honoured, welcomed, and treated with respect.

Beneath It All: What You Couldn't Feel – XZ

This work is a scanned image of a three-panel collage intended to be represented as horizontal Left, Centre, and Right panels. Given formatting restrictions of the Zine, they are instead represented as First, Second, and Third panels.



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Image Description – Left Panel

At the top left of the page, there is a print-out of an email message. Parts of the email are blacked out. The email reads as follows:

“Hello (name redacted).

I am writing in regard to student (redacted) who is registered with Student Accessibility Services. (Redacted) attends your (redacted). (Redacted) contacted me in regard to concerns using a note taking software program installed on (redacted) lap top. (Redacted) uses this software to audio record lectures as per (redacted) accommodations. (Redacted) is concerned as (redacted) understands (redacted) is to sit in the front row. If (redacted) is using a laptop, however this seating arrangement could interfere with the symptoms related to (redacted) disability. It is in (redacted) best interest to sit far back in a lecture theatre, with as few people behind (redacted) as possible.

It would be greatly appreciated if you would permit (redacted) to continue with this seating arrangement while using her laptop. Please feel free to communicate directly with (redacted) who has been copied on this email, or don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or concerns.

Thank you for your kind support of this student.

Sincerely, (redacted).”

End of email.

Three cut out phrases in a smaller font are pasted on parts of the email. These words are: “my nightmares”, “to be hidden”, and “trying to push away the crowd of people”.

In the top right of the page, there is a collage. These are cut-up pieces of paper, with dark grey, light grey, and yellow abstract designs. One of these designs is an outline of the back of a person, which has been torn and pasted in two pieces with part of the person's back missing.

In the left-middle section of the page, there is an abstract line drawing of a human being curled in a fetal position. There is also a grey image of a palm of a hand and wrist, with six uneven red lines on the wrist. In the right-middle section of the page, there is a cut out image of a beige lunch tray. This tray has a plate covered with a warming lid, a small plastic-wrapped yellow container of peaches, a tinfoil-wrapped green container of apple juice, a plastic wrapped set of cutlery - a fork and knife - and two small packets - one of sugar and one of pepper. On top of this image is the cut and pasted phrase, “These thoughts ran rampant”. On the bottom of the image is the cut and pasted phrase, “whispers consumed all of my air”.

In the bottom left of the page, there is an abstract grey collage, with the phrases “gasping for

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air”, “I am your burden” and “get me out of here” overlaid on top. In the bottom right of the page, there is another printed out email with parts blacked out. The email says:

“Hi (redacted, with the phrase “too distracting” overlaid).

(Redacted), I would be happy to chat with you about this. Why don’t you see me at the end of class today? In principle, I’m not opposed to you sitting at the back of the class, but would like to talk to you about recording lectures. I didn’t even realize students are allowed to do so, so it would be helpful to talk about this. I will let the TAs know that you will be sitting in the last row, so they don’t ask you to close your laptop, but it would be helpful to know who you are. If you can’t see me after class, could you please visit me during my office hours on (redacted).

Thanks,
(redacted)

Image Description – Middle Panel

At the top left of the page, there is an abstract grey and white pattern. Cut and pasted words have been overlaid on the pattern, one on top of another. From top to bottom, these words are, “I slipped away”, “numb”, “helplessness”, “worthless”, “paralyzed”, “hopeless”. In the top right section of the page, there are black and white abstract line patterns, with a sketch of a hand. The words “She struggled” are pasted on top of the hand.

In the middle of the page, there is a printed email with parts blacked out. The email says the following:

“Dear (redacted).

I’m writing to touch base on some interactions I’ve had with my mentor (redacted). Recently in my class on (redacted), (redacted) used language that stigmatized mental illness. Specifically, (redacted) shared stories of roommate that struggles with obvious mental illness. I feel this is inappropriate, in general. However, (redacted) also used words like “psycho” and “crazy” to describe this person.

Upon approaching (redacted) about (redacted) ableist use of language in an academic setting, (redacted) attempted to justify it, by means of suggesting that only some people are, and I quote “crazy” while others, like myself, are not. I feel as though (redacted) is therefore ignoring the frameworks of institutional and systemic ableism. As well, when I brought up (redacted) position of authority, which further made the situation inappropriate, (redacted) denied that (redacted) had any authority over myself and my peers. (Redacted).

This makes me extremely uncomfortable. The point of what I was trying to get across to (redacted) is that it isn’t okay to use this kind of ableist stigmatizing language in general. However, I felt as though (redacted) only heard how it was affecting me, and ignored the idea that stigmatizing anyone with mental illness is not ok. This is not acceptable to me.

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I would appreciate if I could speak to you further about this subject, and I appreciate your assistance with this matter.

Sincerely, (redacted).

End of email.

There are cut and pasted phrases overlaid on this email. These phrases are “problematic”, “those who are struggling”, “I could not stop their poisonous words”.

At the bottom of the page, there is a collage of ripped pieces of dark grey, light grey, greyish blue, and yellow paper. Pasted on top of the collage is an email, with parts blacked out. The email says:

“Hey (redacted).

I understand. And you are not a failure. Every day you fight and keep going, you are an amazing success. Get the help you need and we’ll figure things out when you get back. I’ll communicate with your group.

(Redacted).

Short phrases are also cut and pasted on the collage. From top to bottom, left to right, these phrases include: “remember the feeling of relief”, “embrace and accept”, “be brave”, “strong enough”, “She is hopeful”, “it’s okay”, “I am grateful”, and “you begin to rise”.

Image Description – Right Panel

At the top left of the page, there is an abstract collage of black and white and greyish blue patterns, and a small image of sand-coloured leaves and branches of a plant. In the top right section of the page, there is an out-of-focus black and white photograph of trees and a lake. On top of the collage and photograph are cut and pasted phrases. From top to bottom, left to right, these phrases say, “Please be patient”, “You have formed my self-identity”, “I broke”, “She’s a tornado”, “You cannot help”, “we will not carry on”.

In the middle of the page, there is an email with parts blacked out. The email says:

‘Hi (redacted).

Welcome back! Listen, I’m happy to give you the extension...but will it actually be helpful? Might it be worthwhile to instead just do it “poorly”? I’m happy either way, but it seems to me that it might not even be worth the stress of pushing the sample questions quiz to later. Basically, I’ve seen you repeat this pattern before and I wonder if things just end up piling up.

To be clear, this isn’t me saying no. I just want to make sure that you aren’t stuck in the same

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situation that you've been caught in before. Basically, it's up to you and I'll support you either way...but you should at least ask yourself that question about whether it's worth it and whether it'll really mean less stress.

Let me know!

(Redacted).

End of email.

On top of the email, there are cut and pasted phrases. These phrases say, "I can't remember", "do this", "you don't know who I really am", "I can never satisfy you", "These words playing on repeat", "I fail the test", "To distance myself from you".

On the bottom right of the page, there is an image of someone's lower legs dressed in black jeans and black shoes, laying on a bed drawn in abstract black lines. A blue hospital gown and white towel are folded at the end of the bed. In front of the bed, a wood door, and white walls are visible, with a metal, paint-chipped attachment on the wall.

On the bottom left of the page, there is a collage of pictures and patterns. There is an image of sand-coloured plant leaves, a black and white abstract scribble, a black and white drawing of three eyes and an eyebrow, and a deep purple image of rolling cloud shapes.

MANTRA – Grey Isekai

It's hard - very hard
To pinpoint the exact moment
The moment where I made the decision
But once I made that decision, I let it guide my life

Become a sort of North Star of my moral compass
Because from birth I had no self-directed purpose

So, I keep it close - this compass
Using it as a veil in front of my eyes
Allowing me enough visibility to still see what's in front of me
While also providing me with enough shadows to question that very visibility

Because my mind plays tricks on me
And I need a guide to keep my feet steady

But if I had to guess - and I do guess
I made the decision when I started high school
Because by this time I discovered that I was allowed to use my voice
And didn't have to do schoolwork that was exclusively for students with disabilities

**My education was coded as "special"
And was designed around a reward system
Of being told: what to do, when to do it, how to do it
And eventually being rewarded after having done whatever it was**

And I didn't want them - the exclusionary education or the reward system - anymore
But prior to high school I had no choice but to take these things that were forced upon me
Because at that time I was still a voiceless, submissive and implicit participant in my learning
And I saw my future on that very path as one of dependency on others for my continued survival

So, I made the decision
To adopt a mantra to be my vision

"Whatever I can't do physically, I'll make up for intellectually"

These words - they carried me with purpose
Brought me all the way to graduate school in 2020
But after ten months of graduate school, they could no longer be my guide
Because my faculty members put a white flag in my hand and taunted me to raise it

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Education was my ticket to ascension
In a society that is more comfortable with my descension

And it worked - their taunting
It forced me to raise my school-provided white flag surrendering to them
I was defeated by academics and felt I could no longer make up for things intellectually
My self-determination was no match against power, whiteness, tenure and research experience

So, I felt no choice but to abandon my mantra

Faith lost - I let depression consume me
But allowed my anxiety to give me one last push to act
I outstretched my weakened hand towards one whom I could trust
Explained that my brain had been broken and accepted their offer to repair my broken compass

Artist Statement for MANTRA

When I was in high school, around the age of sixteen, and looking for my first job I really struggled to find something that I could do. Because of my disability I have difficulty standing and walking for long periods of time, and also experience severe pain and muscle spasms throughout my body. It was hard enough trying to find a job with my lack of experience (I had none at the time) but that on top of having a disability made my job search all the more difficult. So, although I started telling myself that **whatever I couldn't do physically, I would make up for intellectually** as a sort of mantra only a couple of years prior, I felt that my difficulty finding a job further proved that I was okay to continue to think this way because this was the only option. Eventually this way of thinking led me to believe that I could potentially secure and maintain (paid) work through education despite not yet knowing what that "work" would look like. And so, I knew that in order to do this (secure and maintain paid work through advancing my education) I needed my education to be at the level of my peers who did not have disabilities.

However, ten months into graduate school (September 2020 - June 2021) my brain broke. During these ten months I found myself up against members of an institution who unknowingly used their power, whiteness, tenure, and years of research experience as a means to "support" me by manipulating my thesis to adhere to the university's academic/research standards as if it hadn't already. This caused me to feel so incredibly overwhelmed, frustrated, and exhausted that my brain broke. The mantra (**whatever I can't do physically, I'll make up for intellectually**) that I had been telling myself for years up until this point no longer felt true and possible. At this time in my life, I was still unsuccessful in finding and maintaining paid work, so to feel that my compass was broken by educators who claimed to initially support my vision for my thesis made me feel hopeless. I wanted to die; because the alternative was for me to write the thesis they had been manipulating me to write - to put my name on it and be okay with the final product. But one day that June (2021), I reached out to a faculty member who I believed understood the original vision I had for my thesis. They took it upon themselves to advocate for

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me to regain autonomy over my thesis and then 100% supported me in my goal to write a thesis that I would be proud to have my name on. We were successful in that regard, but my compass was broken beyond repair and at this time I still don't know if it can ever be fixed.

In conclusion: Consider that for some people with disabilities the path to independence, validation, and ascension (meaning, for me, reaching economic security, gaining social capital/status, experiencing reduced marginality) is only accessible through autonomy in one's education - something that I have fought my hardest to have for myself and fight for others (with disabilities) to have the same. Therefore, denying people with disabilities the opportunities to be seen in academic settings keeps those students with disabilities (like myself) without hope that there is space for them in the world to achieve their goals, dreams, hopes, and aspirations just like everyone else.

Post-Scholarly Growth – Michelle Sayles

In the fall of 2017, I landed at McMaster University in Ontario as an international student from the U.S. My return to academia marked a bookend on four years post-undergrad living in a community of deep experiential life learning and activism. I was giddy, and hopeful that this year would be a chance to reclaim my focus. I had prepared myself to weather the challenges of grad school, though I worried about how I would find my state of mind through the isolation. Pre-departure, I did everything I possibly could to anticipate what would come that year. I sought grounding in therapy, peer relationships, and a never-ending supply of St. John's Wort. I had gotten into McMaster on a full scholarship. I knew I needed to trust that my best efforts would pull me through and worked to relinquish my anxieties as best I could.

Within my first few weeks, I strategized to build community and find people I could trust. I was just starting as a TA and got a teaching and learning fellowship with the MacPherson Institute to develop a graphic history project on student disability activism.

Novelty proved a temporary balm. Within a short time of arrival, I started to feel overwhelmed by an exhausting and banal wave of depression, crowding out the space I needed just to think. I tried to sit with difficult thoughts as best I could. Often one of the only things that released some of the pressure-cooker in my brain was drawing, so in fits of exasperation I released my energies in free-form abstracts and grotesque doodles. I would walk for hours back and forth from Sous Bas at night to dance. I had to be in my body - that was the only steady practice I knew to connect with some clarity of mind.

