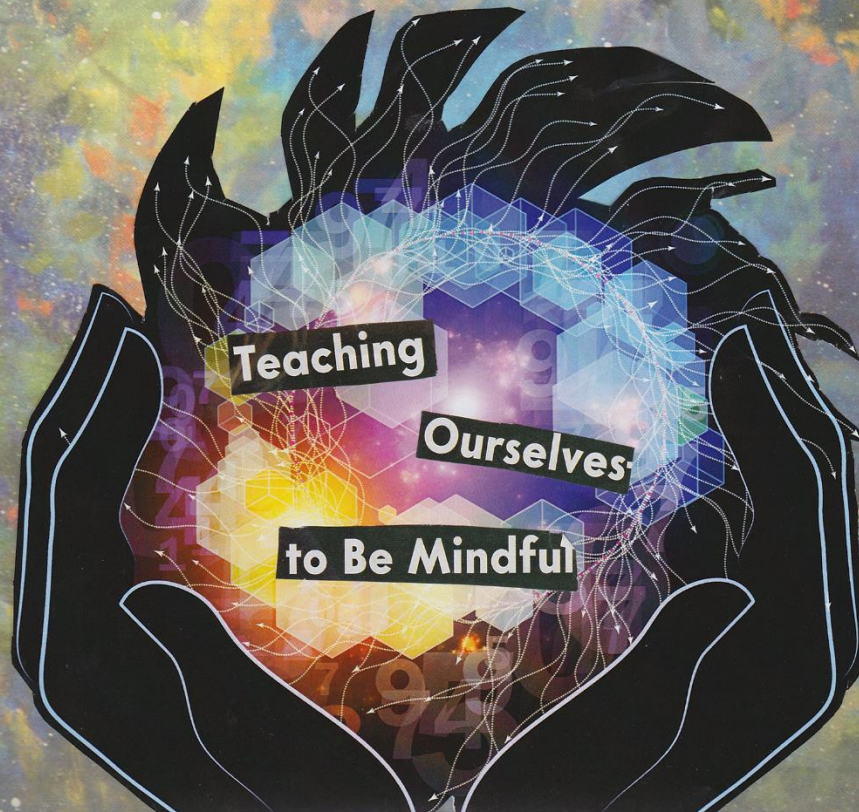# Active Minds:

