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### **Mental Wellness by Design**

Universities are fundamental to our society. They have a monumental task: educate the next generation of students well enough for them to go on to do amazing things. The burden we place on universities to move our society forward is huge. However, that burden can shift to the students themselves, spelling dark times for their university years. In trying to provide the best education for students, universities are holding the students to a standard that is above what many of them can handle, causing many of the students to break for the first time. Mental health and depression in university students is a bigger issue than ever (Marsh). While universities have services to help students who come forward, these services cannot hope to treat the core problems many students face that lead them into a debilitated mental state. The biggest issue for some students, myself included, is how school unintentionally takes advantage of their personality. In addition, the sheer amount of time and focus university requires can vary wildly per student and upset any semblance of balance. Finally, the students have their own perception of the help available and their own disbelief that counselling can help them specifically. By recognizing the reasons students fall into their own hell during school, we can aim to treat the causes instead of the symptoms.

It's especially hard to connect with someone whose way of thinking is radically different from your own. When it comes to mental health and depression, we're quick to dismiss others' ingrained mindsets because we can't even imagine thinking like that. For the most part, we have

no hope of truly putting ourselves in the shoes of others. We can work toward changing schooling to avoid these unwanted interactions between academics and the personalities of students that induce a worsened mental state, but we first need to be able to see school through different eyes. Personally, much of my qualms with university stem from a deep-seated obsessive nature. The number one resulting behaviour is extreme stress over deadlines, especially conflicting, and any sort of unfinished work. For well over a year now, there has not been a single day without a large task eating away at the back of my mind. Whether it be a work term report, my Final Year Design Project, a course project, an upcoming deadline, or any ridiculous combination, there has always been something there to elicit guilt for trying to have free time. Any free time, school term or not, is spent obsessing over that next project that needs to get done and not being in the mental state to make any progress on it. This usually takes the form of fatigue or plain physical sickness. Working on anything before its deadline is approaching is time better spent on finishing the more pressing tasks. The net result is that nothing ever gets done until the last minute or not done at all.

This brings us to the other big half of obsession: perfectionism. My 2A term was the first time that the work I did was not my best. Up until that point, every assignment had more time than one would expect spent on completing it to my unreasonably high self standards, even if I hated doing it. Not just assignments, either. Every email. Every little comment made on the Internet. It's not uncommon for a professional email to take upwards of 30 minutes to compose. In 2A, that idealistic pursuit crashed and burned when there simply wasn't enough time to devote to doing assignments well. I had grand plans for the project in my favourite course that term, but what I submitted was a rushed, poorly-implemented product that followed the idea of something that works being better than nothing. Making that decision was extremely self-conflicting and

marked a turning point. When I can't put the effort I want into a piece of work, it becomes pointless. Much of the schoolwork I've done since was, therefore, pointless. It's a trap between forcing myself to do the work, inevitably pouring an absurd amount of time into it regardless, or sitting there trying to resist that torture for as long as possible.

That is what a well-rooted obsession can do to a person as they go through normal university life without accounting for extracurricular activities or a part-time job. This drive can be harnessed to do great work, but university can provide the means for it to turn a person against himself. Obsession is by no means the only thing affecting students mentally. Each student with mental health problems like this has a unique way of thinking that can lead to drastic outcomes. To allow students to do their best work without as much regard to number of hours, universities could let students manage their term as they see fit rather than creating deadlines that conflict between courses. In their paper, Keith Gregory and Sue Morón-García find “no evidence that long deadlines lead to more late submissions”, nor “that the timing of a deadline has any effect on the final mark awarded for an exercise”. Longer deadlines would leave students with more opportunity to improve time management skills without the same hit to flexibility where obsession can take over. One issue at a time, we can plan to improve university for everyone. Of course, each solution comes with its own considerations. Late deadlines can move the stress to the TAs who have to mark the work. The first step to improvement is to discover the problems.

For students who suffer from depression and other mental states that can be hard to empathize with, there is near-universal help available. Universities have services that cater to these students. This is great, but comes with its own caveats. First, students must be willing to use them. It's hard to truly recognize and come to terms with one's own mental health

degradation or depression, and harder still to take steps to change it. Of over 25 000 college students surveyed, 59.3% felt that academics were traumatic or very difficult to handle any time within the last year and 46.1% relayed that they felt so depressed, it was difficult to function. However, only 26.1% were diagnosed or treated by a professional for one or more of a variety of issues in that time, notably 14.7% for depression (ACHA 2, 14-15). Regardless of services existing, there is certainly room for improvement in students using them. When it comes to mental health, every person is unique in how they think. It's very easy to stay separated from the world and not open up. It's also easy to underestimate the problem and get into thinking that seeking help is a waste of time. With the mindset that no results will come of help short of changing a large part of one's character, the help can seem like a waste of time, making the student feel further outcasted. Even for those who go, the story isn't perfect. Educational mental health services are not wholly perceived as high-quality in the first place (Hutchins 59). In addition, solutions can be suboptimal. For example, a student could develop a technique to handle stress, but larger steps could be taken to remove the source of the stress instead. This is usually difficult to do, and can involve changing what we've come to accept as normal in school, but it is a worthy goal.

Mental health among university students is a challenging issue. Everyone is different in how they are affected and how they try to deal with it. We have on-site help available, but the situation is often not without need of improvement, both for the services being offered and for the students who would benefit from them. To devise effective solutions, we need a different perspective. We need to see the world the same way as the suffering students do and really think about what improvements can be made to help them. We shouldn't be afraid to work toward a

big change if the result is better than what we have now. In the end, we want students to take control of their life, not their death.

## Works Cited

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