I noted how easily my peers could retain the information from our readings. I would often spend a whole day agonizing over a single article, struggling to remember while nearly transcribing a full detailed outline of each piece. I fumbled to converse about the work, conscious of how hard it was for me to simply *retain*. My memory felt faulty, I assumed as the result of a decade spent fighting off a yet undiagnosed depression. This struggle to feel competent in basic ways eroded the trust I had in my own abilities.

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Graduate seminars were incredibly stressful and performative events. I wanted to sink deep into the material and engage with my peers in authentic ways, but I felt as though I was constantly struggling to latch on to the flow of the conversation - witnessing the tail of the discussion soaring, but not able to bring the thrust of it into focus. In this feeling of slow-motion, I often worried I didn't belong in the room.

I imagined my brain was a sieve - not broken, but not reliable. Not long into my program, I started to feel completely overwhelmed by that burdensome morbid feeling again...

And then, I lost someone very dear to me to suicide.

I made it through that year in a haze, but things didn't start to clear - really - until nearly three years later. I didn't feel *well*, and I couldn't understand how I was supposed to delay this traumatic grieving process. Recovery ended up being as nonlinear as my learning journey.

That winter, I received a wellspring of accommodations that allowed me to continue in the program, both academically and financially: grief counseling, flexed deadlines, altered assignments, and a re-arranged teaching assistantship. I drove eight hours to a funeral in New England that winter, only to rush back and write two twenty-page papers in the course of two weeks. It was like I had punctured a lung, but still had to finish the race. It was awful. I'm grateful for my supervisor who helped me make things work when I broke down and couldn't TA my spring semester. I wasn't functioning, wasn't thinking clearly, and thought about dropping out.

I watched myself showing up for group discussion with that eviction-resistant demon of despair on my back. In all my preparations, I could never have fathomed adding "dark night of the soul" to my to-do list. To lose someone who had shared their own journey so vulnerably with me felt like an impossibility, but there it was. These experiences were fodder for another level of soul learning, but that wasn't what the classroom demanded. Of competing urgencies, something artificial took precedence, and the classroom became a dissonant place to be, rather than a place of growth and integration.

As I researched my thesis on the psychological experiences of people living in climate disaster zones, I learned about the concept of *Post-Traumatic Growth*² - the idea that people can flourish following traumatic life events. The concept struck me because it pointed at some hope for making meaning of the existential dead end I was experiencing. I was trying to heal myself, and in the thick of this complicated grief, I felt my contributions seeping like sludge into absolutely all of my exchanges. I tried to put a plug on something that needed out. I joked

² Triplett, K. N., Tedeschi, R. G., Cann, A., Calhoun, L. G., & Reeve, C. L. (2012). Posttraumatic growth, meaning in life, and life satisfaction in response to trauma. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 4(4), 400–410.

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about wanting to go on a spiritual quest. I felt completely overwhelmed by the state of the world and had pinned my sense of purpose and hope on doing something about it. However, I hadn't cultivated any tools to emotionally prepare for the work I wanted to do.

Over the years, I've come to associate my depression, mainly, with alienation.³ Our world breeds its ubiquity. Can pedagogy be healing *and* stimulate transformation?

To create deeper accessibility, I wonder about the urgent need for an educational space where our full selves can be integrated, maybe even witnessed. I want a learning community that can bridge formal study with the lessons that our own paths have taught us.

None of us are bystanders, casually removed from this existence, but all deeply impacted and shaped by it. To learn is to see the interconnectedness of life and text, future and history. In popular education,⁴ learning is structured so that we see each other as valuable sources of knowledge, and we engage in deep sharing, pulling out the threads that connect our independent (but deeply linked) experiences of the world.

I imagine I'm in those grad seminars again. Rather than returning to a space of performative intellectual volleys, it's comforting to think about a format that's more introspective, more healing, more real. Since graduating, I've been learning about the process of council-based dialogue,⁵ and I see how that could have been fruitful for a more authentic ecology of engagement. Sitting with peers in a circle, speaking spontaneously and honestly, without some ingrained pressure to perform - this might start to build up a social groundwork for barrier-free learning. Shifting the expectations for how we engage and slowing that process of exchange down is so critical for drawing out an authentic and more accessible conversational flow.

I imagine sitting in a circle with my peers and building our inquiry from the seeds of a more organic relationship. I want to dredge up my knowledge to share why I'm doing this work, and I want to witness you as you do the same. We'd observe some ground rules as a guide.

Proposed Group Agreements:

- Share with the intent to cultivate connection and relationship. Your colleagues are also co-conspirators for building a better world.
- Speak up and then listen intently. Don't posture for standing.
- Slow it all down.
- Break open your assumptions.
- Remember why you started on this path and dream hard about what you hope to build. Who can you build it with?

³ Alexander, B.K. (2000). The globalization of addiction. *Addiction Research* 8(6), 501-526.

⁴ Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder.

⁵ Baldwin C. & Linnea A. (2010). *The Circle Way: A leader in every chair*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

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- Find them. (But also find yourself.)

In order to address the massive challenges before us - climate change, a global pandemic, food insecurity, homelessness, hopelessness - we must stop depersonalizing the space of learning, and we must create an environment where all voices are brought to the table.⁶ We've got to model in the classroom how we hold one another as we integrate deep knowing that is not just mental, but emotional, spiritual, and deeply embodied.

Deadlines are artificial, and true learning never segregates itself from the teachings of our lives. We must embody all of it, and nurture a new way to be real with one another.⁷

Additional Recommended Reading

Zajonc, A. (2013). Contemplative pedagogy: A quiet revolution in higher education. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 2013(134), 83-94.

⁶ Lotz-Sisitka H., EJ Wals A., Kronlid D., & McGarry D. (2015). Transformative, transgressive social learning: Rethinking higher education pedagogy in times of systemic global dysfunction. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* 16, 73-80.

⁷ Additional recommended reading: Zajonc, A. (2013). Contemplative pedagogy: A quiet revolution in higher education. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 2013(134), 83-94.

Untitled Collage – Anonymous



A Cry for Change: How I Survived the Post-Secondary Education System With (Undiagnosed) ADHD – An Anonymous Recount

1. **Start university** as the seemingly neurotypical person you've thought to be all your life. Go to class and pay attention. Remember your deadlines and manage your time. Stay organized and you'll be just fine.
2. **Go to class** and feign paying attention - because for some reason, no matter how much you try to keep up, the pace of the professor's lecture outruns your processing speed. The information is too dense, and the details fall through the cracks.
3. **Record your lectures** - because most professors don't already podcast their lectures (until the COVID-19 pandemic forces them to, but that's only when EVERYONE needs it). Go home and listen to the recording and pause a dozen times while listening in order to make sure you get all the details. Congratulations. You've spent 3 hours listening and making notes for a 50 minute lecture.
4. **Master the art** of finishing things last-minute and somehow manage to be successful. It's not that you're procrastinating, but that no matter how hard you try to manage your time, every task takes forever - especially when it's a grueling task you don't want to do - and time escapes you.
5. **Memorize the formula** for requesting an extension from your professors by heart - you'll need them often - and hope to God they'll be understanding about it.
6. **Realize your struggles** and extreme efforts to attain the same level of academic success as your peers are not due to your own personal failures, but attributed to your long undiagnosed ADHD, which you were unaware of. Realize that the education system was made to favour neurotypical learning and lacks optimal equity and accessibility.
7. **Hear about the University's accommodation services** for students with disabilities from a good friend who also has a disability. Watch as this (at least to some extent) changes your life: extensions and extra time allotted to you to support your academic success. For the first time, it feels as though the playing field has been somewhat levelled out, but you still struggle at times.
8. **Watch the COVID-19 pandemic take over**, forcing everything to go remote and allowing you to have the online recordings of lectures you've always dreamed of having for every class. While your neurotypical peers whine about missing out on in-person classes, you've never been happier nor thriving better, being able to watch lectures on your own time and at your own pace.
9. **Overcommit to extracurriculars** and other aspects of your life to "prove" to yourself that you are academically succeeding whilst being a well-rounded student DESPITE your

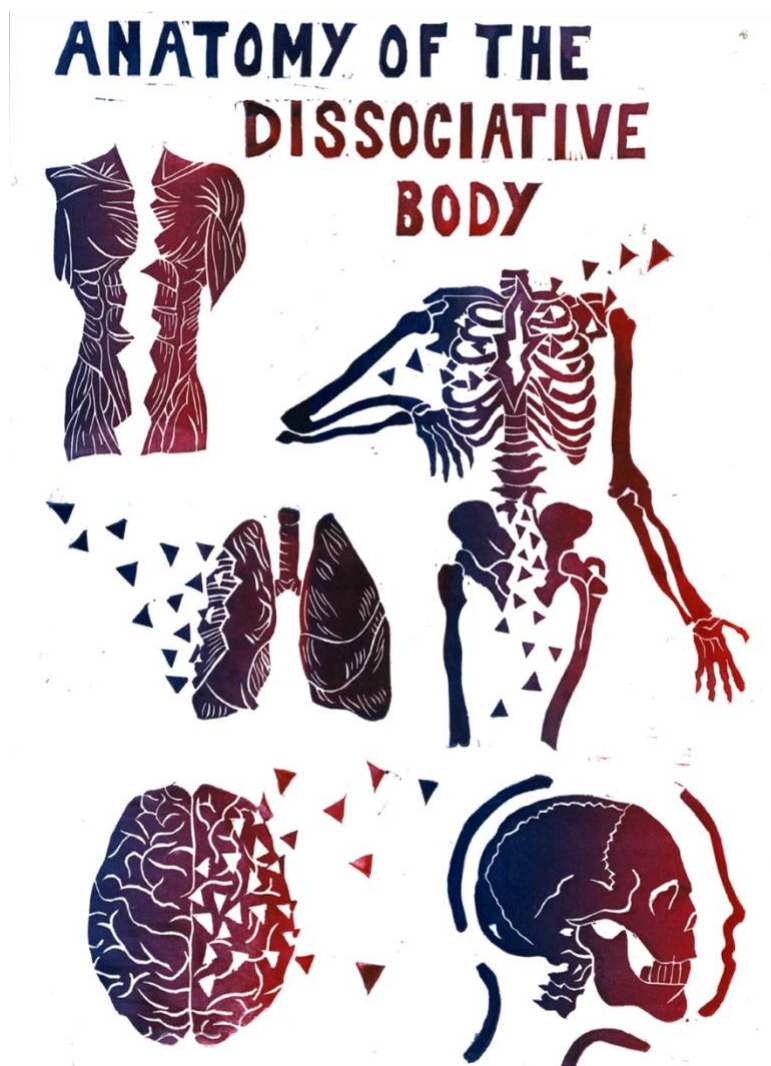
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ADHD in attempts to make you feel up to par with your neurotypical peers (disregarding the fact that even they don't take on such busy workloads).

10. **Eventually, you get overwhelmed.** Realize that your worth is not based on how productive you can be or how much you can take on. Come to understand that trying your best does not mean you push yourself to burn out. Your best is enough. Acknowledge that you have achieved amazing things. However, cutting back on some commitments can help your well-being and make things more manageable for you.
11. **Join a mad/neurodivergent and disabled student group.** Find a sense of community in this safe and inclusive space where folks can resonate with your experiences and share similar perspectives. You find it refreshing that you don't have to explain yourself as much. Collectively share your lived experiences for a special cause that is close to your hearts: advocacy for folks who identify as neurodivergent or disabled, just as you all do.
12. **Hear about the COVID-19 pandemic possibly coming to an end** and in-person classes possibly resuming in the next year. Worry and fear for the future, because remote learning has helped you and others like you in ways no one thought was possible, pre-covid. Mourn the possible loss of the accessible means of learning and accommodations that have been in place throughout the pandemic - accommodations that were previously said to not be feasibly made possible - that is, until everyone needed them amidst a global pandemic.
13. **Recognize that you are not the problem.** There are larger systemic barriers in place that have hindered you. Acknowledge that students with disabilities and neurodivergence will continue to struggle in post-secondary institutions, unless other action is taken. We are here. We have always been here, but failed to receive adequate support for our academic success. History need not be repeated, but learned from. This isn't just a recount of how I survived the post-secondary education system with (undiagnosed) ADHD. It calls out everything inherently wrong with the system. It's a call for action. It's a cry for change.

Anatomy of The Dissociative Body – Merel Carrijn

I've always been a writer. Using language to express my thoughts and emotions is something I've been good at for quite a while. But words are limited. I came to realize that I experienced some things that could not be described in words, so I challenged myself to use visual art as my new language. The artwork that I created represents the body of someone who is experiencing dissociation. The concept is based on the anatomy posters you find hanging on the wall at the physiotherapist for example. I used lithography to show the ribcage, pelvic bone, lungs, skull, brains, chest, and stomach in a dissociative state. Or at least, how I experience dissociation. It feels like a form of fragmentation, but like I said: words cannot describe the experience, so I'll let the image speak for itself.