Teaching Ourselves to Be Mindful

Josie Seach
The University of Indianapolis
December 2015

Active Minds:
Teaching Ourselves to be Mindful

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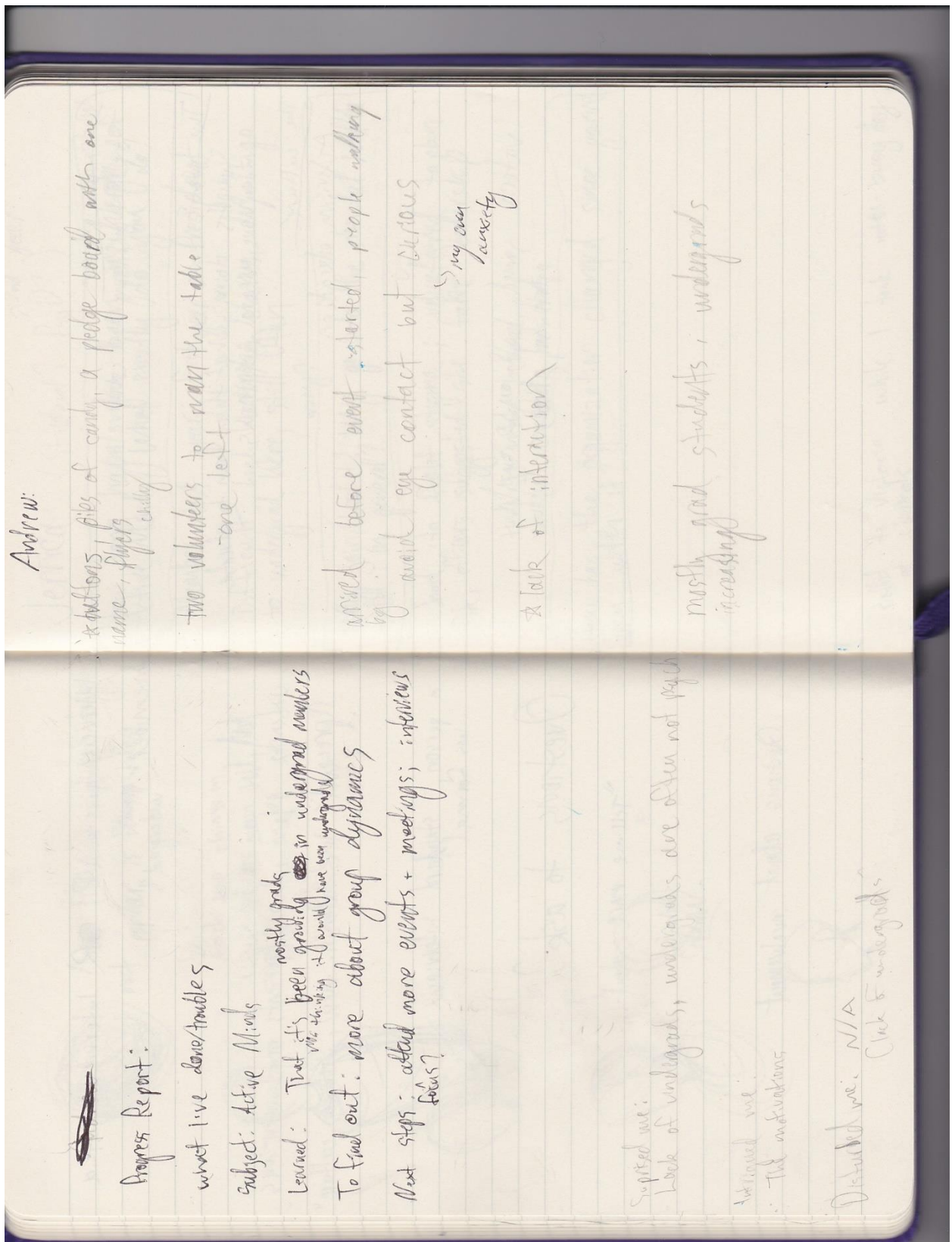The University of Indianapolis

2015

My first exposure to the group known as Active Minds was its entry on a page tucked away in a corner of the University of Indianapolis website after my mother suggested I look into joining a student organization. It was at the top of a list of numerous other organizations, each with a brief one-or-two sentence description before moving on to the next organization, with no contact information listed or anything. Active Mind's description was enough to grasp the gist of what they do - though I now know there was much left unsaid.

As someone who has personal experience with mental illness and knows others who experience it as well, I thought about joining, but I gave up when my young freshman self couldn't figure out how to get involved. It was only three years later, during my junior year, when I was faced with a task – find a group to study – that I finally followed up on contacting the group. With what I know now, I wish I had been involved earlier. The group does a lot for mental health activism – and yet, as I also discovered in my research, hardly any other students know about Active Minds. Considering the importance of peer support for those who suffer mental illness, I hope to help at least somewhat to rectify this and call more attention to the group and all it does to help spread awareness of mental health issues.

Table of Contents

Progress Report:

what I've done/troubles

Subject: Active Minds

Learned: That it's been growing — mostly grads in undergrad numbers

To find out: more about group dynamics

Next steps: attend more events + meetings; interviews
focus?

Surprised me:
Lack of undergrads, undergrads are often not psych

Intrigued me:
The motivations

Disturbed me: N/A
Clash b/w undergrads

Andrew:

donations, lots of candy, a pledge board with one name, flyers

two volunteers to man the table
— one left

arrived before event started, people nothing

avoid eye contact but curious
— my own anxiety

lack of interaction

mostly grad students, undergrads increasing

Jerrica (Student? PsyD?) 2nd year

How long have you been in charge of
Active Minds? What exactly do you do at your Org?

— Member last year, first year as President

Difficult high learning curve, didn't go
to undergrad here, still Ann
worry?

Why join/lead it? Why go into the mental health
field in general?

Want to fight stigma; volunteered to plan
DR officers suggested she take leadership

tush to take charge
student council president

How has the organization changed since you've
been with it?

staffed to Victoria while I took notes- busy day
at clinical

Anna

Whats going on here?
Standard gathering and coordinating

The story?
Students doing what they seen to educate
many have personal motivations

The culture?
Activism, education

Victoria joined halfway through
details and glasses

6

Victoria - Studying: public health freshman

How long have you been with Active Minds? What do you do in the club?

