



Elemental

*The Official Mental Health Magazine of the
University of Toronto*

SPRING 2024

SPOTLIGHTS

FOSTERING HOPE AND RESILIENCE

EMBRACING UNCERTAINTY: STUDENT STORIES // AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. JANE FREEMAN
// THE SCIENCE OF STRESS REDUCTION TECHNIQUES // MENTAL HEALTH APPS AND
PODCASTS - REVIEW // RECOVERING FROM GRINDR - VIEW POINT //
LEARNER'S SUCCESS: THE IMPORTANCE OF A GROWTH MINDSET

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ISSUE 11

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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS



We are excited to present the 11th edition of *Elemental Magazine*, the University of Toronto's official tri-campus mental health magazine. For this edition, we wanted to focus on the resiliency of our graduate student writers and share their stories of hope and resilience. As such, this special edition includes stories for our team of journalists and their journey of mental health and recovery. The theme for this issue is *Fostering Hope and Resilience*.

Students across the globe experience high rates of anxiety, stress, depression, and other mental health concerns¹. These experiences and symptoms have only been exacerbated in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic². Research has found that emerging adults aged 18-29 were the most impacted population during this time³. Despite identifying the

impact imposed on student mental health, limited research has focused on the resilience in this population and the ways in which they have been coping during such difficult times⁴. As such, we decided to focus this issue on the ways in which university students across the UofT community have found hope and persevered in the face of adversity.

In the current issue, students across the University of Toronto community share their stories of hope and resilience. UofT's Dr. Jane Freeman discusses developing resourcefulness in graduate students. Complex trauma and complex post-traumatic stress disorder is introduced and discussed. Helpful stress reduction techniques and positive coping strategies for unhelpful thought patterns are also presented in the current issue. Dr. Andrew Simone, a Toronto

for unhelpful thought patterns are also presented in the current issue. Dr. Andrew Simone, a Toronto dermatologist, shares his inspirational story of resilience. We also present a review of apps and podcasts that support or discuss mental health. Scientific papers are also presented and summarized in the context of the issue's theme. UofT's PEARS project, a survivor-led and student-run anti gender violence and anti-sexual violence group on campus are interviewed and share how they are fostering resilience and community at UofT. Popular books such as the *Body Keeps the Score* are reviewed. Sylvester Stallone's 1976 film *Rocky* is also reviewed in the context of hope and being a true "underdog" story. We also hear from Louis Busch on Shkaabe Makwa, Canada's first hospital-based centre for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities. The genre of HopePunk is explored in the context of resilience. We also tackle food insecurity and the importance of a growth mindset in the current issue.

We would like to extend our gratitude to the Elemental journalists, illustrators and editorial team for their hard work and contribution to this issue. We would also like to extend our thanks to the Chair of Grad Minds, Daisy Hu, and the Grad Minds team for their support.

Sincerely,

Lola Leving & Talia Vacca

*Co-Editors-in-Chief,
Elemental Magazine*

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MEET THE ELEMENTAL TEAM

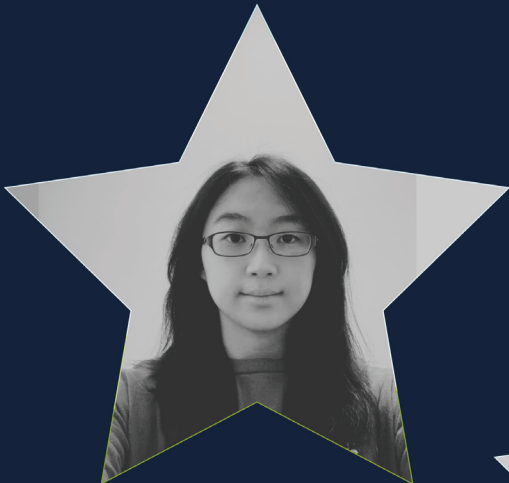
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2023/ 2024



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2023/ 2024

WHAT CAN YOU FIND IN THIS ISSUE?

*Start with this word search for a
little clue of what's to come!*

T	Y	W	F	F	E	N	P	O	D	C	A	S	T	S	S	R	F
Y	T	T	H	I	N	K	I	N	G	T	R	A	P	S	E	O	R
R	R	E	S	O	U	R	C	E	F	U	L	N	E	S	S	C	M
O	A	R	G	H	J	W	F	M	Y	A	N	Z	K	R	X	K	O
O	U	I	N	S	P	I	R	A	T	I	O	N	L	S	A	Y	C
Q	M	F	P	E	A	R	S	U	M	D	Y	Q	L	C	S	U	H
W	A	D	S	T	U	D	E	N	T	S	T	O	R	I	E	S	I
H	O	P	E	M	O	T	I	V	A	T	I	O	N	X	H	V	M
Z	D	I	T	V	R	E	S	I	L	I	E	N	C	E	C	J	I
S	H	K	A	A	B	E	M	A	K	W	A	Q	Z	J	R	E	N
W	O	M	I	N	D	F	U	L	N	E	S	S	H	T	H	F	D
T	S	E	L	F	C	A	R	E	H	E	A	L	I	N	G	N	Y

Find the following words in the puzzle.
Words are hidden → ↓ and ↘ .

HEALING
HOPE
INSPIRATION
MINDFULNESS
MOCHI MIND
MOTIVATION

PEARS
PODCASTS
RESILIENCE
RESOURCEFULNESS
ROCKY
SELF-CARE

SHKAABE MAKWA
STUDENT STORIES
THINKING TRAPS
TRAUMA

GAMES PAGE

Play to reveal a secret message

Unscramble the following words and use the answers to decode the secret message

OEHP

--	--	--	--

HNSTGERT

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

EHMLTHTLNAEA

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

YATEPHR

--	--	--	--	--	--	--

GNCPOI

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SNLIUNDMFES

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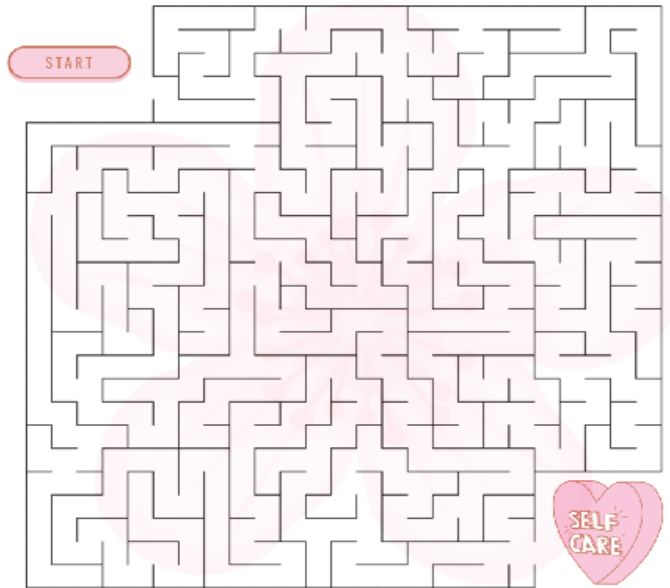
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Thought of the day:

"The human capacity for burden is like bamboo – far more flexible than you'd ever believe at first glance."

– Jodi Picoult, My Sister's Keeper

EMBRACING UNCERTAINTY: STUDENT STORIES

UOFT GRADUATE STUDENT COLLECTIVE



Part 1. by Imelda Wei Ding Lo

“I’m here. I’m here again. I can’t believe it,” I whispered to myself as the familiar Gothic spires of Trinity College came into view.

Trinity College has always held a special place in my heart. In 2011, during the last semester of Grade 12, I applied and was accepted into Trinity College. Stepping onto campus for the first time as a sheltered, bright-eyed-and-bushy-tailed 18-year-old, I was instantly awe-struck by its gorgeous chapel, majestic quad, and inviting common rooms.

As I strolled through the quad after my first Master of Arts in Political Science class, retracing the paths I walked as an undergrad, memories of my teenage years and early twenties flooded back. The bright

September noon sun glared into my eyes, while a black squirrel darted across the lawn in my peripheral vision. A lifetime has passed since my undergraduate years. Although I remain struck by Trinity College’s beauty (I don’t believe that could ever change!), I’ve evolved from that loud, abrasive, and opinionated teenager who has yet to explore the world.

Today, I am a resilient 30-year-old (non-practicing) lawyer who has embraced multiple roles since graduating from law school in 2017. From freelance legal researcher and Search Engine Optimization (SEO) editor to podcaster and legal document reviewer, my career journey has been a tapestry of unconventional and diverse experiences. However, some things remained unchanged from my undergraduate days: untamable bangs that stick up

Photograph by Imelda Wei Ding Lo

all the time and an unwavering passion for writing, analysis, broadcasting, photography, and videography.

As I retraced my former self’s footsteps through Trinity, I contemplated about the transformation I’ve undergone in the past 9 years. After three years of undergrad (I did summer school every year because I wanted to graduate and start my career early), I went straight to law school, where I was forced to face the fact that I didn’t know what I wanted out of life.

Overwhelmed by the rigorous curriculum and the prospect of becoming a lawyer, I sought solace in art, writing, and social media. Although I tried my best, I did not do as well as I thought I would, and I was not able

to land a full-time traditional legal or corporate job after graduation. Depressed, anxious, and overwhelmed, I sank even deeper into the engrossing world of my creative pursuits.

Despite the challenges of an oversaturated job market for new lawyers, I eventually found several part-time jobs over the next few years, including a stint as a freelance legal researcher for Thomson Reuters Canada.

These jobs taught me more about the law and my writing abilities (of which I've always been proud). They also left me plenty of time to explore my creative interests because they were primarily contract or freelance. Perhaps they gave me too much time — when I wasn't working, my mind would go into overdrive, and I would start doubting my future. I developed an even more intense obsession with my interests outside of work hours, causing me to become increasingly isolated. I also struggled with finding purpose in my professional and personal life.

Once the pandemic hit and my jobs went online, I became even more withdrawn and embedded in the digital world. Eventually, crafting intricate social media posts about my original fiction became my daily refuge from reality in 2020 to 2022.

My life during the pandemic was simple, almost too simple: I worked from home for 9 hours a day, had dinner, and then wrote about my stories, drew, or played video games. I was so obsessed with my inner world and work that I started drifting apart from even my oldest friends, and I was too depressed by my derailed law career and seeming lack of prospects to think much about the future.

As far as I was concerned, my life was destined to be boring, and I could do nothing to change that until COVID ended. It was not a good time for me mentally. Looking back, I felt like a shell of my former self. I barely laughed and spent most of my time trying to run away from my feelings of worthlessness.

In December 2022, I decided to do something I would've never thought I would do just a few weeks ago: apply to graduate school. My reasoning? I was sick of my self-imposed restrictive lifestyle, and I needed more momentum in my life. Plus, the master's program would give me external motivation to research a topic of interest to me: the rise of populism in the age of social media disinformation. I did not want to let my negative emotions about my "failed" law career continue controlling me. Even if I still felt horrible about being unable to get a full-time legal job, I knew I had to move on and reconnect with passions that used to drive me.

Since I decided to return to school, I've networked with new people, honed my writing skills, and gained the courage to explore new careers and life paths. While the future remains uncertain, I am now willing to face reality and use time more wisely. I still love writing, art, and fiction, but they no longer dominate my life. I've also learned important life lessons:

1. Embrace change: Even if things look daunting or scary, you must move forward. If you retreat into comfortable routines, you may shut yourself off from new opportunities.

2. Optimize your time: Use your time wisely to pursue your

goals and enrich your life.

3. Set goals: Setting goals can alleviate anxiety and prepare you for the future, even in the face of uncertainty.

4. Talk to a wide range of people: Broaden your horizons by engaging with a wide range of people.

5. Don't think about yourself that much. The more you think about yourself and what you should be doing, I've realized, the more likely you will feel depressed. In my experience, over thinking can contribute to anxiety.

6. Don't build your identity around one thing: One of the reasons I felt depressed about my career for so long was because of my strong focus on being a lawyer. I should've realized there is more to life than meeting that goal, and that I am allowed to seek happiness even if I don't have a solid or conventional career path. I was subconsciously hesitating to do things because I thought I should meet my career goals before I could do anything else. All this mindset did was set me up for more disappointments in life.

For the first time in a long time, I look forward to seeing what will happen next year!

Part 2. by "No Mud No Lotus"

Anyone who is familiar with the St. Michael's College campus or has ever passed the corner of Bay and St. Joseph's has surely noticed the unusual sculpture of a towering donkey with its front legs in a pink cast covered with sympathetic messages from passersby. When this quirky addition to our urban campus landscape first ap-

urban campus landscape first appeared in 2019, I felt both amused and, unexpectedly, seen. To me, this cute, injured donkey was a perfect visual representation of my younger undergraduate self: stumbling through emerging adulthood and struggling – not with broken limbs but with my mental health.

My first brush with the University of Toronto (UofT) took place a decade ago. I began my undergrad at Trinity College in September 2012 as a bright young student with a President's Entrance Scholarship. Only a few years prior, in 2009, my parents and I had immigrated to Canada from Moscow, Russia. Needless to say, changing continents as a fourteen-year-old was challenging. I missed my friends and teachers back home and had to adapt to a completely different culture and education system. Yet I quickly overcame the language barrier and felt as prepared for university as my Canadian-born classmates. What I was not prepared for was my mental health suddenly taking a nosedive.

Don't get me wrong, I did have many amazing experiences in my undergraduate years: studying abroad in Berlin and Brussels, experiencing the delirious highs of first love with a guy from Barcelona whom I met in Europe, making friends and learning from some great professors. However, toward the end of my degree the long-distance relationship with my Spanish boyfriend turned sour, and that painful breakup brought to the surface unaddressed mental health problems that my parents and I had failed to recognize in the preceding years. What we thought was just some typical coming-of-age angst turned out to be a severe case of obsessive-compulsive disorder



and so, at the end of 2016, my treatment journey belatedly began.

I will not go into the details of my journey here, but suffice it to say that wrapping up my undergrad was extremely difficult, I never attended Convocation because I was abroad trying to get treatment (instead, I sobbed disconsolately on my friend's shoulder the day I received my diploma), and only in 2019 – the same year the donkey sculpture was installed on campus – did I finally start to get better. I have never blamed the university for any of what happened to me; on the contrary, I am very grateful for the support I received there in the last couple years of my degree when the going

got tough. It is hardly surprising, though, that, in light of my traumatic early twenties, I wanted to leave my UofT chapter firmly in the past.

After I began to recover, I spent three years teaching at various private schools around the city. Working with children and teens, feeling valued, and even surviving the pandemic years of remote teaching as a young educator gave me a great sense of satisfaction and self-efficacy. I was once again feeling happy and in control of my life, and I even dipped my toes back into the dating pool, eventually meeting my now-fiancé. Things were definitely looking up and yet, I was not quite fulfilled. As much as I enjoyed teaching



Photograph by No_Mud_No_Lotus

French and social science, I knew I still had a lot of my own learning to do if I were to live up to my full potential. I needed to go back to school.

There are two schools of thought on returning to a place where you have once experienced trauma. One says that you should avoid it like the plague so as not to trigger painful memories. The other encourages you to go back there and make new positive memories that will overlay and eventually displace the old bad ones. When I was offered admission to the European and Russian Affairs Master's program (MA) at the Munk School, I had to face that dilemma. Should I say yes to this amazing op-

portunity and face daily reminders of my less-than-rosy early twenties? Or should I stay away and perhaps get a fresh start somewhere else?

As one can guess from seeing my article in this magazine, I chose to pursue graduate school at UofT, and it was one of the best decisions I have ever made. I am now in the second year of my MA and am thinking of completing a PhD. I absolutely love the program, I am keeping up my teaching practice through TAs, and thriving in the very place I was once struggling has been incredibly therapeutic and important for my recovery. There is nothing more healing than proving to yourself how far you have come, how much you have grown, and how resilient you have become. Just like learning, my mental health recovery is a lifelong journey, and I still work hard at it every single day. I know many young people who can relate to this. My advice to anyone who has gone through similar challenges is not to run away from the past. As Socrates (the fictional character in Dan Millman's book *Way of the Zen Warrior*, not the ancient philosopher) said, "The secret of change is to focus all of your energy, not on fighting the old, but on building the new." We are all a little like that cute lost-looking donkey in a pink cast, but casts are temporary. Our hardest days often lead to our greatest triumphs. *Keep writing your story.*

Part 3. Stories from GradMinds "Share Your Story Campaign"

Embarking on a direct PhD in engineering in Canada, away from home, presented unexpected challenges. The relentless pressure of research and coursework led to sleepless nights and pan-

ic attacks, compounded by a deep sense of homesickness. At times, I felt disconnected and burned out, questioning my purpose here.

In this struggle, I found solace and strength in three pivotal strategies. First, I prioritized spending time outdoors and with friends, breaking the isolation of academic life. Second, I rediscovered painting, a forgotten hobby from my home country, which became a therapeutic outlet for my emotions. Lastly, engaging in entrepreneurial events rekindled my motivation and connected me with inspiring individuals. These experiences were not merely coping mechanisms but vital lessons in resilience and mental health. They underscored the importance of balancing academic pursuits with activities that nourish the soul.

To anyone navigating similar challenges, remember the power of hobbies, community, and self-care. Your journey is unique, but you don't have to walk it alone. Prioritize your well-being and find joy in the pursuits that light your path. This story is a reminder that amidst the pressures of academia, finding balance and embracing our passions can lead to true resilience and fulfillment.

A collection of stories and experiences from graduate students at our university.

There was a time in my life where for some reason, all the joy left. I have heard the words "being in a dark

place", but I must admit I did not understand it until I felt it myself. It actually felt like everything in my life was being experienced through a filter that made everything dark and heavy. I did not know what to do at that time. I had always heard about reaching out, but I did not feel comfortable sharing these feelings with others. Actually, the hardest part is that I did not understand the feelings, or why, or how I got to that point, so it was difficult to share. At that time, my partner was trying to help as much as possible, and they recommended just checking out some assistance programs. I did not feel comfortable talking with someone face to face, and at the time I felt too overwhelmed with other things (work, life, school) that I did not feel I had the time to go to counselling.

