MAS.S61 Project Proposal

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What I will be doing:

I will be designing and possibly building a website where the MIT community can post questions and stories about mental health and receive constructive feedback and support. This site will ideally be anonymous but open to only the MIT community (which may be difficult to implement in practice); I also want to design the site in a way that will foster productive discussion about mental health issues on campus and also allow people who need support to get useful and appropriate support from their peers. Even given what I have learned from my literature review, I still have quite a few unanswered questions about what design choices might be best and what forms of peer support are most helpful. For example, I'm still not sure what the best balance is between largely allowing people to define for themselves what useful peer support is (as happens on reddit mental health forums) and defining very structured ways to offer support (e.g. the Panoply study). At this point, though, I feel that the best course of action within the time constraints I'm dealing with is to build or prototype a site, depending on how difficult web design ends up being, and make thoughtful, informed best guesses about the design and peer-support considerations I run into.

How I will work on it:

I will need to learn a great deal more about web design than I currently know; I plan to use the scripts.mit.edu hosting service because I'm fairly certain that it plays nicely with MIT certificates, which I will need to confirm that users are members of the MIT community. My skillset is decidedly skewed toward the databases and data structures that will (hopefully) be invisible and power the user interface; I therefore plan to start making the frontend earlier in the design process. I do, however, have a few friends who are interested in helping me with getting this site off the ground, so I hope I will be able to tap into their expertise and possibly ask them for help on the more difficult tasks I run into. As I design the site, I plan to ask people such as Peer Ears (dorm-based mental health counselors) who are knowledgeable about the forms peer support at MIT takes and where need exists; given the time, I will also try to test the site's ease of use and affective effects using metrics from human-centered computing scholarship, an example of which I discuss in my literature review.

Connection to prior work/literature (somewhat paraphrased from lit review):

Peer-to-peer mental health dialogue at MIT has a long history; the Nightline service, which ran from 1978 to 2010, when it was shut down (first for review, then perma-

nently), was a nighttime phone hotline where students could call in and talk in confidence to anonymous staffers. People who had previously worked on Nightline tried to bring about a new initiative, peer2peer, where people could input questions or concerns on a certificate-protected website and in a few hours, a trained peer would email a response. The community raised concerns about response latency and anonymity, and the site was ultimately not created. According to the latest MIT student mental health survey, while MIT students believe the campus climate encourages open discussion about mental and emotional health much more than their nationally representative counterparts, we do not believe that mental and emotional health is a priority here, and we're not always sure when to seek help or what policies take effect when we choose to do so.

In my literature review, I discuss a few examples of online community support for mental and/or emotional health; they vary greatly in how structured posting and lending support are; intended effect on participants; and provision for anonymity. Structure and explicit constraints on the way in which users lend support to others can have significant cognitive effects, as demonstrated in Robert Morris' Panoply study, but as de Choudry et. al. explain in their study of mental health support in reddit communities, support without constraints tends to take a few different forms (advice, emotional support, and offers of help or a listening ear) that may be more useful or provide a greater sense of community connection for the original poster. Anonymity may also allow users to share more than they would otherwise feel comfortable sharing on a permanent identity, and it seems to make them more at ease expressing negative sentiment. However, anonymity can also make it easier to be a troll (as is evident on the anonymously moderated MIT Confessions facebook page) and it is difficult to design a site in a way that encourages users to lend support (another MIT confessions page features very honest, sometimes concerning anonymous confessions with few supportive comments, perhaps because it is not well-read or users feel ill-equipped to offer support).

Timeline of relevant milestones:
First and second weeks of November: Figure out what post/comment user interface will look like, paying attention to the way it invites commenters to offer useful and supportive feedback. Talk to Peer Ears about what kind of feedback and structure might be useful.
Third week of November: Make a wireframe for the site so if I get really hosed, at least I'll have a working wireframe and user interface.
Fourth week of November: Begin to implement backend if I'm not completely swamped with work by this point, paying attention to security of site. Spend a lot of time talking to my friend who is taking 6.858 (Computer and Network Security).

First week of December: Do all the work that probably overflowed into December. Try to figure out how people use the site and ask them to talk me through how they would use it (I think that's how HCI researchers seem to approach this kind of thing).