



Issue 12 ❁ elementalmag.ca ❁ 2024-2025

Elemental

The Official Mental Health Magazine of the
University of Toronto

A Grad Minds Publication

Navigating Change:
Adapting to Academic
and Campus Life
Challenges

Exclusive Interview with KnitWits:

A weekly crafting group fostering connection and creativity

Featured Article on Newgate 180:

Supporting women through addiction recovery

Voices from the U of T Community:

Personal journeys, coping strategies, recipes, and more!

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FROM THE EDITORS

Welcome to Issue 12 of *Elemental Magazine*, themed **Navigating Change: Adapting to Academic and Campus Life Challenges**. Change is a constant part of the graduate journey, whether it involves adjusting to a new academic environment, experiencing personal growth, or finding balance during times of uncertainty. This year's issue embraces that theme by exploring how we adapt, reflect, and care for ourselves and each other during periods of transition.

Elemental is also in a period of change. For this issue, we expanded our approach to content by inviting community submissions from graduate students and other members of the U of T community. We welcomed new voices, new formats, and new ways of storytelling, including personal stories, coping strategies, poems, recipes, and more.

We are proud to spotlight two feature articles that explore community care both within and beyond the university:

- **KnitWits: Building Community Through Creativity**
- **Healing, Growth, and Change: How Newgate 180 Helps Women Rebuild Their Lives**

This issue also features photos submitted by contributors, as well as images from Grad Minds wellness events held throughout the year. Whether you are flipping through these pages during a quiet moment or sharing them with a friend, we hope this issue offers reflection, connection, and inspiration. Thank you for being part of this evolving journey with us.

Warmly,

Daisy Hu

Chair, Grad Minds

Kealyn McDowell

Editor-in-Chief, Elemental Magazine

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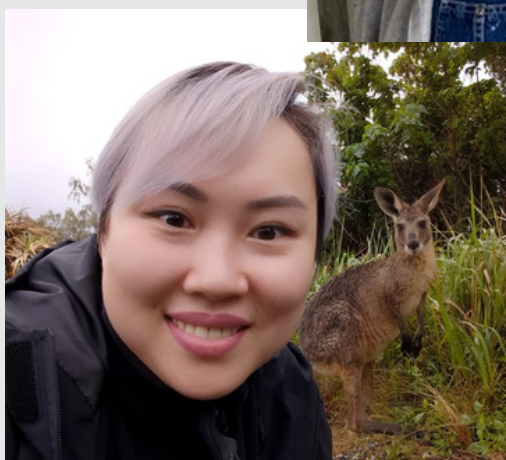
Members of the graduate community contributed to "Canvas of Care," a communal painting activity that fostered reflection, creativity, and collective wellness at the University of Toronto Graduate Students' Union 2025 Winter Fest.

MEET THE TEAM



KEALYN MCDOWELL
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, ELEMENTAL

Kealyn is a Master of Information student at the University of Toronto (UofT), specializing in Library and Information Sciences. With a background in Psychology, she is passionate about supporting mental health awareness and advocacy efforts across campus. As Editor-in-Chief of *Elemental magazine*, she aims to promote wellness and foster a supportive community among graduate students at UofT.



DAISY HU
CHAIR, GRAD MINDS

Daisy is a PhD student in the Department of Psychology at the University of Toronto. They conduct brain imaging research to investigate the biodevelopmental bases of sexual and gender diversity cross-culturally. As Chair of Grad Minds, they lead a dedicated team of student leaders working to advance peer-driven mental health initiatives that foster community connection and creative expression. They also serve on the School of Graduate Studies Mental Health Advisory Committee.



MONIKA FOLKIERSKA-ŻUKOWSKA
ART DIRECTOR & EDITORIAL DESIGNER

Monika is a Postdoctoral Fellow at University of Toronto Mississauga and Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. Her research focuses on brain correlates of gender identity, gender diversity across cultures, LGBTQA+ wellbeing, asexuality, and aromanticism. Apart from her involvement in the *Elemental Magazine*, Monika volunteers at Grad Minds as an arts and crafts workshop instructor.

SPECIAL THANKS TO CONTRIBUTORS

This issue of *Elemental Magazine* would not be possible without the creativity, insight, and generosity of everyone who contributed their time, stories, and talents.

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Self-Care and Support

Graduate school demands a great deal of intellectual and emotional energy, which can make it easy to overlook your own well-being. That is why we have curated a series of pieces that explore practical, compassionate ways to care for your mind and body throughout your academic journey. Self-care is not a luxury; it is a necessary foundation for resilience and balance.

From expert insights to personal reflections, the articles in this section offer both guidance and encouragement. They highlight how different students and organizations nurture well-being in creative and meaningful ways. We hope you come away with new ideas, small moments of recognition, and a reminder that your well-being matters just as much as your academic progress.



A crochet doll of double Nobel laureate Marie Curie, made by Paula using a pattern from *Crochet Iconic Women: Amigurumi Patterns for 15 Women Who Changed the World* by Carla Mitrani.

KnitWits: Building Community Through Creativity

An interview with Paula Karger and Sophia Schreckenbach
By Kealyn McDowell & Daisy Hu

Community & Craft: An Introduction to KnitWits

Graduate school can be a transitional period marked by both personal growth and new challenges. Support and peer connections are vital throughout the graduate journey, yet neither are concentrated in one easily found place. KnitWits emerged as a welcoming crafting group in answer to the need for social connection, additionally offering a creative outlet and a moment of calm amid academic demands. Founded in 2016, the group has grown into a consistent and supportive space for graduate students and alumni to de-stress, learn new skills, and share experiences. To learn more about its origins and evolution, we interviewed KnitWits founder Paula Karger and long-time member Sophia Schreckenbach.

KnitWits was created by Paula in 2016 while she was a graduate student at the University of Toronto (UofT) as a way to foster community among fellow graduate students through crafting. After completing her degree, Paula worked in university administration before becoming an Assistant Professor, Teaching Stream at the Department of Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Latin American Studies. Sophia, a graduate of UofT's Masters of Science program in Environmental Chemistry and current PhD student at Laval University, joined KnitWits just before the COVID-19 pandemic. Although she attended only one in-person meeting before everything moved online, the group's immediate and seamless transition to virtual meetings allowed her to remain connected and, later, participate regularly from Quebec City.

Crafting Through Transitions

KnitWits began as an in-person group at the former Grad Room, where Paula combined her love of knitting with a desire to build community among graduate students. She noticed that when events were framed as purely social, people sometimes felt hesitant or less comfortable attending. Offering a shared activity made it easier for attendees to participate, unwind, and connect. Over time, Paula realized that KnitWits was very constructive for grad students as it allowed them to “have a community space, a project that actually ends, and be able to relax a bit and get support from each other.” This structure worked well, but had to change when the COVID-19 pandemic moved everything online. While the shift posed challenges, it also increased access to members outside Toronto, which became especially important as members graduated and moved from Toronto to pursue their subsequent studies and careers.

“KnitWits was one of the constant things in life,” Sophia reflected, describing how the group remained a source of connection through academic transitions and pandemic uncertainty. Moving online brought changes in membership, activity structure, and participation style. Helping beginners learn remotely was a challenge, but the group adapted: members shared tutorials, showed techniques on camera, and supported each other through each stitch. KnitWits has continued to meet virtually every week, creating a rhythm that many members now rely on.

When Paula transitioned to faculty member, her teaching schedule limited her ability to facilitate KnitWits sessions. In response, the group adjusted meeting times and shared facilitation duties. This shift marked a new phase of shared responsibility and mutual support among members, which Paula appreciated. “It became much more collaborative in terms of the organization,” she said, noting how KnitWits moved away from hierarchical structures common in student groups.

More recently, collaborations with the Graduate Students’ Mental Health Caucus (Grad Minds) during the 2024-2025 school year brought fresh energy to KnitWits and expanded its reach. Three co-hosted events—Haunted Hooks: Halloween Crochet Workshop (October 2024), Winter Threads: A Knitting Experience (February 2025), and Craft Buffet: DIY Drop-In Night (June 2025)—welcomed new crafters and reintroduced in-person gatherings. These hands-on sessions were especially helpful for beginners, who appreciated the opportunity to learn in a supportive, interactive environment. Over time, the group has also expanded beyond knitting. “KnitWits started predominantly as a knitting group,” Paula explained, “but we’ve gradually had more and more people join who do different crafts.” Crochet, embroidery, cross-stitch, beading, and Shrinky Dink projects are just some of the many varied arts practiced by group members. This diversity has fueled lighthearted pranks and jokes, such as a playful rivalry between sewing and knitting. Sophia, an avid embroiderer and cross-stitcher, often changes her Zoom name to “SewingWits” when she facilitates the group meeting, thereby promoting her primary crafting interest and poking fun at Paula by implying a sewing coup of the purported knitting group. Such friendly humour is part of the supportive fabric of the group.



A cozy moment from “Winter Threads: A Knitting Experience”! Featuring a handmade heart by Emilie using a pattern by @studioknit on Instagram.

Wellbeing Through Making

Crafting offers more than just a creative outlet; it can support mental wellness, connection, and a sense of balance. Both Paula and Sophia highlighted the benefits of having a regular space for creativity and community. Whether it's knitting, crocheting, embroidery, or another hands-on project, the repetitive motions of crafting can be grounding and meditative. "It's a break from staring at computers and reading all the time," Paula noted. "Once you're comfortable, you kind of get into the zone, and it's really relaxing."

Weekly KnitWits sessions offer members a chance to unwind, refocus, and enjoy the satisfaction of creating something with their hands. The group's consistent rhythm provides a sense of ease and routine. "Even if all you do is come to KnitWits for an hour or two on Mondays," Sophia said, "that's still an hour or two where you're not doing your research and you're doing something different. You're giving yourself a bit of a break." For many, crafting brings a sense of progress that complements the longer timelines of academic work. As Sophia explained, "When you're crafting, you get the satisfaction of seeing visible progress on something and actually finishing a project." KnitWits helps cultivate that feeling, while also encouraging creativity, balance, and shared joy.



Dessert, yarn, and good company! KnitWits stepped out for a creative gathering.

Support Through Shared Experience

KnitWits fosters an environment where members can speak openly about the realities of graduate school. Paula noted that conversations often touch on challenges like navigating research projects, relationships with supervisors, or getting stuck on writing. By sharing these experiences, members support one another through the more complex and isolating aspects of academic life. With members from a range of disciplines, there's often someone who can offer a helpful suggestion or resource. While KnitWits is not designed as a networking group, Sophia pointed out that "people know of some resources that are able to help someone else," and that sense of shared understanding brings comfort and connection. One instance of sharing—in this case, a contact with helpful knowledge—brought especially unexpected results, as the initial conversation has now developed into a larger, collaborative project meant for publication.