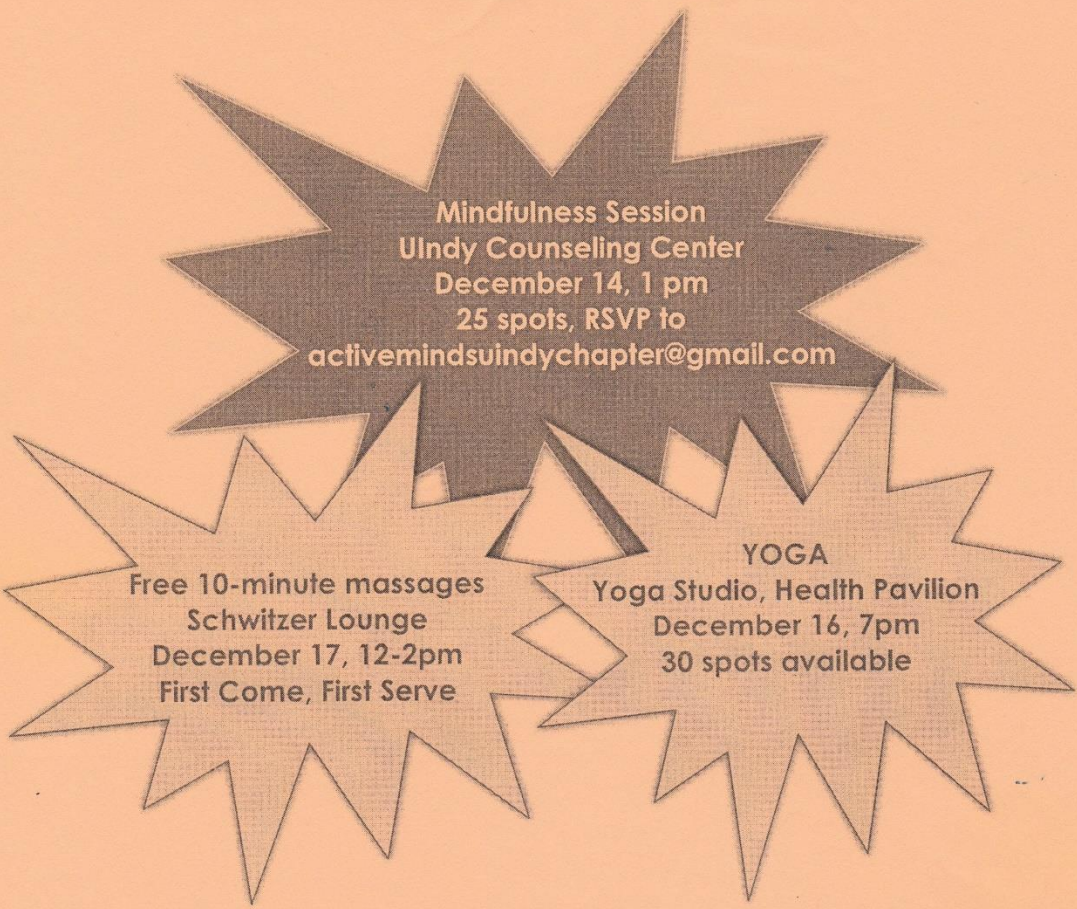First year, mostly attends meetings, helped with Day Without Stigma table

What's a standard meeting like?

2 meetings - announcements about events, group announces development and research in field, suggests events - often

How often are you involved? How get involved/go into mental health?

personal interest - dad and younger sister autistic; depression and anxiety through family

If you hadn't gone into mental health activism, would you have been advocating for something else? (Do did mental health call to you?)

How has it changed since you've been here?

Veteran's Day

Display 660 flag in front of Roberts

Hall

number of veterans who commit suicide a year

9th - veteran with PTSD speaker

Victoria - 10 page English paper

Mindfulness Session
UIndy Counseling Center
December 14, 1 pm
25 spots, RSVP to
activemindsuindychapter@gmail.com

Free 10-minute massages
Schwitzer Lounge
December 17, 12-2pm
First Come, First Serve

YOGA
Yoga Studio, Health Pavilion
December 16, 7pm
30 spots available

STRESS LESS!