Untitled Collage – Anonymous



Fostering Mental Health During a Global Crisis: The Importance of Peer Support – Tiffany Chen

“All in-person classes, discretionary events, and large group gatherings are suspended effective end of day on March 13.” I still remember getting that notification on my phone during my club meeting held in the middle of the university library. We had just finished planning the logistics for our annual fundraiser, but now those plans disappeared into thin air. I felt an initial wave of confusion, which evolved into acceptance, then fear. As I sat there processing, I watched everyone around me take the news well and treat it like any other snow day announcement. But I couldn’t help but wonder what this meant for us as students in the upcoming few months. Upon reflection, nothing quite prepares you for a pandemic and all its frills. The first few days and weeks of physical distancing may have been welcomed during a hectic end of a semester. However, as weeks became months and then years, it became quite apparent that quarantine and social distancing have not only impacted myself but countless others.

I’ve personally never realized just how much I rely on and value the support and comfort of others until I was mandated to stay away. Before COVID-19, I wasn’t aware of all the different formats and avenues for giving and receiving support. I can only assume that there are many other individuals like me out there who are just waiting to be exposed to the practice and benefits of peer support. Working with several colleagues to write pieces for this zine, we developed this idea to explore how peer support services have adapted during the pandemic. Therefore, over the past few months, I’ve reached out to a few organizations that have made a significant impact in their community by continuously providing peer support throughout the pandemic. In this short piece, I will describe my experience interviewing 3 representatives (Richard, Clare and Jacquie) from Support House (Halton region, Canada) and 1 from Western University (London, Canada) to gain a better understanding of how the peer support field has learned to thrive and adapt even during the era of COVID-19.

Support House’s Centre for Innovation in Peer Support provides peer-led, wellness-based self-help and social connections programming to community members & consultations for organizations who provide peer support services. Support House provides peer support through mental health organizations in the Mississauga/Halton area of Southern Ontario, Canada. These services can be reached on [their website](#) and through phone 1-833-845-WELL (9355).

Western University’s Peer Support Centre is staffed by student volunteers who are trained in the model of peer-based support and undergo continuous training to provide undergraduates with accessible, welcoming, and accommodating support and services. The services they provide are described in more detail and accessed from [their website](#).

I’ll discuss three main topics in this piece: (1) What is peer support? (2) How has peer support been delivered during the pandemic? (3) How might we enhance peer support moving forward?

Peer support has helped me and countless others create a sense of community and support

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during a time of limited social interaction. I hope this piece sheds light upon the importance of peer support in fostering mental health during a global crisis and encourages postsecondary institutions to develop and extend peer support offerings. Equally, I hope that by sharing different strategies and adaptations peer services have made during the pandemic, this article can aid peer supporters and their organizations – on campus and beyond – in continuing to improve the delivery of peer support services.

What is peer support?

Different folks emphasize different components of peer support as important to them. Richard from Support House described peer support as a “reciprocal relationship.” He emphasized that peer support can vary in terms of its practice and intentions. We often use our lived-in experiences as a way to communicate hope, empowerment, and the feeling of connectedness. To Richard, peer support is all about walking along with someone and accompanying them on their wellness journey. When individuals are struggling, they need to hear they are not alone. In peer support, there is a focus on relationship formation and trust rather than 'clinical' activities like diagnosis or case management.

Clare from Support House viewed peer support as a new perspective that “opens a world of possibility”. For her, mental health concerns have always been associated with biomedical and clinical care pathways. Until encountering peer support herself, she never felt such a feeling of hope or control that peer support has offered her. To her, peer support removed shame and stigma associated with ‘mental illness’ and allowed people their own time and their own way of healing and figuring out what helps. In a mental health system that emphasizes the biomedical side of healthcare, folks often feel like they don’t have a choice or control over their care. What makes peer support unique is that it is a lifelong experience of autonomy, commonality, shared values, and truths. In other words, peer support provides a community where individuals can heal.

Jacque from Support House agreed with many of the points her colleagues mentioned. To her, peer support is “finding that common ground and experience”. It is one of the truest forms of communicating “genuineness, honesty, and vulnerability” from one individual to another. I also had the opportunity to speak to Emily, the Associate Vice President of Peer Support at Western University’s Students' Council. She offered the unique lens of an academic institution providing peer support services to students. Emily defined peer support as a combination of listening, reflecting, clarifying, validating, self-determination, and cultural humility. For her organization, peer support services followed a peer-based and resource recommendation model and consistently practiced transparency in terms of the training and capabilities of peer support providers and the resources available.

The components of peer support touched upon by my interviewees really resonated with me. To me, the “reciprocal relationship” part of peer support is crucial for trust and building rapport. I still remember when one of my close friends opened up about her struggles with depression and anxiety, and how sharing lived-experiences and allowing one another to be on

the same vulnerable level helps with fostering hope and feeling less alone. I've always been an advocate for mental health, and I truly think peer support is one of the best ways to educate the public broadly about mental health and to challenge the stigma associated with mental illness and seeking help. Among youth and people my age, I commonly see the issue of difficulties navigating and accessing the mental health services provided in academic institutions. With such a large and growing demand for mental health support, students in institutions with high enrollments may have to wait months before receiving an appointment. I personally think peer support services can be used instead of mainstream services by those who do not wish to be pathologized by them or want to maintain privacy from places that keep patient records.

How has peer support been delivered during the pandemic?

Both Support House and Western University provided peer support in an in-person format before COVID-19. At Support House, peer support was predominantly provided in groups. Once the pandemic hit, Support House quickly established virtual peer support sessions using the input and recommendations of the individuals they support. Their peer support offerings expanded to include virtual 1-1 and groups using Zoom, telephone, text, email, and mail. Since the implementation of these different formats, video calls through Zoom have had the strongest uptake, and more sessions have been added to meet the demand. Similarly, at Western University, peer support was originally 100% in-person. When the province went into lockdown in March 2020, peer support services shifted fully online using the Zoom platform.

Benefits of facilitating peer support virtually

Something in common among all interviewee responses was that the virtual format was considered more comfortable for the individuals providing and receiving peer support services. The option to turn off the camera, and disengage when needed, respects the personal space of all individuals and also creates a safer space as a result. Additionally, virtual peer support overcomes geographic barriers such as living far away from resources and having to commute. Virtual peer support therefore opens the doors to all individuals needing support regardless of distance. According to Support House, people from all parts of the world have dropped into their specific peer support sessions to receive the benefits of peer support. As mentioned by everyone, the capacity to provide peer support is also greater virtually, due to an increase in flexibility in the timing of sessions, decrease in travel time, and faster transitions between individual/group sessions.

Challenges of facilitating peer support virtually

Some common challenges associated with the transition to virtual peer support included technical difficulties and accessibility concerns. Initial technical difficulties were unavoidable at the beginning, but navigating these challenges together as a group avoided significant frustration and encouraged collective collaboration. What also helped with the smoother transition between peer support formats was putting together and disseminating a toolkit for virtual support. This involved creating videos to assist staff and familiarize individuals with the Zoom platform. Additionally, new accessibility concerns are created with the increased reliance

on technology. Those who may not have access to a computer or phone, or have no internet connection, face significant challenges. Support House overcame this issue with support from several funders and partners such as the Government of Ontario, who enabled them to supply and deliver laptops to the individuals that needed them. Support House also continued to provide in-person services even during lockdown for certain individuals where the virtual format was not possible. I personally assumed a lack of non-verbal cues would have a larger impact on the success and uptake of virtual peer support, but it seems that it played a smaller role in building trust and rapport.

How might we enhance peer support moving forward?

1. Prioritize accessibility

The pandemic has allowed us to better understand access issues to peer support and to find ways to enhance accessibility. All the individuals I had the privilege to speak with agreed that in-person and virtual peer support formats had their own pros and cons. Therefore, both organizations are moving forward with a hybrid model (both in-person and virtual formats). Western University will continue the hybrid approach since walking to campus and going to a physical space may not be possible for all individuals. In the future, Western peer support services aim to increase service hours closer to exam season, which can easily be done virtually as well. Similarly, Support House will also continue hybrid implementation of peer support to provide those seeking support with more options and allow them to choose what is right for them.

2. Support underserved groups

These interviews have also provided valuable insights in terms of the gaps in peer support services and ways to improve peer support in the future. In an academic context, Emily pointed out that there remains a lack of assistance for certain groups, such as peer support for international students transitioning into university and individuals dealing with certain mental health disorders (eating disorders). Therefore, more emphasis and resources should be placed on filling in those gaps in the academic system. Emily also identified the importance of incorporating peer support volunteers with specific lived experiences, particularly individuals from marginalized populations and those with varied cultural backgrounds.

3. Address Eurocentrism in peer support practices

Interviewees advised that peer support services should also place more emphasis on cultural humility because current peer support skills and practices are sometimes very Eurocentric in nature. For example, the content covered in many standard peer support training programs do not include certain topics unique to Black and Indigenous people and people of colour (BIPOC), and 2SLGBTQ+ populations. Ensuring individuals with lived experience have their voices integrated into all areas of peer support training (by continuously refreshing training and adding additional modules) is a step in the right direction. Some organizations have taken time during the pandemic to revamp the content, scope, and breadth of the topics covered in their training. Both organizations will continue to maximize the capacity of group-based peer support, and broaden the scope of topics for peer support provider training.

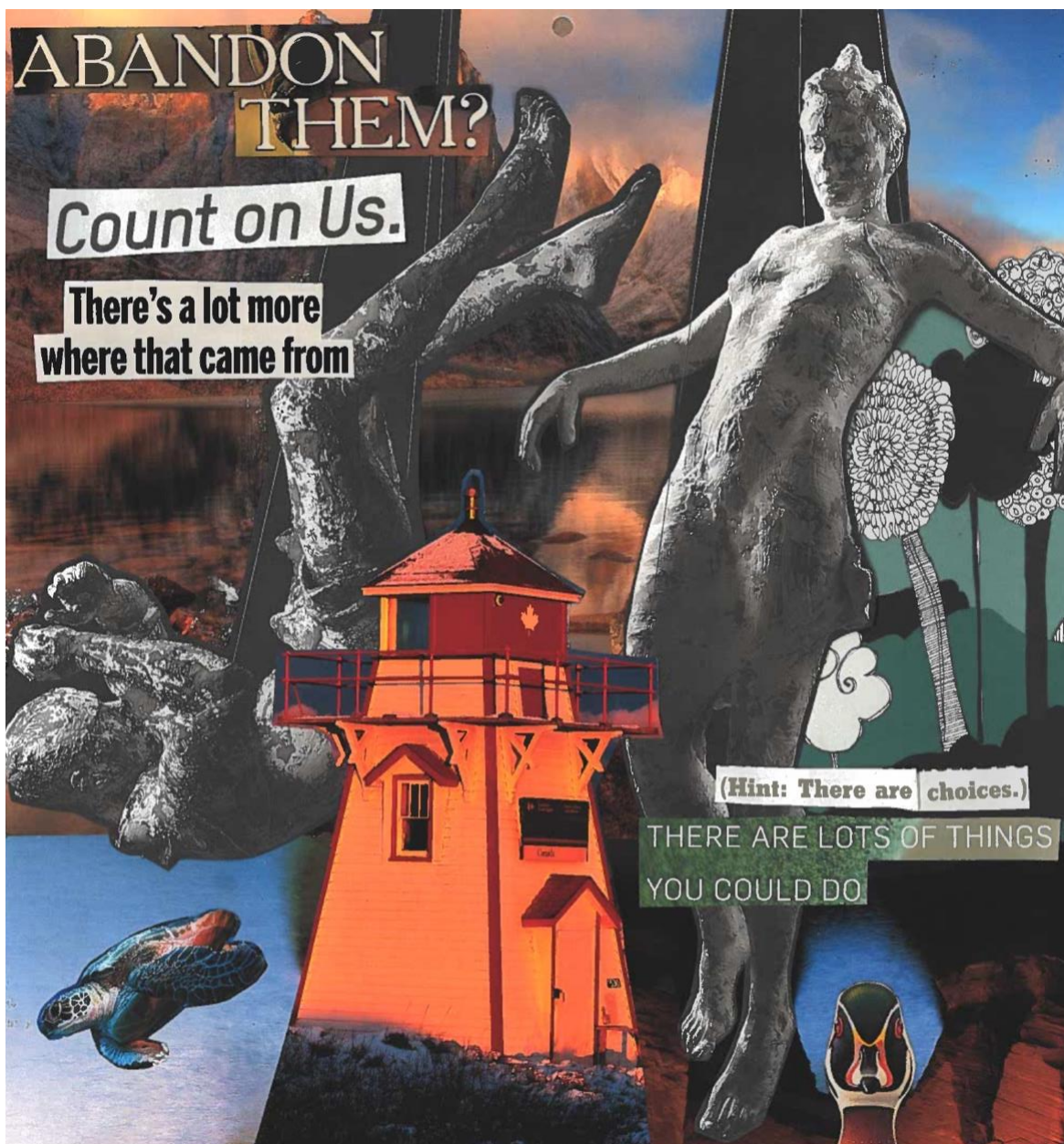
Conclusion

It is clear that COVID-19 and social distancing have made a lasting impact on the entire field of peer support services. From these interviews, I couldn't help but notice the incredible resilience of peer support services and the determination of providing these services to those who need them. I've learned that peer support can take so many different shapes and forms, and its growing circulation means that very soon, anyone, anywhere, will be able to benefit from peer support services. Even though these organizations provide peer support in different contexts and to different populations, the underlying commonality of shared experience remains. I've come to understand how peer support sets each of us on our own journey to prioritize mental health and support those around us.