From the moment someone joins KnitWits, they are warmly welcomed regardless of crafting experience. Both Paula and Sophia emphasize that there are no expectations for skill level or participation. As Sophia put it, "you're more than welcome to join even if you're not crafting." Members are encouraged to ask questions, whether about choosing a beginner-friendly pattern or trying out a new technique, and others are always willing to offer guidance and encouragement. This inclusive, friendly atmosphere helps build the strong sense of community that defines KnitWits.

Advice for Builders, Hopes for the Future

Reflecting on her experience, Paula offers advice for students hoping to start their own community-based group. She emphasizes the importance of patience, noting that it can take time to build a consistent and cohesive community. "It's 2025 and I started this group

in 2016,” she said, “In the beginning, people would join for a semester or a year and then move on, often because they were on exchange, graduated, got jobs, or relocated. So it took several years before a stable group really formed.” She also encourages new organizers to find collaborators. “It’s so helpful to have more people who are contributing,” Paula noted, especially since organizing events can be time consuming. Most of all, she recommends simply continuing: “Keep going,” she said, because these kinds of initiatives really do make a difference for graduate students.

Looking ahead, both Paula and Sophia hope KnitWits continues to thrive and grow. They’re excited about the potential for more themed in-person events and even a possible field trip to the Textile Museum of Canada in Toronto. They also hope to welcome new members through upcoming events on campus. As Paula reflected, KnitWits has “already exceeded my expectations” of what the group could become. With a close-knit community and crafted support for grad students, there’s every reason to believe it will continue to flourish.



Forever in bloom and zero upkeep! These charming crochet plants were made by Sophia using patterns by @emmavarnam and @amy_gaines on Instagram.



A little piece of Canada in bracelet form! These macrame creations by Daisy were made for an international conference to share a touch of home with new friends.

Want to join a session, learn more, or see what the group is working on? Here’s where to find KnitWits online and stay connected:

 **KnitWits Web Page**

www.gradminds.ca/knitwits-with-paula

 **KnitWits Zoom Link (Mondays at 8:00 PM)**

<https://utoronto.zoom.us/j/87470558115>

 **Instagram**

@gradknitwits

Positive Coping Strategies for Dealing with Life Transitions

By Krushnaa Sankhe

Starting my PhD journey in my late 20s, I felt a mix of excitement and quiet self-doubt as I walked into orientation. Most of my peers seemed younger as they were fresh out of their undergraduate or master's degrees. I remember attending my first graduate-level academic class, feeling slower in my learning compared to others, as it had been almost six years since I had last taken an academic course. The struggle of getting back into academia was quite a challenge. Although I never felt delayed in my own timeline, societal pressures and seeing how early others started their journeys sometimes made me wonder if I was falling behind. Through continuous self-reflection, I have always maintained that there is no "right" timeline for building a meaningful career or achieving life goals. This perspective has shaped how I approached the transition into a PhD—here are a few coping strategies that have helped me along the way.



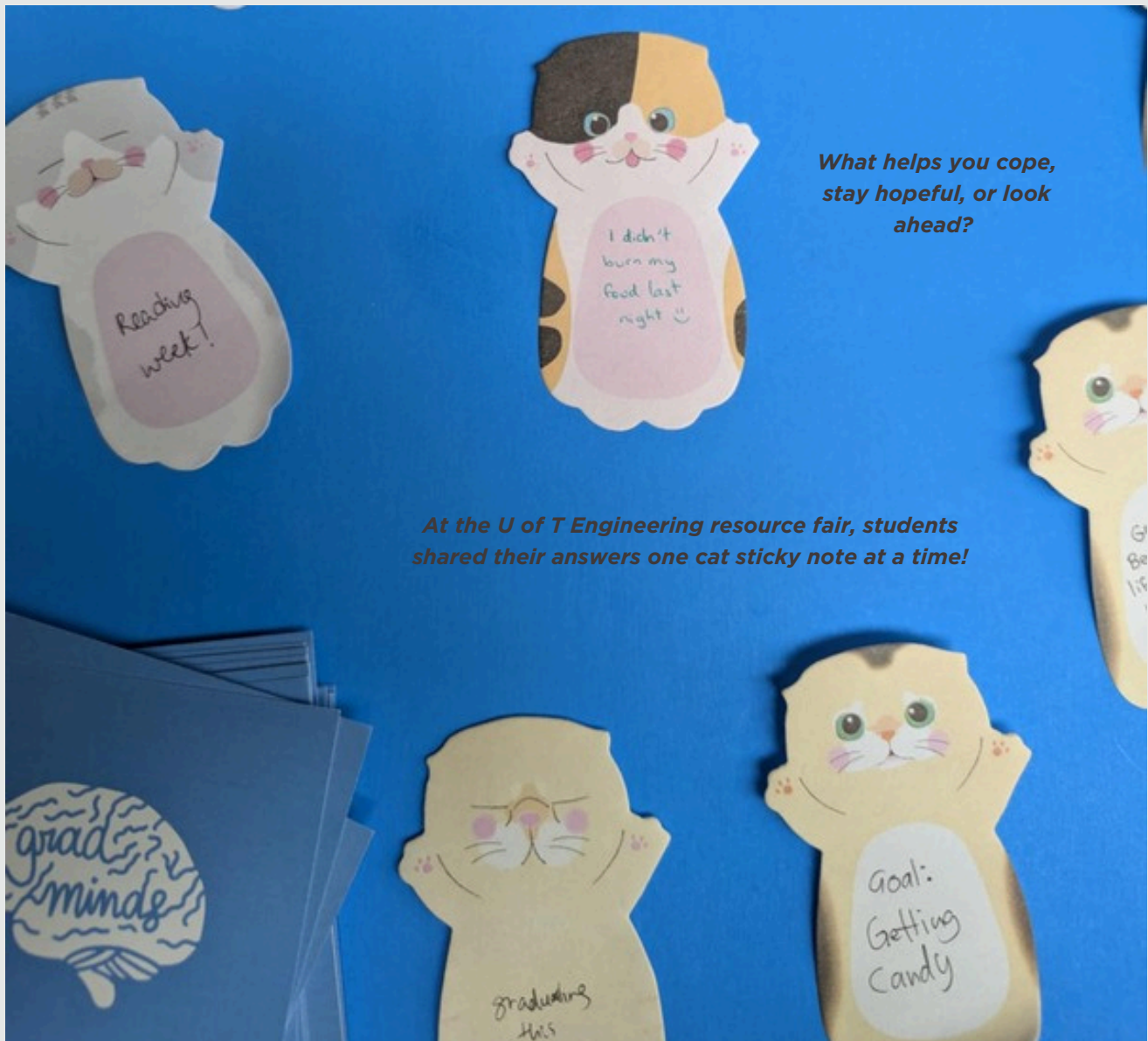
Letting go of societal timelines: It is easy to internalize societal timelines (ex: I need to graduate by X age, get a job by Y age, find a partner, own a home, etc.). Letting go of that narrative became one of the first, and most important, coping strategies that helped me navigate through this new chapter. By letting go of that timeline, I was able to take the pressure off myself and focus on my own growth and learning. The truth is, everyone's timeline is different, and it's possible to create a meaningful path for yourself, even when it doesn't follow a traditional, linear route. Going through a PhD program is hard enough and comes with immense pressure, and the least you can do for yourself is to let go of internalized societal timelines while you create a unique path for yourself.

Finding community through student clubs: During my first year, I intentionally got involved in various student run clubs and attended workshops and events on campus. Even though I felt out of place at first, it helped me connect with other students and learn more about their experiences during this program. Being involved in clubs and other organizations during grad school helped me meet like-minded individuals and allowed me to give back to the student community.

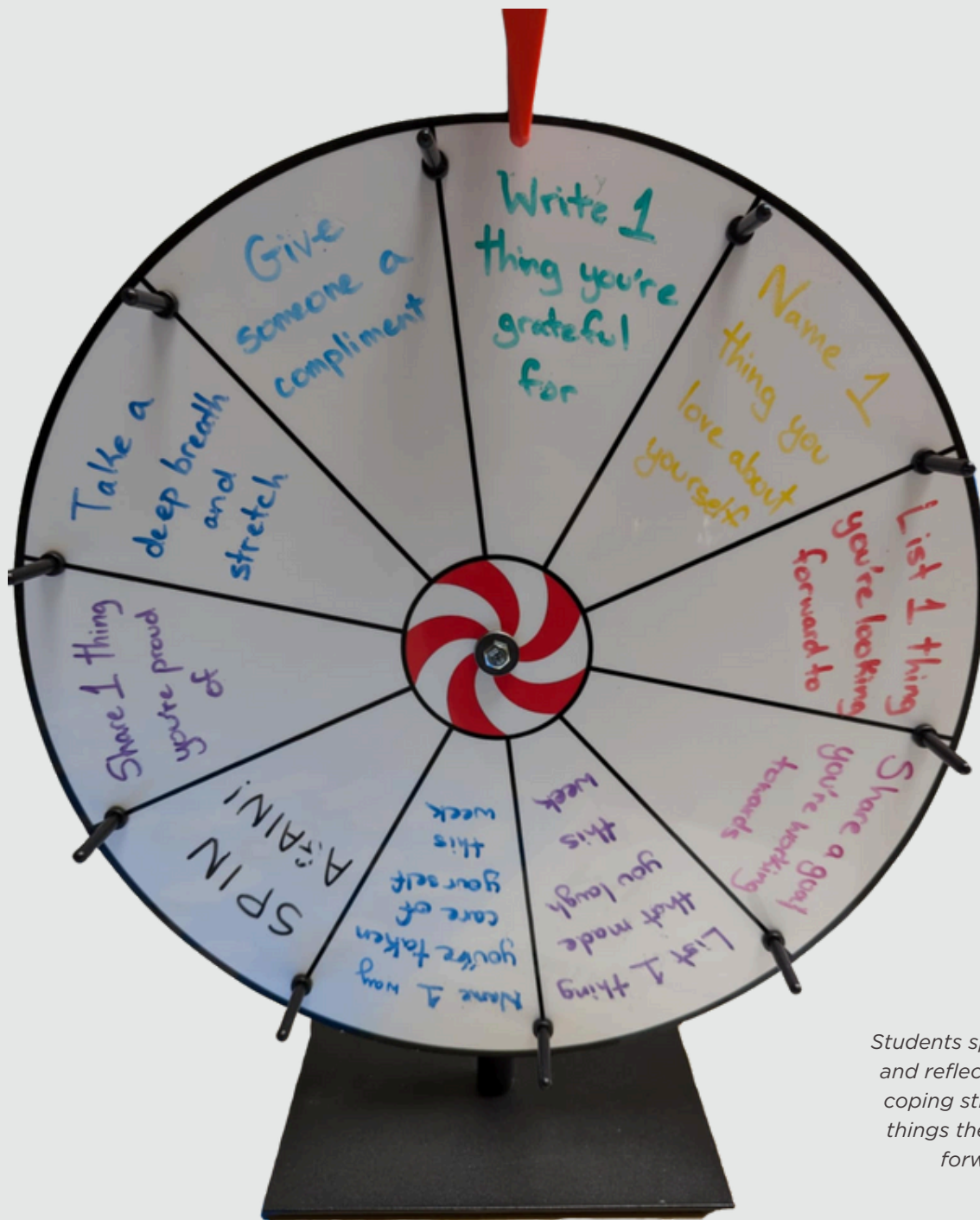
Find yourself a mentor: Studies have shown that one of the key limitations of graduate education today is the lack of accessible and consistent mentorship.¹ Having a mentor can help you speak things through to someone who may have more experience than you in navigating certain obstacles, such as steps to developing a thesis idea, reaching out to professors for volunteering opportunities, resume/CV editing, and any other issues you may have navigating through school. Most programs at UofT offer formal mentorship opportunities, so it's worth exploring what's available in your department and taking advantage of that support early on.