With UIndy Active Minds

Finals Week: December 14-17

My Progress: Works Created Along the Way

Positioning Paper

The subculture I have chosen to study would be the subculture surrounding the members of a student organization at the University of Indianapolis, Active Minds. Active Minds is an organization which aims to raise awareness of mental illness among students as well as help provide support and other resources to those affected. Given the nature of the organization, it may be easy to assume that its members are marked by mental illness and that said illnesses are what define the subculture. This is most likely incorrect. First, if all members were, in fact, mentally ill, the experience of having a mental illness is so varied among individuals – even, at times, among those with the same illness – that I believe it would be a fault to define a subculture by this quality.

I expect that many members may have a mental illness, but I suspect others may be mentally well. Perhaps they may or may not have a friend or relative with a mental illness whom they hope to support, or they may wish to give others in a similar position the resources to help their own loved ones. Perhaps they are completely disconnected from the experience of having a mental illness, but they wish to learn more and to do something. Regardless, what I believe will define the subculture is not the experience of being mentally ill, but the culture of activism regarding mental illness.

I feel most students on campus are ambivalent about the organization's existence, therefore, I cannot imagine there are any particular myths about it, other than that all

members might be mentally ill, which I can neither verify nor falsify. There are, however, myths about those with mental illness. Though my subject of study is not mentally ill students, there will likely be mentally ill students participating in Active Minds. Speaking as someone who is diagnosed with one particular mental illness, I am an insider and therefore cannot say with certainty what beliefs outsiders hold. I do, however, have a general idea. From what I've read and observed in the past, it seems that some people assume others with certain illnesses – typically those which cause hallucinations or mood swings – are violent and dangerous, when in fact, people with illnesses such as those are more likely to be victims of violence themselves. Other illnesses carry a stigma of some sort of personal and easily remedied fault – the idea that those with clinical depression just don't want to cheer up, for example. Some illnesses seem to be altogether ignored; some people seem to think that those with anxiety can stop worrying at any time, seemingly forgetting that there is an actual illness involved. Though I see an increasing understanding of mental illness as a whole, misconceptions do still exist.

Previously I described myself as an insider, however, that is only as far as those with my particular illness – an eating disorder not otherwise specified, or EDNOS – are concerned. To paraphrase, at the time of diagnosis, I had all symptoms characteristic of anorexia nervosa except for a BMI under a certain threshold. As far as those who have other illnesses, even other eating disorders, I am an outsider, especially considering I am now nearly fully recovered. Most importantly, as stated earlier, members of Active Minds are defined not by any illness or lack thereof, but by participation. I have never attended a meeting and I do not know anyone in the organization, therefore, I am an outsider. I do feel that I have a bit of an odd position, having some insight but having never participated in the organization or any similar organization. I may

face some difficulty by letting my personal experience cloud my observations, by assuming I have some camaraderie with the members where none actually exists, or by misinterpreting events due to my perceived involvement. I may also start focusing too much on the element of mental illness as opposed to the culture of activism within the organization, and as stated previously, the activism is the most important quality defining this subculture.

My somewhat unique position is part of the reason I chose to study the members of Active Minds. By both having insight on the subject of the organization while having never engaged in the activism which defines the organization, I feel that I am in a position to gain a more holistic understanding of the experiences of the subculture as well as gain an opportunity to grow personally. Additionally, as stated before, most students are probably ambivalent about the existence of Active Minds – many are probably unaware altogether. In doing my research, I may be able to raise awareness of the organization at the same time.

A Day in the Life

The air was chilly but beginning to warm as I took a seat at the table outside Schwitzer just before 11 o' clock a.m. on October 5th. Active Minds, the student organization devoted to raising awareness of mental health on campus, had set up a table for the National Day without Stigma, with the goal of educating people with and without mental illness, increasing acceptance of those with mental illness, and creating a safer environment for those with mental illness, encouraging them to speak up about their experiences and seek help when needed.

I had arrived to the table early, before the event truly started, to watch the reactions of passersby when not being actively engaged by members of Active Minds. The table was filled with buttons displaying a logo-like "1/4" – the fraction which represents the number of college students with a diagnosable mental illness – as well as small piles of candy, fliers packed with information on mental illness and resources, and a whiteboard with one signature, titled, "I pledge to be stigma free!" which I assume had been signed by the member of the group who was leaving just as I was arriving. There were a few chalk messages scattered about the campus sidewalks, as though extending outward across campus from the table, spreading information and encouragement.

As I sat and observed the pedestrians walking past – who displayed a great interest in the table while simultaneously desperately avoiding eye contact – I spoke with the vice president of Active Minds, Andrew, who was currently the only other person at the table other than myself.