So instead, I mustered up the guts to use the online assistance program, which allowed me to communicate with a professional through email, which I found was the easiest thing for me. It almost felt like I was writing for myself, but getting feedback and support from someone who could help. This person guided me and helped me understand my feelings, and eventually I was comfortable and feeling better enough to talk face to face with someone. And this has been the best decision in my life (cliche, I know), but this helped me gain coping skills that I have used throughout, including the ability to reach out again when I felt similar feelings. If you ever feel like this, I remind you, you are not alone, and I send you all the strength and support to make that one phone call, that one email, or to reach out that hand and say "I am not ok, I need help". I promise, someone is there looking for that hand, and will help you.

Throughout my upbringing, I lacked a clear understanding of what a healthy relationship entailed. Witnessing my parents' separation when I was merely five years old set a precedent. As my mother remarried, her new husband grappled with fidelity issues and battled alcoholism. Consequently, I grew up devoid of faith in love and devoid of comprehension regarding boundaries.

My initial romantic relationship mirrored the turbulent dynamics I witnessed at home, marked by

emotional and physical abuse. In hindsight, I wished I had recognized the warning signs sooner. However, when I finally received assistance from a local agency, my self-esteem had already plummeted, leaving me feeling directionless and vulnerable, ultimately returning to the arms of my abuser.

Upon earning my undergraduate degree at the age of 21, I experienced a sense of empowerment and newfound awareness of alternative paths. Yet, I remained ensnared in emotional manipulation, with my partner threatening self-harm if I dared to leave. Trapped in this



toxic cycle, I reached a breaking point during a violent altercation when he hurled glass at me. It was in that moment that I resolved to sever ties for my own safety, realizing that the cycle had to end.

Now, on the brink of graduating with a Master's Degree in Social Work, I reflect on my journey. Despite the darkness of my past, I found purpose in assisting women in my community who faced domestic violence and educating adolescents on healthy relationships. My story underscores a crucial truth: the power to create change resides within oneself. Despite the

hardships endured, I discovered that by unlocking my own potential, I could break free from the chains of abuse and start anew. Through resilience and determination, anything is achievable.

“We are all made of stories.”

I've been struggling for a long time with PTSD. In university I started to realize that my abusive family home was not the norm, and then I was sexually assaulted in my first year. I had a really hard time keeping my grades up afterwards and I was out of school for five years before beginning my master's degree. In that time I struggled with abusive relationships and my self esteem. I've been chronically underachieving for the last ten years to avoid the fear of not being good enough.

Last fall I started doing everything necessary to work towards my career again, even if it burned with embarrassment or agonized me with shame or overwhelmed me with the fear of rejection. I just did it anyway, and then gave myself a hug and took another step forward. It's the hardest thing I've ever done. Some days it is really difficult to honour my feelings and let them out in a healthy way, and to come to terms with the fact that I will be doing this management for a long time, maybe life-long. It's hard to focus in class and some days the work feels overwhelming and confusing.

I'm afraid to state my ideas and afraid of disapproval. But the most helpful thing I did this term was talk to my program head and professors when I started to struggle with the course load. I also started counselling through U of T's disability services, with a focus on managing my feelings about receiving criticism and to let go of perfectionism.

I think that when I learn to get out of my own way, it will be even harder for any person, circumstance, or any other set back to break me down again, because I have already climbed a mountain. You are different from me and I can't advise you. I'm just here, sitting beside you with my story, on a similar mountain.

Edited by Ami Patel & Talia Vacca

Thank you to GradMinds and all of the amazing students who shared their stories.



DEVELOPING RESOURCEFULNESS AS A GRADUATE STUDENT: AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. JANE FREEMAN

IMELDA WEI DING LO

The following is based on an interview conducted with Professor Jane Freeman, the founding Director of the School of Graduate Studies' Graduate Centre for Academic Communication (GCAC) at the University of Toronto. A Senior Fellow of Massey College and a member of the Stratford Festival's Senate, Jane's areas of expertise are Shakespeare, classical rhetoric, and oral and written communication. In 2023, she was awarded the highest honour for teaching at the University of Toronto, the President's Teaching Award.

Q: Can you talk about your position relative to graduate student experience and student wellness?

I am a Director of the GCAC, so I have had the chance over the years to work with hundreds of Master's and PhD students on their academic writing and speaking. I often see students in stressful situations, such as when writing their first assignment in graduate school, writing grant proposals, preparing for a dissertation defense, a job talk, or a comprehensive exam.

You ask me about my experience with graduate students and mental health. I think it's important to state right up front that I'm not a mental health expert. Mental health experts have vital and very different training



Dr. Jane Freeman, director of the Graduate Studies' Graduate Centre for Academic Communication

than I have. At the GCAC, we often see students who feel discouraged, overwhelmed, or stressed, because those feelings sometimes come up when students are struggling in isolation on their writing, and we understand the importance of helping students find support from a mental health expert if that's what they seek.

Q: Are there any parts of grad school that are particularly isolating or potentially challenging for students?

In working with graduate students,

I've noticed three times when many students face the challenge of going through a major transition:

First, when students enter the largely independent world of graduate school from the largely dependent world of undergraduate studies. There is an inherent change in the nature of work that graduate versus undergraduate students undertake: much undergraduate work takes place in groups, as students prepare for exams and write essays/reports on the same topics, while much graduate work takes place alone as students pick their own topics and conduct their own research.

Second, when graduate students finish their coursework and "achieve candidacy." When PhD students complete their coursework, they move even further into solitary work as they leave classroom learning behind and start writing their dissertations alone. The skills needed to write productively and confidently in isolation aren't skills many students have previously had the chance to develop; those skills take time and choice to cultivate.

Third, when students see graduation coming and prepare to leave their lives as a student. By the time students complete a PhD, they've been in school for a long time, and being a student has been part of their



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

See Yourself Here

Image source: <https://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/>

identity. Often, students graduate without certainty about what's coming next, and that can cause anxiety.

These times of transition can bring challenges, but they're easier to navigate if students realize they're not alone, support is available, and (most important of all), they're stronger and more resourceful than they knew they were.

Q: In recent years, what significant changes may have impacted students' well-being from your point of view?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many people adapted to doing things online. While this has made things more efficient, it has further increased the already potentially isolating work of graduate students.

When working from home, students risk missing out on the natural social connections that were available before the pandemic, such as meeting colleagues in the lounge, chatting after class, having lunch together in the cafeteria, or working out at the gym. These casual interactions help students get out of their heads and into their bodies, and remind them they are not alone. They also

sometimes lead to new friendships and unexpected research ideas or collaborations.

At GCAC, we've been trying to offer more in-person classes and workshops because we know the power of bringing students together both to learn with and from each other and to help them realize they are all struggling with similar challenges. We haven't had nearly as much uptake for in-person classes, I think, because students think it's more efficient and convenient to work from home, but if increased isolation causes people's writing to get stuck and their confidence to get shaky, then coming to campus to learn in the company of others can actually be a far more efficient means for students to move their writing forward.

Q: What role may artificial intelligence play in graduate students' experience with well-being?

I'm no expert on AI, and AI is very new, so I can only discuss my concerns. My primary concern is that overreliance on ChatGPT could interfere with students' doing the hard work to develop their own expertise and essential skills, which could, in

turn, lead to lower self-esteem and confidence.

Let me give you an example: I ran a workshop recently on academic writing and ChatGPT. One of the students asked: could you tell us how to use ChatGPT to write a literature review? This question made me very concerned because a literature review isn't just a string of words summarizing various articles. Writing an effective literature review requires researchers to become deeply familiar with the research in their field as it relates to their own specific work. It's a slow process that involves developing real expertise, which takes time, but it's also the foundation on which original research can be built.

When reading through the literature, you learn what people have done, what they haven't done, and who disagrees with what. Ultimately, building expertise allows you to join scholarly conversations with expertise and confidence, whether it's in a casual chat in your department lounge, a discussion with your supervisor, a chapter of your thesis, or when answering questions in a job talk.

A student who sees a literature review as a product to hand in, and relies on Chat GPT to generate such a product, leaves themselves dependent on external intervention and without the knowledge needed to speak and write with the confidence of an expert.

Q: Some grad students feel stuck in a rut, especially if they aren't having good luck with their job searches. Do you have any suggestions for how they can maintain positivity?

Graduate students are specialized, and specialized jobs take time to find. People with specialized training often experience a period of uncertainty and unstable employment, such as short-term contracts, as they look for jobs well suited to their specific skill set. It's not very common for the right job in the right place to become available just at the right time.

I'd encourage students to recognize that lots of people (myself included) move once or twice and go through a series of finite jobs as they look for a permanent job. I'd also encourage students not to lose their nerve. The fact that navigating the job market takes time is not a reflection of your value as a highly skilled and worthy candidate.

Q: What does resilience mean to you?

I find resilience a sort of unhelpful word. To me, it sounds like "tough it out when the going gets hard," but it's reactive rather than proactive.

For me, resourcefulness is a more helpful concept. Resourcefulness to me means that when I face a challenge – whether a writing problem like writer's block or a physical issue like a stiff neck after too long at the computer – I know how to help myself. Rather than feeling reliant on external help (like waiting for an appointment with a massage therapist to relieve a sore neck), I know that swimming, or certain yoga moves can help me help my own neck. It's like the power to address the problem has gradually moved from outside me to inside me.

That same feeling of growing self-reliance can also be experienced related to our writing, or to our disci-

plinary expertise. In several of our courses in GCAC, we aim to help students develop a sense of resourcefulness in their own writing process. Even experienced writers get stuck in their writing sometimes, but experienced writers know how to help themselves get unstuck: they feel resourceful in the isolation of their office. They are in touch with their own sense of agency.

As a young student, I didn't have expertise in my field, so I relied on my teachers to learn the answers. But as my expertise has deepened, I've gained confidence in my ability to find answers to my own questions. That feeling of growing expertise is a form of resourcefulness: I'm better able to answer my own research questions now, and part of developing expertise is knowing what I don't know and when I need to seek expertise beyond my own.

A sense of personal resourcefulness can also help us cope with challenging times. If we're in touch with how we're feeling, and we feel some confidence in our ability to help ourselves, we can consider whether what would be most helpful today would be an uninterrupted work day to catch up, or going for a swim to give our body a break from the computer, or reaching out to others for guidance, or social contact.

A growing sense of resourcefulness is something I would wish for all of my students, for knowing deep down that you can count on yourself makes the journey of graduate school – and of life – much more manageable and enjoyable.

Edited by Ami Patel & Talia Vacca



Image illustrated by Ruobing Chen

MOCHI MIND: AN INTRODUCTION TO COMPLEX TRAUMA AND COMPLEX POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

ANGELICO OBILLE



I have a mochi mind. Mochi is a yummy Japanese rice cake that is made from starchy glutinous rice. The traditional method of making mochi is by steaming the rice and repeatedly pounding it into a paste and molding it into a desired

shape and texture. Just like the glutinous rice, I have been beaten up and broken down several times over the course of my life. It got to the point where I did not expect anything else from the world. I felt like I did not deserve anything better. Turns out, my mind has simply been “mochified” and that the final product of my brain is elastic, resilient, and as beautiful as any other.

This article is about trauma, specifically about complex trauma and complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD).

Before delving into this, it is important to recognize that terms for psychological disorders and the psyche are tools to understand the human experience and to determine next steps for treatment. The formalization of disorders such as PTSD, clinical depression, and anxiety, are useful to support systems of care, but it is not the ultimate source of description for the human experience. It is not possible to fully capture the mind and all its possible states in one document. The current version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) is in its fifth revision, which goes to show that our understanding of the human psyche changes and is limited. For example, the first

edition of the DSM included homosexuality as a “sociopathic personality disturbance” ... and thankfully it has been removed since ¹.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a set of symptoms related to a traumatic experience. The DSM and other similar formalizations such as the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) list a very rigid and concrete set of criteria in order to be diagnosed with PTSD. This provides a framework to plan treatment and next steps but can be a barrier to access to some forms of treatment. In these criteria, the “trauma” is defined as an event that threatens a person’s life, causes physical harm, and/or involves sexual violence. This could include experiencing a natural disaster or a car accident. To be classified as PTSD, the collective group of symptoms must be explained as being related to that traumatic experience. For example, a person may experience intrusive thoughts such as flashbacks or nightmares of that event. A person may also be engaging in avoidance behaviours such as refusal to drive a car following a car accident.

Complex PTSD (C-PTSD) is a related condition but has some significant differences that may explain the inability of a person to respond

to classical treatments for PTSD. It is listed in the ICD-11, but it is not listed as a separate condition in the DSM and has thus not been widely recognized by many as a real condition. This reliance on formal recognition can be quite invalidating for those who are simply seeking ways to explain and treat their pain and struggles. C-PTSD is however gaining more recognition with increased awareness as more cases are being reported and suitable treatments are being shown to be effective ².

C-PTSD differs from PTSD in that the set of symptoms are related to several or recurring traumatic experiences (physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and/or neglect) over a prolonged period of time. Oftentimes, it is associated with chronic trauma that began in childhood, i.e. people who have experienced several adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). As a result of constant and repeated trauma, the brain develops or is rewired to cope with this baseline.

Many symptoms of C-PTSD overlap with PTSD-related symptoms, including depression and anxiety. Several symptoms however cannot be mapped back to a specific traumatic event. Additional symptoms of CPTSD include those of a behavioural nature, such as relationship problems, poor self-esteem, uncontrollable anger and sadness, or mood instability. At the core, C-PTSD is characterized as having a hardwired fractured sense of self.

In PTSD, we may see a shift in personality after the event, in C-PTSD the personality hasn't even had a chance to develop naturally to its full potential. In C-PTSD the parts of the self that hold the trauma, memories,

pain, and emotions, are fractured (i.e. dissociated or "exiled") from the core and the remainder of the self becomes dedicated to survival/coping mechanisms, keeping the exile in check, and maintaining a normal life. Throughout development, the brain dedicates less room for growth and for the discovery of oneself as a whole being.

For me, I found that I had trouble expecting kindness as a default from other people. I expected hostility and violence wherever I go. I learned that I was always the problem, and that I should be ashamed of taking up space. I learned that I must work to deserve my place in this world. I was stuck in a cycle of dysregulation and mitigation for this dysregulation (i.e. "firefighting"). I experienced "emotional flashbacks", where I did not have active memories of the traumatic experiences, but rather I was trapped in the feelings of dread, fear, anxiety, sadness, or rage.

In PTSD there may be some identifiable and well-defined triggers; in C-PTSD the brain is triggered even more subconsciously. In both, survivors always feel like they are in battle, even when they are objectively safe.

When I escaped from my situation and found a soft place to land, I still had my internal struggle. I felt that no one could hurt me as badly as my own mind could because at least now I can walk away from the danger, but I cannot walk away from myself. I had to train myself to believe that what happened was never my fault, it was never my fault that I didn't feel good enough to live, and it was never my fault that my needs weren't met. It was the world that failed me, and it is so unfair that I am the one



who must do the work of healing. This work involves "reparenting" the self and learning how to get out of an emotional flashback by doing the next right thing in the moment. The healing process involves building sustainable routines to set yourself up to live your authentic self. The goal of therapy is to discover and to connect with your true self; to be present and aware of the world around you without hypervigilance.

There is plethora of resources to learn about the nature of trauma and how to heal from it. These include authors such as Pete Walker, Bessel van der Kolk, and Richard Schwartz. Various therapeutic interventions have been widely employed to various degrees of



Image created with MidJourney

effectiveness. This includes Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy and exposure therapy, which are recognized as the classical treatments for PTSD. For both PTSD and C-PTSD, cognitive processing and psychosomatic brain remapping can be effective. Particularly for C-PTSD, dialectical behavioural therapy (DBT) has been proven to be effective in rewiring some of the internal narratives of shame, worthlessness, and hostility towards and from others.

For me, I found the Internal Family Systems (IFS) therapeutic model to be pivotal in my healing journey³. I was able to see myself – all of myself – as a whole system of parts that work together to keep me alive and safe. I

was able to see the parts of myself that work tirelessly to prevent me from perceiving the parts of me that feel pain, the parts of me that are stuck in childhood, hiding from the dangers of the outside world. I was able to see how I was able to get this far and how I was able to navigate this hostile world having been dealt an unfortunate set of cards. I was also able to see the parts that I thought were “problematic” and even “evil”, and saw them as extensions of me, born out of necessity to keep me safe and to keep my system functioning.

The IFS model works to delineate parts, including “managers,” “firefighters,” and “exiles”. The intent of keeping exiles exiled is to separate you from the pain that the exile holds, so that you can move on in life without feeling the burdens that the exiles have. Of course, trauma is stored in the body as much as it is stored in the psyche, so the pain of the exile and the emptiness (for exiling a part of you) is felt eventually. The protectors, particularly the “malevolent” ones, only know what has worked for them in the past, which was by exiling the part that is seeking your attention and by distracting you. This involves pushing the exiles back, telling the exile all the terrible things that will keep it feeling worthless, inadequate, broken, undeserving, etc., and influencing you to take action that would minimize the triggering of the exile so as to keep you and the exile dissociated.

In all this work, I am slowly working on building a stronger relationship with myself, leading with compassion and love at the core. I am learning to believe that I am not worthless after all. I am simply human, with both flaws and strengths. This perspective allows

my brain to feel connected to other humans, thus activating compassion that I can use towards myself.

It's hard to self-assess health especially when it comes to mental health, which is why it's better to work with someone with an objective perspective (i.e. a trusted therapist or psychiatrist). The key is to work with them instead of simply going to someone and expecting them to “fix” you. You are the one in control of yourself and your experience at the end of the day, and you get to decide what parts of treatment and self-discovery to explore. Waking up and fully feeling life can be overwhelming and destabilizing; it is important to be careful and to start this healing journey slowly and thoughtfully. It is so incredibly painful to grieve the past, especially when the grief debt is too high. But I promise, it is worth it to be able to experience and interact with the world as your full, authentic self.