Adopting a growth mindset: In grad school, you will likely be wrong about something, make mistakes, or fall short of certain expectations. Don't be too hard on yourself; it's all part of the process. Instead of fearing failure, embrace it as a learning opportunity. In fact, research shows that students who are psychologically flexible—i.e., those who can adapt to challenges by staying present and open to experiences—are more likely to persevere in the face of setbacks.² Growth often comes from reflection, revision, and persistence. By focussing on the process, rather than the outcome, you will find yourself making steady progress.

Redefine productivity: Some days you may feel highly productive, and others may leave you wondering if you did enough. Try to keep track of your wins, big or small. When the days feel slow, jot down what you accomplished, even if it was just reading an abstract or thinking through a complex idea. In grad school, progress comes by taking a series of small, steady steps over a period of time. Acknowledging that movement, however subtle, can go a long way in helping you stay motivated.



Navigating graduate school can come with its challenges. You might move forward one day and feel stuck the next. But with the right mindset and strategies, it can be one of the most enriching and rewarding experiences.



Students spun the wheel and reflected on goals, coping strategies, and things they're looking forward to.

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Building Community, Breaking Barriers: How UofT Students Are Supporting Mental Health Through FWPT x Stella's Place

By Koby Lee

When I fractured my neck a few years ago, my world changed overnight. The isolation and uncertainty I felt during recovery gave me a glimpse into the mental health struggles so many young people face, often alone and unsupported. Even with my family by my side, I found myself questioning my worth and place in the world. It made me think about those who face mental health challenges every day, often without a support network or access to care.

My partner's experience with anxiety brought these issues even closer to home. We both realized that while I could offer comfort, professional support was what she truly needed. But as we searched for help, we ran into the same barriers many students do: stigma, cost, and a lack of accessible resources. That's when we discovered Stella's Place, a Toronto-based organization offering free mental health supports to young adults aged 16 to 29.

Inspired by my own journey and the positive impact Stella's Place had on my partner, I saw an opportunity to make a difference through my student-founded clothing brand, Forget What People Think (FWPT). FWPT's mission has always been to uplift self-confidence, and this collaboration felt like a natural extension of that goal. Together with Stella's Place, we launched a hoodie fundraiser with 100% of proceeds directly supporting their programs.



What Makes Stella's Place Special?

Stella's Place stands out for its commitment to accessible, youth-driven mental health care. Their programs are free, inclusive, and designed with input from young adults themselves. Here's how they support the community:

- **Individual Intake & Counselling:** Young adults can fill out an intake form to access ongoing programs, with support from clinicians to find the right fit for their needs.
- **Drop-In Services:** From the BeanBagChat app (offering one-on-one support) to virtual drop-in counselling and group sessions like Stella's Orbit and Queer Expressions, Stella's Place offers flexible, low-barrier ways to connect.
- **Peer Support:** Trained Peer Ambassadors with lived experience provide guidance and understanding, while the "My Next Chapter" program helps young adults develop their own peer support skills.
- **Accessible Referrals:** Youth can self-refer or be referred by professionals, ensuring that support is never out of reach.

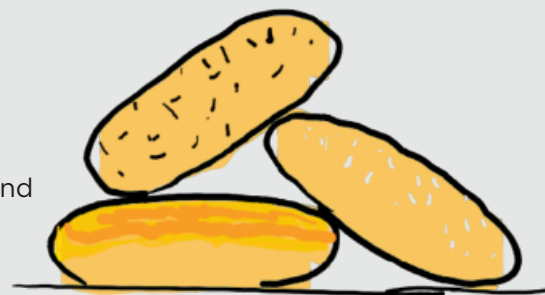
Stella's Place focuses on young adults living in Toronto, especially those in "M" postal code areas, but their welcoming approach means anyone in need can reach out.



Knead the Stress Away

By Charlotte Thorpe

Since coming to the University of Toronto for my Masters, I have found that baking to be one of the ways I decompress. Once a fortnight I like to make a batch of bagels. These are adapted from the Sophisticated Gourmet recipe and can be kept in the freezer and reheated in the toaster for an easy meal — I hope you enjoy them as much as I do!!



Ingredients

- 2 tsp active dry yeast
- 4 ½ tsp granulated sugar or 3 ½ tsp honey
- 1 ¼ cups warm water (plus more if needed)
- 3 ½ cups flour (I prefer to use bread flour)
- 1 ½ tsp salt
- ½ tbs olive oil
- 1 whisked egg
- 1 tsp bi-carb soda (optional)
- Toppings of your choice (Some toppings I enjoy are cheese, Italian herbs, poppy seeds, and sesame seeds.)

Instructions

1. Add ½ cup of warm water, sugar or honey, and yeast together and let it sit until it becomes bubbly and frothy.



2. To a large bowl add flour and salt. Add the yeast mixture and use a spatula to mix until a shaggy dough forms.



3. Slowly add the remaining water to the mixture and stir. I usually need more water, but don't go overboard. Knead the dough until it's smooth and elastic and forms a firm and stiff ball (this will take around 10ish minutes).



4. Coat the dough with olive oil and leave it in a large bowl to rise. Cover the bowl with a clean dish towel.



5. Let the dough rise for 1 hr, or until the dough has doubled in size. Then punch the dough down, and let it rest for another 10 mins.



6. Divide the dough into 8 pieces and shape each into a ball by pressing and rolling it into the countertop.



7. Coat your fingers in flour and make a hole in the middle of the dough that is ⅓ the diameter of the bagels.



8. Cover the bagels with a clean dish towel and let it rest for 10 mins. Turn on the oven to 425°F/220°C.



9. Fill a pot or saucepan with boiling water and reduce to a simmer. Whisk in some bi-carb soda and a pinch of salt (these helps give the bagels a crispy outside texture like NYC bagels). Cook the bagels in batches, 45 sec to 1 min on each side.



10. Transfer the bagels to an oiled or parchment-lined baking sheet. Now you can add an egg wash and any extra toppings you want.



11. Bake the bagels for 20 to 25 minutes, until they are a golden brown. Remove from the oven and let rest.

Now you can enjoy them! They taste great out of the oven but can also be frozen and reheated in a toaster; just make sure to cut them in half before freezing.



Optional variant for blueberry bagels

Heat up 1 ¼ cups of blueberries in a saucepan over low heat till they are juicy. Turn off the heat when the blueberries are warm but not too hot, and add the sugar or honey, yeast, and an additional 3 tbs of water. Let this sit for five minutes. Follow steps 2 onwards, excluding adding water in step 3 unless you feel like more water is necessary.

I like to
have my
blueberry
bagels
with
cream
cheese!

Knead the Stress away with **me** Bagles.

inspired by Sophisticated Gourmet

Since coming to UoF, I have found that baking has become my little way to decompress. Every couple of weeks I make my fave batch of bagles. It's a fun ritual that always makes my space feel like home. I hope you enjoy them as much as I do!

Ingredients • makes 8

- 2 tbs/6g active dried yeast
- 4 ½ tsp/14g sugar or 3 ½ tsp honey
- 3 ½ cups/440g Flour
- 1 ½ tsp/6g salt
- some ~~extra~~ olive oil
- 1 whisked egg
- 1 tsp Bi-Carb Soda
- toppings of your choice

Step 1

Add ½ cups of warm water, sugar and yeast together (no mixing) + let sit 5 mins

Step 2

Mix flour + salt in a separate bowl + add yeast mixture. Use a spatula to mix until a shaggy dough forms.

Step 3

add ½ cup of water to the mixture + stir (I usually need more water (but don't go overboard))

Step 4

knead dough till smooth + elastic + this will take around 10 mins

• like a baby's bottom

Step 5

brush a large bowl with olive oil + add dough and cover with a dish towel. let rise 1 hr. Punch down + let rise 10 mins

Step 6

divide dough to 8 pieces + shape into balls by pressing into the countertop

Step 7

Coat fingers in flour + press through dough - stretch to make a hole ½ of bagle

Step 8

cover + let rest for 10 mins
turn oven on 425°F/220°C

Step 9

boil water in a pot + whisk in Bi-Carb Soda. add bagles to boiling water 1 min each side

Step 10

Add egg wash and any toppings you want

Step 11

bake for 20-25 mins + enjoy

My Fave Toppings!!

- Cinnamon + Sugar (1 part each)
- Cheese
- Italian Seasoning
- Poppy + Sesame Seeds

Want Blueberry Bagles?

heat up 1 ¼ cups of blueberries in a saucepan over low heat till they are juicy. Add sugar/honey + yeast + 3 tbs of water. let sit 5 mins. Follow steps 2 onwards

Bon Appétit!

They can be frozen + reheated in a toaster. Just make sure to cut in half before freezing.