Andrew, a graduate student at the university currently studying to obtain a doctorate degree in psychology, was clearly very invested in the future of Active Minds. He told me that the organization was primarily made up of graduate students like himself, although they have been trying – successfully, it seems, this semester – to get more undergraduate students involved.

"A lot of undergrads came to our first meeting," Andrew said, "and I really hope they come back to the next one later today."

Perhaps it is unfair to expect students to approach a table before the event it is associated with has actually begun; still, I had assumed that there would be at least a few students who would approach us to ask what the table was representing. However, I only saw more of what I had been observing since I had sat down at the table.

"Yeah, I see it too," Andrew said when I remarked on the other students' avoidant behavior. "That seems to be the immediate reaction to any sort of table set up on campus."

"I think it is," I replied. "I do that myself, actually, trying to avoid catching the table attendants' eyes."

Our conversation turned to small talk – the details of my research project, my major, my general academic plans – and before long, I left to take care of other responsibilities, telling Andrew that if I could find time in my schedule to attend that day's meeting, I would.

I did not attend that meeting, not because of other obligations, but because I'd developed a slight headache. The fact that I skipped out on the meeting for a rather

insignificant reason, combined with the students' earlier curiosity yet desperate avoidance, struck me hard. I realized that it must be extremely difficult for the members of Active Minds to reach out to other students. If one were to walk by the tables set up in Schwitzer just outside the cafeteria, a lot of the same behavior would be seen. Even so, there is still a lot of activity, and students seem to be more interested in those tables, even if some do avoid them. Maybe some of the students' behavior at the Active Minds table was due to the fact that the table had not officially opened yet; however, when I later walked past a few times throughout the day, while the table was open, I never saw more than two students at a time talking with the volunteers from Active Minds staffing the table. Students seem to, in general, be uninterested in Active Minds' message; or, perhaps, they simply don't know what the message is, as the table had no easily-seen identification, and most students seem to instinctively ignore any sort of attention from campus organizations.

It seems that, in the past, even undergraduate students within the organization may not have been very involved, given that Andrew said the group was working to retain undergraduate interest. I do not know just how many students, graduate or undergraduate, are members of Active Minds, much less the number of members who actually participate. I do know that there were no more than two volunteers at the tables at a time, and that the organization was having difficulty finding volunteers for the morning shifts. It seems a bit paradoxical: Active Minds is one of the student organizations whose presence on campus I have seen most often, even prior to my involvement with the group this semester. Even so, I imagine that when the organization's staff meet, they discuss not only how to reach out to those who are not members, but also how to keep members within the organization interested.

I may exemplify part of the problem, myself: I am very interested in mental health and the social contexts surrounding it, I made the decision to study this organization, and I am mentally ill myself, yet I still skipped the meeting that took place on the same day the table for the National Day without Stigma was set up due to simple laziness. It seems the members of Active Minds that are not graduate students may not be as involved in the group as I would have assumed, and I may have unknowingly demonstrated the reason.

Profiles in Active Minds

As I walked to the Health Pavilion on the evening of my interview with Jerrica Patterson, it struck me that I didn't know how either of us would identify the other. I had never seen the president of Active Minds in person, and she had never seen me – all of our correspondence thus far had been through email. The fact that I had never before seen the interior of the Health Pavilion did little to allay my concern. We had agreed to meet in the café area of the building; what if I failed to find it? As I entered, I saw The Perk II and the salad bar hidden behind an array of chairs and tables and a flight of stairs. I sat at a table near the doors and did my best to look official, hoping that my laptop and Moleskine notebook would help Jerrica identify me as her interviewer.

As our agreed meeting time, half-past-four, approached, I began to worry that I was in the wrong spot – perhaps there was a second dining area elsewhere in the Pavilion? I packed up my belongings and walked to the second floor, thinking that Jerrica might be waiting at one of the booths I could see from the first floor. On the second floor, I saw more tables – maybe this is the café area she suggested we meet at? – as well as a number of students. I paced until realizing that none of these students were going to ask if I was there for our interview. Now nearly a quarter-to-five, I decided to risk appearing impatient. I texted Jerrica with the number she provided in case of an issue.

"Hi, this is Josie. Should I meet you on the first or second floor?"