Edited by Sophia Liu & Lola Leving

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THE SCIENCE OF STRESS REDUCTION TECHNIQUES

SABRINA LAI



Image illustrated by Ruobing Chen

Throughout our lives, stress has become an unwelcome companion for many of us. The demands of work, academics, and responsibilities easily take a toll on our mental well-being. Amid this chaos, the practice of stress reduction techniques has provided a way to address mental health and as an alternative to pharmaceuticals. In this article, we delve into the science of yoga on lowering stress levels, enhancing focus, and fortifying emotional resilience as well as how we can incorporate this mind-body practice in our daily lives.

Understanding the Stress Response

Stress is the body's way of reacting to challenges, like a signal that tells your body to be alert and ready for action.¹ When faced with a stressor—whether it is an upcoming deadline or a challenging situation—the body releases hormones like cortisol and adrenaline and initiates neurological changes to prepare you for the situation; this is known as the “fight or flight” response. This is a normal and helpful response; however, too much chronic stress can harm both your mental and physical health.¹ Therefore, learning how to han-

dle stress is important for keeping your body and mind healthy.

Yoga: The Mind-Body Practice

Yoga, an ancient mind-body practice, provides a holistic approach to stress reduction.² The science behind yoga's role in stress is its ability to trigger the relaxation response, a physiological state opposite to the stress response. When engaged in yoga, the body activates the parasympathetic nervous system (often called the “rest and digest” system). This activation decreases heart rate, blood pressure, and

cortisol levels, promoting a sense of calm and well-being.^{2,3}

The physical postures (asanas) and breath control (pranayama) in yoga serve as key elements in initiating the relaxation response.² Asanas, ranging from gentle stretches to more challenging poses, fosters a mindful connection between the body and mind. The deliberate and controlled breathing patterns in pranayama further enhance this mindfulness,² serving as a bridge between the physical and mental aspects of stress reduction (hence, why yoga is known as a mind-body practice).

Scientific studies examining the impact of yoga on stress hormones consistently show a reduction in cortisol levels.⁴⁻⁶ Cortisol, often elevated during stress, contributes to various health issues, including impaired cognitive function and weakened immune responses. Yoga's ability to lower cortisol levels provides a physiological basis for its stress-relieving effects, improving mental health and well-being.

Enhanced Focus and Resilience: The Mind-Body Connection

Beyond its role in stress reduction, yoga has been linked to improved focus and attention.⁷ The mindfulness cultivated during yoga practices influences daily cognitive function. Research suggests that regular yoga practice enhances cognitive performance by promoting neuroplasticity (the brain's ability to reorganize and form new neural connections).⁶⁻⁸ As the

mind becomes more adept at staying present and focused on the current moment, we become less prone to distractions and cognitive resilience improves.

Takeaway: Where to Start?

As we unravel the science behind stress reduction through yoga, it's essential to acknowledge the accessibility of this practice. How can we fit yoga and other stress-reduction techniques into our already busy schedules? Integrating yoga into daily life doesn't necessarily require lengthy sessions; even short, consistent practices can yield profound benefits. Individuals can begin their yoga journey by attending local classes, following a 5-minute online tutorial, or exploring free mobile apps.

“Scientific studies examining the impact of yoga on stress hormones consistently show a reduction in cortisol levels.”

In conclusion, the science behind stress reduction techniques, particularly yoga, bridges ancient wisdom with modern neuroscience in health and well-being. As we embrace the mindful movements and conscious breathing, we are activating an intricate interplay between body and mind, fostering a state of balance and resilience. So, roll out that yoga mat, breathe, and flow—it's not just a physical exercise;

it's a journey towards a more stress-resilient and mindful life.

Edited by Paul Jerome Gamueda & Talia Vacca

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POSITIVE COPING STRATEGIES: “THINKING TRAPS” & TIPS FOR DEALING WITH UNHELPFUL THOUGHTS

ANYA BROYTMAN

Life as a grad student can be stressful. Between a constant flurry of readings and assignments, professional commitments, and personal life, it is easy to find oneself more than a little frazzled. Unfortunately, the natural challenges that come with graduate studies can be needlessly exacerbated by counter-productive thinking styles (also known as cognitive distortions). Below you will find an overview of the most common unhelpful thinking habits with grad school-related examples, as well as some strategies for addressing these negative thought patterns.

All-or-Nothing Thinking:

The tendency to think in extremes and see things as either black or white. All-or-nothing thinking often includes words like "always," "never," or "I'm the only one."

Example: I will never catch up on all this reading. I'm the only one who always needs extensions on assignments.

Unfair comparisons:

If you have unattainably high standards and focus primarily on the few people who meet those standards, you will constantly find yourself inferior in comparison. In the age of social media we tend to magnify the achievements of others and minimize our own.

Example: I will never be as erudite and well-spoken as my professors. Her life seems so effortless and put-together on Instagram! Why can't I be more like her?

Mind-reading:

Making assumptions about what others are thinking.

Examples: The professor now thinks worse of me for making that mistake during class discussion. Nobody found my presentation interesting.

Personalization (Self-absorption):

Interpreting a potentially unrelated event as something negative to do with you.

Example: My thesis supervisor cancelled our monthly meeting. She must be disappointed in me after reading my latest draft.

Fortune-telling:

Predicting negative future outcomes without enough evidence.

Example: I will never manage to finish my dissertation. Nobody will give me a reference letter on such short notice.

Negative filter:

Discounting the positive; only noticing the bad stuff and disregarding the good things you have going

for yourself.

Example: I did very well on this assignment, but it doesn't really matter because I am now behind in my other courses.

Emotional reasoning:

Believing that something is true just because it feels true.

Example: I feel like a total impostor in this unbelievably bright cohort, so I don't really belong here.

Catastrophizing:

Blowing things out of proportion and imagining the worst possible outcome.

Example: It's no use asking for an extension at this point. I will only discredit myself as someone who can't meet deadlines and get a zero anyway.

Labelling:

Our harsh judgmental evaluation of the self sometimes leads us to putting ourselves down.

Examples: This was really stupid of me. I am so scatterbrained.

“Should” statements:

Putting pressure on ourselves by an endless list of the things we should be doing. Thoughts with "must," "have to," and "ought to" fall into



Image illustrated by Ruobing Chen

fall into this category as well.

Examples: I am not good enough at this. I should read more, know more, and write better. I should be the type of person that gets A's on all assignments.

We all fall prey to one or more of these "thinking traps" from time to time. Fortunately, though, we don't have to stay stuck in unhelpful loops of negativity and rumination! Here are a few science-backed strategies to help tame negative thinking:

1. Challenging maladaptive thoughts

Ask yourself:

- Is this thought helpful right now? Is there a more advantageous way of looking at this?

- Is it true? What is the evidence for my thought? What is the evidence against it? Which is more convincing?
- Is my thought logical? Is there a more rational way of looking at this? Could there be another explanation?
- So what if the content of my thought was right, and my fears came true? Could I live through it? Would it really change the big picture of my life? Would I still care about it in a few years' time?
- What's the best thing that could happen?

2. Self-compassion

What would you tell a friend in this situation? Would you reprimand

them or support them? Would you be harsh and demeaning or gentle and comforting toward them? Treat yourself the way you would treat a very dear friend who turned to you for help and advice. What is the kindest thing you can do for yourself right now?

3. Cognitive defusion

Cognitive defusion is seeing thoughts and feelings for what they are (mental streams of words, passing sensations), not what they say they are (dangers or facts). It helps us "unhook" from unhelpful thoughts rather than stay "fused" with them.

Reframe your unhelpful thoughts by acknowledging them for what they are — just thoughts.

Example: I'm not good enough. → I'm having the thought that I'm not good enough. → I'm noticing that I am having the thought that I am not good enough. Note the increase in separation relative to the original thought in each of these sentences. Creating this distance between yourself and the thought can reduce the problematic thought's power over your feelings and its influence on your behaviour.

Say your thought out loud in a silly voice or set it to a funny tune.

Remember how Professor Lupin taught his students to deal with bog-garts? You can tame your anxious thoughts by trying to view them in a humorous or ridiculous light.

Practice mindfulness.

Try to pay non-judgmental attention to your present-moment experience without getting caught up in thoughts about the past or the future. Engage your senses: take in the sights and sounds around you, explore the texture of your clothes, the feeling of your feet on the floor, the taste and smell of the coffee in your cup.

Passengers on the Bus.

Imagine you are in the driver's seat of a bus full of noisy passengers (your thoughts) who are talking loudly, pressing the stop button over and over again, and being obnoxious. You just keep focusing on the road ahead and follow your planned route. You are the one in the driver's seat, and you can tune them out.

The River.

Picture a stream, flowing freely in your mind's eye. On its rippling surface, there are leaves, twigs, and bits of mucky debris that the water carries downstream. Now, notice the different thoughts, feelings, and

images passing through your mind. Place each one on a leaf as it comes up and watch it float away, carried by the current. You are standing on the riverbank, watching it all go by. If you prefer, you can do the same visualization practice with clouds softly drifting in the sky. Place each thought on a cloud and watch it pass across the horizon.

The Beach Ball.

Thought suppression never works! Imagine that you are in a pool, and your distressing thought is a ball that you are trying hold down under water. The harder you try to hold it down, the greater the force with which it keeps popping back up onto the surface. Instead, just let the ball float around you as you continue to enjoy your swim.

The Tunnel:

When we get anxious while driving through a tunnel, our best option is to just keep going. Everything is temporary; there is an end to this tunnel.

The Mountain:

In any weather or season, whether the mountain is covered with snow, flowers or falling leaves, it stands firm, grounded, and unchanging. We can be like that mountain, observing the moods and seasons of our life while knowing inner stillness.

I hope this article helps you find a bit more peace and self-compassion as you navigate your graduate studies. Remember, your thoughts don't have to define how you feel about yourself or how you act. You've got this!

Edited by Ami Patel & Lola Leving

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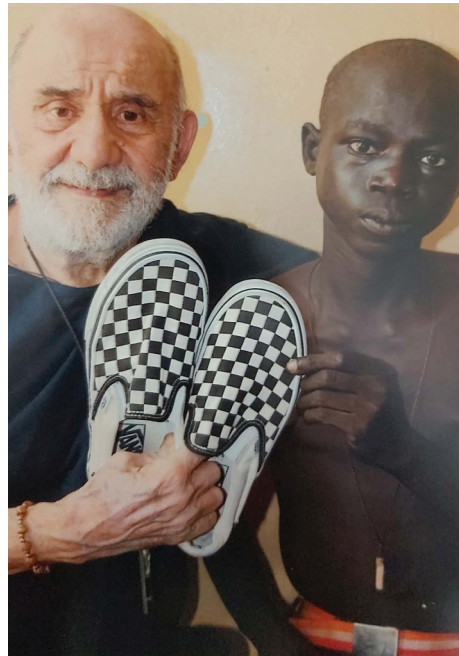
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“JUST KEEP GOING”: AN INSPIRATIONAL INTERVIEW WITH DR. ANDREW SIMONE

ARMUGHAN ISLAM

As you wait in the patient room of Dr. Andrew Simone's Toronto-based dermatology practice, you can't help but feel a sense of anticipation. It has been months, years, or even decades since you began suffering that particular skin condition, and yet many months remain from a dermatologist referral had this walk-in clinic not existed. The patient room walls highlight Dr. Simone's many accomplishments and achievements. A handwritten letter from Mother Teresa, images of impoverished children supported by the doctor's charity, and various photographs of athletic triumphs in elite competitions. The sense that this doctor is the stereotypical embodiment of a prodigy, a truly exceptional and privileged individual from his youth, is however, broken by the audiology report posted centre-stage on the wall detailing his deafness. It becomes quickly apparent that he is not the product of ideal circumstances and talent but rather an underdog who defied the odds to become an exemplar of hope and resilience.

Dr. Simone recalls a humble childhood growing up in Toronto with his loving family. His father was a bookie and sold fruit to support the family, a stark contrast to the often-affluent individuals who have the privilege of attending medical school. In high school, he was the second smallest student in the entire school and already had challenges



Dr. Andrew Simone, founder of Canadian Food For Children

with his hearing. “I was teased by the other kids for my short height, deafness, and the profession of my father,” explained Dr. Simone, “it led me to have low self-esteem and develop what some might call an inferiority complex.” Concerned with his classmates finding out about his background at a local medical school, classmates who would largely have been the children of doctors, lawyers, and other esteemed professions, Dr. Simone left Toronto to begin his medical education at Queen's University. In reference to his hearing issues, Dr. Simone stated, “I didn't want anything to stop me from my dream, from becoming a doctor.”

It was in Dr. Simone's second year of medical school that he finally sought out a specialist's opinion who confirmed that he was, in fact, going deaf. The specialist told him to quit medicine since he “couldn't use a stethoscope, talk to patients, or even answer the phone.” This would have been a difficult position for anyone, but especially for Dr. Simone who had married the love of his life, Joan Simone, earlier that year and the couple were expecting a child. “I had no choice but to push on, I had a family to support,” as Dr. Simone outlined his decision to continue pursuing medicine in spite of the hearing specialist's opinion. He was given clunky hearing aids to wear and had to sit in the front row from where he asked questions that sounded illogical or repeated those already asked because he could not hear. “I developed anxiety and depression during this time,” states Dr. Simone, throwing himself into his work to deal with the mounting pressure.

Despite his diagnosis of deafness, Dr. Simone worked his way to tying for first place in his program that same year. Unfortunately, not all of his classmates were supportive of the underdog. Yet, Dr. Simone never let negativity slow him down. The inspirational work ethic would carry on throughout the MD program as he graduated second in his class and won the prestigious Medal of Medicine award, all while having

two sons before graduating. Still, the hearing loss would continue to shape how the newly minted doctor could practice medicine, unable to become a family physician as he originally dreamt of. The Dean of Medicine recommended pursuing training in dermatology instead. The field would require minimal reliance on hearing, as Dr. Simone explains that “99% of diagnosis can be made just by looking.” He completed his residency at Harvard Medical School under the direct instruction of Dr. Thomas B. Fitzpatrick, who many consider to be the father of modern dermatology. Undeterred by the advice early on to give up because of his disability, Dr. Simone is celebrating his 55th year of practice. Dr. Simone has treated countless patients at his walk-in clinic, a practice designed to serve those who cannot access traditional dermatologists because of the lengthy wait times or the lack of a family doctor to initiate referrals.

The same resilience that makes Dr. Simone such a remarkable physician also makes him an exceptional athlete. The high schooler who was too short for sports has since completed four Ironman Triathlons and ran the Boston Marathon twice, continuing to complete routine 10K runs and swimming competitively. Yet, Dr.

Simone’s greatest accomplishment is his ongoing humanitarian work, which starts at his accessibility-oriented clinic. Every Saturday, he and his staff begin seeing patients at 4:00 AM to accommodate disadvantaged individuals unable to take off work during traditional clinic hours. All the proceeds are donated to the Canadian Food For Children (CFFC) organization, a charity he founded with his wife, Joan. Becoming an official charity in 1985 with the direct approval of Mother Teresa, CFFC sends food to the poor in more than 20 developing nations, including El Salvador, Uganda, and Sierra Leone. Such selfless commitment to those in need is echoed in the numerous recognitions Dr. Simone has received. For their humanitarian work, Andrew and Joan Simone were inducted into the Order of Canada, in addition to Dr. Simone receiving the Royal College’s Teasdale-Corti Humanitarian Award, Papal Cross, and Doctorate of Sacred Letters, to name a few.

Dr. Simone’s story is one of hope and resilience, embedded with lessons that each of us can reflect upon when facing our own challenging times. He did not give up when others told him to quit, instead focusing on the people who mattered most to him to become a top per

“Dr. Simone’s story is one of hope and resilience, embedded with lessons that each of us can reflect upon when facing our own challenging times.”

former in medical school. He now views his deafness as a gift rather than a disability, reflecting back on a conversation with a medical school professor who stated that “a handicapped person makes the best kind of doctor because they have empathy for their patients.” This story also underscores the idea that what may appear as setbacks, are setting the stage for greater opportunities tomorrow. Without his deafness, Dr. Simone would not have been pushed down the road of becoming a dermatologist and all the incredible humanitarian work that accompanied it. His message to all the students dealing with challenges today is, “don’t give up, you have a contribution to this world, just keep going!”

Edited by Rameez Khara & Lola Leving



Image source: [Thttps://www.canadianfoodforchildren.net/](https://www.canadianfoodforchildren.net/)

COMPLEXITY AND HOPE: A SUMMARY OF MURROUGH AND RUSSO

ARMUGHAN ISLAM

Murrough and Russo's review paper (2019) details the impact of conditions linked to stress on the brain, such as major mood disturbances and trauma-associated stress reactions, which significantly raise the chances of mental health issues. There is growing optimism about the mechanisms that help individuals cope with stress and related innovative treatments. Resilience is not merely bouncing back after intense stress; it involves actively maintaining stability in brain and behavioural function. Individual differences, influenced by gender and development, play a substantial role in determining how people handle stressful situations. Understanding the biological roots of resilience requires detailed investigation into various brain processes, genetics, immune responses, and the microorganisms living in our bodies. However, due to the nascent stage of research and the complexities of the brain-behaviour connection, the studies reviewed by Murrough and Russo (2019) generate more questions than answers. Despite the urgent need for effective treatments, turning our understanding of resilience into therapies for mood disorders and stress-related conditions remains uncertain.

Neurobiological and Immune Mechanisms

The neurobiological and neuroimmune resilience mechanisms are primarily based on rodent research. This research investigates how stress responses are regulated by the autonomic nervous system and the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, introducing the concepts of allostasis and allostatic load. Allostasis maintains stability, while allostatic load represents the strain on neurobehavioral systems from stress. Understanding these concepts enriches our comprehension of varied stress responses. Resilience, emerging from tailored allostatic reactions to stress, requires coordination across multiple systems, including brain circuits and immune components. It is imperative to validate and further explore these findings, with a particular emphasis on human contexts, for greater reliability.