I hope you love them, share them and feel compelled to bake more

♥♥ Charlotte ♥♥

The Influence of Social Media Therapy Language on Grad Student Wellness

By Ken Fierheller, *Registered Psychotherapist*



In recent years, “therapy speak” has moved beyond counselling sessions and into lecture halls, lab discussions, and everyday conversations across social media. This linguistic shift isn’t just a passing trend, but part of a broader cultural movement towards emotional transparency. The post-pandemic rise in mental health awareness is fueled by an increase in online learning communities and the online presence of emotionally resonant content. And of course, its ability to go viral. A Media in Canada study highlighted 3 in 5 people aged 18-34 felt they increased their regular use of social media during the pandemic.¹ That’s millions more moments where language about care, boundaries, and self-awareness could take root and grow.

For graduate students, this trend is especially relevant. Immersed in an intellectually demanding environment and under constant pressure to perform, it’s common for topics like stress and burnout to be at the forefront of many grad students’ minds and conversations. The growing use of therapy-related language in everyday life can foster compassionate self-reflection and help reduce the stigma around seeking support. At the same time, the original meaning of these terms can sometimes become blurred or misused, which can lead to misunderstandings, over-pathologizing normal challenges, and missing opportunities for genuine growth.

A recent study by The Guardian showed that more than half of the top 100 TikToks with the hashtag “#mentalhealthtips” include misinformation.² Interpersonal challenges can feel amplified when labels like “toxic” and “gaslighting” are applied, making the situation feel more severe, and the consequences potentially worse. Being too quick to apply labels can flatten nuance and block progress toward understanding what’s happening. Just as quickly as therapy language can validate one person’s experience, it can just as easily have the opposite effect on another.

What Does “Therapy Language” Look Like on Social Media?

- “My toxic trait is turning trauma into personality.”
- “Setting boundaries is my love language.”
- “Me gaslighting myself into thinking I’m fine.”
- “Not me getting triggered by a TikTok trend.”
- “Every green flag comes with hidden red flags.”

Do these sayings sound familiar? Have you heard something similar amongst your peers in person or online, and maybe didn’t quite understand what they meant?

Social media and trends have normalized therapy-related language like “trauma,” “boundaries,” and “burnout.” You’ll come across this language throughout TikTok, Instagram, and other platforms, as well as in everyday conversations. This trend has

created widespread micro-education and helped normalize mental health vocabulary. According to the Canadian Association of Colleges & Universities Student Services (CACUSS), 66% of students report experiencing overwhelming anxiety, and 46% report being so depressed that it interferes with daily function.³ Considering the reality that many grad students face, it is likely that some would turn to social media to seek help or simply a label to describe how they’re feeling.

Students are increasingly engaging with complex therapeutic ideas on social media, breaking them down into bite-sized, digestible takeaways that fit into their busy academic lives. Seeing mental health talked about openly online helps break the stigma. And for many, it’s the push they need to finally try therapy.

Have you ever found yourself saying something you saw online without knowing what it actually means?

The downside of the widespread use and normalization of therapy language on social media is that the misuse or overuse of these terms without full understanding can water down their meaning. This poses a risk of unintentionally pathologizing everyday struggles, creating greater feelings of isolation and self-doubt. This can quickly make it seem too overwhelming to tackle “right now,” even when what you’re experiencing is a natural response to the demands of grad school.





Do you compare your struggles against what others share online?

This trend has the power to shift inner narratives. Using therapy language encourages reframing self-criticism as self-compassion and shines a more understanding light on self-identities. Becoming familiar with these terms can be really helpful in naming complex thoughts and feelings that students may be experiencing. This practice creates space for grad students to start telling their story through a kinder, more compassionate lens to others, but also to themselves.

For example, the use of therapy language in casual settings allows students to transition from “I’m bad at handling stress” to “I’m learning to set boundaries for my workload.” It makes challenges feel more manageable and gives a sense of control over what can feel overwhelming.

Why Grad Students Are Especially Impacted

Many grad students are navigating major life transitions. This varies from living away from family, shifting identities, financial precarity, and a range of other challenges. This leaves grad students more attuned to discussions of resilience, boundaries, and self-care. It’s no surprise that therapy language has quickly woven itself into the social fabric of grad school life.

Shared language creates quick empathy and connection. When peers can naturally understand the meaning behind burnout, imposter syndrome, self-care, and the importance of boundaries, stigma is reduced and there’s less need for explanation. Learning and embracing this language helps students develop skills that carry beyond school, whether it’s setting and maintaining boundaries, negotiating workloads with peers, or clarifying expectations. The tools gained from these concepts support growth and resilience in any career path, long after graduation.

Anonymous Grad Student Reflections

A client of mine once shared that they felt they were overusing the term “gaslighting.” Although they initially found this validating, over time, they noticed that every challenge began to feel large. These harsh labels given to every challenge started highlighting the opportunity and result of harm in every situation, instead of the growth in it.

This is very common. There is so much value in taking the time to reflect on whether you are using a particular label because it is truly accurate, or because you are feeling overwhelmed. The unintentional exaggeration we lean toward when we are overwhelmed typically makes the situation feel worse and more difficult to escape.

Therapeutic Reflections & Guidance

Reflection: Do you ever feel pressured to use or understand these terms?

Therapy language is such a powerful entry point. The words, phrases, and concepts that have emerged in digital spaces—social media, forums, blogs, podcasts, and teletherapy platforms—is a way to begin engaging with mental health ideas. The meaning behind them depends on both personal context and the original clinical usage of the term, but regardless, they serve as a way to start the conversation.

The simplest way to navigate the challenges therapy language can bring, whether for you or your social circle, is to pause and reflect. Consider where you learned a term, what it truly means, and whether it fits the situation. This can help prevent unintentionally labeling experiences in a harmful way. Checking in with peers about this shared language can also strengthen understanding and continue to reduce the stigma around therapy. By age 40, the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) found that about half of the Canadian population will have or have had a mental illness.⁴ This goes to show just how important these conversations are. It's not just about using the terms to reduce stigma, but having the conversations themselves. Respecting boundaries, offering empathy, and listening as much as speaking will help to strengthen your support system even more.

Reflection: Would your support system welcome these conversations?

Consider where you are able to have these conversations. Everyone has their own personal boundaries and comfort level with having vulnerable discussions, and we need to acknowledge our own, as well. Supportive environments can offer a space to open up, which is integral to heal and grow. With that said, there is a difference between empathy and expertise. Both of these are valuable components, but sometimes we need to go beyond emotional support and work with a trained professional to help navigate deeper, more complex concerns. It may feel easier to turn to social media to avoid sharing, but it has limits.

Social platforms make this kind of language more accessible and community-building; however, it does not replace real, human guidance. Using therapy terms does not replace therapy. If you are noticing persistent changes in sleep, appetite, mood, or focus, or if you're withdrawing from relationships or activities you value, or if you're feeling unable to cope, regardless of trying, consider seeking professional support. Seeking help is a sign of being resourceful, not being weak.





Coping Habits for Daily Balance

Grad school can amplify stress cycles. Incorporating small, daily habits in your routine can help anchor your emotional stability. Focus on habits that are consistent, simple, and achievable, even on your busiest days and during exam seasons.

Practice setting boundaries in your personal and professional life in order to be effective. It's also important to set boundaries for the language you consume and use. Doomscrolling content surrounding mental health when you are already feeling emotionally overwhelmed can exacerbate that feeling. Be mindful of label fatigue. When everything feels like it's been given a strong label, emotional nuance and meaning get lost.

Practice self-regulation to return your nervous system to baseline, helping you move from reactivity toward steadiness and choice. Box breathing, scheduling transitions between study and rest, and limiting screen time before bed are all things that help settle your nervous system. Something as simple as tactile and sensory anchors can help to feel grounded again. Holding a textured object, splashing cool water on your face, and naming five things you can see/hear/feel can all be done discreetly in classrooms, libraries, or labs without drawing attention to yourself.

Practice body scanning to recognize that your body is the first responder to stress. Daily movement helps regulate stress hormones throughout your system. Pairing this movement with breathwork or mindful attention only improves the results. If you aren't seeing improvement, remember that habits are tools, not a cure-all.

These tools are designed to provide support over time, but it is important to recognize when they are not enough. Reaching out for help is part of resilience.

Now It's Time To Turn Digital Dialogue Into Real Life Well-Being

The narrative we use to describe our lives becomes the architecture we live inside. Every word is a frame. Every phrase shapes the story. The language we choose not only reflects our reality, but creates it. When we speak with clarity and specificity, we sharpen our self-understanding. We can tell the difference between being “overwhelmed” and being “in despair,” between feeling “anxious” and feeling “unsafe.” That precision matters—because it guides us toward the right resources, conversations, and self-care.

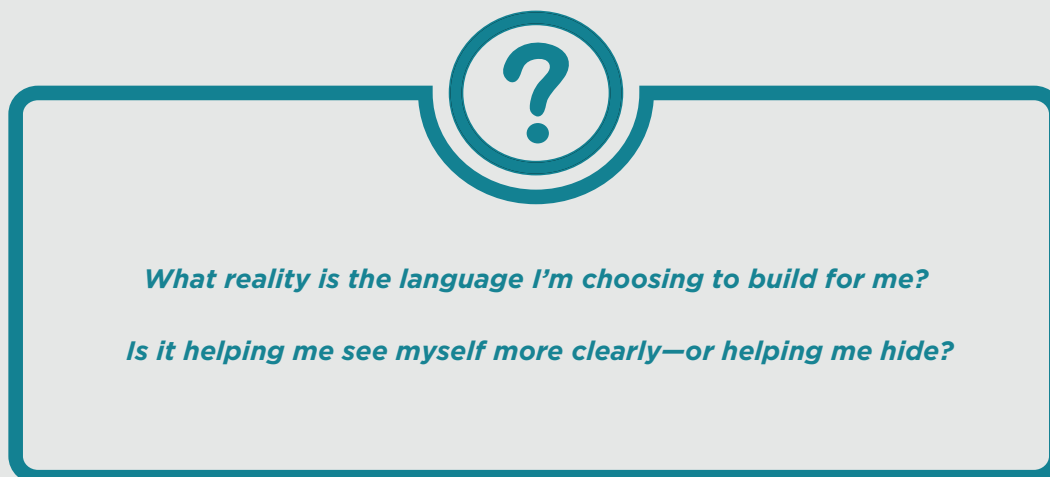
The use of therapy language in day-to-day life will inevitably shape our culture's future. It is so valuable for grad students to be at the centre of these changes during such a pivotal time in their lives. Experiencing first-hand the fall of therapy stigma provides grad students the unique opportunity of witnessing these cultural changes and effects they have not only on their peers, but on themselves.