By collecting and synthesizing this knowledge of how peer support providers have adapted to the changes and challenges associated with COVID-19. I hope that this piece managed to shed light on the importance of peer support in an academic and social setting especially during a mental health crisis. While student-led peer support happens on university campuses, it is often unfunded and unrecognized. The investment and advancement of peer support programs and services at Western University does not yet exist across all other Ontario universities (and beyond). Instead, universities offer individual counselling, psychiatry, group therapy, primary medical care... but not peer support. By sharing these different peer support strategies and adaptations I hope to encourage postsecondary institutions to improve access to and the scope and delivery of peer support services. Moreover, I hope this piece helps guide the future direction and priorities of peer support to take into consideration accessibility, underserved populations, and challenging Eurocentric approaches.

I want to thank all the individuals who have taken the time to share with me their thoughts and experiences. I am so grateful for your contributions and your continuous dedication to improving peer support services.

Untitled Collage – Anonymous



What I Learned From Raising Hell – Luise Wolf

“Welcome to Hell,” he said. The lab instructor for the analytical chemistry course could not have picked a more discouraging and accurate introduction. It was 2010, my first semester of the infamous Chemical Biology specialization, and the twenty of us in the third ever cohort of the program had just realized the magnitude of what we’d signed up for.

The first year, once we’d survived it, was only the beginning. I never managed a full course load again, dropping classes every semester to cope with a health crisis. It made me terribly insecure

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and it was easy to believe I was the only one who had failed to adapt. After a while, I realized everyone had been affected in their own way. Not sleeping. Not eating. Not having relationships, or having toxic ones. Drinking, always drinking. Some left the program entirely. The fifteen of us who stayed came to rely on and support each other, and we saw the hurt more clearly. Our regular complaining became a strong undercurrent. We'd stopped expecting things to get better and we'd gotten angry.

In my fourth year, I had a breakdown so severe I dropped my thesis and stayed for a week at a half-way house. The students who weren't in the co-operative program [employment mixed with academic studies] graduated and our close-knit group was split in half. With one year left, it seemed there was nothing left to lose. Those of us who remained decided enough was enough. We wanted change.

When you're hurt, it's hard to know what will heal it. We knew what wasn't working: the collective silence and lack of awareness or understanding. We wanted recognition and we wanted to be heard. Looking back, I think we wanted validation and comfort, perhaps closure. And even though we couldn't explain exactly what this was, we wanted no one to ever have to go through it again.

I contacted an instructor about creating an event where we could talk about what the students were going through—a forum, of sorts. Soon I was getting responses from the instructor regarding a “Mental Health Inreach Event”. Talks that began with the two of us, the instructor and myself, soon grew to include campus services, but discussion was often centred around specifics: in what actionable ways could the department be better? How would this “student-led initiative” develop solutions?

The focus on tangible, trackable results was frustrating in a way I didn't have the vocabulary for at the time. We knew little about mental wellness or self-care: there was no departmental precedent. I was one of few of my peers with any real activism experience, thanks to the Feminist Alliance McMaster (FAM). I was also sleep-deprived, lacking hope or inspiration, and intimidated by the responsibility of advocating for a student body whose needs they didn't have the language to communicate to me. How could I explain to professors in a meaningful way that the same reward system that was breaking us down was the very reason we were here in the first place? That everything we did for our classes was “despite”—despite fatigue, despite depression and anxiety, despite a very real desire to quit and pursue something we might actually enjoy? And why wasn't it enough to say that and be heard?

Planning dragged on into another semester, and after another delayed response, I sent this scathingly polite reminder to the instructor:

The importance we place on a Mental Health Inreach event is evident in that we're willing to organize time and effort for something that will mostly benefit a younger cohort of students. While we hope to enjoy the evening and learn a lot from all the participants, we don't expect any "payout" from hosting a discussion such as this.

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We are also capable of organizing support for this on our own - I've offered a couple times to speak to the Student Wellness Centre and its representatives. Now, I recognize you and the other professors are busy - and it's not my place or intention to question you focusing on your own priorities - but if you find that delegating to a group of students is too much to take on at this time, we will organize this event on our own.

Please remember that the precedent that the Chemistry and Chemical Sciences Department would set by collaborating on a mental health discussion with its students could only have positive repercussions throughout the University and academic community.

I did my best with the resources I had, with what I knew at the time. I still tell myself that.

Because to this day I can't shake the feeling that the Event flopped.

March 19, 2014, it finally happened. We gathered late—students I'd known were coming, two or three I hadn't known, some instructors, and support from Student Accessibility Services.

We split into groups and chatted over a list of questions designed to help us brainstorm solutions to how we were feeling. My group quickly became an impromptu peer support session. There was no talk of coping mechanisms or strategies. It was an outpouring of personal experiences and grievance as we spoke of just how bad things had gotten. I wanted to direct the conversation, but couldn't. I wanted to talk about how we could change things, *improve* things, but our group time was up before we even had a chance.

Now the plan had been to share our solutions with everyone. Other groups had actually gotten through the questions, but the answers followed a theme. *The students needed to advocate for themselves. The students needed to manage their time better, develop healthy routines. The students needed to speak up.* (Weren't we?) I wrapped up the event with some thoughts. It was getting late and I was getting looks from the instructors, but it was only 10 pm and honestly, since when had I gone to bed that early for them?

The Event came to a close, the anticlimactic result of months of planning, and I felt exhausted and dissatisfied. The following week, at a wrap-up meeting, when one of the instructors said, "Well, we sure heard a lot from *one* person," I felt kicked.

For the rest of the semester, I felt I'd let everyone down. I had wanted to hold someone accountable. I didn't feel like a revolutionary. I hadn't opened floodgates of empathy from the department or changed students' understanding of their own wellbeing. I'd barely gotten anyone in the door.

This feeling persisted "despite", as it was well-trained to by now. Classmates who hadn't attended would congratulate me for doing 'something'. *You weren't there, I would think. I blew it.* A Christmas card from a Secret Santa in my class said *I really appreciate how much you*

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advocate and care for others. I was a little lost for words, but shame won out again. *You weren't there. It sucked.*

When I graduated later that year, my friend wrote me these lines:

I think you're very brave for initiating the mental health program with Dr. [X]. I certainly would not have been able to do that, and I think very few people I know would have enough guts to do it. I'm sure the younger generation CBs [Chemical Biology students] will thank you for your efforts. Many will probably do it silently, in a few years' time when they've gone through the "grind", so to speak. But know that you will absolutely touch lives with it. And I admire you very much for taking the time and the effort to do so.

The sentiments slid over me without leaving a trace. There wasn't going to be a "program". The Event was a one-time thing, barely anyone who wasn't involved in the planning had been there and I'd monopolized the entire evening with my speaking. That was how I thought of it and that's how it cemented: a failure.

It's taken seven years for me to realize I did nothing wrong. Without the prompt from this Zine, I would never have taken the time to look back on it with any kindness. In writing this, I have gone through grief, embarrassment and, finally, anger: at myself, the instructors, and my classmates for coming up with nothing better than to keep blaming ourselves.

But I've also found emails from then, hopeful ones from the planning phase, citing interest and discussion created in the months leading up to the Event. People talking about things they'd never talked about before, learning words for feelings they'd never acknowledged before. I remember the instructors who shared their experiences of university life. And I've gone through the cards and letters I kept from my university days, when my classmates and I were holding onto each other for dear life in a storm, as if we could all float if we just created a big enough landmass.

Seven years to learn that no one is solely responsible for a revolution.

When I organized the Event in 2014, I wasn't alone. My classmates backed me, in the full knowledge that, as fourth and fifth-year students, our chance to reap any benefit had passed. But we didn't care. I was 21, ready to keep the Chemistry department up past its bedtime, ready not to flinch in the face of our own suffering, ready to change nothing but angry enough to try. For that, I say *Thank you. You've touched my life with this.*

Intersectionality in Peer Support: Reflections and Future Directions – Chanel F.

Note about content: this piece contains mentions of transphobia and sexual violence.

“When approaching intersectionality, or just when approaching helping people in general, [...] have an open mind and talk to people and listen [...] I think that is the path. And viewing every voice as valuable.” - Peer Supporter

When I first started university, I grappled with understanding my identity. My adolescence was supportive, but I often felt like I had little sense of community. I struggled with understanding - and finding words to describe - my queerness, culture, and my neurodivergence and how they intermingled. During university, I felt I had an opportunity to change this. Interested in mental health as a psychology student, I applied to be a volunteer with an organization that provides peer support to 2SLGBTQ+ youth (29 and under). I also made new friends through university clubs who shared similar experiences to mine and made me feel comfortable sharing pieces of myself I had previously ignored. In this new environment, I started building an understanding of the impact of different dimensions of social identities on my life. Quickly, I found myself a world that provided me language to discuss my feelings of alienation from myself and my communities.

Intersectionality is a term that has risen in popularity, which I have especially noticed in studies of health and well-being. Coined by Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality is a framework and term to describe how various dimensions of our identities and systems of oppression interact and affect lived experiences. I have become concerned that sometimes the concept is tossed around to make spaces seem more inclusive without genuine understanding and analysis. As is echoed by a peer supporter I spoke with, oversimplifications of intersectionality and social factors of life cause *“people [to] get pushed into categories and pushed to be stereotyped”*, which in my eyes defeats the intention of providing attentive peer support. Thus, the combination of my gratitude for my communities in grounding me during a tumultuous time and the desire to do right by advocates in justice inspired me to write this reflection.

This piece is just a small glimpse of the feelings, thoughts, and hopes of five peer supporters, including myself. The individuals I spoke with provided and often received peer support in some capacity, many through some organization or group. We spoke about the individual one-on-one peer relationships, group facilitation, educating from lived experience, and general community advocacy. I aimed to speak with peer supporters who self-identified with neurodivergence, disability, and/or Madness, another equity-seeking group (e.g. trans and gender diverse and racialized individuals), and post-secondary education. Despite our diverse identities and varying experiences in and around peer support, I found that every conversation resembled the others and my own reflections. As such, this piece describes both our shared perceptions and unique experiences that I hope will provide other peer supporters like us a sense of commonality to build community and feel heard. I also hope this piece will provide insight for student and post-secondary organizations and groups that facilitate peer support. Lastly, I extend my gratitude to

the peer supporters I spoke with. This piece would not have been possible without their generosity in sharing their experiences.

Why does intersectionality matter?

Considering intersectionality allows us to not only explore how social positions affect our interaction with the environment and others, but also adds a layer of nuance to understanding one another. We are constantly making assumptions about the people we encounter. Challenging these assumptions was one of the most important lessons I learned as a peer supporter. As one peer supporter said, *“being able to see my own intersectional experiences allows me to be open, to not assume that I understand what someone needs or what someone’s going through”*. This is important to peer work because no person is one-dimensional, despite often singular demographic categorization of peer support groups. It is important to remember that I likely will perceive a situation differently than the person I’m providing support to, especially when someone holds the same identity as myself. Thus, having an intersectional lens matters when trying to actively listen and centre the person I am supporting, rather than centering the pre-existing notions I may hold about their experiences.

It is important to have discussions and reflections about intersectionality in peer support to build a sense of community, thereby supporting peer workers and activist spaces. For instance, one peer supporter I spoke with got connected with me by being in touch with individuals at McMaster University who knew about my work writing this piece. Building these relationships with peer supporters through shared contacts can be a space to share our experiences and build community, especially for those of us who could not reach community in other ways. Moreover, another peer supporter mentioned that they felt it was personally important to speak about their neurodivergence and how it impacts their experiences, including when providing peer support. This highlighted the need for peer support groups and organizations to consider how their peer supporters are supported through the process as well. For one of the peer supporters I spoke with, talking about intersectionality and peer support was also an opportunity to talk about making activism work in formal and professional settings. As such, I feel that we were hopeful about the future of peer support and in creating secure environments where we feel comfortable engaging in peer support.

Some gaps and areas to improve in peer work

One major gap we have noticed is that very few groups or organizations take multiple identities into explicit consideration. In the field of formalized peer support through organizations or groups, we find that often groups and/or resources exist for one topic, such as sexual assault, and for a presumed singular audience.

