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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. Those students go on to do amazing things. This puts pressure on the universities to get it right. The burden we place on universities is huge. They move our society forward, after all. However, that burden can quickly shift to the students themselves. This in turn can spell dark times for their university years. Trying to provide the best education for students can backfire. Universities are holding the students to a standard that is above what many of them can handle. As a result, many of the students break for the first time in their lives. Mental health and depression in university students is a bigger issue than ever (Marsh). Universities do have services to help students who come forward. Unfortunately, these services cannot hope to treat the core problems causing this weakened mental state. The biggest issue for some students, myself included, is how school clashes with their personality. In addition, the sheer amount of time and focus university requires varies wildly from student to student. This can upset any semblance of balance in some students' lives. Finally, the students have their own perception of the help available. They have their own disbelief that counselling can fix their specific problems. We need to recognize the reasons students fall into their own hell during school. By doing this, we can aim to treat the causes instead of the symptoms.

It's very hard to connect with someone whose way of thinking you can't fathom. This is especially true of mental health and depression. We're quick to dismiss others' mindsets because

we can't even imagine thinking like that. For the most part, we have no hope of truly putting ourselves in their shoes. We can work toward changing schooling to avoid students' personalities getting in the way. We can steer away from destroying the mental health of these students. First, we need to see school through their eyes. Personally, much of my trouble with university comes from my very obsessive nature. I get extreme stress over deadlines and any unfinished work I have. It's worse if the deadlines conflict. My mind has not been free of this for well over a year now. There has not been a single day without a large task weighing down my mind. It could be a work term report, my Final Year Design Project, a course project, an upcoming deadline, or any ridiculous combination of those. Whatever free time I think I have, there's guilt for not working on these. It doesn't matter whether it's a school term or not. Any free time is spent obsessing over that next project that needs to get done. However, when obsessing like this, I'm not in the mental state to make any progress. This obsessing leads to wacky sleep and fatigue. It also affects my ability to eat, occasionally leading to unintentional fasting. It's no surprise that I get physically sick from all this sometimes. My IBS simply makes it worse. I can come home and feel too sick to work on anything all night. This is usually just for upcoming deadlines. There are some things I'd much rather work on ahead of time. However, that's time better spent on finishing the more pressing tasks. The net result is that things get done at the last minute or not 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, I held myself to unreasonably high standards. Even if I hated doing the work, I had to pay attention to every detail. I still do, even though it turns out badly. This applies to more than schoolwork. 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. There simply wasn't enough time to devote to doing assignments the way I wanted. I had grand plans for the project in my favourite course that term. What I submitted was a rushed, poorly-implemented product. I had to resort to something that works being better than nothing. Making that decision was extremely self-conflicting and marked a turning point in my life. 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. If I force myself to do the work, I inevitably pour an absurd amount of time into it. If I don't force myself, I sit there trying to resist that torture for as long as possible.

That is what a deeply obsessive personality can do to a person as they go through university life. This doesn't even account for extracurricular activities or a part-time job. Being detail-oriented is very beneficial for my programming job. However, university unintentionally uses it to turn me against myself. That said, 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. Similarly, that way of thinking can lead to drastic outcomes. Ideally, students could do their best work without as much regard to how long it takes. To move toward this, universities could let students manage their term as they see fit. This reduces conflicting deadlines between courses. There is a clear concern with this: If deadlines are relaxed, what incentive do students have to complete their work early? This could cause even more work and stress at the last minute. 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 more opportunity to improve time management skills. They would also remove the decrease in flexibility where obsession can take over. Additionally, we can provide incentive for students to finish early. Instead of

penalizing for late submissions, we can turn it into a linear bonus for early submissions. In this way, there's motivation to finish early, but no big loss for finishing later. Furthermore, the leisure to complete work at a chosen pace brings more room to learn through assigned work. Instead of learning material in class and using it on the assignments, students can learn it through assignments and reinforce it through classes. The freedom to do this arises from the lack of other assignments' deadlines getting in the way. The midterm can serve as an indication of whether the student is adequately managing their work or needs to prioritize this work more. Of course, any solution to this 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. Then we can aim for a solution that works best for everyone.

There is wide help available for students who suffer from depression and other mental problems. 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 for a student to recognize and come to terms with their issues. It's even harder 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. 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% of those were for depression (ACHA 2, 14-15). In Canada, there was an even larger gap between those willing to seek help and those who actually did. Furthermore, 13% of these 2 million Canadian students voiced that they had considered suicide within the last 12 months (Walsh). Despite services existing, there is certainly room for improvement. 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. It's not uncommon to think that seeking help is a waste of time. Expecting no results before trying can make students feel further outcasted. Even for those who use the provided services, 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 when it would be better to remove the source of the stress. This kind of solution is usually much more difficult to pull off. It can involve changing what we've come to accept as normal in school. Nonetheless, 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 the services being offered and the students who would benefit from them have room to change. To devise effective solutions, we need a different perspective. We need to see the world the same way as the suffering students do. We need to really think about what improvements can be made to help them. We shouldn't be afraid to work toward a big change if it improves the situation. In the end, we want students to take control of their life, not their death.

Works Cited

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