But there's another side to this cultural shift. Therapy language can also become a polished mask, a way of appearing self-aware while quietly avoiding deeper pain. We can learn the right words, present ourselves as having it figured out, and still be struggling in places we haven't yet dared to name.

What we're witnessing now is part of a larger societal evolution. More people, including graduate students, are developing a therapeutic inner world that allows them to describe their feelings with nuance and openness. This is progress. It's a collective move toward making the unseen visible.

Yet the challenge remains: to use that language not only to sound insightful, but to be honest. To ensure it's a bridge to genuine healing, not just a performance of wellness.

So, as you scroll, post, or speak about your mental health, ask yourself:



The answer could be the first step toward a truer, more grounded version of yourself.



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About the Author

Ken Fierheller, Registered Psychotherapist at One-Life Counselling & Coaching.

Ken specializes in helping clients who want to improve their relationships, develop higher self-confidence and hone their communication skills. He works with leaders, entrepreneurs and high performers who want to access their greatest potential and live a life with greater meaning, peace and aliveness. Ken comes from the philosophy that if we develop a greater self-awareness, we have the opportunity to choose new possibilities and access untapped potential. He believes true change is rooted in challenging our thinking patterns and belief systems. He invites his clients to dive into a growth mindset and make a personal agreement to change by becoming very intentional in life. Ken has his own private practice as a therapist, coach, and trainer in Calgary, Alberta.



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Navigating the Unspoken

Even as mental health becomes a more open topic, many aspects of the graduate experience still go unspoken.

There are challenges that may be deeply personal, complex, or uncomfortable to share, but they are no less real or important. This section offers a glimpse into those often-hidden experiences.

Through honest stories and thoughtful perspectives, these pieces aim to normalize difficult emotions, break the silence around stigma, and foster a sense of solidarity. Some articles include content warnings so you can decide whether or not to engage. We hope this section reminds you that you are not alone, and that there is strength in both vulnerability and shared understanding.

Healing, Growth, and Change: How Newgate 180 Helps Women Rebuild Their Lives

An interview with Lia Forma

By Daisy Hu & Kealyn McDowell

Introduction to Newgate 180

Navigating change is one of life's most significant challenges, especially regarding personal transformation. Amid life's major transitions, many women find themselves turning to substances as a way to cope. Yet, recovery demands profound transformation, replacing harmful coping strategies with healthy, sustainable ones. For women on the journey from addiction to sobriety, this process is shaped by courage, vulnerability, and a renewed sense of hope.

At Newgate 180, an addiction treatment centre in Ontario, women find the support they need

to rebuild their lives in a safe and nurturing environment. *Elemental Magazine* Editors, Daisy and Kealyn, spoke with Lia Forma, Relapse Prevention and Ongoing Care Counsellor, on the newly expanded women's program. This program is helping women navigate this profound transformation. With a background in social work, Lia has long supported individuals struggling with addiction, particularly those facing major life transitions, including housing instability, domestic violence, and crises during their youth. In her current role, she has been instrumental in redeveloping the women's addiction program, working to create a more comprehensive and supportive path to recovery.





Creating Safe Spaces for Recovery

One of the most significant developments in Newgate 180's program is creating a dedicated women-only space. With a dedicated women's house, Lia has found that the program is better able to meet the needs of their clients. "Having a space without male presence allows our clients to be themselves without fear of judgment," Lia says. "For some, it's as simple as feeling comfortable enough to attend group sessions in pajamas. It's a bubble within a bubble—an added layer of security and comfort."

Beyond the physical space, the program has been restructured to address women's needs. It follows a four-week rotation with themes such as self-esteem, family dynamics, relationships, and grief. "Smaller, gender-specific groups allow for deeper conversations and reduce the fear of judgement," Lia explains. "The support in these settings feels different—it's more personal, more connected."

The Challenge of Seeking Help

For many women, admitting they need help and seeking treatment is an uphill battle. The weight of societal expectations makes it incredibly difficult to acknowledge when they struggle. "We've had clients who meticulously plan every detail of their family's routine before entering treatment," Lia says, "ensuring their absence doesn't disrupt the household." Deep feelings of guilt and judgment often accompany the idea of prioritizing their healing and well-being.

"The stigma surrounding addiction is significant for everyone, but it is especially harsh for women," Lia explains. "We still live in a world where women are expected to do it all—build a career, raise a family, keep it together—and manage everything quietly." Many women delay treatment due to caregiving responsibilities or fear of judgment from their family and community. Beyond stigma, shame, and fear of judgment, Lia notes that many women hesitate to seek treatment because they worry about



serious repercussions, such as losing custody of their children or facing backlash from their community. She emphasizes that breaking down this stigma is the first step in recovery, but that requires creating a safe, supportive environment where women feel empowered to seek help.

The Journey Through Recovery

A typical day at Newgate 180 includes guided meditation, followed by psychoeducational group therapy and individual counselling sessions—all structured to provide emotional stability. The evenings include lighter programming, such as movie nights or wellness activities. Clients also participate in holistic activities such as yoga, acupuncture, and creative expression, reinforcing that recovery is more than just sobriety—it's about rebuilding a sense of self.

Women in early recovery often experience a mix of relief and fear. “They’re finally in a safe space, feeling their emotions for the first time in years,” Lia says. “But then there’s the fear of

returning home to the same pressures and responsibilities.” The program helps them with this transition by emphasizing relapse prevention, self-care strategies, and boundary-setting, ensuring women leave with the necessary tools to maintain their progress.



Beyond Treatment: A Plan For Sustaining Change

Recovery doesn't end when treatment does. At Newgate 180, ongoing care is provided for up to a year, offering guidance as women transition into their daily lives. "We don't just send clients back into the world and hope for the best," Lia explains. "We help them create a plan for success beyond treatment."

The centre also runs a family program designed to educate loved ones about addiction and recovery, helping ease the transition back into home life. "Families often expect the 'old version' of their loved one to return," Lia says. "But recovery changes people, and families need to learn how to support that change."

Lessons for Navigating Change

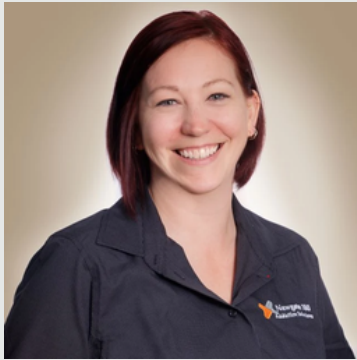
While addiction recovery is a unique journey, Lia believes some lessons can resonate with anyone navigating a significant life transition. "Give yourself grace," she advises. "Change is messy and uncomfortable, but it's also necessary for growth." Embracing the

discomfort as part of the process allows individuals to move forward with greater self-awareness and resilience.

Lia emphasizes the importance of balance for students facing academic and personal transitions. "Learn to manage transitions early in life, and remember that school is just one part of your journey. Prioritize your well-being, use available resources, and don't be afraid to ask for help." Whether in recovery, academics, or life, developing trust in yourself and your feelings can be a powerful tool for facing change and finding personal fulfillment.

Change is possible with the proper support; it leads to healing and transformation. At Newgate 180, women aren't just overcoming addiction—they're reclaiming their lives. Recovery is not a single event but a continuous journey that requires compassion, patience, and a strong support system. As Lia puts it, "Our goal is to help people find what 'normal' and 'healthy' look like for them. And sometimes, that means walking them through change until they're ready to do it independently."





About Lia Forma

Lia Forma, MSW, Relapse Prevention and Continuing Care Counsellor at Newgate 180.

Lia works closely with clients to provide comprehensive support to help them understand the root causes of their addiction and help them lead fulfilling lives in recovery. With a compassionate and client-centred approach, she provides a safe and supportive environment for clients to explore their struggles and work towards positive change.

Lia has been part of the team that re-developed the Women's program and participates in the ongoing evolution to ensure best practices for the program.

About Newgate 180 Addiction Rehab Centre

Newgate 180 is a fully accredited centre of excellence, specializing in treating addictions for nearly 50 years. They use state-of-the-art techniques to treat the causes of addiction. Newgate 180 has helped more than 5,000 people from all walks of life.

As a private, not-for-profit organization, Newgate 180 provides a personalized, one-year program consisting of a 30-day residential component and 11 months of ongoing care and support. Newgate 180 is dedicated to restoring its clients' dignity and hope for a better life, especially one free from their addiction.



Website: **<https://newgate180.com/>**

Telephone: **613-706-0520**

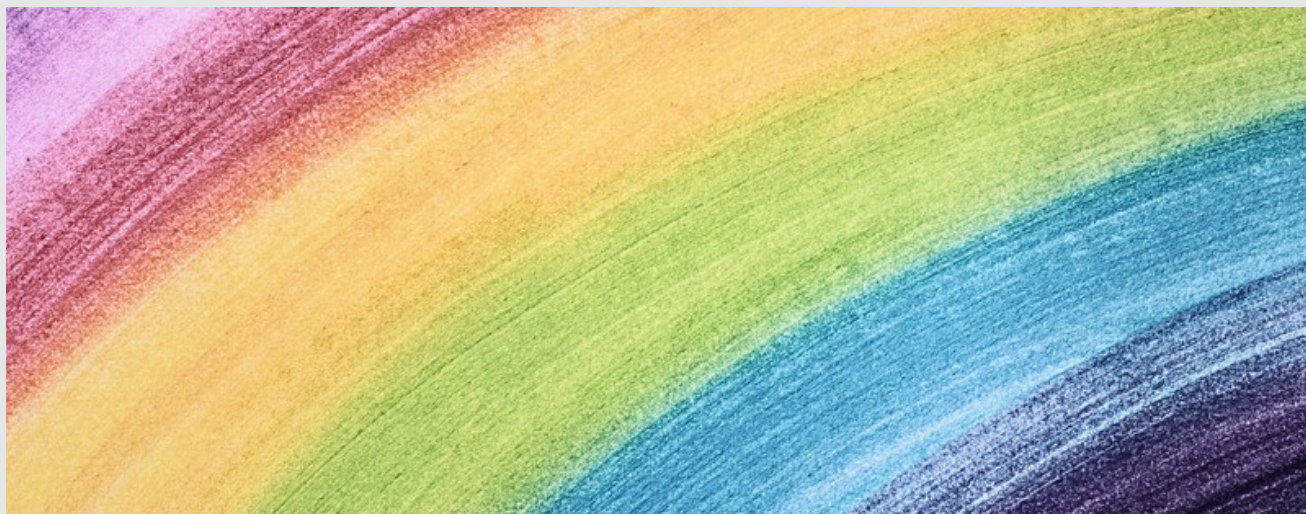
Toll Free : **1-888-622-0682**

Text: **613-294-HELP (4357)**

Visit us: 435 Main Street East
Merrickville, ON K0G 1N0

A Long Overdue Truth

By Nicole G.