Sexual assault centres are often focused on cis women’s experiences, either through labeling the resource as ‘for women’ or by only the briefest of mentions of including trans and gender-diverse individuals in their mandate. For example, one peer supporter noted that *“one person was just referring to all of the [sexual assault centre] volunteers as females”*. For someone looking for resources, the exclusive focus on the victimization of cis women adds an additional

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barrier to resource access. Moreover, this focus constructs the experience of interpersonal violence as an issue that only affects cis women, despite the complexities of interpersonal and sexual violence.

This gap, assuming people reaching out for peer support could be sufficiently understood by a one-dimensional lens, was echoed by other conversations I had as well. Another peer supporter reflected that when joining groups for Black students, *“there wasn’t really talk about intersectionality, [...] we would maybe talk about the differences between Black men and Black women”* but multiple social dimensions were rarely discussed in relation to one another.

This feeling of disconnect with intersectional issues was related to online peer support as well, since oftentimes you can only hear the voice of the person you are speaking with. In these experiences, this peer supporter spoke about how it felt like communication was broken, and conversations were limited from going deeper into disability because it felt like there was a rift in the conversation. This idea reminds me of the desire we have to feel seen and understood, which is inhibited if we only recognize one aspect of a person. To me, the goal of peer support is to have someone sit with us and our thoughts and feelings; to see us. As such, the lack of recognition for intersectional identities seems to oppose the goal of peer support.

The peer supporters I spoke with also mentioned feeling like their identification with multiple communities lead to people expecting that they would be willing and able to speak on behalf of an entire group. Because we hold multiple marginalized identities, people carry this expectation for us for each of our identities. Simply put by one peer supporter, this experience of feeling tokenized *“can be quite draining”* in informal settings, such as conversations among friends and/or in classes. The sense of feeling drained was contrasted to formal peer support settings, where peer supporters have the ability to choose the *“physical and mental space to provide support [...] rather than having to immediately react and respond”*. As another peer supporter noted, the expectation of an immediate reaction can be disorienting, especially for people with verbal processing difficulty. Informally, people sometimes expect support at times when I am unprepared. Thus, I too feel that having the choice to ‘opt-out’ of providing peer support when I am feeling unable or when the request for peer support is inappropriate allows the support I can provide to be more sustainable.

People who hold intersectional identities are often positioned to decide the viability and possible outcomes of challenging harmful comments in post-secondary education (and beyond). Again, the expectation to speak on behalf of multiple marginalized groups comes up, especially when hearing ignorant comments in class. As one peer supporter noted, the question *“do I need to challenge this today?”* can feel like a constant, repeated reflection when in post-secondary education. In peer support spaces, tokenization can show up when people seek support about feelings and experiences surrounding intersectional identities. Also, ignorant comments can also be perpetuated in peer spaces. Thus, it is important for organizers and groups that provide peer support to be aware of the additional burden of being vigilant about harmful comments in post-secondary education. Altogether, peer supporters spoke about how these expectations of individuals were barriers in making activism work. These barriers can feel

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isolating and can take away the capacity to connect and voice solidarity with various communities.

As peer supporters, we also navigate our own identities and cultures. There is often a gap in respect and recognition of cultural support besides Western ways of supporting mental health. Feeling like our own cultures are valued helps us provide sustainable peer support. Another peer supporter mentioned how it felt like their experiences of peer work and culture were at odds with each other. The co-optation of certain philosophies and practices of Eastern cultures by Western mental health initiatives can further alienate people who live between these boundaries. This is a feeling I am familiar with, a feeling that toes the line between resentment and pride. Particularly for topics that are met with stigma, cherry-picking parts of culture is an incomplete way to address how the social constructs of our lives affect us. Moreover, the same peer supporter noted that there are cultural *“strengths and resources that exist that are not tapped into [by mainstream services] when providing services for people of [their] culture”* showing that there certainly is a need to consider different ways of doing mental health and peer work where people across experiences of distress interconnect with other community affiliations. Incorporating and valuing holistic approaches to mental health support, such as art, could create a more supportive environment so people can bring their whole selves into providing peer work.

What will the future of intersectionality and peer support look like?

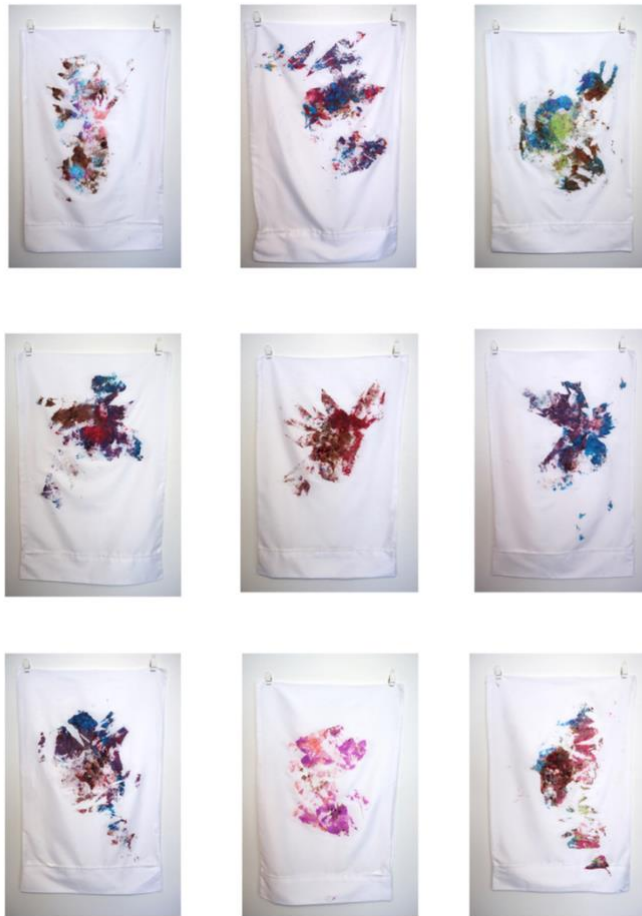
My conversations with other peer supporters concluded with reflections on how we can work towards a more supportive future in peer work. Resoundingly, all the peer supporters I spoke with emphasized the need for acknowledgement and understanding of intersectional identities. We discussed how this acknowledgement could take the form of inclusion; by including equity-deserving groups in popular media representation, our organizations, and challenging the one-dimensional demographic categorizations that define and confine our experiences. Peer supporters also spoke hopefully about opportunities to have these discussions about intersectionality and peer support openly, through groups and self-acceptance. This included understanding neurodivergent communication and greater respect for trans individuals. Explicitly valuing anti-oppression and making efforts to listen and address concerns were ways that helped peer supporters feel like their contributions were valued by organizations and supervisors.

Though we had limited time for our discussions, I am comforted by how I resonated with each individual I spoke with. The conversations I had and the sense of common understanding between peer supporters contrasted with the isolation and lack of words I felt prior to university. Through the lens of intersectionality, we were able to connect on what we hope the future of peer work might look like. I hope that our reflections will be useful to those who organize peer support and those who participate in it.

Weeping Willow – Stacey Skalko

Swaying in the wind
Down a long forgotten path
Weeping silently without a sound
The tears flow down coming deep from within
Living, breathing, basking in what is left of the day's sun
Providing shelter, strong, sturdy, yet gentle.
The roots are overgrown, twisted and tangled
searching for nourishment.
Providing protection for the lost ones
Those who have fallen off the beaten path
Down on their luck and having little hope.
Yet count my rings
I am as wise as they come
I have withstood many storms,
And yet I stand tall, strong, yet graceful.

Creature Comforts (2020) – Diane Langevin



Artist Statement

I wanted to express my sense of identity as a Mad Individual in the most fluid and personal way I could deliver. I was working within parameters of the pandemic, and that restriction rearranged my entire world within days. Like many, I felt stress, isolation, a sense of instability. I wanted to communicate my experience within these unexpected emotions. I used common comfort foods: cakes, icings slathered onto a favourite comfort toy. Wrapping the piece in a pillowcase each time I personally felt these experience, and laying with it in my bed, I built a time capsule of how my anxiety felt during this time: consistently moving, flowing, changing and returning in its new form only to change again.

Untitled – Kai Kristoff



It's okay to be bright and murky at the same time.

Image Description: This painting was created with acrylics on canvas. The background is dark, murky green, with small fuchsia dots layered on with both the bristled and wood ends of the paintbrush. In the centre is a blurry and abstract outline of an ambiguous, curving figure (which may be interpreted as a duck) that blends a bit into the background - hiding and standing out at the same time. The outline is filled in with layered blue and green hues. Rather than representing a typical pond, the murky colours, fuchsia dots, and blurry and abstract outline offer the feeling of both a natural and unnatural setting.

My intention was to leave room for people to have their own process, direction, and interpretation. I don't want to be labelled and I likewise wanted to create a piece where different interpretations – mine and others' - could be equally valid rather than titling this piece or explaining what it is.

A Deep Desire for Transformative Justice: A Reflection on the Birth of the *Canadian Journal of Theology, Mental Health and Disability* – Amy Elizabeth Panton & Miriam Spies

“Indeed, the first step in overcoming oppression is expression. That is why it is so important to listen to people and allow them to find their own words in order to name their own world.”
~Patricia Deegan⁸

Introduction

In the winter of 2020, a group of graduate students from the Toronto School of Theology took a reading course on the intersections between theology and disability at Emmanuel College. Twice per month, ten of us gathered with our professor to read and discuss key texts. During these meetings, we focused on the voices of mad and disabled people, who are often overlooked in contemporary conversations at the intersections of theology and madness/disability. During our conversations, we uncovered again many of our deep wounds connected to our faith communities regarding our lived experiences of madness/disability. After the semester ended, two students from the group – Amy and Miriam, the authors of this piece - put our heads together to see what we could do to contribute to positive change regarding these issues.

After some discussion with our mentors at Emmanuel College, we decided to create an online space for mad/disabled people to share their lived experiences and develop their voices⁹ in the form of an open access journal which we named the *Canadian Journal of Theology, Mental Health and Disability*. On a very practical level, the journal uses the Open Journal Systems (OJS) platform,¹⁰ and is hosted by the University of Toronto library, which makes it entirely cost-free for us. The journal focuses on highlighting peer-reviewed articles, creative work, reflections on pedagogy and practice in the field of theology, as well as opinion pieces written by people with lived experience of mental and emotional distress and other disabilities. Below, we present reflections upon the birth of the journal, as well as some thoughts on how we hope to contribute to the wider conversation about madness and disability in the realms of academia and faith communities within a Canadian context.

The Problems as We Have Experienced Them

How mad/disabled peoples’ stories are told, in the field of theological studies as well as within

⁸ Patricia Deegan, “Spirit Breaking: When the Helping Professions Hurt,” *The Humanistic Psychologist* 28, no. 1–3 (2000): 194–209, 200.

⁹ Peter Beresford, “The Role of Survivor Knowledge in Creating Alternatives to Psychiatry” in *Searching for a Rose Garden: Challenging Psychiatry, Fostering Mad Studies*. Ed. Jasna Russo and Angela Sweeney (United Kingdom: PCCS Books, 2016): 25–34, 27.

¹⁰ “Open Journal Systems,” Public Knowledge Project. Accessed April 12, 2021. <https://pkp.sfu.ca/ojs/>.

our wider society, regularly inflict harm. Often, theologians writing on madness/disability participate in the “colonization” of the stories they collect for research purposes.¹¹ Although many have good intentions propelling them to write about these underrepresented intersections, the colonization of these stories leads to what Jasna Russo and Peter Beresford call “the consumption and recycling of mad people’s stories.”¹² This process leads to a re-framing of narratives in support of various agendas and purposes that have nothing to do with helping people who are actually experiencing mental distress. As well, academics can be called on as “experts” in mental health research and participate in a “taking over” of the narratives of mad people, effectively silencing mad/disabled voices. Sadly, we have seen this phenomenon play out over and over in theological research on mental distress and other disabilities. In the field of theology, this often takes the form of the white, allegedly sane, able-bodied male positioning themselves as the expert on the lives of mad and disabled people and writing theological reflections on madness and disability that end up feeling very disconnected from people with actual lived experience of madness and physical impairments. What ends up happening here is that those of us who are not white, sane, able-bodied or male end up feeling like our experiences are irrelevant and that our faith communities see us as burdens and inspirations.

In the first issue of the journal which we published online in April of 2021, we decided to focus on some of the ways that mad/disabled people are often disrespected, dehumanized, and othered when they attend places of worship. For example, Laura MacGregor reflects upon the experience of attending church with her son Matthew, who had profound physical and intellectual disabilities. She writes:

Churches often dehumanize people with intellectual disabilities by using them as inspirational tools to sustain the spirituality of others, maintaining them as objects of charity by engaging in ministry to rather than with, or infantilizing their gifts of embodied spirituality as childish. For many faith communities the practice of “inclusion” maintains an us/them divide that perpetuates existing power structures, practices, and beliefs that isolate people with intellectual disabilities rather than creating communities of belonging that value diverse spiritual lives.¹³

MacGregor writes that her family was treated so badly by churches that they left organized religion when Matthew was young, in search of more liberative and life-giving spaces.