MicroRNAs are one area of interest as they relate to inflammation and reactions to stress within experimental models. This topic adds to a growing body of literature that suggests differences in certain white blood cells could predict how susceptible or resilient an individual might be. Researchers examining how microRNAs regulate genes in these cells focus on Ly6chi monocytes from mice displaying varying stress responses. This initial discovery hints at microRNAs potentially influencing stress reactions, urging further exploration into this field.

Early Life Factors

Research also includes investigation into the effects of early-life adversity on susceptibility. Scientists in this field identify groups displaying resilience in challenging circumstances. The introduction of a framework centred on neural networks managing emotional regulation suggests that differences in utilizing prefrontal cortical systems affect how a child responds to adverse experiences. It has been observed that those who effectively regulate amygdala responses amid adversity display lower vulnerability to depression. This underscores the potential of strengthening these systems as avenues for mitigating or managing trauma-associated conditions such as depression.

There are neurobehavioral facets tied to managing stress responses throughout life. It is proposed that resilience involves balanced stress reactions and effective post-stress recuperation. As such, manageable stress early in life might strengthen emotion-regulating neural circuits, potentially guarding against later stress-related challenges. Parenting styles, positive outlook, cognitive adaptability, and strong social support become key factors influencing resilience. The intricate nature of neural systems, like the prefrontal cortex and amygdala, prompts an exploration of potential interventions focusing on neuropeptides and molecular components to optimize these

neural circuits linked to resilience and stress recovery.

Individual Considerations: Genes, Biomarkers, and Sex

Despite progress in understanding neurobiological stress responses, there's limited knowledge about the genetic aspects of resilience. It is a point of interest to identify genetic variations that alter disease susceptibility amid challenging circumstances, with the goal of uncovering crucial mechanisms supporting resilience and discovering new avenues of treatment. The focus centers on exploring how gene-environment interactions in humans shed light on resilience mechanisms. Conceptual frameworks include the "match-mismatch" and "differential susceptibility" theories, aiming to contextualize these interactions within a broader theory of susceptibility to environmental influences. These models challenge constraints within the stress-diathesis model, presenting opportunities for innovative research. Researchers aim to identify reliable markers for diagnosing, managing, or preventing psychiatric disorders. Predictors of susceptibility and resilience in an animal model of social defeat stress have been explored using advanced computational and molecular methods. They reveal that existing anxiety, reduced hippocampal volume, and elevated interleukin-6 levels in mice signal susceptibility to stress-related symptoms. Notably, early use of L-acetyl carnitine in susceptible mice encourages resilient behaviour. These outcomes, seen in genetically similar mice, imply that environmental factors contribute to stress susceptibility. If this predictive method extends to clinical use, it could notably innovate diagnostic strategies and patient care.

Trauma resilience has also been framed as a flexible process shaped by both exposure timing and an individual's sex. Existing research consolidates clinical and preclinical data, analyzing how hormonal and epigenetic stress regulation differs across male and female lifespans. Notably, different stress responses—whether during the stressor period (proximal) or at other times (distal)—yield unique behavioural and physiological outcomes. This holistic lifespan consideration provides valuable perspectives for future studies, revealing the intricate complexity of stress responses.

Translating Research and Future

Challenges remain in applying neurobiological findings to treating stress-related conditions like Post-Traumatic

Stress Disorder (PTSD) and better understanding the resilience mechanism. There are notable advancements in pharmacological strategies for PTSD based on understanding intricate systems like the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis and neuropeptide Y, promising progress with ketamine treatment and 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine-assisted psychotherapy. Despite these advances, effective PTSD treatments remain limited. Caution is advised in anticipating immediate gains from "rational pharmacotherapy" and advocating for "reverse-translation," using early efficacy data from repurposed compounds. There is growing anticipation that clinical insights deepening the understanding of resilience mechanisms will possibly reveal new targets for PTSD and related conditions. The exploration of resilience, a complex process, has significantly progressed in understanding its genetic and neurobiological origins. Trials investigating innovative therapies using the body's inherent resilience mechanisms are in progress, showing initial promise. Continuing research strives to differentiate vulnerability from resilience, which is pivotal for early intervention. Murrough and Russo's 2019 review acts as a roadmap for future resilience inquiries. This field shows potential in developing approaches to improve mental well-being and addressing disorders linked to stress, a potential source of optimism for individuals managing mental health difficulties.

Edited by Rameez Khera & Lola Leving

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Image illustrated by Ruobing Chen

A REVIEW OF MENTAL HEALTH APPS FOR MEDITATION, MINDFULNESS, AND MOTIVATION

ANYA BROYTMAN

Smartphones are taking a toll on our mental health. Many spend a lot of time scrolling aimlessly through social media or getting distracted by yet another notification. But what if we could harness the power of technology to boost our mental health instead of undermining it? This article will review the different apps that I have used for meditation, mindfulness, and motivation. Whether you are looking to sleep better, jump-start your meditation practice or conquer anxiety, there are apps offering science-based tools to help. Turn your phone into an ally and not an enemy on your mental health journey.

Calm

One of the first mental health apps to hit the mass market, *Calm* has been around since 2012 and is a

one-stop shop for all things meditation. Its popular Daily Calm meditations are narrated by Tamara Levitt, a Toronto-based mindfulness instructor whose soothing voice catapulted the app to stardom in 2014. The most popular offering on the *Calm* app that truly sets it apart, though, is its extensive collection of Sleep Stories – relaxing recordings designed to lull adult users to sleep as they enjoy a comforting bedtime story. Some of these are well-known timeless tales like *Beauty and the Beast*, *Peter Pan*, *Little Women*, Shakespeare's sonnets and plays or Greek myths. Most are *Calm* originals designed for every type of listener. Rom-com lovers, avid travelers, nature explorers, history buffs, and life scientists will all find a perfect sleep story to drift off to. Some of the sleep stories are narrated by celebrities, such as Diane Keaton, LeBron James, Matthew McConaughey, and Stephen Fry. Unfortunately, *Calm* only offers limited free content and is subscription-based, but I have found it well worth the investment.

Headspace

Headspace is another veteran meditation app, also launched in 2012. One of its founders, Andy Puddicombe, is the voice behind most meditations on the app. In 1994, he abandoned his sports science degree to travel to the Himalayas and become a Buddhist monk. Andy eventually returned to secular life and embarked on the mission of popularizing meditation and making the practice accessible to as many people as possible. *Headspace* has a daily meditation available to all for free and a vast collection for premium subscribers. Breathing exercises, a fun inspirational video series called The Wake Up, courses related to different aspects of mindfulness, workout videos, and sleep stories (called Sleep Casts on this app) – *Headspace* offers it all. In choosing between *Calm* and *Headspace*, I would recommend *Calm* to those looking for engaging mental health content delivered by great narrators and *Headspace* to those who are serious about building and deepening their personal meditation practice.

Insight Timer

Insight Timer truly stands out in the world of meditation apps because of the incredible amount of free content it offers its users. You can spend a lifetime exploring the meditations, soundscapes and yoga practices available on *Insight Timer* for free without ever having to dip into its premium content. Also, a core feature of the app is the ability to set a timer for your own unguided meditation practice and choose among a wide variety of instruments for your starting and ending bells, from a duduk to crystal bowls.

Buddhify

Buddhify is an affordable app available as a one-time \$6.99 purchase. Upon purchase, you gain lifetime access to a colourful "wheel" of meditations divided into helpful categories you can tap into depending on what is happening in your life right now. It has tracks for waking up, travelling, walking, practicing with a friend, taking a break from work, using your phone mindfully, and going to sleep. This app is particularly suited for people who like to practice

meditation on-the-go and those who prefer a small upfront price to an expensive monthly subscription.

Fabulous

This app may be my favourite. It was incubated in Duke University's Behavioural Economics Lab, led by Dan Ariely, and is all about cultivating good habits through small steps, repeated regularly over time. The app is beautifully designed with lovely graphics and animations, making self-care routines feel like an absorbing game. At the core of *Fabulous* is the Wake-Up Routine, Workday Routine, and Bedtime Routine. It also has a plethora of challenges that you can embark on depending on your needs, from gratitude and journaling to deep work to exercise and healthy eating or decluttering your home. App users receive daily and nightly coaching recordings that blend positive psychology with inspiring passages from poetry, fiction, and memoirs. The *Fabulous* universe also offers companion apps: *Ambiance* (ambient soundtracks for relaxation), *Clarify* (thriving with ADHD), *Shape* (healthy eating), *Lumiere* (easing stress and anxiety), and *Elixir* (finding balance and purpose).

Dare

If you are struggling with anxiety or related disorders, *Dare* is the app for you! It was created by Barry McDonagh, a native of Ireland who developed an effective strategy for overcoming his own anxiety. The acronym DARE stands for the four steps Barry recommends you take to address anxiety: Diffuse, Allow, Run Towards, and Engage with Life. The app has a free collection of SOS audios you can play when feeling overwhelmed or overcome with panic, and these alone are worth downloading the app for. It also has a treasure trove of helpful training for anxiety relief, stopping panic attacks, ending insomnia, overcoming worry and intrusive thoughts, embracing body sensations, conquering health anxiety, and dealing with social anxiety. Stretching practices have recently been added to the app, as well as great masterclasses on reprogramming unwanted habits, healing trauma, and letting go of negative thinking. The app also gives you access to a community of like-minded people who have shared their success stories of progress and recovery they

have achieved by implementing the DARE method.

Mindfulness.com

This app is fairly similar to *Calm* in terms of what it offers and is also subscription-based. Its daily mindfulness meditations are led by Cory Muscara and Melli O'Brien, both exceptional meditation teachers and practitioners. Cory Muscara is a former monk who has taught positive psychology at UPenn and Columbia. Cory's warmth and wisdom is what keeps me coming back to the app. The sleep stories collection on this app is much smaller than on *Calm*. However, the app does have its strengths, such as the lovely Daily Gratitude practices. A truly standout feature is the collection of courses taught by world-class spiritual teachers. My favourites include Finding Happiness, Emotional Resilience in Adversity, and The Healing Power of Self-Compassion.

I hope you have found this list helpful and are now on your way to downloading an app that will make the stresses of grad school life a little more bearable!

Edited by Ami Patel & Lola Leving

Check out these apps on Android or iPhone!

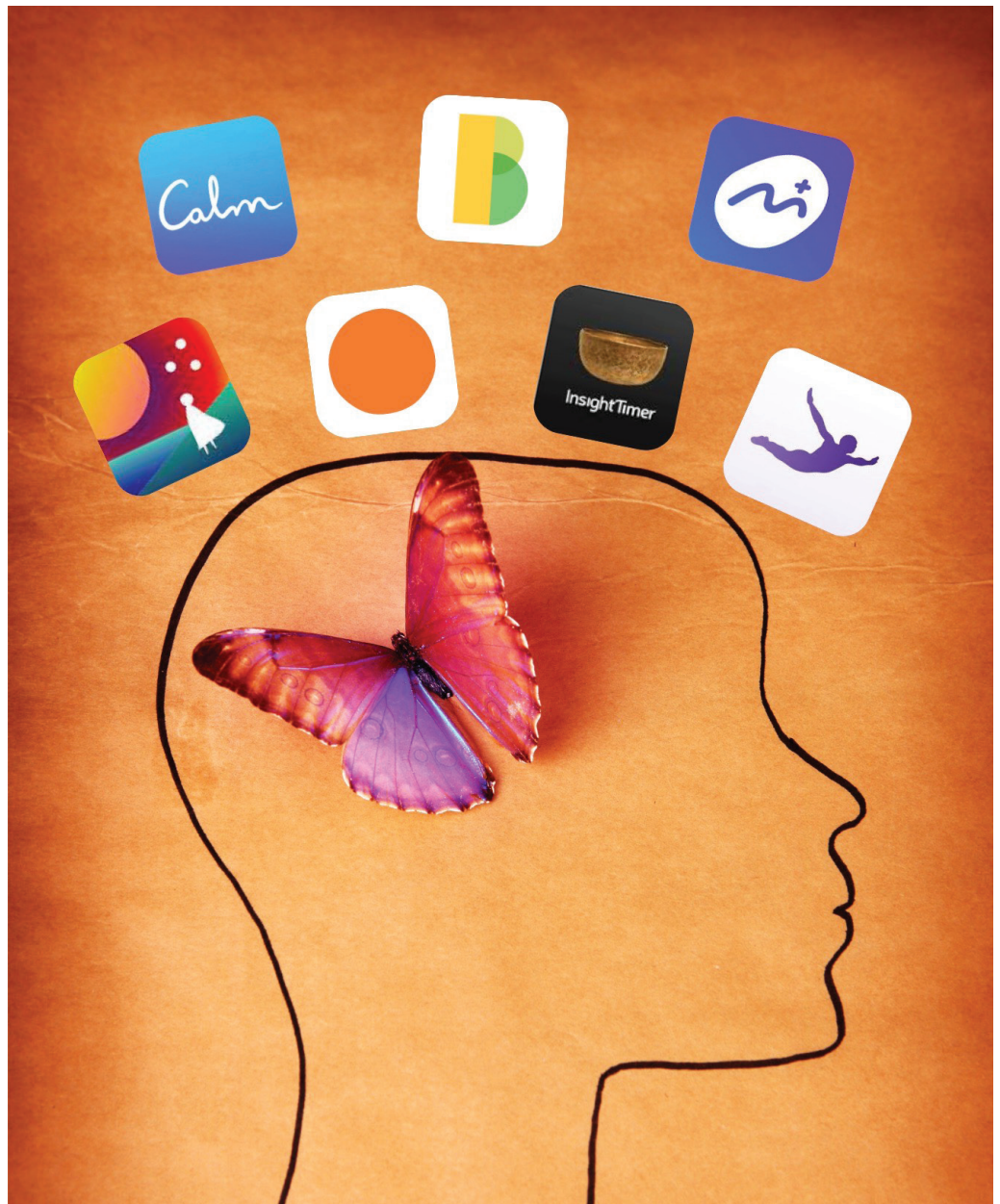


Image created by Isabel Khudr

RECOVERING FROM GRINDR

ANGELICO OBILLE

We all deserve to love and to be loved. I learned early on, however, that I was probably the exception. I learned that wherever there is love, there is loss. They either die or they leave, or they simply take and never return. Nevertheless, I still chose to love.

I was the hopeless romantic who would have intense feelings for someone and pass notes in class to ask them if they liked me back. I calligraphed poems and anonymously left them in pockets for them to find. I met my first love, my first girlfriend, on Tumblr. I left a message in her inbox because I thought she was very pretty and had a great heart. She was my high school sweetheart.

I felt accomplished. Our pairing was acceptable to society and to God. I could marry her and have children and pass down my family name. Unfortunately, when you are closeted and in a heterosexual relationship, problems will inevitably arise. It took a year of trying to work something out during the first year of university, our fourth year together, a year of bending myself backward and forward to keep our relationship ablaze, for us to fully realize that we could no longer grow together. Our inevitable break-up was immensely difficult for me to accept. My worldview, my plan for my future, my ticket to heaven, was shattered.

Did I love her? Yes. Was I in love with her? Probably. Was I fully myself with her? Definitely not. That was no problem for me though. I was used to sacrificing parts of myself to please the world. I was used to fighting for my space.

In any case, I felt awful for having failed at keeping our relationship alive. I understood this as a personal failure and as a sign that I did not deserve an ideal life. Deep down, I knew. I knew that I was flawed. In my trained brain, I was broken, wrong, and invalid. All because I had attraction to men. My trained brain learned to be disgusted in myself, to shove my affinity for affection all down by means of self-hatred, rage, and shame. All these parts of me born to keep my homosexuality in its place.

This part of me, the part that simply loved and yearned for love in return, the part that I compartmentalized into a box and squished into the deepest, darkest corner of my mind, decided that without her, it was this part's chance to take over. It finally fought back. *And it won.* This part, that happened to like men, was set free.

That summer, I stayed at the university to take a few courses (but mostly to escape my hometown). I was alone. I didn't know nor



Image illustrated by Ruobing Chen

did I try to find any queer people. I did however allow myself the freedom to explore what it meant to be homosexual. And what did 18-year-old me think was the main (i.e. only) part of being homosexual? The answer was: Sex. So, I downloaded Grindr, and I frequented the personal m4m pages on Craigslist.

My experience was anything but

fun. It was filled with man after man preying on my youth. Caring nothing about me but my flesh. I starved myself to be skinny enough to be called a “twink”. I started smoking to combat my hunger. I fell for the fake and superficial validation from these men. Because at least it was validation. *If I could make them happy, I am thus a successful homosexual.*

I was addicted. I was reckless. I was depressed. That summer, my innocence died.

I let anyone use my body as if they owned me. Even if I didn’t have the energy, perhaps especially when I didn’t have the energy, I went out. I was forced to do things I didn’t want to do. These nameless faces giving me nothing... and taking everything. All I could think was, “I deserve this.” To me, I put myself in these positions, so I had no right to complain. To me, this was all the “love” I deserved. To me, this was the cursed life that was meant for me and for people like me. That part of me that longed for a connection with someone was beaten and broken each time.

Still, I survived.

Fall term began and I was at one of the lowest points of my life. I suffered in silence. I put on my mask every day. With the help of this mask, I was able to build some strong friendships. I found people who saw me, who unknowingly were vital in pulling me through. No one knew that I was carrying so much baggage. Maybe they did know, and they cared for me anyway...

With each connection moving forward, I began slowly building my self-worth. Eva was one of those connections. One day in the library between classes, I decided to share my secret out loud for the very first time. I told them I was seeing someone, and I pulled up his Tinder profile and revealed to them that I was seeing a boy! Eva did not bat an eye, and this was all the validation I needed to keep on keeping on. To this day, Eva has remained one of my main supporters as I journey towards living out my life as my true, authentic queer self.

“To me, living an authentic life means choosing to not modify who I am on the inside when expressing myself outwardly. It means recognizing the effect that my internalized shame has on my thoughts and actions and choosing to be who I am anyway – unapologetically.”