Her response was quick. "First floor. I'm headed that way"

I headed back down to the first floor, relieved that the only other student at a table was male. I assumed Jerrica would be able to identify me by my feminine name, but I laid my materials out in an official manner for good measure. I was soon greeted with a cheerful voice.

"Hi! Josie?" Jerrica extended her hand.

"Yes, Jerrica?" We shook hands, then she nodded and took a seat in the chair to my left.

I hadn't had a particular image in mind of Jerrica, but I suppose I must have subconsciously assumed something outside society's beauty conventions; despite her clothes, style, and overall appearance meeting standard social norms, I felt that she should have looked different somehow. She wore just enough makeup to be perceptible. Her light brown, highlighted, shoulder-length hair sat at her shoulders, straightened meticulously, and she wore a blue jewel-toned sleeveless top with a few ruffles. All in all, she looked very professional. On her hand, I spotted a silver engagement ring.

"I'm sorry I'm late," she said, "I was meeting with clients and it's been a hectic day." Jerrica, I soon found out, is a student at the University currently in her second year of the PsyD. program. As such, she works in the Health Pavilion as a counselor.

I let her know that I was in no hurry, we exchanged some small talk, and then I began to go down the list of questions I had prepared for Jerrica. The interview had admittedly not gone as planned – it ended up as more of a guided conversation. Some of the questions I had meant to ask never got brought up, as they would have interrupted the flow of the conversation; I learned a lot about Jerrica regardless.

This year is Jerrica's first as the president of Active Minds. As president, she is in charge of coordinating events, guest speakers – just about everything that goes on in the organization. When I asked how she became president, she told me the role was offered to her after she had done an apparently exceptional job as a volunteer planner for the organization's annual 5k run.

"They offered me the position, and I took it," she said. "I've always been the kind of person who just takes charge. Back in high school I was student council president and all that. I have to remind myself to sit back and let things happen sometimes." She told me it has been difficult adjusting to her new role, however; the learning curve has been steep since she did her undergraduate studies elsewhere. She still very much enjoys leading Active Minds, and she was clearly very proud of what she does for the group.

It was at this point that Jerrica looked past and greeted someone else. At first, I thought she was politely acknowledging a friend or acquaintance, until the girl sat at our table and greeted me in turn. I realized this new girl was the other interviewee that Jerrica had arranged to meet with me: Victoria, a freshman public health major.

Victoria had certainly not appeared like I expected her to, either. Her dark hair was pigtailed, and blunt bangs sat on her forehead. This, alongside her glasses, made her appear quite nerdy. I had not known she was a public health major until she told me during the interview, which caught me off guard – when I think of public health majors, I tend to think of athletes.

I had assumed that I would be interviewing Victoria separately, but I rather liked the idea of a conversation with the two of them at once, since it would give me an opportunity to

see the relationship between the president and the general members of Active Minds. Their interactions were very casual and familiar, and they seemed to be having fun as they shared details of their involvement with me, with one chiming in after the other every now and again.

When I asked Victoria why she was involved with Active Minds, she told me her motivations were highly personal. Her father and younger sister both have autism, and depression and anxiety disorders run in her family as well. I wish I had asked Jerrica her motivations for working in the mental health field, as I would like to know if her motivations were personal as well.

Though I had forgotten to ask Jerrica about her motivations, the passion in her voice was clear as she described to me the upcoming Veteran's Day plans – the 660 flags that were going to be set up in front of Roberts Hall, one for every veteran who commits suicide a year, and the guest speaker coming in on November 9th to discuss his experience as a veteran with post-traumatic stress disorder. When I frowned at the suicide statistic, Jerrica paused to emphatically agree with me how sad the statistic is. I didn't ask Victoria if she would be one of the members assisting in setting up the flags, but I imagine she must be, as she is very involved with the group – she helped set up the table for the Day Without Stigma event that the organization had arranged earlier in the semester. What struck me about both Jerrica and Victoria were their remarkable dedication to reaching out to the community and eliminating the stigma against mental health.

Active Minds: Actively Educating Our Campus

An Introduction to Active Minds

Active Minds is a fairly recently-established national non-profit organization which aims to educate students on college campuses about mental health and illness. The methods and goals of Active Minds, as stated on its website, are this: "By developing and supporting chapters of a student-run mental health awareness, education, and advocacy group on campuses nationwide, the nonprofit organization works to increase students' awareness of mental health issues, provide information and resources regarding mental health and mental illness, encourage students to seek help as soon as it is needed, and serve as liaison between students and the mental health community (Active Minds)."