For all that I've been during my undergrad career, being completely honest about myself hasn't been one of them.

Yet when I entered grad school—and by extension, the wider world of academia—I found that there was a more pressing demand for authenticity. There were consistent prompts to be open about your identity: to establish your positionality in relation to research, to equity issues, and to peers in order to make discussions on personal experiences much richer.

Although it sounded simple, the actual act of defining myself felt like dislodging a skeleton from my closet. There's something so uniquely tricky about being non-binary, or in general, queer. It's an identifier that lends itself well to invisibility. It's not as consistently present through daily perceptions as race. So, it often goes unacknowledged, and its absence from programming does little to help bring it into the spotlight. How do you do it then—how do you accept academia's demand to be truthful about who you are when there's no good way to gauge what the reaction will be? Silence doesn't yield any evidence that is explicitly positive or negative.

To me, coming out has never been an act so much as it has been a question. It's a willingness to ask: Do you still care about me? Or did you always believe that, in some way, that I was a bit too odd? But it's also a question that's only posed after hours of careful listening, picking up on subtle cues to ensure that even if it's a rejection, then there's still a safe way to retreat.

As uncomfortable as the demand for the authentic self initially was, I found that it reignited an old, personal grievance—it's tiring wearing a face that isn't your own.

I figured out my gender identity back in high school, still then an awkward child parading my way into adulthood. Despite my youth though, I was aware of how queerness was perceived. I wasn't ignorant to my classmates' comments about how being transgender was synonymous with being delusional. I didn't miss how one of my teachers expressed disdain about changing pronouns. So, I fixed myself into a person that I had long outgrown. It became habitual to leave a part of me behind when it came to schooling.

There hadn't been a reason for academics and my personal identity to converge as clearly in my life until now. After the first few weeks, I came to the realization that admitting that I was queer may be a demand from academia, though perhaps it was also something that I needed. It was a challenge to both be firm in who I was, but to also be prepared to carve out a space for myself in grad school despite the lack of signs that I'd be welcome.

So, I started my journey by seeking out community through a queer book club. It was as low-stakes a beginning as it could be, and though the words felt foreign on my tongue, it was a relief getting them out.

"I'm non-binary," I said in my first introduction.

Maybe it was the knowledge that there were other queer people—people going through the same turmoil that I was—but slowly, it got easier to let my identity bleed into my academic life. I spoke of queer theory whenever it was possible, and by the end of the semester, I even decided that I would overhaul my current research topic to focus on it, further cementing that link to academia. There was something reassuring about knowing that there was a group that would accept me in grad school if no one else did.

During one of my last classes, we were tasked with sharing a positionality statement as part of a wider project. When it came to my turn, despite my shaking, I managed to admit it. It was fueled by nearly a decade's worth of exhaustion.

"Here's my re-introduction, I'm queer."

And it was unmistakably honest.



Becoming Both: Balancing Academia and New Motherhood

By Elisha Gauthier

I embarked on my PhD journey in the midst of a transition into motherhood with my second child—my son only a few months old and my daughter beginning her own educational chapter of kindergarten. The fears I carried about succeeding in both these new realms of my life were deeply intertwined with a sense of joy and excitement for what lay ahead. For many, academic institutions can feel unwelcoming and exclusionary, shaped by notions of gatekeeping and looming hierarchies. I, too, felt this sense of uncertainty, questioning my entry into the doctoral program. Was I actually good enough to be here? Could I manage all aspects of my busy life without falling behind in some? Would I miss out on critical moments when my kids need me by choosing to go back to school?



How did I survive my first year, with all my uncertainties and a dash of anticipation? Community and grace, that is how I made it through the loop of change. I succeeded not only because of sheer determination, hard work, and lots of coffee, but because I was able to lean on community and support from my loved ones. I asked for help, leaned into my peers when I had questions and concerns, and set boundaries for myself regarding the workload that I was taking on, both at home and at school. I started to accept that I was not, and did not have to be, superwoman, super mom, super wife, and super student. I offered myself the grace to say no and to rest. There were days I could wear all my hats with ease, and others when they were simply too heavy—when I needed another head to share the weight, or just space to breathe and enjoy the moments. I also celebrated the wins and relished the times when I felt content, at ease and, dare I say, thriving in all my new roles. I began to recognize that the journey ahead of me is a long, demanding path that will be filled with a great deal of uncertainty but with intention and openness, it will be sprinkled with an array of success and a lot of growth and knowledge sharing.

In my previous degrees, I was always focused on finishing with urgency, whereas; with this particular journey, I understand that time will enable me to cultivate the skills, knowledge and collective that I need to be successful. Learning is not meant to be a solitary endeavor, especially for those students who are parents, caregivers and providers for others. It can feel overwhelming when you think of nourishing others along with yourself, but feeding your own soul is crucial to your happiness. There are so many resources and so many people who want you to succeed, and who have the skills to share so that you can adapt to the shifts in your life. Be kind to yourself and seek out the things and the people that bring you joy in your academic journey because that is ultimately how we shape community and hold space for transformation. I'm still learning. I've certainly made mistakes, but I survived my first year and walked away with so many new parts of myself, along with valuable knowledge and insights from those around me. Their voices, stories and advice will be essential in succeeding in my own academic journey.



Descent into Madness





By Adora Morris



Content Warning: This piece includes references to mental health challenges such as suicidal thoughts, experiences of discrimination, and emotionally intense language. As this year's theme explores transitions, some submissions engage deeply with personal and vulnerable experiences. Please take care while reading, and feel free to pause or step away if needed.






Unfurl



A. Allegro - Ecdysis





Soloist  when I turn inward, I see 

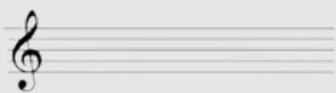
Acc.  shells of former selves 
 ecdysis  ecdysis 

Soloist  chrysalis and imago 

Acc.  myself  at ages 4, 7, 12, 16, 18, 24 
 changing yet fully formed  Russian dolls: 

Soloist  sometimes a callow: pale, vulnerable  leaving shells behind

Acc.  rainbow membranes 
 callow  callow 



I gaze out the large picture windows at the low clouds clinging to building tops like vapours around a showered body. My nurse, a woman with curly auburn hair, nervous eyes and rosacea, comes every morning to collect me from my cell—she scrubs me with chlorhexidine gluconate solution (the hospital-issued all-purpose cleanser), her gloves moving over my body, which trembles lightly under her touch like a leaf near the ocean. She doesn't know Black hair, doesn't know how to treat the delicate curls coiled like pen compression springs. So, she squirts the cleanser and massages gently, my coils tangling and roughened under the harsh treatment. When they dry, they crackle to the touch, springing out of my head in an unruly heap.

Some people are afraid of dementia at end-of-life, but I've already experienced the half-death of severe psychosis. I've already been catatonic, my hands reduced to useless claws, my gaze unfocused, my face unresponsive. Though my body was in peak physical condition: lithe, toned, firm—my mind had broken.



I, 2 months from my 21st birthday, the golden child of my parents, a competitive pianist, national French dictation winner, the teacher's pet, the scholarship winner, valedictorian daughter of two educators, gifted with an IQ in the 95th percentile... I roamed the three hallways of the acute unit of the Mental Health and Addictions ward for 2 weeks, spending another 3 in the general ward. None of the anti-psychotic medications were working. None of the anti-depressants had worked. Not risperidone, not olanzapine, not quetiapine, not the SSRIs, nor the SNRIs, not the little blue ones that dissolve under the tongue, not the ones that killed my libido, not the ones that made me sleep all day and gain 60 pounds. They. Didn't. Work!

Despite my privileged, upper middle-class upbringing, despite the piano lessons, the swimming lessons, the gymnastics lessons, the inspiring middle school teacher, my high intelligence, my potential... I was diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder. Schizoaffective disorder (SZA) is a serious and chronic mental illness, in the schizophrenia-spectrum of disorders. Like most mental illnesses, there is no cure for SZA, meaning it is a lifelong condition, but it is treatable. It is not unusual for teens and young adults to experience psychotic symptoms, particularly those who go through prolonged periods of stress, lack of sleep, and psychedelic drug use. "Bad trips" are fairly common—seeing or hearing things, feeling paranoid, not being able to tell what is real and what is a product of an overstimulated brain trying to make sense of the world in an altered state. And yet, as a schizophrenic, I feel my illness has some of the most intense stigma attached to it. The biggest misconception about schizophrenia that I've encountered is people assuming I'm hallucinating all the time. I don't hallucinate at all in my regular day-to-day life. I take medication daily to keep psychotic symptoms in check, and my symptoms have always been episodic: they only take place when I am actively unwell. They are not present at my baseline.

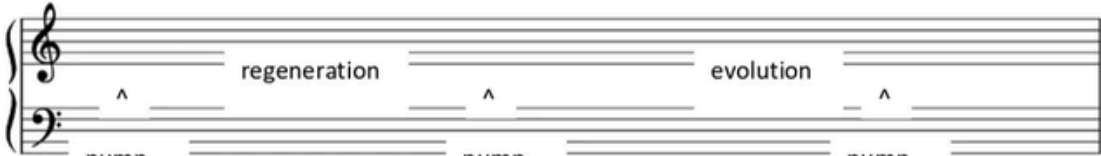
Like a knee once dislocated, now weakly held in place, will sometimes pop out of its rightful position, so too can the mind—taxed by stress, lack of sleep, trauma, drugs—dislocate, pop out of this reality and into a dream. With enough pressure, reality can bend and shatter... After the trauma, at times I felt like a limp, paper doll forced to dance to and fro on a string, dangling, a passenger in my own body—numb to the beauty. There were no epiphanies, no untamed joy, only a desire to leave, to give up, to die. But now, I am back from the brink of brain-death and returned to the land of the living.