To me, living an authentic life means choosing to not modify who I am on the inside when expressing myself outwardly. It means recognizing the effect that my internalized shame has on my thoughts and actions and choosing to be who I am anyway – unapologetically. Living authentically means accepting my past, accepting my body, and accept-

ing the reality of the systems that I am confined to live in. In doing so, I can find inner peace and look up towards a better tomorrow.

The reality is that I am queer. I may not be straight, nor am I thin, nor am I the “right type of Asian” (all of these were “deal-breakers” according to the men I’ve spoken to on Grindr), but I am strong, I am passionate, and I am enough. I deserve to cultivate love in my soul and to share it unsparingly with the world.

This cultivation of love is rooted in self-love. This means taking the focus towards the approval of others and portioning some of that energy towards discovering who I am and what I create. It means giving myself the same benefit of hope and curiosity that I extravert. Self-love means finding my core of compassion and using it as a source of light as I relate to others and the world around me.

It is with this approach that I write this piece today, almost a decade later, working on projects that align with how I relate to the world. I am here living near the Village with my boyfriend and puppy. I read the books I want, I play the music that inspires me, and I welcome those seeking that same safe place for the cultivation of love and creativity that I craved for all those years ago.

Edited by Sophia Liu & Lola Leving

HOW THE PEARS PROJECT FOSTERS RESILIENCE AND COMMUNITY

MAGDALENA NITCHI

Last fall, I interviewed The PEARS Project co-directors about their advocacy work and the ways in which PEARS fosters hope and resilience in the student community. Emma Biaminte (she/her) is an undergraduate double-major in diaspora and transnational studies and environmental ethics, with a minor in critical equity and solidarity. Jay Prentice (they/them) is an undergraduate student pursuing critical studies in criminology, queer solidarity, and sexual diversity.

Q: How would you introduce PEARS?

Emma: PEARS stands for Prevention Empowerment Advocacy Response for Survivors.

Jay: My elevator pitch for PEARS is that we're an anti gender violence and anti sexual violence project on campus. We are survivor-led and student-run, and I work from a grassroots, anti-colonial feminist framework to support survivors and folks on campus who need support with the goal of ending gender-based violence. We do everything from peer support to policy advocacy, we run events regularly and do community outreach.

Q: Can you tell me about your roles in the PEARS project, and how PEARS is organized?

Emma: [Jay and I are co-directors, and we have different areas of expertise.] We decided to add a co-director position this year because [it is quite a big role and a lot of work]. We oversee a branch at every college within the Faculty of Arts and Science, an engineering branch, a graduate student branch, which we initiated this year, and branches on the Mississauga and Scarborough campuses. These [little branches] create a more accessible community for people to become involved in. It can be a lot less intimidating when it's someone from your college. As the executive branch we aren't in charge of these branches; we help [them], but they have their own

government. We focus on wider U of T administrative issues, providing support to anyone who looks for it, and we work with other student unions. We are also the go-to for conflict resolution between the branches.

Jay: We also started a board of directors this year, which has a representative from each of our branches and oversees the executive branch. So it is a collaborative instead of top-down approach. We use an anti-colonial framework where we don't prioritize hierarchies or power structures.

Q: What motivated you to start a chapter of PEARS for graduate students? Have you noticed any unique challenges we face compared to undergrads?

Emma: From [the time when] PEARS became a thing, we have [always] been moving on to different branches and colleges. [W]e had some graduate students reaching out to us, and we realized they have very different needs compared to the undergraduate population on campus, so we wanted to create a branch for anyone in the School of Graduate Studies, professional programs, etc. For example, there is a very different relationship between students and professors in graduate school, a different nature of academics which is more career-focused, and we wanted to provide more specific resources, rather than having blanket support that doesn't fit the needs of specific people.

Jay: One of the downsides of a more informal relationship is that professors and researchers hold the ability to basically destroy a student's career. Students need professional references and recommendations, so if they were to come forward about those things, their life's work could all be taken away just because of these people having so much power.

Emma: And while the university policy is supposed to prevent that through anti-retribution clauses, we

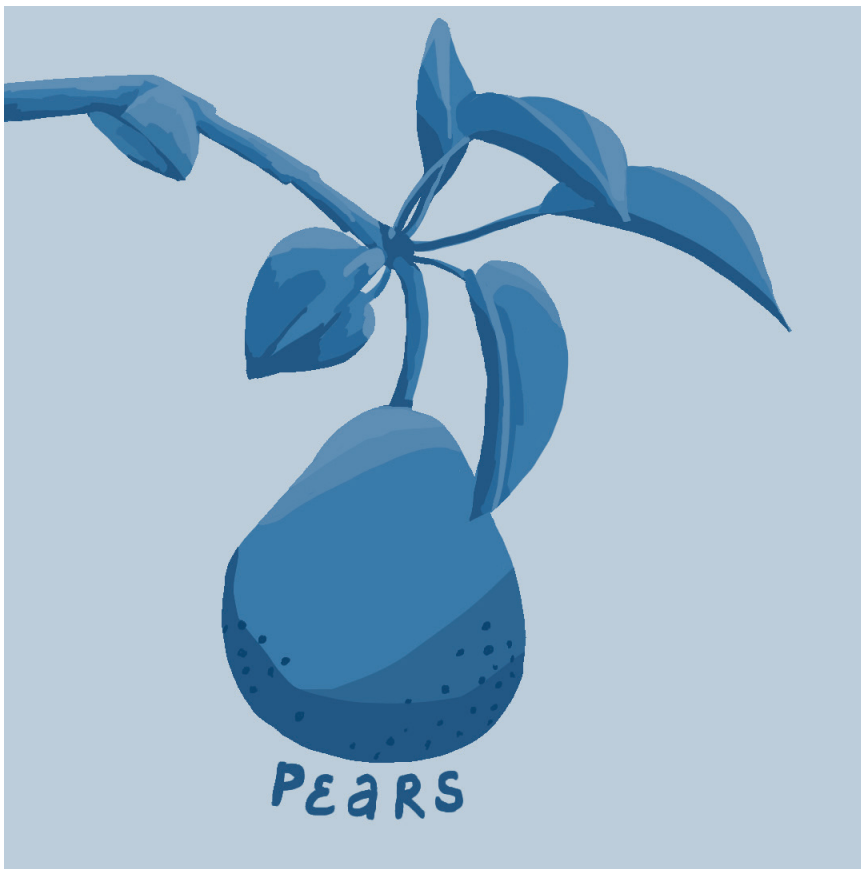


Image illustrated by Ruobing Chen

know from survivors' experiences that is not the case. It can be really difficult to get that kind of support... Giving these people consequences is necessary and important, but the university is reluctant to do so because it is difficult to replace people functioning at this high academic level, and they use expertise in niche topics as an excuse for bad behaviour.

Jay: Last year, a major focus was the Robert Reisz campaign. He is a professor at U of T who has been found guilty of multiple things by the administration, including academic bullying, sexual harassment, and racial harassment. The survivors came forward with a record of everything that he put them through. Although U of T agreed that this constitutes harassment and inappropriate behaviour from a professor, he was not fired. He continues to run his lab, which has many graduate students. After running that campaign, we knew that there were certain experiences that we as undergraduates didn't have, so we wanted to include a grad branch to speak to that. We were helped a lot by people who already know these systems.

Q: Last year, PEARS released a statement responding to the University of Toronto's sexual violence policy. Have

you noticed any changes based on your recommendations? Is there anything that we as students can do to mitigate issues, including fighting against institutional delays in investigations?

Emma: Last year we released a document called "Too Little, Too Late" in response to the university's legally mandated three year review of the sexual violence policy. [...] The review was [done internally,] which was one of our issues: [...] there is a risk of bias involved. [...] The final document] removed a recommendation about creating more clearly defined processes and timelines for cases. [...] PEARS and other groups spoke numerous times during consultation meetings. While a number of recommendations improved the university's policy, they did not [provide sufficient support] to the students who needed them, and some were in fact harmful. For example, a new change to the policy states that survivors have to report

their case to the Sexual Violence centre and then again to the Office of High Safety and Risk, so now the survivor is forced to repeat their story multiple times, which can be re-traumatizing. (...) We have continued to demand a new review of the policy, but those in charge are polite but extremely dismissive, and no changes are being made. On January 1st 2023, the new sexual violence policy came into effect but it just isn't enough. It is a weak document from a strong institution, and we face a lot of academic red tape in attempting to improve it.

Jay: U of T talks about how it is one of the best academic institutions in the world, and we frequently see folks reaching out to us in disbelief about how weak it is. How is U of T not going to have those avenues in place in order to keep their students safe if they are so important to them? (...) In terms of how students can advocate, it is often by having conversations and making noise. U of T is a [prestigious] institution; the last thing the administration wants is noise. When these discussions come up, it can be as simple as sending an email about your concerns. Email institutions, your student unions[...] just generally get in touch with the people who make these decisions, and do so many times. When they get a flood of emails, when we go to the press, when everyone is talking about issues, they can't ignore them. It can be

really difficult to start these conversations, because people's research can be on the line, but if everybody is talking, it makes it harder for any one person to face repercussions.

Emma: It is difficult because it's a lot of labor on the students, but the only tool in our arsenal is using our voice.

Q: *Your Instagram account states that students who participate in peer support programs, while not certified or psychiatric professionals, receive "trauma-informed training". What does this training entail, and is it possible for people outside PEARS to access it?*

Jay: [...] None of us are mental health professionals, we are peer supporters. Many of us are also survivors and have gone through the experiences that people tell us about, so we come with a lens of understanding and being able to empathetically support people. The trauma-informed training comes from Viktória Bell, the founder of the Dandelion Initiative, an gender-based violence prevention organization that closed down last year due to lack of funding. We had Viktória and our founder Micah Kalisch [...] come and do trainings in the past. We do a two hour session, where we go through the principles of trauma-informed work, how to support survivors at U of T, [and discuss some things folks have learned from doing this kind of work. Micah themselves have been supporting survivors at U of T for four or five years.] We also make it clear that no one has to provide peer support at PEARS, it is something that folks choose to engage with.

Emma: We also have additional trainings. For example, identify/assist/refer is a module about how to identify a mental health crisis and, as a non-mental health professional, refer students to the proper ways to get help. This resource is free for all students, and I highly recommend it. Another part of peer support is knowing the university systems. It can be confusing, and you might need someone to walk you through the steps of making a report, or tell you how to use your health insurance to access mental health resources. We refer people to other resources as required; we definitely don't want to overstep, and we want people to get access to whatever resource will support them best.

Jay: Also, we are not long-term counselors. We are just a listening ear, someone to help validate experiences, empathize with them, and refer students to professional resources.

Q: *The theme of Elemental's issue this year is hope and resilience. What does resilience mean to you and how does PEARS foster it?*

Emma: This work can be difficult. It's very slow, and hard to advocate for changes. But knowing there are people whose lives have been impacted by what we do is incredible. We face a lot of barriers but we also get a lot of beautiful messages about how something we've done changed someone's experience or helped them access a resource. [Having these conversations over and over with new people makes me hopeful that change is going to occur.] Change isn't just a dream in the future, it's something that will happen every day.

Jay: I would add that one of the letters in our acronym stands for empowerment. We want not only to support survivors, but make them feel like there's a light at the end of the tunnel. A lot of us are survivors who know what it's like to go through these things and also feel the long-term effects of trauma. It can be really difficult and isolating, and to continue work and school while trying to navigate trauma can be incredibly difficult. [...] We try to empower survivors to be able to handle all this and make sure they have other people to lean on. There's a particular graphic I like to post on the PEARS account sometimes of someone curled up on the floor with the caption "this is what resilience looks like," because that is what resilience looks like. It looks like crying your eyes out and ranting to a friend, and that's okay. It can be messy and it can be whatever you need from it.

Q: *How do you personally take care of yourselves and your mental health amidst all of the challenges, difficult conversations and support that PEARS gives to other people?*

Emma: [It] is something we prioritize in our organization, even in our training. You cannot support someone if you are not supported. While this work is difficult, being in PEARS helps me. It's a beautiful community, and we do fun events that are nice and relaxing, like crafting nights. We also recognize and accommodate peoples' needs. Sometimes we won't make a deadline and that's okay. Sometimes you need to sit in bed all day and not answer emails. PEARS has become a big community, where there is often someone willing to do the work instead.

Jay: One of the questions we ask in interviews is how people plan to care for themselves. Being a part of

PEARS is helpful for me because I intend to go down this path as a career. [I am passionate about it,] and connecting with other people who are also passionate helps fulfill me and inspires me. Sometimes I sit in bed and think “wow, all of this sucks.” [Sometimes it’s a lot to deal with and talking with friends, family, and going to therapy is necessary.] The key is just leaning on everyone around you while trying to also support them.

Conclusion

After speaking to Jay and Emma, I have become even more convinced of the necessity of organizations like

PEARS at the University of Toronto. While PEARs does important work in connecting those who have recently experienced assault to resources to help them, the community building they engage in is essential to foster hope in a group of people who struggle with it more than most. Jay and Emma’s words are a testament to the resilience not only of its members, but of the students who come to them for support, and PEARs’ graduate student branch is a valuable resource for anyone who is in need.

Edited by Rameez Khara



Image created with MidJourney

TRAUMA AND HEALING: A REVIEW OF THE BODY KEEPS THE SCORE BY BESSEL VAN DER KOLK, M.D.

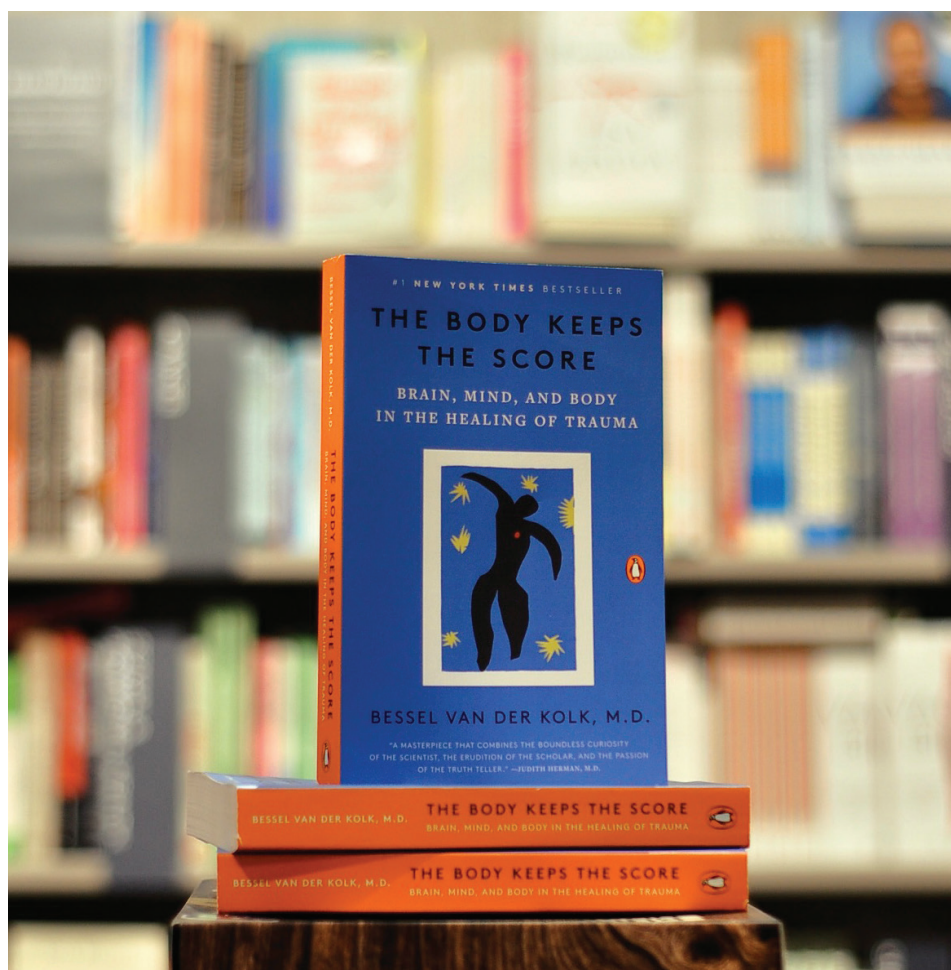
IMELDA WEI DING LO

The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma is a 2014 book by Bessel van der Kolk, M.D., the medical director and founder of the Trauma Centre in Brookline, Massachusetts.

A huge pandemic hit, *The Body Keeps the Score* remains #14 on the Amazon best seller list nearly 10 years after its publication. Unlike most hits, though, it is unexpectedly dense. Not only does it offer a deep dive into van der Kolk's lengthy career in treating survivors of traumatic incidents such as war, incest, and rape, but it also delves into highly technical neuropsychology concepts. The central thesis of this 445-page book argues that trauma can cut the link between the body — which can't forget the source of trauma — and the mind — which wants to forget and move on, and that trauma can alter people's brains and nervous system.¹

The book's focus on exploring the connection between trauma and the body is not new. For example, another popular psychology book, Dr. Peter A. Levine's *In an Unspoken Voice*, also explores how the body releases trauma and restores goodness.²

That said, *The Body Keeps the Score*



distinguishes itself by broadening the definition of trauma. In contrast to conventional descriptions of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that limit the condition to specific symptoms like hyper-vigilance, nightmares, and flashbacks, van der Kolk associates trauma with a much broader spectrum of phenomena, identifying its presence in

various somatic (bodily) complaints.

For example, one of van der Kolk's clients, Julian (pseudonym), was molested by a priest during his childhood. However, Julian had repressed memories of the abuse until he read an article about how the priest who had molested him was under suspicion for child

sexual abuse. This discovery triggered traumatic memories.¹ van der Kolk reasoned that humans store the distress linked to a traumatic incident in their bodies. Thus, traumatized people often suffer a wide range of physical maladies, including chronic fatigue, headaches, autoimmune diseases, and fibromyalgia.¹

A broader definition of trauma has several benefits, including allowing for the inclusion of more experiences. This inclusivity is vital for spotting and validating individuals' unique experiences. Arguably, a broad definition of trauma also opens the door to diverse treatment methods: van der Kolk's suggested therapies include Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing or EMDR (an approach that involves bilateral stimulation such as rapid eye movements to help individuals process traumatic memories and reduce their emotional charge), somatic experiencing (which focuses on releasing the physical sensations and tension associated with trauma), and yoga.¹

However, critics have noted several disadvantages of van der Kolk's expanded definition. In *The Atlantic*, Eleanor Cummins accused the book of reducing the word "trauma" to a term "uselessly vague — a swirl of psychiatric diagnosis, folk wisdom, and popular misconceptions."³ As a result, she argues, it's not very useful or relevant to most readers.

