

Innovating Mental Health with less Disruption

Tina Chan for TEDxUW

When I went into university, I was focussed on one thing, getting into medical school. I was pretty good in highschool, I knew I'd continue the streak in university. I knew how to study, was good at time management, and my teen self thought she was kinda smart.

But I didn't realize that deciding to do well in university was that simple, and that transitioning into university was a little more than a harder textbook. The new environment, new people, the realization that I took my parents for granted. It was a bit.

Unfortunately, this led to an anxiety diagnosis from my family doctor, and it brought me into a deep cycle of self-hate, jealousy, and well, illness. I had a lot of panic attacks in my dorm room late at night with nothing really but crumpled intimidating hotline cards from the school and ridiculously detailed pamphlets describing symptoms of panic, aimed at prevention rather than guidance.

I eventually received treatment, and learned how to take care of myself. But, you don't need a diagnosed disorder to experience symptoms of anxiety or depression, like how you don't need the flu to have a sore throat, even if the internet suggests otherwise.

But, even though I was more able to, I didn't do the things worth doing.

In 2nd year, I fell seriously physically ill, and I had to get some pretty invasive surgery. I almost bled out on the operating table, and the doctors literally said I cheated death. Not gonna lie, I felt special being one of the 22 only documented cases for my illness, but it was the worst feel-good feeling. Nonetheless, it was a confronting experience, and it made me realize how life was limited down to the hours and minutes, and this is true for everyone.

This illness also gave me some physical limitations, throwing the doctor option out the window, but it also gave me a different outlook. Made me reflect on what I should do with my limited time.

In 3rd year, I entered a competition, where we were to pitch a solution to a social problem using a business model. I entered with no business experience beyond maybe plushie tycoon on neopets. I wanted to do something about the tools students were given in times of need -like when I had panic attacks after hours. If not for the coping skills I learned back then during treatment, dealing with my surgery would have been much more difficult.

An idea popped up of "Wouldn't it be cool" if there was a first aid kit, but for mental health?" Everyone I asked gave a "yes" or "interesting, what would be in it?" There were a lot of opinions when I asked around, and a lot of ideas when I google searched. From tea and chocolate to

xanax and gin. After I narrowed it down to the practical and legal options, I decided to do a fact check on it with credible sources, and also consult some professionals in social work, counselling, and education. I wanted it to be cool, but also credible.

I called it the PASS kit, an acronym for panic, anxiety, and stress support. It had earplugs and sleeping masks to address environmental stressors of noise and light. Chewing gum and a stress ball to release tension in muscles, and also a set of flashcards.

The flashcards were based on the concept of cognitive behavioural therapy, where we brought up stress symptoms or unhealthy behaviours someone might not have noticed about themselves, and if they wanted to change them, we offered suggestions of habits, perspectives, or relaxation techniques they could take up. All the suggestions were referenced to their sources, and proofread by professionals who also became our customers.

After winning the competition, I entered an incubator, and the idea grew into a business over two years. And I found that working on the PASS kit, actually prepared me for the stresses in entrepreneurship. Giving pitches is scary, moving around money three times your tuition is scary, being plagiarized by larger groups and being criticized in newspapers was scary, and being one of the first non-tech startups in the largest free startup incubator in the world really gives you some imposter syndrome. But, I knew how to react to stress critically, how to choose my battles, and allocate attention and energy.

But, it is the most scary to champion a cause you have personal investment in.

The PASS kit to visualize the mental health conversation, emphasize urgency of stress management, and to guide people towards healthy coping habits.

Stigma has always been an issue. Yet, we talk about mental health a lot, how it is important, how mental illness exists, the famous 1 in 5 stat, and how yoga can be helpful. But, I don't think there is enough talk about the turbulent, disorganized thoughts and feelings during a dip in mental health beyond the sterile numbers in a pamphlet. About the specifics, of the fears of not matching up to your peers, the disorientation from all-night cramming, the guilt from calculating the calories in the cupcake, maybe the brain fog that's making you think you are not smart enough to be here.

And also, about how hard it actually is to make the first move to do something different so your mental health might get better, and how hard it is to decipher self-care from unhealthy coping. We wanted to start some of those discussions through the PASS kit.

Mental health management can be ugly and tough, and I really wanted to make something that could guide people on that journey, when the existing resources are not enough.

I come from a public health background, and was trained to think systematically, to consider the determinants of health, like the way our society's policies, inequities, living conditions, and even

the academic system contributes to mental health and wellbeing. Thus, there are other factors coming before the individual which determine wellbeing. There is good effort being made to improve our system to be more conducive to mental health. This could be more affordable nutrition, better living spaces, and better academic environments. But all good things take time. Until those efforts are realized, we are still facing gaps of time from onset of symptoms to treatment, or even until we are ready to seek treatment.

But even in the most perfect well-engineered environment, it is still validated to have these stress symptoms, and it is still important to teach individuals how to react to it. We're not here to replace mental health systems, we are here to work with it.

This year, UW bought a PASS kit for all their incoming first year students, and it was the biggest sale we ever had, over 7000, equalling the number of sales of our first two years in business. The amazing thing is that the order did not come from the mental health groups of the University, but was a collaborative among orientation teams of the faculties from a swag budget. Student mental health needs resonated with so many groups at the university, that they saw the need to act on it without incentive, they saw the merit in doing something instead of handing out yet another branded water bottle.

Anyways, we wanted to do it right, but we also recognized that it was an opportunity to do a little more than business.

We came to know local group which provided activities to adults with developmental disabilities. They used to run a work program where their members would take assembly jobs with industry partners for employment and community participation. However, the program was discontinued after their partners were unwilling to offer competitive wages.

After working with our costs, reducing overheads and supplier negotiations, we said to them, hey, we can pay the wages. So in believing what we did, they offered to re-start the work program, where they provided assembly services, and we'd pay full Ontario minimum wages with vacation. So every kit UW first years received, were made possible with the hard work and care by KWHabilitation's members.

I think that there is a social responsibility to entrepreneurship as well, when you create something new in the community, you should be cognizant of what is already there, and seek to cooperate instead of replacing or leaving them behind. It is tempting to look to replace, and substitute, to disrupt the system if you will. But sometimes these systems are not broken, and do not need replacing, and can be improved just with more relationships, links and resource mobilization.

The PASS kit is also not here to replace counsellors, like bandaids don't replace doctors. We just want to bridge some space between symptoms and treatment.

I receive testimonials and stories from my customers, about how the kit helped their friend through panic attacks, how the cards were used until they wore out, how it helped them sleep more for their studies, and even how it stopped them from doing something harmful that they really would regret now. Prevention is needed and systematic change is extremely important, but until those efforts are realized, I think it is also important to address the in-the-moment symptoms of anxiety.

There are two things I wanted to do in my venture: improve mental health without taking from the existing system and improve the community by using underused resources. And I think our cooperation with the University of Waterloo this year really showed that both were possible.

Innovation is really amazing, and I encourage you all to go change things you feel worth changing, because change is really up to people with the ideas, taking the first steps.

But, when making waves, it is smart to make use of what's in the waters first.

Thanks for coming to my ted talk.