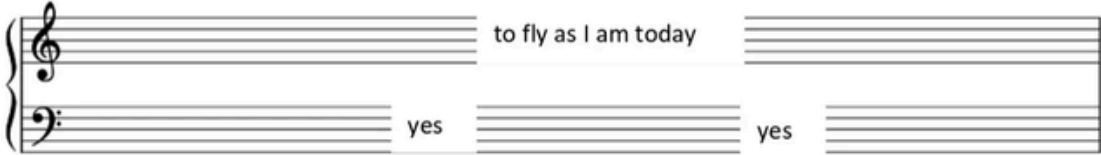
B. Largo - Hemolymph



Soloist  let these shriveled wings unfurl 


excruciatingly

Acc. 
pump regeneration pump evolution pump

Soloist  let these shriveled wings  take me above the din 

Acc. 
to fly as I am today yes yes

Soloist  she unfurls, made new 

Acc. 
a university degree, a job, new friends made new.

Progress

By Ella Guo

Content Warning: This piece includes references to mental health challenges such as suicidal thoughts, experiences of discrimination, and emotionally intense language. As this year's theme explores transitions, some submissions engage deeply with personal and vulnerable experiences. Please take care while reading, and feel free to pause or step away if needed.



I remember that November morning when I looked out the ER window, waiting for the IV to finish. The area where he had punched me still throbbed, and the nausea was becoming unbearable. I thought to myself, "Something happened, something changed, but I don't know what." The pain and nausea still haunt me, as though that experience burned a mark on my soul and existence.

Fast forward to Christmas Eve. I went over, cleaned his place, ordered food and wine, and waited for him to return. The evening began as planned—food, drinks, and fun conversations. But soon, it took a turn. He tried to force himself on me—for the pure joy of watching me suffer. I screamed for him to stop, but he wouldn't. I yelled, fought with every ounce of strength I had, and eventually crawled into a corner, crying and trying to make myself as small as possible. I don't remember much of that night, except that the next day, I couldn't stop crying for reasons I couldn't grasp. He blamed my tears on being "overly emotional" and accused me of not wanting to leave. He forced me out of his place, crying and begging for comfort, because he had a Christmas party to attend.

Sometimes I wonder how I made it through that day—that dreary Christmas, cloudy and cold. I had a flight to go home that night, but every cell in my body was screaming "Something is wrong." Panic attacks hit me one after another. I had meltdowns in the middle of the street. I cried and screamed so much at home that my neighbour knocked on my door. Never in my life had I so desperately wished for someone, some entity, or even him, to tell me what was happening and make it all go away. But that never came.

In the days that followed, he told me that I was too dramatic, needy, asking for too much, overstepping his "boundaries" and making him uncomfortable.

And I believed him. Or maybe a part of me forced myself to believe him because the truth hurt too much. I broke every resistant bone in my body, even though my heart was screaming and begging. I tore apart my soul and erased everything that makes me me to become a "thing" that he could use and destroy for his pleasure.

It wasn't until months later that I began to understand what had happened. It wasn't until I called my mom to say goodbye, texted a friend to apologize for missing supper, and woke up in the ER, surrounded by tubes, wires, and beeping machines. It wasn't until my friend couldn't even understand me on the phone, until texting became impossible because I couldn't control my hands, and until staying somewhat conscious felt like a blessing and opening my eyes took all my strength, that I finally began to comprehend.

Even now I sometimes wonder if things would have gone differently if I had said yes to the help and resources that the doctors and nurses kept offering me that November morning. But life has no ifs.

It's been almost a year since that Christmas Eve. Some days, I wake up feeling like I'm falling into that dark, endless hole again. But I look up and see that faint, blinking light—whether it's real or imaginary—and beg myself to go on for just one more day.



Tracing the Journey

Graduate school is not just an academic pursuit. It is a personal journey shaped by growth, change, and self-discovery. This section reflects on the evolving nature of the grad student experience and the many paths it can take over time.

Each piece reflects one individual's path through graduate school, from early uncertainty to moments of clarity and transformation. Whether you are beginning your program or nearing the end, these reflections speak to the emotional and intellectual evolution that comes with the process. We hope they encourage you to honor your own journey, with all its twists and milestones along the way.

From Caregiver to Advocate: A Law Student's Call for Kindness

By Natalie St Pierre-Jubb, Global Professional Master of Laws (GPLLM) student at the University of Toronto, Faculty of Law

A Life-Altering Diagnosis

In September 2015, my world was rocked when my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. I took a leave of absence from my undergraduate studies to take care of my mother and treat the severe depression I had been diagnosed with as I faced the possibility of losing my mother and my best friend. Desperate for support and solace, I turned to the Wellspring Cancer Support Foundation (Wellspring). It was there that I found comfort and a platform to share my family's experience with cancer and my battle with depression. As a member of Wellspring, I was invited to Austin, Texas to speak to an audience of 500 people to express the significant role that Wellspring played in saving my life. The response was overwhelming; I was met with a standing ovation and a flood of personal stories.

My involvement with Wellspring helped me realize the power of sharing personal experiences to foster understanding, connection, and empathy. My speech prompted my commitment to raising awareness about mental health, challenging societal stigmas, and supporting those facing similar challenges.

Shaping a Purpose-Driven Path Through Law

The lessons of kindness and gratitude instilled by my parents, combined with my time spent in my mother's office at the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care Legal Branch, helped me see the critical role of legal policy in promoting community well-being.

The formative hours spent in my mother's office helped inform and welcome the belief that as a lawyer, I could make a tangible difference in the lives of others and contribute meaningfully to my community.

My pursuit of a law degree became not just a personal ambition but a manifestation of my deep-rooted desire to help others and my community. Despite the financial strain it placed on my family, my parents' emphasis on education and belief in my success propelled me forward, culminating in my achievement as the first in my family to attend university and pursue legal studies.





Navigating Academia with Anxiety and Depression

Anxiety and depression have been all-too-familiar companions throughout my academic journey, from my undergraduate degree to my law and master's degrees. I know the challenges associated with being a student, particularly a law student—the intense competition, the high stakes, and the self-imposed pressure to excel amongst highly driven, successful, and intelligent people. My self-imposed pressure to succeed stems from my father's unwavering dedication to our family, which is a significant source of inspiration for me. Despite my father being retired, he continues to work part-time, driven by his belief in my potential and desire to ensure that my future is free from financial hardship.

Advocating for Wellness in Legal Education

Yet, what brings me peace is supporting and helping others, especially students, by offering encouragement, kindness, and reassurance. When I learned about the opportunity to serve as the Graduate Student Representative on the Dean's Mental Health and Wellness Committee, I immediately applied. I was incredibly thrilled to be elected by my peers.

Fostering a Culture of Compassion and Kindness

As a committee member, I work alongside faculty members and student wellness professionals to voice the concerns of graduate students regarding their mental health challenges and the ways the faculty can provide better support for us. One of my key contributions has been advocating for greater empathy and understanding amongst students during exam periods and eliminating the stigma surrounding accommodated testing support.

Others and I have heard murmurs in the law school about students who are absent from standard exam locations and speculations surrounding their absence. It's concerning to me that these conversations may discourage students from seeking accessibility support out of fear that their peers will find out and wrongly assume they're gaining an unfair advantage through exam accommodations. This perception—that accommodated testing somehow makes things easier—is one I've heard echoed on campus, and it is simply not true. During exam periods, I gently remind others to lead with empathy and refrain from judgment.

As a long-time advocate for mental health awareness, particularly in academic spaces where anxiety and depression often persist, I am so grateful to have a platform to share the importance of raising awareness and enhancing mental health literacy, which is crucial in combating stigma and alleviating feelings of isolation.

This role has reinforced my belief that meaningful change starts with open dialogue and collective action. Through compassion, kindness, and education, we can further cultivate a law school culture that prioritizes mental well-being alongside academic excellence.



Navigating Academia Through the Lens of a Camera: How Doctoral Diaries Became My Memory


By Vic Duarte

the adventures of me ... vic

NEVER BE SO CLEVER YOU FORGET TO BE KIND

When I first started documenting my PhD journey online, I had no grand vision or content strategy—just a simple need to create a memory bank of self-discovery. At the time, I didn't know I had ADHD, but I did know that moments of clarity often slipped through my fingers as quickly as they arrived. I wanted a way to capture what I was learning, what I was feeling, and who I was becoming.

What started as a personal archive (built over the years of my childhood) has since grown into something much bigger: a space where I share the ups, downs, and hidden realities of being a first-generation, queer woman in higher education. The challenges of navigating a Social Science PhD—a journey so rarely documented online—felt mundane at first. There were no roadmaps, no viral study vlogs, no neatly packaged "Day in the Life" videos that truly reflected what it means to move through academia as someone who doesn't fit the traditional mold. So, I decided to be that representation for myself, and for others like me.



the adventures of vic

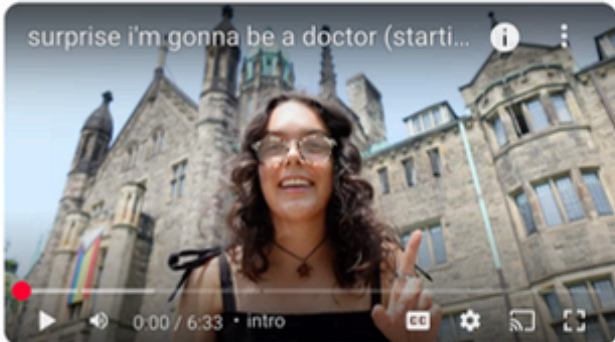
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🍷 Welcome to Doctoral Diaries! 🍷

I'm excited to announce the launch of my new YouTube series, "Doctoral Diaries," where I'll share my journey as I begin my PhD at the University of Toronto this September. Join me as I navigate the highs and lows of academic life, share tips and tricks for surviving grad school, and explore the vibrant city of ...

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From Memory Bank to Community

The Doctoral Diaries has become more than just a way to track my progress—it's a space where I can openly grapple with imposter syndrome, academic pressure, and the realities of pursuing research that challenges existing structures. Unlike the polished image of academia often portrayed, I share the struggles with burnout, the frustrations of navigating institutional barriers, and the deeply personal moments of questioning whether I belong here at all.

Through this process, I've learned that visibility matters. So many people, many of whom I've never met in person, have reached out to say they've felt seen in ways they never expected. My experiences, my doubts, my breakthroughs—they aren't just mine. They belong to a larger story of underrepresented voices in academia, pushing forward, making space, and proving that knowledge-making isn't reserved for those who already see themselves reflected in the system.