Christine Rosen has also expressed concerns that the broad definition of trauma has become a political tool.⁴ She argues that due to the broad definition of trauma, people see trauma everywhere, as a concept to "explain almost any human action, including antisocial behaviour."⁴

For instance, the author of *My Grandmother's Hands*, Resmaa Menakem wrote that every American "carries trauma in [their] bodies around the myth of race" (i.e., every American carries trauma related to race and racism), "white-body supremacy has become part of our bodies," and that there is a unique category of "deeply toxic" trauma "that lives and breathes in the bodies of many of America's law enforcement officers."⁴

Rosen believes that far from being helpful, such broad definitions of trauma have led to an explosion of self-diagnoses of trauma as well as an increase in racial resentment. Ultimately, Rosen contends, the goal of harm reduction has "expanded into incoherence."⁴

All in all, despite its flaws, *The Body Keeps the Score* provides a compelling, if not flawed, exploration of trauma's connection with the body and mind. I was initially uncomfortable with van der Kolk's detailed descriptions of traumatic events, such as rape and war, which I thought could re-traumatize victims. However, considering the amount of

technical language and the distant tone, van der Kolk's primary audience may be clinicians seeking a more nuanced understanding of trauma rather than traumatized people themselves. In light of this perspective, I give the book 4/5 stars.

Edited by Ami Patel & Talia Vacca

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Photographs by Isabel Khudr



MIND AND BODY: A SUMMARY OF CATHOMAS ET AL.

ARMUGHAN ISLAM

Cathomas and colleagues' review paper (2019) embarks on a journey through the labyrinth of stress and resilience, exploring the body's complex responses to life's challenges. Unveiling the intricate dance of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis and the art of resilience, this exploration delves into neurobiology's enigmatic realms. From the intricate interplay within the brain's domains to the microscopic theatre of gut microorganisms, each revelation unveils a chapter in our quest to comprehend stress resilience. Unravelling the mysteries of immune defences and the delicate blood-brain barrier, this paper navigates the frontiers of science, seeking to illuminate the neurobiology of stress and novel therapeutic options tackling its consequences.

Stress, Resilience, and the HPA-Axis

The body's adjustment to immediate threats is crucial for adapting to life's shifts. Control over this reaction is managed by the autonomic nervous system and the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis. In moments of peril, the hypothalamus triggers cortisol production and activates the sympathetic nervous system, initiating the body's "fight-or-flight" mode. Prolonged intense stress contributes to various illnesses such as Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Resilience

is associated with factors like social support, a positive outlook, and individual coping methods. Active coping involves the direct handling of stressors and encourages adaptability, while passive coping like avoidance or helplessness, heightens vulnerability. Accordingly, individual reactions to stress exhibit significant diversity.

Rodent Models of Susceptibility and Resilience

Exploration into the neurological underpinnings of resilience faces obstacles due to ethical boundaries in studying human adversity and a lack of comprehensive understanding of the human brain. Developments in animal models delineate between susceptible and resilient traits, shedding light on behaviours linked to stress. For example, new models for exploring a female-specific stress response are emerging, which are vital in understanding gender-based differences in mood disorders. Models simulating early-life stress highlight the intricate dynamics between stress and resilience, where moderate stress exposure may enhance resilience while severe stress can heighten vulnerability. Despite progress in HPA axis research, its clinical applications lag behind laboratory discoveries, emphasizing the need for improved translational studies and targeted treatments.

Central Nervous System Mechanisms of Resilience

The central nervous system (CNS), encompassing the brain and spinal cord, governs sensory processing, motor function, and cognitive faculties. Various structures in the CNS are involved in stress and resilience. Of note, the hippocampus has been implicated in stress modulation and adult neurogenesis. While some studies posit its neuroprotective role post-stress, other perspectives suggest its involvement in neurogenesis, highlighting it as a site of interest for intervention exploration.

Additionally, dopamine-mediated brain pathways responding to stress-induced stimuli are also frequently explored and understood to elicit altered neural connectivity in stressed mice, contrasted with normative connections in stress-resilient counterparts. The Nucleus Accumbens (NAc), governing reward processing and behaviour, exhibits altered signalling reflective of stress resilience or avoidance. The locus coeruleus (LC) in the brainstem, a source of norepinephrine (NE), interacts with the ventral tegmental area (VTA), showing heightened activity in stress-resilient mice, potentially contributing to improved stress management. Exploring specific VTA receptors stands as a potential avenue for stress treatment. Epigenetic modulation of brain

genes emerges as a critical determinant in stress coping mechanisms, highlighting differential gene activity between stress-adaptive and susceptible states. Distinct gene profiles, particularly gender-associated variances, offer insight into stress responsiveness. Ongoing endeavours in genetic manipulation aim to deepen our understanding of stress adaptation at a molecular level. Elucidating these neurobiological nuances in stressed states is significant in comprehending human stress responses.

Peripheral Mechanisms of Resilience

Chronic stress exerts a profound impact on the immune system, a vital physiological defence mechanism in both human and animal physiology. Individuals diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) frequently exhibit heightened inflammatory markers. Some pharmaceutical interventions for depression have shown efficacy in mitigating these inflammatory responses. Stress-induced alterations in the immune system may delineate susceptibility to adversity or resilience in the face of challenges. While the complex interplay between the adaptive immune system and stress remains underexplored, indications suggest the potential significance of specific immune cell subsets, notably T cells, in fostering resilience against MDD. Experimental manipulation in rodent models has demonstrated that bolstering immune function through targeted immunization ameliorates depressive symptoms and elevates neuroactive substances in the brain, with T cells appearing instrumental in stress coping.

Notably, the impact of stress extends beyond mood regulation, influencing immune responses. Strategic interventions akin to "behavioural vaccination" could fortify individuals against future stressors by harnessing immune adaptability. The microbiota inhabiting the gastrointestinal tract significantly modulates stress reactivity, evidenced by altered compositions in MDD patients and behavioural and neurochemical shifts in germ-free mice upon fecal transplantation. These findings underscore the potential of specific beneficial gut microbes in stress resilience and their plausible role in immune modulation. However, a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between gut dysbiosis and stress adaptation remains an imperative research frontier. Stress-related perturbations in the blood-brain barrier dynamics unveil potential mechanisms impacting stress responsiveness, as evidenced by altered permeability observed in stressed animal models. Strategies promoting resilience involve maintaining the integrity of this barrier and offer promise for enhancing stress management. Furthermore, stress-induced alterations in cerebral immune mediator transport implicate a potential nexus between the immune system and brain function, particularly in anxiety-related behaviours. Cells within the brain's immune repertoire are implicated in stress-related disorders, suggesting a pivotal role in integrating immune responses with neural processes. Novel therapeutic avenues involving the manipulation of gut microbiota hold promise in enhancing stress resilience by modulating these immune-brain interfaces, marking a potential paradigm shift in stress management approaches.

Conclusion

In the intricate tapestry of stress and resilience, our body's responses reveal both vulnerabilities and remarkable adaptability. From the HPA axis orchestrating our fight-or-flight instincts, to the neural nuances shaping our coping mechanisms and the immune system's complex dance with our gut microbiota, we have unveiled a mosaic of interconnected systems. Through animal models illuminating susceptibility and resilience, we uncover pathways for potential therapies. Unravelling the mysteries of brain circuits, immune responses, and genetic underpinnings fuels a beacon of hope for targeted interventions. As we navigate these frontiers, understanding the interplay between stress and our systems offers promising pathways toward fortitude in the face of adversity.

Edited by Rameez Khara & Lola Leving

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Image created by Isabel Khudr

ROCKY (1976) AND ITS PRODUCTION: TWIN UNDERDOG STORIES

ARMUGHAN ISLAM

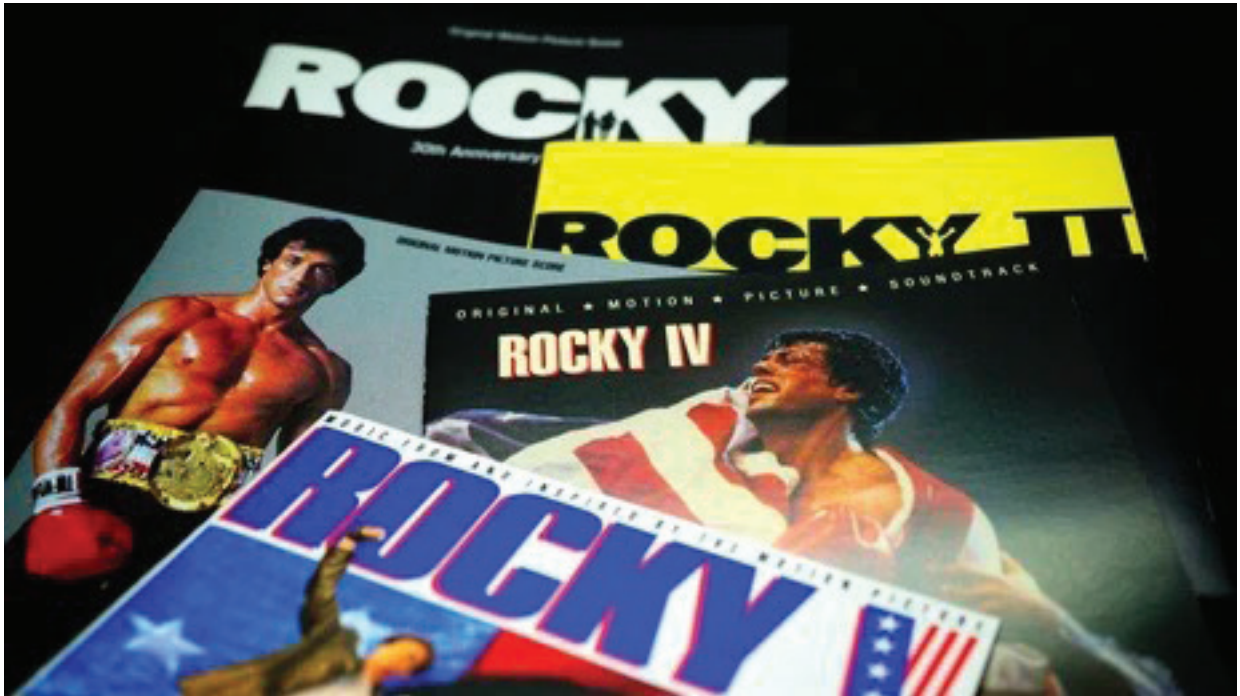


Image created by Isabel Khudr

Spoiler Alert (!)

What do you watch when you need a motivational pick-me-up, something that mirrors that underdog feeling reverberating inside you, perhaps something that contains a legendary training montage? *Rocky* (1976), written by Sylvester Stallone and directed by John G. Avildsen, is arguably the most recognizable (and parodied) underdog story in cinema history. It follows Rocky Balboa (Sylvester Stallone), a small-time, struggling Philadelphia boxer who moonlights as the muscle for a loan shark. One quickly senses a feeling of incompleteness within our protagonist, whose life feels purposeless as he only lives to stay afloat, culminating in an emotional outburst where he verbalizes his regret at a wasted youth. An invitation to fill in as a last-minute replacement opponent for Heavyweight Champion Apollo Creed (Carl Weathers) becomes his one shot at escape from the shackles of insignificance but requires immense emotional and physical sacrifice to go the distance with the champ. Rocky's preparation and

performance in his bout are immortalized in popular culture and have captivated generations of viewers for its inspiring plot; however, many fail to realize the production behind the film is equally, if not more inspiring.

Stallone was not always a household name, first starting out as a struggling actor who was briefly homeless. His underdog story is a direct reflection of the most prominent character he would eventually portray. He only had \$106 in his bank account before starting production and worked various gigs to survive, ranging from theatre usher to zoo custodian. Stallone wrote these parallels of poverty into the script for *Rocky* during this challenging time of his life. Despite his financial woes, the novice screenwriter bet on himself and negotiated a significantly lower-paying deal under the guarantee that he could star in his own creation. His insistence on playing the leading role was much to the dismay of his producers, who insisted on hiring more established actors instead. The move carried immense risk, considering Stallone previously only led a single film that

filming on handheld cameras using single shots for much of the film. His decisions leading up to the film perfectly capture what it means to be resilient. It was obviously trying times for Stallone, struggles that all of us can relate to in some form or another. It would have been easy to give up on film, not write the script, and then take the quick cash on his eventual script rather than bank on his dream of headlining a movie. Yet, Stallone was resilient against the odds, just like Rocky, with overwhelming success patiently awaiting both.

Reflecting on the film, watching Rocky lose to Apollo on the judge's split decision is always a gut punch. However, it makes the story all the more relevant to us, for life may not always deliver a perfect ending, but it can still be a happy one. While not the victor, he becomes the first to hang with the champ until the final bell, which is exceptional considering his training only began five weeks prior. Most importantly, he proves to himself that he is capable of great things and deserves happiness as he is embraced by his lover after iconically yelling for "Adrian, Adrian, Adrian!" As the audience, we are left feeling fulfilled despite the loss because there is so much more to a journey than a single outcome at its culmination. The same holds true in our everyday lives as students, whether that be a particular exam, admission to a program, or job application – a single result does not negate what you have accomplished. Finally, I always find comfort in the fact that there are eight more movies in the Rocky and Creed franchise. If you didn't win the big fight today, there's always a sequel tomorrow.

Edited by Rameez Khara & Talia Vacca

SELF-CARE ON THE AIR: FIVE GREAT MENTAL HEALTH PODCASTS

ANYA BROYTMAN

Podcasts are all the rage right now! If you love listening to them while you walk to class, cook, drive, or work out, why not use this downtime to benefit your mental health, too? Below you will find five great podcasts to tune into, whether you are looking to boost your self-care, learn more about positive psychology, or simply get a good night's sleep.

*If you are a positive psychology geek, you are going to love... **The Happiness Lab with Dr. Laurie Santos.***

Dr. Laurie Santos is a cognitive scientist and professor of psychology at Yale University. In 2018, her course *Psychology and the Good Life* became the most popular class in Yale's history, packing an auditorium of some 1,200 students -- about a quarter of Yale's undergraduate population! The wild success enjoyed by her course on how to be a happier human speaks both to Dr. Laurie Santos' talent as an engaging educator and to the dire mental health crisis experienced by university-age young adults. The course is now available for free on Coursera, and in 2019 Dr. Santos launched a podcast called *The Happiness Lab*, which explores the many ways our minds misconstrue happiness, leading us away from what would really make us happy. The podcast is packed with science-based, research-backed insights into how we can all lead better, more fulfilling lives. Unhappy millionaires, disappointed Olympic level athletes, perfectionistic Ivy League students, best-selling authors, and a Nobel Peace Prize winner all make an appearance, offering hard-earned insights into what really makes us happy and what does not, contrary to popular belief. My favourite episodes on

the podcast form a series called Happiness Lessons of The Ancients, in which Dr. Santos shares what we can learn from Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, Epictetus, Confucius, Lao Tzu, the Buddha, Judaism, and Sikhism. If neuroscience and positive psychology really make you tick, and you would love some actionable tips to harness their power for improved well-being, this is the podcast for you!

If you are struggling with anxiety or related disorders, you are going to love... Your Anxiety Toolkit with Kimberley Quinlan.

If you would love free, compassionate, knowledgeable guidance from a licensed therapist specializing in all things anxiety, look no further! Your Anxiety Toolkit, hosted by Kimberley Quinlan, is an extraordinary resource. Her motto "It's a beautiful day to do hard things" will inspire you to conquer your fears and step outside your comfort zone, while her emphasis on self-compassion and her warm tone will make you feel supported in the process. In some shorter episodes Kimberley shares a particular insight or recovery tool (e.g. time management, sleep hygiene, mindfulness practices), while other episodes are feature-length and have guest speakers share stories of perseverance and recovery. Whether you have been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder or are simply looking to build up your psychological flexibility and expand your toolbox for dealing with the challenges life throws at you, you are sure to find value in this podcast. For those seeking to dive deeper, Kimberley also published The Self-Compassion Workbook for OCD with New Harbinger Publications in 2021 and has virtual courses available through her psychoeducation platform cbtschool.com.

If you are a self-help aficionado, you are going to love... By the Book with Kristen Meinzer and Jolenta Greenberg.

So many self-help books and so little time to read them? Fear not! If your self-improvement reading list has gotten dauntingly long, Kristen and Jolenta have your back! On this podcast, its lovely (and feisty) co-hosts spend two weeks reading a popular self-help book and following its recommendations to the letter before recording each episode. They then tell listeners all about their two weeks of living "by the book" and deliver a verdict on whether it changed their lives. The books they cover on the podcast run the gamut of the self-help universe: from The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up to The Body Is Not an Apology, and everything in between.



While you will love hearing these ladies' takes on self-help bestsellers, part of the podcast's appeal is its reality show quality: over the show's ten seasons you really grow to know and love not only Kristen and Jolenta, but also their long-suffering husbands Dean and Brad who put up with their wives' endless lifestyle experiments, and even Jolenta's cute and very vocal dog Frank! And, of course, the podcast's opening song will delight and crack you up every single time. My favourite season on the show is season 6, in which the ladies trace the history of the self-help industry by decade from the 1930s to the 2000s with cultural historian Dr. Trysh Travis helping



Image illustrated by Ruobing Chen

them situate each book in its historical context. N.B. By the Book has recently morphed into a new show called How to Be Fine, but all ten seasons of By the Book are archived and available wherever you get your podcasts.

If you need some help shutting your busy mind off at night, you are going to love... Nothing Much Happens by Kathryn Nicolai.