Another piece that was included in the first issue of our journal calls into question why it is that people with autism are often silenced or ignored within communities of faith. Author Krysia

¹¹ Jasna Russo and Peter Beresford, “Between Exclusion and Colonisation: Seeking a Place for Mad People’s Knowledge in Academia.” *Disability & Society* 30, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 153–57, 154.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Laura MacGregor, “Embodied Spirituality: Maternal Reflections on Intellectual Ableism, Worship, and the Embodied Leadership of People with Intellectual Disabilities.” *Canadian Journal of Theology, Mental Health and Disability* 1, no. 1 (April 1, 2021): 55–65, 58.

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Waldock reflects on her experiences attending church as an Autistic person, writing that she enjoys the community aspect of attending church, but she found that her needs were not being met by her faith community. She recounts:

Like many disabled people, I have experienced barriers and negative events which have deeply hurt and scarred me. I persist though. For me at least, I know it's a lack of knowledge, power imbalance, and a culture of "this is the way we've always done it" which has led to exclusion and my needs as an Autistic being ignored and neglected.¹⁴

It is heartbreaking that our friends and our family members have been treated this way by members of their faith communities. Although they have a deep desire to gather together with others that share their faith, sadly they were treated as outsiders and as burdens.

Our Response

Starting up a new journal isn't easy, we must be honest, but it is definitely a worthwhile endeavour. We wanted to make clear from the beginning that this journal would be different, and perhaps a bit unconventional. Most of the existing journals that focus on mental health, disability, and theology publish academic papers alone. Instead of only papers, we decided we would publish invited commentaries on social justice issues related to madness and disability and also creative work, poetry, life-writing, visual art, etc. Taking inspiration from magazines such as *Asylum* and *Our Voice*,¹⁵ we wanted to create a space where we can ask questions and challenge readers, while honouring those who have come before us as we are listening to new voices in the field of theology.¹⁶ It is also key to note that because our college is an interfaith environment, which is a mix of Buddhist, Sikh, Muslim, Christian, Pagan, Indigenous, Jewish (and other!) faith traditions, it is important that we publish work that reflects theologically on madness/disability from the vantage point of many faith commitments and spiritual worldviews.

Reflecting on Our Own Locations

What exactly do we bring as editors to this work? We all know that a person's social location influences the way they see the world and also act within it. As two queer-cis-white editors, we are aware that we come from a position of privilege in our editing. It was important for us to grapple with our privilege while also honouring the fact that we both live with mental health diagnoses and physical impairments. Amy's current dissertation work on the intersections between madness and spirituality highlights the importance of recognizing our multiple roles as

¹⁴ Kryisia Waldock, "'Doing Church' During COVID-19: An Autistic Reflection on Online Church." *Canadian Journal of Theology, Mental Health and Disability* 1, no. 1 (April 1, 2021): 66–70, 67.

¹⁵ See: "Asylum, the Radical Mental Health Magazine," accessed August 16, 2021, <https://asylummagazine.org/>, and "Our Voice / Notre Voix, Viewpoints of the Psychiatrized Since 1987," accessed August 16, 2021, <https://www.ourvoice-notrevoix.com/>.

¹⁶ "About the Journal," *Canadian Journal of Theology, Mental Health and Disability*," accessed April 12, 2021, <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/cjtmhd/about>.

they relate to our research. As a person who began experiencing mental distress at a very young age, and who is also a survivor of the mental health system, Amy is considered by others to be a “survivor-researcher.” Amy has found that adopting the label of “survivor researcher” has been so important as she considers who she is in relation to both her dissertation work, and also regarding this journal. According to Angela Sweeney, often survivor researchers link their scholarly work to activism:

Adopting the explicit label of survivor researcher is often a political statement meaning that we want to challenge dominant ideas about mental distress and about us...and aim to conduct research that challenges the powerlessness and marginalization of survivors.¹⁷

Reading Sweeney’s definition of survivor researcher helped Amy to clarify her role in her mind with regards to her academic work. Instead of feeling like an outsider (or even a voyeur) with regards to the research she is doing in her dissertation on self-injury and spirituality, Amy positions herself as standing “side by side” with those whose stories she is reading. Amy has given herself the name of “Mad theologian” and all of her work emerges from this vantage point.

In Miriam’s case, she sees herself as a “Crip theologian” whose research aims to challenge the church in how it views leadership and who it desires to fill leadership roles. Asian-American disability activist Sandy Ho wrote, “taking up space as a disabled person is always revolutionary.”¹⁸ Through engaging in disability theologies and studies, Miriam’s confidence continues to grow concerning when, where, and how Miriam takes up space both with regards to faith communities and in academic locations. Amy and Miriam desire to encourage other mad/disabled peoples and their communities to reflect on the spaces we have taken up and desire to take up. Amy calls this “place-taking” and it is an act of resistance. Place-taking here is connected to the “divine banquet in which the last are first and the weak have a special place, not because they are cured and made strong along the lines of normalcy, but because they are more ready to accept being welcomed by God for who they are.”¹⁹ This is a boldness to take our place at the divine table unashamed, proud, and beloved.

Conclusion

We encourage others from mad/disabled communities who are feeling forgotten or silenced by their faith communities to think and act creatively with us, contributing to transformative justice. For us, recognizing some of the injustices in the intersections between theology and

¹⁷ Angela Sweeney, “The Transformative Potential of Survivor Research,” in *Searching for a Rose Garden: Challenging Psychiatry, Fostering Mad Studies*. Ed. Jasna Russo and Angela Sweeney (United Kingdom: PCCS Books, 2016): 49–58, 51.

¹⁸ Sandy Ho, “Canfi to Canji: The Freedom of Being Loud,” Bitch Media, May 13, 2019, accessed April 27, 2021, <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/the-freedom-of-being-loud>.

¹⁹ Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2008), kindle location 5723.

madness/disability fueled a “righteous anger” and propelled the vision for *The Canadian Journal of Theology, Mental Health and Disability*. Although at times belonging to the margins means that we need to try twice as hard to have our voices heard and our “outsider” perspectives acknowledged, we believe that grassroots initiatives make a difference. If you are among us as folks who have experienced similar struggles and pains, do not give up on finding ways to let your voice be heard. Let us work together to transform faith communities and societies.

Chrysalis Emerging – Stacey Skalko

I once was trapped;
Afraid;
Feeling forgotten;
Scared;
Alone.
Yet somehow I managed to survive.
Life isn't always easy
And it definitely isn't fair.
But having lay dormant for so long,
It is time to expose my soul
Piece by piece the tapestry is woven
Growing stronger
More apt, able, and ready
To deal with the baffling complexities
Of Life
...
I am strong
I am beautiful
I am brave
...
My mind cracks
Unleashing the demons
That have wreaked havoc on my soul
Yet I dare do the impossible
I break free from the chains of
Apathy, isolation, and despair
...
I not only fly but
SOAR
...
Life in its mystery is beautiful
The darkness is gone,
The storm has passed,
Nothing but goodness is left.

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...

Night falls fast.

Starlight, star bright

I wish for...

Nothing;

I have everything that I need.

I must remember to believe in myself

When the turbulence and darkness draw near.

Find the light within myself;

That effervescent spark

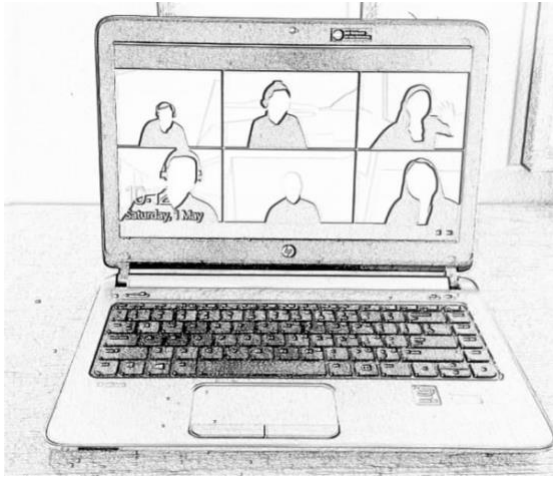
The one that though dimmed

Has been a guiding force

Allowing me to not only survive but

thrive.

We Are Mad Community – Amanda Chalmers and Robin Arnott



Mad students come together
We unite
We are Mad Community

Pushing beds in the street
We march
We are Mad Community

In virtual spaces we gather
We survive
We are Mad Community

Reduced to intangible bodies
We connect
We are Mad Community

Finding solidarity in solitude
We thrive
We are Mad Community

Mad students come together
We unite
We are Mad Community

Artist Statement

Our inclusion of the image represents that there is still connection within the mad community virtually, but people and pieces are missing. There are people excluded and how we connect as a community has been altered. In the past, we have become accustomed to the option of in-

person advocacy, such as events held by the School of Disability Studies at Toronto Metropolitan University and the Toronto Mad Pride Bed Push (as referenced in the second stanza of our poem). While we have adjusted, people have been left out, and our activism has changed and, in some instances, been cancelled. There is only so much time we can stare at a screen and Zoom fatigue has cut important conversations short. The faces in the image are blank to represent the events that have been cancelled, the missing people and missing activism. While the people are faceless, they remain present as we are still Mad community.

Origins of *Outliers*: Alise, Lieve, Evonne, Vikita, and Danny in conversation

How did we find our way into Mad student worlds and conversations?

ALISE: I first found Mad student community in 2009 via the Mad Students Society in Toronto (Canada). Meeting other students who were similarly struggling to negotiate psychiatric institutions/ideas, politicize their experiences, and create alternatives had a profound impact on my life. In 2012, when I began doctoral studies an hour away, I lost proximity to this community and started gathering Mad students locally. I continued organizing the Hamilton Mad Students' Collective (HMSC), which grew to 200 members, until 2016 when the university student union finally adopted and funded a disabled student-run peer service, something for which HMSC members and colleagues had been advocating.

My dissertation became a space to theorize from my experiences and to confront ways that Mad students are harmed by conventional approaches to 'mental health awareness' on campus. I wrote about Mad student loneliness, arguing that the typical recommendation to 'refer' students experiencing distress 'away' from the classroom to counselling services constitutes a form of abandonment of Mad students as knowers and learners.²⁰ Although I didn't talk openly about it, I found Mad student organizing lonely too. I came to feel like I belonged less and less in this network I had cultivated so that I could belong somewhere; the barriers and distress incoming undergraduate students were facing were increasingly different from the peer support I needed as a later-stage PhD student.²¹ Longing for colleagues and peers with whom to explore these experiences, I found my way to the 2018 Lancaster Disability Studies Conference in the UK where I met Lieve.

LIEVE: I didn't know about 'Mad Studies' as a discipline before the shift to my present department of Disability Studies at Ghent University, Belgium.

When I was a student counsellor in the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, and during my studies as a clinical psychologist, we just talked *about* disabled students or mentally ill students and their different pathologies. We were discussing as professionals how to tear down barriers in connecting students with specific needs to available support, while proactively trying to detect, as early preventative measures, those unable to formulate a quest for support. By communicating the

²⁰ de Bie, A. (2019). Finding ways (and words) to move: Mad student politics and practices of loneliness. *Disability & Society*, 34(7-8), 1154-1179.

²¹ de Bie, A., Rothwell, C., Prowse, C., Yogendran, V., Douglass, M., & Green, T. (In preparation). What has Mad student community meant to us?: Mourning Mad losses as methodology and praxis.

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message that students themselves had to apply for this support to become successful students, students internalized the idea that they had a problem to be fixed and that it was their individual responsibility to solve it.

As I listened to many lived experiences, I became very aware of the diverse population and students' worry about the impact of disclosure on their career and relations. Building a trusting relationship was a necessary condition before we could delve into what it meant disclosing and studying as, what I later would describe as a 'Mad student' or 'a student Mad@school'.

I noticed the parallel struggles in disclosing among students with disabilities. Applying for accommodations when studying with a visible disability was not easy. It was even more difficult when the 'disability' was not visible as this apparent invisibility put into question if a student really 'suffered' or even had the right to apply for accommodations. The system of granting accommodations led to many discussions with staff and students about labels, not from a speculative point imagining the impossible, but unfortunately from the perspective of deficit thinking, obstacles, and exclusion.

As a counsellor, I got "mad at school"²² when we as colleagues, policy and academic staff, got stuck in discussions expressing powerlessness to deal with student distress; staff talked about the problem of student distress as a resource issue they could not change (inadequate staff capacity) rather than as created by a university system that could be designed differently.

Unable to continue fighting the oppressive ableist attitudes, and recovering from extreme burnout, I made the shift to the department of Disability Studies where I was introduced to Mad Studies²³ and invited to work on a PhD concerning the topic.