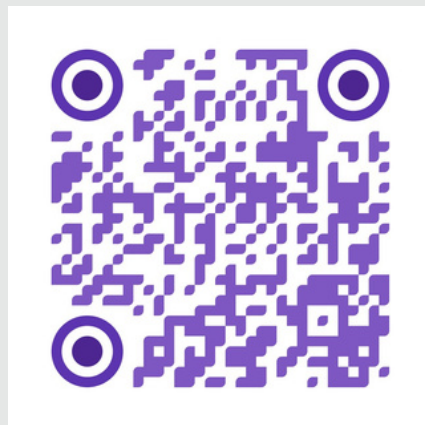
Navigating Change, One Video at a Time

This channel has also forced me to face myself in ways I never anticipated. I can literally see the growth, not just intellectually, but in confidence, resilience, and understanding of what it means to take up space in this field. Some days, watching old videos reminds me of how much I've overcome, while on others, it's a stark reflection of how much further I have to go. But that's the beauty of it: it's all part of the process.

For anyone who has felt lost in academia, who struggles with their place in institutions not built for them, or who simply wonders if they're the only one feeling this way... You're never alone. I didn't start Doctoral Diaries to be a voice for others, but somehow, that's what it has become. And for that, I'm endlessly grateful.

Final Thoughts

As I continue this journey, I remind myself that I'm not just documenting my academic growth, I'm also building a space where others can see themselves in the process. And maybe, just maybe, that's the kind of navigating change that makes all the difference.



Unlearning Perfection: What Grad School Taught Me About Myself

By Savina Cammalleri

It's hard to write this. It's easier to focus on the highlights—the conference presentations, the passing of major exams, the “academic wins” that feel LinkedIn-worthy. But the truth is, my transition into grad school was anything but smooth, and I want to share that side of the story.

When I first started, I struggled to find a routine. I thought I had study habits and productivity figured out after undergrad, but grad school was a completely different game. There was no structured expectation—just an overwhelming pressure to constantly do more. Publish more. Get further ahead. Prove myself. And somehow, in trying to keep up, I ended up isolating myself.

Mentorship was another challenge. No one tells you how crucial it is to set boundaries early, and I learned that lesson the hard way. I didn't know how to navigate the dynamic, how much to ask for, or what to expect. Instead of seeking support, I convinced myself that I was alone, that there were no resources, that everyone else had it figured out while I was barely treading water.

And then, there were the experiments. Oh, the experiments. I would repeat the same one over and over, convinced that I was the problem. Maybe I had made a mistake. Maybe I wasn't working hard enough. Maybe I wasn't cut out for this. It took me an embarrassing amount of time to admit that something fundamental—like the reagent I was using—was probably the issue. But even when I did succeed, I felt like I wasn't far along enough, that there were always voices telling me that I should be doing better.



Eventually, the weight of it all became too much. I needed to start therapy again. I reached out to my friends, and most importantly, my mom, who reminded me to breathe when I felt like I was suffocating. I also forced myself to stop hiding—I joined clubs, I met other students, I became part of the Biomedical Engineering Graduate Mentorship Program, which connected me with like-minded people who just got it. And the most surprising part? The more I talked about my struggles, the more I realized I wasn't alone. Other students felt the same way. Even faculty had gone through their own versions of this transition.

One thing that helped me reframe my mindset was finding things outside of academics. For so long, I had been focused on grades and achievements like getting A's. But grad school doesn't offer that same validation, and I had to find other ways to feel accomplished. I got curious about the world of venture capitalism and started reading more about it. I also began running, setting a goal to complete a half marathon. On top of that, I started making a new recipe every week—something completely unrelated to schoolwork, but that still made me feel like I was achieving something.

I don't think I have it all figured out enough to give advice, but if there's one thing I've learned, it's that the transition from undergrad to grad school is insane. In undergrad, I knew how to study, how to ace exams—but none of that prepared me for the open-ended, expectationless-yet-high-pressure environment of grad school. And to top it all off, I was watching my friends land “real adult” jobs, earn salaries, move on with their lives while I stayed stuck in this weird in-between. I kept asking myself, why am I doing this? And for the longest time, I didn't have an answer.

If you asked me now what success looks like, I'd say it's any day where something astronomically bad didn't happen. I'm only in my second year, but I've realized that grad school is just time—time to think, time to question, time to prove things wrong. It's hectic and exhausting, and sure, the pay is low, but at the end of the day, someone is giving me the space to learn, and I'm learning.

So, if you're struggling, give yourself grace. Not every day has to be a breakthrough. Not every experiment has to work. Not every moment has to feel like progress. Some days, making it through is enough—and that's okay.



Reflections from an Emerging Social Worker

By Kandace Peroramas

It took me 10 years to arrive at the University of Toronto, and now, after 9 months, I will be leaving. I knew I wanted to go to this school at 15 when I visited the city for the first time with my parents. I loved the downtown hustle and bustle, Lake Ontario, and the idea of being thousands of kilometres away from my routine life. My dream seemingly died when my application to the Faculty of Arts and Science was rejected. I pivoted and completed undergraduate degrees in biology and social work right in my hometown. While the transition from high school to university involved great change, my most profound transition is the one that finds me back in Toronto for graduate school at 25.

The journey to complete my degrees was challenged by an academic identity crisis and debilitating depression. As a decimal generation immigrant, a person who arrives in a new country as a child, I reflect on my linear upbringing: fitting in at school, getting good

grades, participating in extracurricular activities, and going to university. My parents encouraged these endeavours but never pressured me down a certain path. The duty I felt to do right by my parents still led me to seriously consider medicine and law, regardless of my lack of passion to practice both. I became depressed the longer I tried to pursue these paths.

The self-imposed pressure to have an esteemed education and career is not unique to my life. I believe my feelings highlight an important precursor to change within academia and other facets of our identity, which is finding what we are passionate about. This seems obvious, but to those who have a fixed mindset, passion and pursuit occasionally do not overlap so long as success is achieved. As I prepared to move to Toronto, I was fearful of going down another hole of depression.



2015 and 2025: A decade in between well-lived!

Walking into the Faculty of Social Work building on Bloor Street West, I knew what I wanted to learn in the 9 months of my master's program. I was motivated by the promise of graduate school to leverage my experience with mental illness to advance social justice at the community and policy levels. Through independent research, event organizing, policy briefs, and advocacy efforts, the faculty attempted to keep that promise.

My intelligent, kind, and justice-oriented peers confirmed that I found my passion in social work. It is difficult to part ways with colleagues whose contributions have enriched my life. While I did not become depressed, I truthfully leave the program confused as to how I will contribute meaningful change to a very complex world. This is not to say I am returning home disillusioned or apathetic, but quite the opposite. Perhaps I care too much now about many issues, and I am left wondering where my social work skills would best fit as I transition to my career.

It is a privilege to care this deeply about academic outputs and futurities. Caring is a byproduct of being in community with people who share our values and interests. As a result, change that looks like mismanaged expectations or disappointment is difficult because we thought we would do things right the first time. At a time like this, I implore you to challenge self-talk that makes you believe you are inherently flawed. When I tried to mould into academic puzzles where I could not fit, what emerged was an enduring lesson on sitting in discomfort when plans do not turn out like you hoped. This return to Toronto should have been the be-all and end-all; a full circle moment to a decade-long aspiration. I believe leaving conflicted is exercising my tolerance to discomfort, which I anticipate being a recurring feeling in social work practice. It is also a testament to my desire for self-improvement, deciding what is next as someone committed to lifelong learning. Navigating change has certainly entailed being more honest about my feelings. In the spirit of what I learned in school about critical hope and combatting despair, I opt to understand transitions as an opportunity to rediscover what makes me happy. It is my hope that you allow yourself to do the same.



Threads of Community

Wellness can take many forms, from movement and mindfulness to creative expression and shared experiences. This section features photographs from Grad Minds events held throughout the past year, including yoga sessions, crafting workshops, and other community care activities.

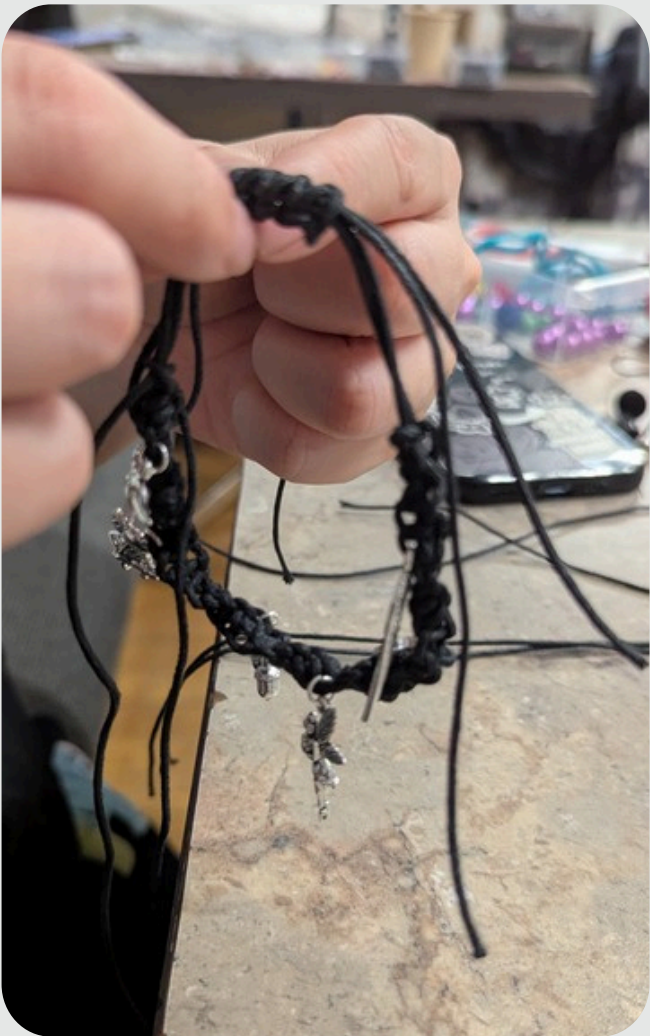
Each image captures a moment of connection, creativity, or calm, and together they reflect the joy and support that can emerge when we care for our well-being alongside others. Grad Minds plans to continue organizing wellness-focused events throughout the year. To stay updated on future opportunities, follow us on Instagram at *@gradminds*

Threads of Community

Gallery curated by Daisy Hu











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