As grad students, we lead busy, complicated lives. If you tend to toss and turn at night, your mind ruminating on

unfinished tasks of the day that just passed and the challenges awaiting you tomorrow, you may need a visit to the “Village of Nothing Much”. An experienced yoga and meditation teacher and a wonderfully evocative writer, Kathryn Nicolai crafts cozy stories and reads them to you twice to lull your brain into sweet slumber. The stories are all set in the same fictional village and gradually introduce multiple characters who live in it. Read by Kathryn Nicolai in a soothing, gentle manner, they are full of comforting detail and heartwarming reflections on the changing seasons, on staying present, and on making the most of life's little pleasures. You will likely never get to hear how the story ends as, by then, you will be sound asleep. If you prefer to read the stories for yourself, Nothing Much Happens is also available in book form.

If you would like to learn to meditate, you are going to love... First This by Kathryn Nicolai.

Kathryn Nicolai, the creator of Nothing Much Happens, also has a daytime podcast called First This. Each episode guides the listener through a brief guided meditation practice. These are ideal for those who are new to meditation, as Kathryn gently leads the listener through breath work, helping them to stay present. She also shares Buddhist Zen stories that offer universal lessons for living a more intentional life. The podcast's motto “First This, Then That” is particularly helpful for frazzled and overwhelmed grad students who are learning to take it one step at a time. Tune in for a sweet ten-minute mindfulness break!

Edited by Ami Patel & Lola Leving

SHKAABE MAKWA, BRINGING FIRST NATIONS, INUIT, AND MÉTIS MENTAL HEALTH TO THE FOREFRONT: AN INTERVIEW WITH LOUIS BUSCH

EARVIN S. TIO

Louis Busch is a Community Support Specialist with Shkaabe Makwa, a centre within the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) designed to drive culturally-responsive systems initiatives to achieve health justice and wellness for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities. Louis is a Bear Clan member of the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation, a community in Northern Manitoba. He has been a mental health clinician CAMH for 15 years and with Shkaabe Makwa for the past four. Louis is a board-certified behaviour analyst and a registered psychotherapist, is currently pursuing his doctorate in Adult Education and Community Development at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto and is currently completing a visiting fellowship at Harvard University.

The Shkaabe Makwa Centre for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis, the first hospital-based centre of its kind in Canada, gets its name from the Anishinaabemowin words for *helper* (Shkaabewis) and *bear* (Makwa). A helper can often refer to a ceremonial helper - one that provides support to Elders and knowledge keepers in ceremony but can also



Louis Busch, a Community Support Specialist for Shkaabe Makwa

refer to spirit helpers. The bear is an important figure for many First Nations and is often traditionally seen as a healer, medicine keeper, and protector. Together, Shkaabe Makwa translates to *Spirit Bear Helper*.

Shkaabe Makwa focuses on patient care, evaluation, workforce development, provincial systems initiatives, research, and reconciliation, to name a few. As a Community Support Specialist, Louis supports the workforce development team by providing tailored training for

First Nations, Inuit, and Métis helpers. These can include materials on trauma-informed care and essential counselling skills for helpers such as case managers, crisis workers, addictions workers, and educational assistants. Shkaabe Makwa is dedicated to providing culturally relevant and safe services for First Nation, Inuit, and Métis and to supporting helpers who walk with others on their healing journeys.

On Hope and Resilience

In an interview between Louis and knowledge keeper and helper Ron Linklater at the Linklater family camp in Saskatchewan, the topic of mental illness and its etymology in Anishinaabemowin or Nêhiyawêwin was discussed. Louis shares Ron Linklater's words: "There really isn't a clear word for mental illness, but the word I can think of is bagosendan,' which translates to hope." Louis continues, explaining that one word carries so much complexity and meaning and has much to do with the heart. Indigenous languages, teachings, and cultures focus on the strengths and gifts one brings as opposed to deficits and pathology that often define Western Eurocentric medicine, especially

in psychiatry. This is evidenced by Ron Linklater's words and his re-defining of illness in terms of hope. Louis expands on this pathology-based model which he is traditionally trained in, stating that it can at times find itself in conflict with Indigenous wellness frameworks. This discord complicates the engagement of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis with Eurocentric health systems, as these systems can conflict with core Indigenous values. This often results in First Nations, Inuit, and Métis avoiding health-care systems entirely. This mistrust is unfortunately well-earned; medical, educational, and social service systems and academia have and continue to play a significant role in colonial harm. Examples include unethical experimentation on Indigenous peoples, and the residential school system has left a legacy of distrust in many communities. Louis comments that even younger generations who may not directly identify the source of their discomfort and mistrust are averse to engaging with these health systems as a result of this persisting generation-

“Hope is at the centre of an indigenous wellness framework.”

al conflict and trauma. He shares, “Hope is at the centre of an Indigenous wellness framework.” First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities are not one conglomerate; with approximately 80 different languages and 800 distinct nations across North America, each with its own governance systems, histories, and spirituality, one cannot claim or prescribe a singular Indigenous perspective. However, Louis believes that commonalities exist across

these diverse Nations, especially concerning wellness. These include a wholistic view of what it means to be human and to be well, a focus on interconnectivity and a reality rooted in the physical world, and a coherence across emotional, spiritual, physical, and mental parts of the self. It is in the compartmentalization and imbalance of these components that challenges can arise; thus, returning one to balance is integral to Indigenous wellness perspectives and corresponding integrated health approaches practised by communities, Elders, traditional healers, and knowledge keepers. With these guiding principles, Shkaabe Makwa integrates a focus on resilience, resistance, and resurgence in a psychiatric hospital like CAMH as opposed to a deficit-focused view. Traditional medicines and helping practices are brought to the forefront of patient care with a level of self-determination for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis in how culturally-informed services are accessed, delivered, and evaluated.

On Reconciliation

Traditionally, land acknowledgements serve as a way to acknowledge the space and place one is in and are particularly important when one is a visitor. Unfortunately, they have recently taken on a performative role in mainstream perceptions around reconciliation. Shkaabe Makwa's guiding principles on [Honouring the Land and Ancestors through Land Acknowledgements](#) encourage visitors to transform the experience into something deeply personal, focusing on personal and familial experience on the land, exploring views of ancestry, and the benefits and struggles that one experiences as a settler - especially as their

experiences relate to colonisation. CAMH has set a leading example in bringing First Nations, Inuit, and Métis mental health to the forefront. This was made possible by strong support from leadership, who together with Indigenous communities, have integrated Indigenous healing practices and philosophies into clinical settings. However, having traditional healers, known as Cultural Care Practitioners, as staff in a medical model did not come without challenges. As Louis puts it, “To bring a sweat lodge onto the grounds of a of one of Canada's oldest psychiatric hospitals is a pretty big deal.” He also points out that work around reconciliation must be congruent with action. Reconciliation cannot solely be approached passively; personal reflection, cultural humility, and acknowledging the land are important concepts to engage with. Nonetheless, if the social determinants of health and the disparities in healthcare quality and accessibility continue to harm Indigenous peoples across the country, then reconciliation is nothing but a performative band-aid solution. Louis describes a resurgence and resistance that accompanies reconciliation and resilience. He believes that “there's a really great opportunity for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis and non-Indigenous allies to work together in a way that really respects and understands that we are dealing with two very different world views that can come together in a respectful way for the benefit of people who need healing.”

On First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Mental Health

Reflecting on another teaching from Ron Linklater on “the capacity of

binding together,” Louis shares that treaties between two Nations are sacred agreements and that treaties are meant to facilitate two-way exchanges that bind the best of both parties together for the benefit of all. Historically, this philosophy had not been upheld by the Canada’s government. Moving forward, Western healthcare systems can take the opportunity to learn from Indigenous approaches to wellness by considering the individual body and mind in a broader context including land, policy, and government. Louis shares, “At the core of Indigenous suffering is the impact of colonisation and the larger systemic factors. If you focus on individual-level health, you ignore and let the systems that perpetuate that suffering off the hook.”

“At the core of indigenous suffering is the impact of colonisation - the larger systemic factors. If you focus on individual-level health, you ignore and let off the hook the systems that have perpetuated that.”

These systems can offer hope and resilience to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis considering each individual in the context of their family, community, land and place they occupy as “inseparable parts of their wellness.”

Edited by Paul Jerome Gamueda



Becky Chambers, Hugo award-winning author



Photograph by Isabel Khudr

MONK AND ROBOT: HOPEPUNK'S EMOTIONAL JOURNEYS OF SELF-DISCOVERY

MAGDALENA NITCHI

HopePunk, a genre coined in 2017 by author Alexandra Rowland, represents “literature that focuses on our capacity for good, and a literary and artistic movement that celebrates the pursuit of positive aims in the face of adversity”¹. The basic premise stands in opposition to the wave of dystopian imagery that has been flooding both real-life social media feeds and the literary market, instead offering those seeking respite stories of “hope, community and kindness in the face of great challenges”². I find these stories to be the perfect antidote to any exhausted graduate students seeking a bit of positivity. Within the HopePunk community, one author stands out: the Hugo award-winning Becky Chambers. Her choice to imagine a positive future where people reaching the emotional catharsis they need involves “looking

at the world exactly as it is, with all of its grimness and all of its tragedy, and [saying], No, I believe this can be better. That to me is punk as hell.”³

Chambers’ latest literary work, the *Monk and Robot* duology of novels, is a powerful HopePunk series which answers profound questions about motivation and how to maintain hope when you are feeling lost. *Monk and Robot* follows the story of Sibling Dex (they/them), a tea monk from Panga, and their fateful encounter with a robot. This fictional universe is set in an industrial society where, several centuries before Dex’s time, robots gained consciousness and departed into the forest to pursue their own dreams. Human society has been radically restructured since, running on solar and wind power and focusing on more sustainable modes of production.

Dex’s role as a travelling tea monk involves making tea for others to enjoy, and listening to their problems. In spite of a passion for their calling, Dex is plagued with a sense of listlessness that seems to constantly follow them. Their struggle to find something which sparks excitement in their daily life, even as they have achieved the vocation which they

dreamed of, is familiar for many struggling with their mental health, as is Dex’s struggle to genuinely engage with those around them. When Dex strays off the beaten path and encounters a robot, their life is shaken up. This robot, delightfully named Splendid Speckled Mosschap, was sent to answer the question: “what do people need?” Unfortunately for Mosschap, while Dex can answer questions about their society, they cannot explain what they need because they don’t understand what they are chasing. Dex and Mosschap journey together in order to understand each other, and hopefully find the answers they seek. Dex’s story will no longer involve simply inspiring hope in others, but in tapping into their own personal emotions and finding deep meaning in their friendship with the unconventional robot.

This is what makes Chambers’ work resonate with me so profoundly: while there is eventually a payoff, Chambers takes the reader on an emotional journey of self-discovery and connection first. Rather than shy away from the complications of life and the struggles associated with mental health, *Monk and Robot* embraces these as a part of

the experience of existence. Moscap's soothing voice of affirmation that Dex doesn't need to inherently understand their purpose, and that simply being alive is enough, is a welcome relief from the stress imposed by deadlines and academic requirements. The story is also a powerful reminder that everyone needs time to recharge, and that you cannot keep giving when you are not taking care of yourself. While the physical journey as a metaphor for a spiritual journey has been done many times before, Chambers' Monk brings a unique flavour to the tale that any reader can savour.

Resilience in Chambers' work is inherently tied to hope, as hope is what sustains the characters in the face of their hardships, which range across mental and physical health struggles. Chambers' hope for a kinder, gentler world is frequently reflected in her characters. Chambers does an exceptional job of building a world through a limited first person perspective, allowing the reader to follow her characters' paths to self-understanding, which is found through interpersonal relationships.

Edited by Rameez Khara & Talia Vacca

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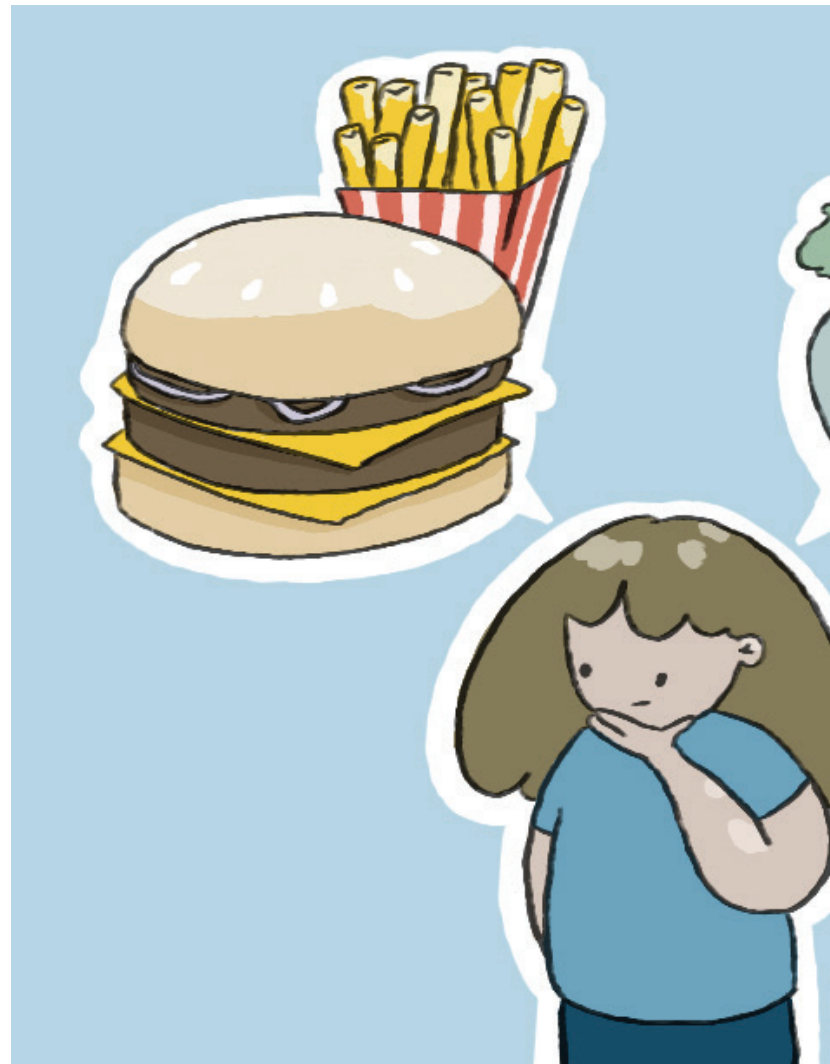


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FOOD INSECURITY, GROCERY COSTS, AND NUTRITION

SABRINA LAI

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dietary choices not only shape our nutritional status but also our cognitive abilities and mental health.

Nutrition and Brain Function

Nutrition is the fuel that powers not only our physical bodies, but also our cognitive functions.¹ The brain relies on a complex balance of nutrients to function optimally. The foods we choose to eat influence neurotransmitter production, hormone regulation, and the overall structure of the brain. Essential nutrients such as omega-3 fatty acids, antioxidants, vitamins, and minerals play key roles in enhancing memory, focus, and mood. Research has shown that higher intake of fresh produce and certain nutrients, such as vitamin A and vitamin E, were associated with increased cognitive function.²

Rising Grocery Costs and Food insecurity

The foods we consume have a profound influence on our physical health and well-being, but what about our mental health? This article will address the intricate connections between nutrition, brain function, and the challenges posed by food insecurity and rising grocery costs, especially in the context of student life. As we explore these factors, we will understand how

However, the unfortunate reality is that healthy eating is not easily accessible to all. Food insecurity is defined by the limited availability of nutritionally adequate foods, often stemming from financial constraints.³ In a university setting, the rising costs of tuition, housing, and textbooks can leave students grappling with difficult choices and with their grocery expenses taking the cut.

Many students face financial constraints that pose a significant challenge to maintain a balanced and nutritious diet.⁴ Nutrient-dense foods are crucial for brain health.¹ However, when faced with food insecurity, students may resort to low-cost, energy-dense options that lack the nutrients we need. The trade-offs between affordability and nutritional value become stark, influencing not only immediate health outcomes but also cognitive health and long-term well-being. For instance, a quick meal at the local fast food chain would seem to be more affordable than fresh produce. This compromise, while financially driven, may be more costly in the long-term and result in a cognitive deficit that hampers academic performance and contributes to stress and anxiety. Research consistently shows that poor dietary intake and nutrient deficiencies, often linked to limited food choices, can impair cognitive function, exacerbate stress, and contribute to mental health challenges.^{5,6}

Strategies for Nutritional Resilience

In the face of these challenges, it is important to explore strategies that promote nutritional resilience, even within the constraints of food insecurity and rising grocery costs.

1. Meal Planning on a Budget:

Creating a weekly meal plan helps maximize nutrient intake and minimize grocery spending.

2. Smart Shopping:

Paying attention to flyers and store discounts to help with prioritizing nutrient-dense and fresh produce options such as beans, whole grains, and seasonal fruits and vegetables. Students can save 10% on their groceries 7 days a week at Metro in Toronto locations.

3. Community Resources:

Explore local food banks, community gardens, and initiatives that provide affordable or free access to nutritious foods.

4. Support Networks:

Establishing peer support networks or community initiatives for sharing recipes, and resources related to affordable and nutritious meals.

Resources for UofT Students and Faculty

Considering the challenges posed by food insecurity and rising grocery costs, the following are a range of resources to support the nutritional well-being of students and faculty at UofT:

- **Canada's Food Guide:** Did you know that there is a new 2019 Canada's Food Guide? Gone are the rainbow food groups. Visit <https://food-guide.canada.ca/en/ to learn more>.
- **UTSU Food Bank:** The University of Toronto Students' Union (UTSU) Food Bank provides non-perishable food items, fresh produce, and essential

supplies to students and faculty facing food insecurity. Visit UTSU for more information.