Excited to join the Mad Studies Stream at the 2016 Lancaster Disability Studies Conference, I presented a poster about "Mad Matters in Higher Education".²⁴ I was perplexed and hugely disappointed when I received the reaction "*who was I to speak on behalf of Mad students?*". It felt like not being acknowledged for the efforts and mediating role to get the hidden stories out, underrecognizing the shared oppressive attitude staff members are confronted with. But working with that remark, I returned two years later with a paper, "Sowing Little Seeds in the Minds of People as a Quiet Activist,"²⁵ and wrote a piece about the importance of co-producing knowledge²⁶ that clarified my own position and research intentions: I was trying to work directly with these students as partners, starting from their perspective and experiences, to change normative ideas about what counts as knowledge and who can be involved to influence thinking about doing academia differently.

Looking up other conference participants in the Mad Studies Stream in 2018, I met Alise coming from the other side as a Mad student. Together we connected with Helen Spandler, who attended and responded to our presentations and connected us to Jill Anderson. I felt like a groupie

²² Price, M. (2011). *Mad at school: Rhetorics of mental disability and academic life*. University of Michigan Press.

²³ LeFrançois, B. A., Menzies, R., & Reaume, G. (Eds.). (2013). *Mad matters: A critical reader in Canadian Mad studies*. Canadian Scholars' Press.

²⁴ Crette, L. (2016). Mad matters in higher education. Poster presented at *Lancaster Disability Studies Conference*, 6-8th September 2016. <https://tinyurl.com/Crette2016>

²⁵ Crette, L. (2018). Sowing little seeds in the minds of people as a quiet activist. Paper presented at *Lancaster Disability Studies Conference*, 11-13th September 2018. <https://tinyurl.com/Crette2018>

²⁶ Crette, L., De Schauwer, E., & Van Hove, G. (2018). "Everywhere we go, people seem to know": Mad students and knowledge construction of mental illness in higher education. *Social Inclusion*, 6(4), 207-217.

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meeting the authors of a book.²⁷ This meeting opened a totally new world of thinking and possible connections with like-minded people and the seeds started travelling.

Where did the idea for Mad student zines come from?

ALISE: I organized Mad Pride Hamilton events for several years with members of the Hamilton Mad Students' Collective and other community members. We experimented for the first time with a Mad Pride Hamilton zine in 2013 and then produced a Mad student-themed zine issue in 2014.²⁸ Zines offered a way of creating and sharing alternative knowledges to build and strengthen community.

Eight years later, this *Outliers* zine represents a second issue on Mad student experiences, extending beyond the local Hamilton context. The idea for this zine emerged when Lieve and I first met Helen and Jill and chatted about curating a Mad student-themed feature for *Asylum: the critical mental health magazine*. When we got back in touch in 2020, they were engaged in a funded research project on MadZines, and Lieve and I began talking about working with student partners on a zine together.

I was interested in pursuing another Mad student zine project for a couple of reasons: I knew that Mad students were engaged in all sorts of cool activities in our local contexts that would likely be erased or forgotten if we didn't write or create sharable material about our work. I was also grieving the loss of Mad student community in my life and looking for some space to process what it means for me to move on from Mad student organizing: How might I support Mad student initiatives as a postdoctoral fellow in a teaching and learning institute? Can I draw Mad community knowledges and cultural practices of creativity, playfulness, and fun into my formal work? These questions turned into several grant proposals aimed at exploring zines as a Mad Studies alternative to conventional 'mental health awareness' training provided as professional development for university instructors and staff. Most importantly, I was looking for something I could work on with Lieve as a way to sustain and deepen our relationship and was thrilled when Lieve said yes to a zine!

LIEVE: As Alise mentions, looking for other ways to connect during covid-time, we were excited to go public with a call for the Mad and neurodivergent student zine.

I was not very familiar with MadZines but did have the experience of reading graphic novels with neurodiverse people a few years earlier and saw how touching material objects stimulated our conversations in different ways. I also remember reading a professional magazine for Flemish psychologists, *Psyche*, which was accompanied by a separate booklet, *Spiegel*,²⁹ to share in waiting rooms with Dutch-speaking service users. *Spiegel* is edited by people with a psychological vulnerability (vzw Uilenspiegel) and filled with artwork, poetry, and more. I used to read *Spiegel* because hearing directly from people with lived experiences was much more appealing than the theoretical articles *about* them in *Psyche*.

When Helen asked me about existing MadZines and shared her experiences of going to the

²⁷ Spandler, H., & Anderson, J., & Sapey, B. (Eds.). (2015). *Madness, distress and the politics of disablement*. Policy Press.

²⁸ Mad Pride Hamilton (2014). *This Insane Life* magazine: Mad students edition. <http://hdl.handle.net/11375/25051>

²⁹ Spiegel, journal by UilenSpiegel vzw <https://issuu.com/uilenspiegelvzw>

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library to look for zines not traceable in online scientific literature,³⁰ I began to think about how zines contrast with the academic world of pressures to publish, restrictive peer review, and impact factors rating research value. My idea of zines is that they are created to share lived experiences and co-construct community knowledge in very accessible ways.

In giving this project a try, we aimed to create a safe space for exchanging and sharing practices and provocative lived experiences. I was concerned about what it takes to share a personal piece and what traces it leaves?

ALISE: I was able to hire five passionate student partners and we began work in January 2021 on two zines: this one on Mad and neurodivergent student experiences (led with Danny, Evonne, and Vikita), and a second one on disabled student and alumni perspectives within our local context at McMaster University (led with Emunah, Tanisha, and the rest of the team).³¹ We valued the support and feedback from Lieve and our other collaborators as we invited contributions and curated the zine.

EVONNE: I got involved in the Zine Team because I wanted to marry my passions for artistic expression and disability advocacy and this project would help me accomplish both! I also looked forward to working with like-minded individuals who share the same goals as I do. I've always thought art speaks volumes. A zine is a wonderful channel for self-expression and can be an impactful outlet to communicate perspectives. I've been drawn to zines ever since encountering *Incite Magazine* (McMaster University's creative arts and writing magazine) on campus stands in my first year.

VIKITA: From the moment I read about the project, I was intrigued. The zine project encompasses my interests in creative expression, art, and disability justice work. Oftentimes, the ways in which we most resonate with experiences other than our own is through art and storytelling, and I feel that a zine is a medium that can truly connect with students and educators. As someone with experience in disability and accessibility work at McMaster, I wanted to learn more about the lived experiences of individuals who identify as neurodivergent and have had difficult and frustrating experiences with accessibility in post-secondary education. I have truly learned a lot from the contributors to the zine and expanded my perspectives on how art and writing can be a tool for change.

DANNY: My first exposure to zines was through the work of fellow neurodivergent creator, StrawbGoblin, who I am very lucky to have in my life. They have created several zines relating to their experiences as an Autistic person, particularly *Autistic/Artistic*.

I am really glad I was able to be a part of this project. It helped me reframe my experiences with madness and address a deep-seated sense of shame that I'd been carrying around for years. The first time I heard 'Mad' as a reclaimed term back in 2015, I couldn't stand the thought of associating with it. I'd recently experienced a manic episode for the first time and I hated how much I had embarrassed myself. I was terrified of what my peers and professors thought of me – how

³⁰ Spandler, H. (2021). Origins of our research. *MadZine Research Blog*. <https://madzines.org/origins-of-our-madzine-research-by-helen-spandler/>

³¹ See <https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/macdisabilityzine/>

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much did they know about how crazy I'd been? I was so ashamed that spending any time at school was painful. Spending time at school in order to take up space specifically as a 'Mad' person felt impossible. Seven years later, I want to reject that sense of shame and stand with my fellow Mad and neurodivergent students. I don't want anyone to feel ashamed or isolated. I don't want anyone to feel like they are less than their peers, or like no one cares about them or what they think.

LIEVE: I was really amazed when everything got compiled in a real zine! We had discussions about digital and paper-based formats. Being on the other side of the Atlantic, the reality of seeing a draft zine online taught me something about touch and feel or the importance of layout and virtual worlds. An online version felt more accessible and on the other hand, less private.

I was a bit disappointed that there was little uptake from Europe in submitting to the zine. But seeing a reaction to another call, "how can we trust and just share our personal experience to a person we have never heard of before?" makes me more aware that sharing stories is a relational thing, and zines might work best in local networks of connections. "Always try again, is what we have to do," one of the promoters in my PhD guiding committee tells me. Working with this insight, we will try to create a local version of a Belgian Mad Student Zine with two Master's students because we think this is a powerful tool to create a safe space for conversations, rendering each other capable.

Maybe creating more awareness about diversity among our students and staff, starting conversations with a little zine, could help to deconstruct the normative view about who should have access to Academia while reconfiguring Higher Education.³² Perhaps a zine could minimize the gap between 'us and them,' influence the composition of the student community, and support the entry of Mad students into professional and research communities.

ALISE: I've learned through this process that there are many ways I can continue to be in solidarity with Mad and neurodivergent students as they critique the status-quo and create life-affirming alternatives. I'm excited to see future issues of this zine - starting with a possible Belgian issue, and perhaps other rotating local editions as we continue these conversations on Mad/ neurodivergent student perspectives with collaborators across educational contexts. **Are you interested in working on a future issue? We'd love to hear from you! Send us a note at mad.student.zines@gmail.com.**

³² Titchkosky, T. (2011). *The question of access: Disability, space, meaning*. University of Toronto Press.

Mad Fun is Knowledge, Mad Knowledge is Fun – Emunah Woolf



Untitled Collage – Anonymous



Intercurricularity – Ali Jones

Day: _____ Date: edible flowers
 PERIOD GRADES LESSON TOPIC # AMBLANCE

Liminal
 puz-zinial
 taxono-monomy*




Zucchini





Crumb
 umbrella term*

Ghost crumb
*Jargon**
Quantum crumb

*location is apparent**
 e.g. "This is a crumb of the Zucchini blossom."

*location is unapparent**
 e.g. "this is an edge of something... could be blossom, icing tip, a tooth..."

might be a dent in the paper
 e.g. "Is this something, or is it just the light in here?"

*DEBATEABLE
 *CONSENSUS-BASED

REMINERS	DEFINITIONS	RELATES	ABSENTERS
① You CAN BRING CAKE TO CLASS.	CHOCOLATE > NUTS, CHIPS (zuc means sweet).	ZUCCHINI IS A SQUASH. LEARN ABOUT 3 SISTERS AND LANDBACK.	ZOOM LINK ✓ RECORDING ✓ NOTES ✓ (not a favour)

Image Description

Overview

A collage featuring handwritten text, four central puzzle pieces, images of zucchini flowers and cake, and penciled notes and doodles. The collage background is a vanilla-coloured notebook agenda sheet gridded with forest-green lines and typed font.

Top-middle: focal material

- Large central black ink handwriting says “Liminal puz-zinial taxono-meronomy* zucchini”. These words are framed by a cake with dark chocolate sauce and whipped cream to the left.
- To the right is an illustrated portrait of Tycho Brahe, a 16th century white person with a long blond moustache, ruffle collar, and black hat in the same shape as the whipped cream of the cake opposite. The detail is from *Harmonia Macrocosmica*, a star atlas published in 1660.
- Below these are two zucchini flowers (long yellow petals with green veins) flanking a puzzle piece mid-page.

Top-middle: small details

- The agenda background sheet says “Day:” and “Date:” at the top. Letter d of Date is crossed out in pencil, leaving the word ate.
- Titles of three columns left to right are “PERIOD”, “GRADE”, and “LESSON TOPIC”. GRADE has been altered to make it say AIDES.
- In pencil, “edible flowers & AMBIANCE” is written to the right of LESSON TOPIC.
- Top-centre page, a penciled circle with wavy lines, resembling a planet or moon, encircles the word ate and LESSON TOPIC. Penciled lines from the planet/moon extend downwards.
- A penciled hand with cuff holds a divider calliper over the cake tip. From cake tip moving left are eight small circles.
- In AIDES column downwards to mid-page are more circles. One of these has two round ears, dot eyes, and simple nose and mouth, resembling a teddy bear. The teddy circle is connected by lines to an invisible circle surrounding the cake tip.
- There are also two circles around the right-side zucchini flower, one large and one small, orbiting.

Middle-bottom: focal material

- Four puzzle pieces are in the centre. Puzzle piece #1 is entirely yellow and green, a piece of an image of a zucchini flower, and is framed by the two centre-page zucchini flowers.
- Puzzle piece #2 below is mainly dark blue, with about 1/8th portion of yellow and green. Left of #2 is written “Crumb”, “umbrella term*” and to the right, “location is apparent*” and “e.g. ‘This is a crumb of the zucchini blossom.’”
- Puzzle piece #3 is almost all dark blue with a small triangle of yellow on one rounded prong of the piece. “Ghost crumb” is written to the left, and “location is unapparent*”

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and “e.g. ‘This is an edge of something... could be blossom, icing tip, a tooth...” to the right.