- **For Mississauga campus,** visit: <https://utmsu.ca/service/food-centre/>
- **For Scarborough campus,** visit https://www.instagram.com/scsu_foodcentre/?hl=en

U of T Health and Wellness Dietary Counseling Services:

- **The Health and Wellness Centre** at the University of Toronto provides dietary counseling services to support students in making informed and healthy food choices. Learn more about their services <https://studentlife.utoronto.ca/service/food-and-nutrition-consultation-and-education/>
- **For Mississauga campus,** visit <https://www.utm.utoronto.ca/health/our-services/nutritional-counsellingdietitian>
- **For Scarborough campus,** visit <https://www.utsc.utoronto.ca/hwc/> to book an appointment with a nurse to discuss healthy eating.

Edited by Paul Jerome Gamueda & Talia Vacca

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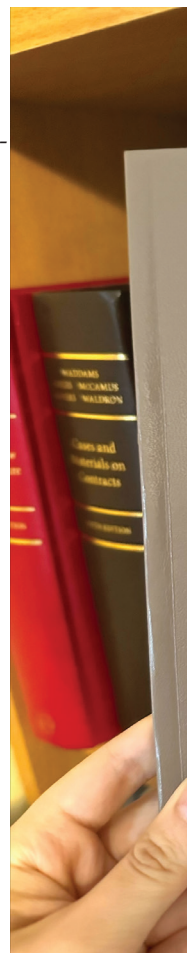
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Photograph by Imelda Wei Ding Lo

A BOOK REVIEW OF “THE SLEEP & CBT-I WORKBOOK” BY THERAPY NOTEBOOKS

IMELDA WEI DING LO

Sleep problems have become pervasive in our fast-paced society. According to Statistics Canada, a third of Canadians aged 18 to 64 do not meet sleep duration recommendations of 7 to 9 hours per night.¹ Research has also shown that 8% to 18% of adults fulfill the criteria for insomnia disorder.² Insomnia is a common sleep disorder that makes it difficult to stay and fall asleep. It may also cause you to wake up early and be unable to fall back asleep.³

In response to this widespread issue, Therapy Notebooks’ lead therapists — Jessica Yu, Ph.D, Diana Hu, PsyD, and Hod Tamir, Ph.D⁵ — have published a comprehensive resource for addressing sleep difficulties: the 112-page *The Sleep & CBT-I Workbook*. This workbook is not a mere sleep journal; it offers actionable advice based on cognitive behavioural therapy for insomnia (CBT-I), the “gold standard” treatment for chronic insomnia.⁴ According to a 2015 meta-analysis, CBT-I can improve total sleep time by 8 minutes and sleep efficiency by 10%.⁵

Here’s what I loved about this workbook.

Sleep Wisdom From Therapists

Upon opening the workbook, readers are immediately greeted by the lead therapists’ insights into sleep challenges. This compassionate approach creates a safe space for readers to acknowledge their struggles without judgment, fostering an environment of acceptance and self-compassion.

The therapists also provide essential information for understanding and changing sleep patterns. In a few pages, they briefly explain why we sleep, how sleep works, what factors determine good or bad sleep, and

how CBT-I works. The appended practical tips (Appendix A), frequently asked questions (Appendix B), and self-care fundamentals (Appendix C) are immensely useful for those seeking to improve sleep.

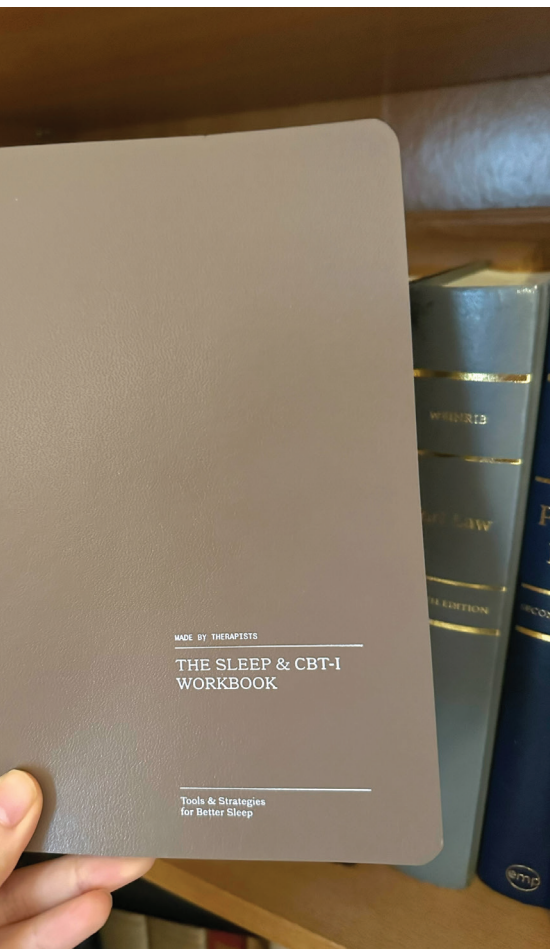
A Hands-On Six-Week Guided Program For Improving Sleep

The core of this workbook is a structured six-week CBT-I-based program that teaches foundational principles for enhancing sleep.⁶

This hands-on program requires users to fill out a Sleep Log every day for six weeks to detect and change patterns in their sleep.

After each week, users are prompted to reflect on their progress and set sleep goals for the next week. Each of the six weeks focuses on a different aspect of CBT-I to encourage sustained improvement:

- **Week I** introduces the Sleep Log format.
- **Week II** teaches you how to increase the amount of sleep you get while lying in bed.
- **Week III** gives you more control of when and where you fall asleep, so you won’t lie in bed for hours waiting to fall asleep.
- **Week IV** provides various sleep hygiene tips, such as following a



- strict sleep schedule and bed-time routine.
- *Week V* teaches you to replace unhelpful thoughts causing and exacerbating sleep difficulties.
- *Week VI* provides space to reflect on your achievements.

It also encourages you to create a plan for responding to temptations to relapse into your old habits.

Although following a workbook can't replicate face-to-face therapy, *The Sleep & CBT-I Workbook's* six-week plan is a good alternative or adjunct form of treatment. Completing the six-week program has significantly enriched my

comprehension of my sleep patterns and the unhelpful thoughts that have hindered my sleep in recent weeks.

Elegant and Warm Design

The Sleep & CBT-I Workbook also boasts a comforting and sleek design. Grey and easy to read, the chosen font exudes empathy. It's also easy on the eyes, making it easy to fill in the Sleep Logs. Similarly, the greyish-brown cover adds to the feeling of warmth, and the pages are smooth to the touch. Overall, you get a relaxing feeling when flipping through the workbook, which was the therapists' intention.

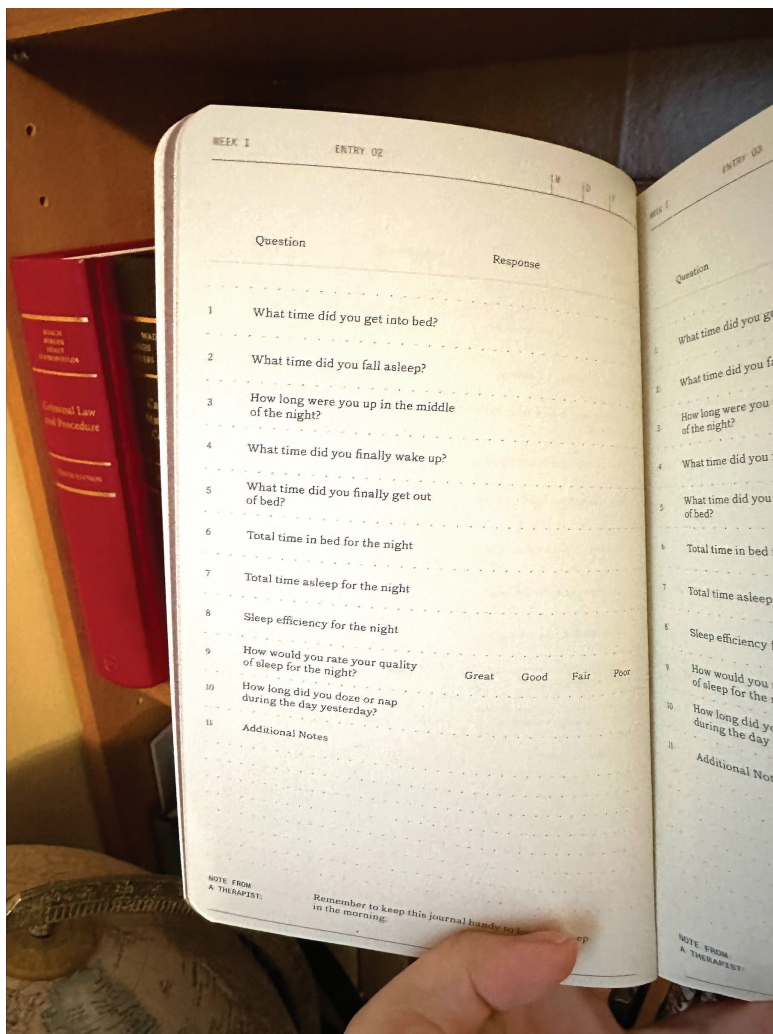
My Rating

All in all, I highly recommend The Sleep & CBT-I Workbook. This beautifully designed workbook does not just enhance sleep — it serves as a beacon for navigating the mental terrain of anxiety and stress contributing to poor quality sleep and other sleep issues. I give this workbook 5/5 stars.

Edited by Ami Patel & Talia Vacca

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Photograph by Imelda Wei Ding Lo

LEARNER'S SUCCESS: THE IMPORTANCE OF A GROWTH MINDSET

SABRINA LAI

In our journey of learning and personal development, the mindset we adopt plays a pivotal role in determining our success. But how exactly does our way of thinking affect our ability to succeed? The growth mindset is a concept introduced by psychologist Carol Dweck, which shows how people who believe that abilities and intelligence can be developed throughout our lives are more likely to succeed.¹ In this article, we will define the characteristics of a growth mindset, understand its significance over a fixed mindset, and explore the profound impact our mindset can have on our academic and personal growth.

Understanding the Mindsets: Fixed vs. Growth

At the core of our discussion lies the distinction between two mindsets: fixed and growth. Individuals with a fixed mindset believe that their abilities, intelligence, and talents are fixed traits; they believe that they possess a finite amount. In this viewpoint, no amount of time or learning can improve intelligence.¹ This perspective can lead to the notion of perfectionism, fostering a fear of failure and a reluctance to take on new challenges that might expose any perceived shortcomings.

At the other end of the spectrum is the growth mindset, where indi-

viduals believe that their abilities can be developed through dedication, hard work, and learning.¹ Embracing challenges and persisting in the face of setbacks, those with a growth mindset see effort and dedication as a way to improve and learn from criticism. People with a growth mindset view mistakes and failure as an opportunity to gain experience, not as a shortcoming or limitation of their abilities.¹

Keep in mind that our mindset is a spectrum, where the growth and fixed mindsets represent the two extremes. There is no such thing as having a pure growth mindset and vice versa. Those with a growth mindset implies that these individuals have a stronger growth mentality.

The Impact on Academic Performance: Growth Mindset in Action

While how we approach our goals influences success in almost every area of our lives, the classroom is a common space where these mindsets manifest themselves in profound ways. Students with a growth mindset tend to approach learning as a valuable journey, rather than just being focused on the destination (e.g., a final grade). Challenges are seen as opportunities for growth, and setbacks are viewed as valuable learning experiences.

Research consistently shows that students with a growth mindset outperform their fixed mindset counterparts.²⁻⁴ When faced with a difficult task, those with a growth mindset are more likely to put in the effort, seek help, and persist until they achieve success. In contrast, individuals with a fixed mindset may avoid challenging tasks to preserve the appearance of their intelligence, hindering their potential for academic growth.

Consider a scenario where a student has failed a challenging assignment. The one with a growth mindset sees it as a chance to learn and improve, actively seeking resources and guidance to learn from their mistakes. Meanwhile, a student with a fixed mindset might shy away from seeking guidance and believe that this one poor grade is an overall reflection of their inherent abilities—"I'm either good at it, or I'm not."

The impact of mindset goes beyond academic performance; it extends to emotional well-being and resilience.¹ A recent study among college freshmen found that students with a growth mindset were more resilient to mental health issues and stressors than their fixed mindset counterparts.⁵ A growth mindset provides individuals with the tools to navigate setbacks and failures without taking it personally or as a

negative reflection of their abilities. Understanding that intelligence and abilities can be developed over time encourages a healthier relationship with success and failure.

In contrast, a fixed mindset can lead to a fragile sense of self-esteem. Students may adopt a perfectionist attitude (for instance, being obsessed with a 4.0 GPA) to maintain the appearance of their abilities, and setbacks can be perceived as a direct threat to their identity. This can create a cycle of avoidance and anxiety, hindering not only academic progress but emotional well-being as well.

Transformative Power of our Mindset: The Neurological Perspective

Did you know? The brain is malleable, a concept known as neuroplasticity or brain plasticity.⁶ In concise terms, brain plasticity is the brain's ability to adapt and change in response to internal or external stimuli. It involves structural and functional adjustments, allowing the nervous system to reorganize its connections and functions. Embracing challenges and putting in effort stimulates the brain to positively adapt and grow. This neural adaptation is not limited to academic pursuits; it extends to critical thinking skills, emotional regulation, and the capacity to handle stress.

In a fixed mindset, effort is often meaningless - yet in a growth mindset, effort is a catalyst for positive neural growth.^{1,6} When individuals engage in challenging tasks and persist through difficulties, their brains form new connections and pathways, enhancing overall cognitive function.

The Role of Educators in Nurturing Growth Mindsets

Educators play an important role in creating a growth mindset amongst students.⁷ Teachers can foster an environment where learning is not just about grades, rather about personal development and self-discovery.

Educators can instill a growth mindset by praising effort, persistence, and strategies rather than focusing on intelligence alone. Providing constructive feedback that focuses on the learning process rather than the end result can help students understand the importance of improvement and continuous learning.

In classrooms where a growth mindset is embraced, mistakes are viewed as stepping stones to success. Students are more likely to take risks, ask questions (e.g., by saying that there are no bad questions), and engage in collaborative learning.⁷ The classroom is one of the first places where students go from proving one's intelligence to expanding one's capabilities, creating an environment that nurtures both academic excellence and emotional resilience.

Tips for Building a Growth Mindset

The influence of our mindset is not confined to academic settings, it extends to personal development and lifelong learning. In the professional world, individuals with a growth mindset are more adaptable to change, open to feedback, and resilient in the face of challenges.⁸

Building a stronger growth mindset requires a conscious effort. Here are some tips to foster a growth mindset in personal development:

- **Embrace Challenges:** See challenges as opportunities for growth. Instead of avoiding difficulties, approach them as chances to learn and improve. Don't hesitate to reach out for guidance and advice during the process.
- **Value Effort and Persistence:** Understand that effort is the path to mastery. Practice makes perfect. Embrace the journey of learning, even when faced with setbacks.
- **Learn from Criticism:** See constructive criticism as valuable



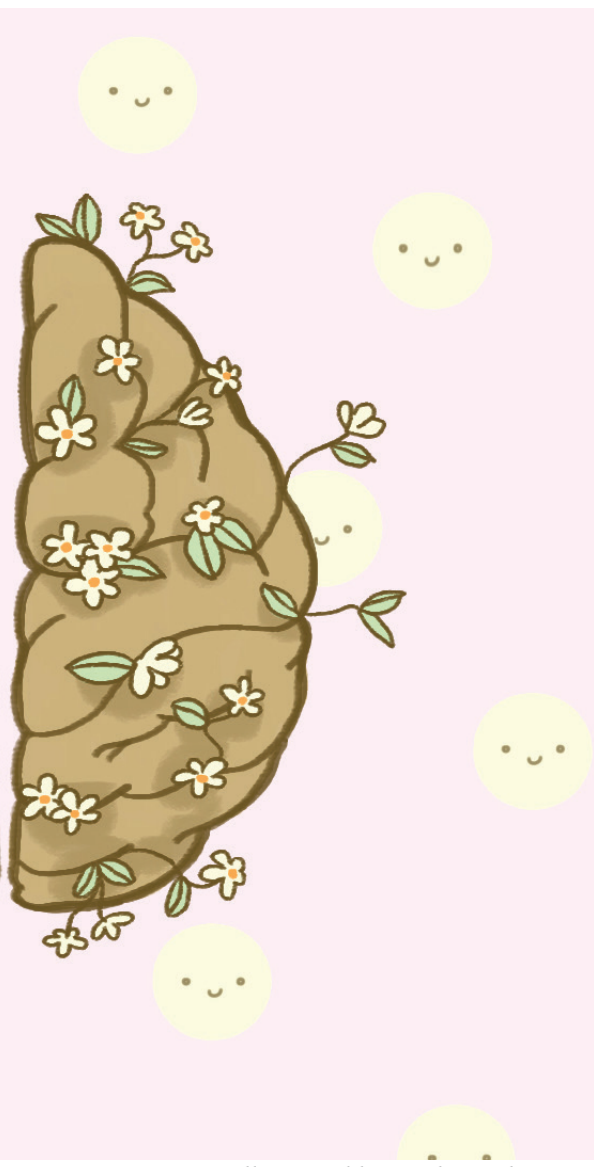


Image illustrated by Ruobing Chen

Takeaway: Unlocking the Full Potential with a Growth Mindset

In the pursuit of learner's success, the importance of a growth mindset cannot be overlooked. It goes beyond academic achievements, and includes personal development, emotional resilience, and a life-long interest to learn. By understanding the transformative power of embracing challenges and valuing the learning process, individuals can unlock their full potential and cultivate a mindset that not only fosters success, but also brings a sense of hope and resilience in the face of life's challenges. As we navigate the complex journey of learning and growth, let us choose the mindset that unlocks the path to endless possibilities—a mindset that believes in the potential for growth, improvement, and success.

Edited by Paul Jerome Gamueda & Talia Vacca

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- comments against you. Use it as a tool for improvement rather than taking it personally.
- ***Find Inspiration in Others' Success:*** Instead of feeling threatened by the success of others, find inspiration. Learn from those who have achieved what you aspire to accomplish.
- ***Cultivate Curiosity:*** Approach learning with curiosity and a desire to understand. Ask questions, seek information, and explore new ideas. Be open-minded.

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