- Piece #4 is all dark blue with an almost imperceptible white dot or shine. “Quantum crumb” is to the left, and “might be a dent in the paper” and “e.g. ‘Is this something, or is it just the light in here?’” to the right.
- A bracket groups pieces #3 and #4 together, with the word “Jargon*” and a heart drawn in pink ink.
- Below the pieces and descriptions to the lower right side is a drawing of a pink ribbon-like flag, reading “*DEBATEABLE” and “*CONSENSUS-BASED”.

Middle-bottom: small details

- A pencil circle surrounds puzzle pieces #1 and #4, to which the lines from the top planet/moon extend.
- The words “ANALOGY”, “GOSSIP”, and “DILATE” are penciled in the AIDES column.
- There are several very small circles under ANALOGY, which is itself circled. Three dots coloured pink, purple, and blue extend between ANALOGY and the word Crumb.
- Below puzzle piece #4 are five small circles in a vertical column. To the left are two more circles, one containing several circle fragments, and the other, three bands coloured white, blue, and pink.
- At the bottom of the page are four small background sections left to right titled “REMINDERS” (with MIND circled), “DETENTIONS” (altered to say “TENSIONS”), “LATES” (altered to say “RELATES”), and “ABSENTEES” (altered to say “SENT”).
- Under REMINDERS it says, “1 YOU CAN BRING A CAKE TO CLASS.” Under TENSIONS is “CHOCOLATE CHIPS > NUTS. (zuc means sweet).” Below RELATES is “ZUCCHINI IS A SQUASH. LEARN ABOUT 3 SISTERS AND LANDBACK”. Below SENT is “ZOOM LINK✓ RECORDING✓ NOTES✓ (not a favour)”.
- Between REMINDERS and TENSIONS on a dotted line there are four small letters, A, C, A, and B.

Contributor Biographies

Ali Jones

Ali Jones is a dilettantish artist with a diploma in massage therapy, a rock collection habit, a bachelor's degree in social work, and a propensity to get lost. She is presently learning about constellations of the northern hemisphere, making miniature food jewelry, volunteering with local activists, stressing about finishing a master's degree in social work, and generally trying to survive as a disabled person in Hamilton, Ontario.

Amy Elizabeth Panton & Miriam Spies

Amy Elizabeth Panton is a Mad Theologian who has gotten involved in practical theological research as she wants to contribute to change. She is also an out survivor of the psychiatric system and is exploring the intersections between mental illness and spirituality in her dissertation work. Miriam Spies is a Crip Theologian whose research aims to challenge the church in how it views leadership and who it desires to fill those roles. Her life with a physical disability has led her to challenge models of inclusion and theological unity that do not leave room for people's voices or needs. Both Amy and Miriam are PhD students at Emmanuel College in Toronto.

Cassandra Myers

Cassandra Myers (they/she) is a queer, non-binary, disabled, mad, South-Asian-Italian poet and peer support worker from Tkaronto. Cassandra is the Canadian Festival of Spoken Word champion in 2018, amongst other spoken word awards. Cassandra recently won the ARC Poetry Magazine Poem of The Year Award and Reader's Choice Award. A Pink Door Fellow, Cassandra's first book of poems is forthcoming from Write Bloody North Press.

Chanel F.

Chanel F. is a Student Partner at the MacPherson Institute (McMaster University) and a peer supporter. Her interests lie in health equity, mental health, 2SLGBTQ+ health, and climate change. Outside of her Master's studies in Global Health, she enjoys exploring bookshops and making music with friends.

Diane Langevin

Diane Langevin is a current student of Art History at NSCAD University in Kijipuktuk. She is of settler and Mi'kmaq descent, and is a member of Millbrook First Nation. Her print work reclaims her Mad identity from Euro-western categories of mental illness, and responds with a more fluid, less restricted narrative of Mad Identity that engages in both resistance and resilience. Working in print often emphasizes repetition. This is also an aspect of Diane's Mad Identity that she integrates into her process of print to confront common stereotypes and stigma surrounding mental illness. Diane's most recent work investigates the action and responsibility involved with reclaiming her identity as an Indigenous person. She is hoping to

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enroll as a Master's student in 2022.

Emunah Woolf

Emunah Woolf is a queer, Jewish, Mad, and disabled disability studies enthusiast/researcher. Emunah is passionate about community building, peer support work, harm reduction, and using art as a tool towards connection and activism. They have founded and been involved in various advocacy, organizing, and arts-based projects including those focused on LGBTQ+ Jews and youth with chronic pain. Some other activities Emunah enjoys include cooking, creating colouring pages, and spending time outside with bugs.

Erin Leveque

Erin Leveque (she/they) is a Master of Social Work student, currently working on a thesis exploring the lived experiences of Mad social work therapists as they navigate discourses of sanism, ableism, surveillance, and epistemic violence within the profession. She is deeply curious about the currently narrow ways that we understand healing and Madness, and how that translates to services users whose experiences have been marginalized or exist outside of neurotypical, able-bodied, white, and western epistemologies. Their work often incorporates Mad activism and artistic forms of expression to challenge dominant discourses of what the products of academic knowledge should look like.

gnarls

gnarls (she/her, they/them) is a rural emo witch who works to center queer & mad survivor knowledges and experiences. they are writing a book about breathing. they love to have conversations about lives categorized as borderline - you can reach out at @waysidegnarls to share some thoughts & connect!

Grey Isekai

Grey Isekai is a graduate of the MSW program at McMaster University and not afraid to speak about her experiences as a Black woman with a disability. Grey is an advocate for disability rights whilst challenging the neoliberal practices of Accessibility Services in post-secondary institutions. She is intentional about holding space for the experiences of all folks who use and/or want to better understand this service in order to foster peer support and a greater understanding of what access to education looks like for students with disabilities. Read more of her work [at this link](#).

Julia Clarke

Julia Clarke (Canadian, 1999-present) is a 21 year old self-portrait photographer who's been studying photography at NSCAD University for the last four years. Clarke uses photography as a means to express the physical and sexual trauma she has experienced in the past. Photography is also a means of coping and understanding her own mental illness. She uses her body and form in her self-portrait imagery to allow others to relate with her photography, and her own struggles.

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Kai Kristoff

Kai Kristoff is an artist from Windsor, Ontario. They graduated with a Bachelor's in Human Kinetics in 2019. They enjoy creating art, especially while outdoors. Their favourite type of art is an interactive style with different texture. They draw inspiration from ducks, feelings, and thoughts. They look forward to learning more and contributing to future projects.

Lieve Carette

Lieve Carette is a PhD student working on the topic 'wellbeing of students in higher education'. She draws on her previous experience working with students as a physiological counselor which was the initial drive behind accepting to work on a PhD within the Disability Studies research group at the department of Special Needs Education at Ghent University, Belgium. She hopes to raise awareness for the silenced voices or ineffable stories students want to express, creating space for diffracting what students bring to university with what universities try to convey within their curricula. In crossing international borders, she is always looking to find allies with similar lived experiences and interests within academia to critically ponder on local educational ways of doing and think about possible other ways inspired by these exchanges.

Luise Wolf

Luise Wolf is a queer, neurodivergent, and disabled nature lover with a fondness for historical costume. As a Third Culture Kid, Luise has spent her life between worlds, a trend she has brought to her professional experiences. She holds an undergraduate degree in Chemical Biology and a master's degree in Forensic Toxicology, and is happy to be exploring life without using either. She has worked as a music teacher, a technician, in community radio, on an archaeological dig, and in a museum. She is now studying Cultural Heritage Conservation and Management at Fleming College. One day, she'll write a novel about human connection and she hopes people will read it.

Merel Carrijn

Merel Carrijn (1995) graduated in 2018 as Master of Linguistics and Literature (Dutch-English) at the University of Ghent (Belgium). Despite struggling with several mental issues, she was able to study, train to become a successful judoka, and teach judo to children. Unfortunately her perseverance pushed her so far over her limits, which made her crash only a week after graduating. Since then she is fighting against CPTSD and depression. She has been writing since forever to cope with her issues, but now she also loves exploring visual arts to express her inner world.

Michelle Sayles

Michelle Sayles is a community-engaged artist and illustrator, with roots spread across the northeastern U.S. Through her art and collaborative projects, she strives to shine a light on environmental and social justice issues to inspire critical awareness of this world we inhabit. Her recent projects include contributions to a book on how to talk to kids about racism, and

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graphics for the No Coal No Gas campaign. She is a queer white woman in a continuous process of unlearning and identifies as neurodivergent.

Robin Arnott & Amanda Chalmers

Robin (she/her) and Amanda (she/her) met while working on their degrees in Disability Studies at Toronto Metropolitan University. As Mad students, Robin and Amanda could relate to one another on a deep level. They bonded over their love of writing about madness and the liberation that came with the discovery of crip time. Robin has had a long career in disability support services and then switched gears and became a freelance writer. When she is not playing with her two kids, she is writing away on her laptop, drawing the pictures in her mind, or reading from the stack of novels on her bedside table. Amanda started in the disability sector in children's autism services however was soon drawn to the activism and community of peer support. She is passionate about policy change and reducing sanism. One of Amanda's favourite ways to fill her cup is by photographing sunsets on the beach.

Sam Shelton

Sam Shelton is a long-term grad student in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies with a focus in Critical Disability Studies and Mad Studies. Sam is neuroqueer and trans, and their research interests include anti-oppressive teaching and learning; access; gender and technology; politics of care; and disability justice. You can learn more about Sam by visiting their website: samsheltonsworld.com.

Stacey Skalko

Stacey Skalko, a student of McMaster University and Mohawk College, had a zest for life that included an insatiable thirst for knowledge and education. She was a gifted public speaker, writer, and poet who regularly shared her experiential knowledge to teach students about mental health, the strengths and weaknesses of the medical model of mental illness, and the value of peer support and making community with other mad and neurodiverse people. She was a beloved member of the Hamilton Mad Students' Collective and disabled student peer support community at McMaster. Stacey's poetry and photography have been previously published in two Mad Pride Hamilton zines. Stacey died on July 17, 2022 and is much loved and deeply missed by her friends and family.

Tiffany Chen

Tiffany Chen has a Bachelors in Health Sciences from McMaster University and is currently a graduate student completing her thesis in Global Health. Her research surrounds youth/adolescent mental health, digital health, and substance use disorders. In her free time she enjoys swimming, baking, rock climbing, and learning new languages. Tiffany is passionate about healthcare equity, health policy, and creating change on a local, national, and global level. She hopes that her experiences as a student, researcher, and crisis responder can help others who are struggling to never feel alone.

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XZ

XZ is a disabled queer Asian femme, who studied Health and Society at McMaster University. Their work is informed by their intersecting identifies as well as their experiences as an intercountry adoptee, and enduring intensive mental illness treatment such as institutionalization. During her time at McMaster, she was an engaged volunteer and community member of Maccess, a peer support service run by and for disabled students. XZ's hobbies are taking care of her plants, spending time with their bunny, cooking, baking, creating, drinking coffee, and listening to music.

Zine Editors & Designers

Alise dB

Alise completed a PhD in 2019 and is back in school studying bioethics while working as a postdoctoral fellow in McMaster University's teaching institute. Alise discovered audiobooks during the pandemic and loves “reading’ while walking in the dark around their neighbourhood.

Danny P.

Danny completed their Honours Bachelor of Science in 2016 and returned to school in 2019 to complete a Bachelor of Social Work. They enjoy watching bad movies with friends, overly complicated strategy games, and playing in their local community concert band. They are deeply passionate about finding creative ways to support youth mental health.

Evonne

Evonne S. is a student researcher and Student Partner at the MacPherson Institute. A woman of colour herself, she is especially passionate about equity and inclusion in education. Evonne is also a Cognitive Science of Language student. Her love for language transcends the classroom and workplace as she is an avid writer – a poet – and often publishes in local and on-campus publications. Some of her favourite moments are spent enjoying good food with even better people.

Vikita M.

Vikita M. is a Student Partner at the MacPherson Institute, and is passionate about social justice and inclusion especially in the realms of education and health. As an Arts and Science student, she has diverse academic interests varying from philosophy and political science to human biology. She has a deep passion for community work and policy advocacy, which led her to co-found Disable the Difference, a non-profit that supports disabled youth during the pandemic and advocates for inclusive education across Ontario. She enjoys reading a good book in the sun, playing board games with her friends and family, and spending hours on an intricate paint-by-numbers.

Back Cover

We highlight four quotes from the zine:

“I am tired of the misknowing, of being wrongly known.”

“Madness evokes fear - I am constantly afraid of those who fear me. For I am much more subject to the power of their will than they are to mine.”

"We wanted recognition and we wanted to be heard."

“In virtual spaces we gather
We survive
We are Mad Community.”