The purpose of my research is to determine the efficacy and visibility of Active Minds on the University of Indianapolis campus and call attention to the fact that, as a small survey I've conducted may indicate, many students here, especially the undergraduate students who may most need the resources provided by Active Minds due to their risk of developing mental illness (Kessler, Berglund, Demler, Jin, Merikangas, and Walters 595), are either unaware of the organization's existence or uninterested, which poses a significant problem due to the fact that peer support is vital to those with mental illness, especially where the risk of suicide is concerned – two thirds of students in a study who disclosed suicidal thoughts disclosed them to a peer before anyone else (Drum, Brownson, Denmark, and Smith 218).

There are limitations to my research. Though I had hoped to view the organization in action, I was unable to attend any of the group's monthly meetings or any of the public events hosted by Active Minds. On two occasions, I was able to speak with members of the organization as they prepared to begin an event – once before their National Day without Stigma table officially opened and again in the Ransburg Auditorium lobby before a speaker hosted by Active Minds began. However, I did not view the main body of either of the described events, nor was I able to attend any other events at all. Thus, all of my primary research relies on what information I was able to glean from brief interviews with the vice president and president of the UIndy chapter and a general member, as well as from the content of emails sent out to members, including meeting summaries, calls for volunteers, plans for upcoming meetings, and the like. Secondary sources also comprise a large portion of my research.

In the case of further research, I would like to spend more time with Active Minds during its normal operations, as opposed to my scarce meetings with one general member and two administration members outside the typical settings for the group. My research suffers from a severe lack of firsthand observation, and this is the main issue to be remedied, as spending more time with the group would also allow me time to gather more artifacts used by the group, as well as obtain permission to show said artifacts.

Additionally, my survey, as mentioned previously, is very small. It contains a sample size of 27 students, of whom only 13 responded. With such a small sample size, conclusions must be drawn very carefully and may not be applicable to the campus as a whole. With that said, I would like to send my survey out to a larger portion of the undergraduate population of UIndy

in the hopes of obtaining more responses and thus gaining the ability to draw more definitive

conclusions.

The National Non-Profit

Active Minds was founded in 2003 by Alison Malmon while she was an undergraduate student

at the University of Pennsylvania (Active Minds). Her older brother, Brian Malmon, developed a

disorder during his freshman year of college later diagnosed as schizoaffective disorder – "a

disorder characterized by psychosis and major depression" (Walther, Abelson, and Malmon 14-

15). Despite his struggles over the course of his college career, he tried to hide his condition,

and he did not seek help until his senior year due to the effects of stigma surrounding mental

illness.

A bit over a year after seeking help, Brian committed suicide on March 24, 2000, at

which point Alison had recently begun her college studies. Realizing that mental health is

extremely important, that those who experience mental illness are often shamed into silence,

and that the majority of people do not know how to support their peers who experience mental

illness, Alison founded the first student-led chapter – then called Open Minds – on the

University of Pennsylvania campus. Another chapter spread to the Georgetown University

campus a year later; the organization continued to grow, and in 2003, Active Minds became a

national non-profit organization with headquarters in Washington, D.C.

Active Minds at UIndy

Active Minds has only been present on the UIndy campus for about 4 years. The University of Indianapolis chapter was founded in 2011 by Rebecca Ritchey, a graduate student in her fourth year in the clinical psychology doctoral program. (Fellows 7) It has been very active on the campus since then, hosting various events throughout the year to raise awareness, including an annual 5K walk around campus to "Stomp Out Stigma," during which participants wear bright clothing to call attention to themselves and Active Minds as a whole (Prosser 3).

During my research, Active Minds hosted a multitude of events on campus. They staffed a table to spread awareness on the National Day without Stigma, October 5th, and left supportive chalk messages around campus meant to uplift spirits and encourage those struggling to find courage and seek help. They organized multiple Veteran's Day events; the group set up 660 flags around campus – one for every veteran who commits suicide a year, I was told by chapter president Jerrica Patterson – and worked with the Student Veterans Association to host a retired marine who shared his experience with post-traumatic-stress-disorder. As the semester began to wrap up, the group organized an entire week of activities during finals week at UIndy, which they have dubbed "Stress Less Week," which includes sharing strategies on how to reduce stress and a cookie drop, among other activities.

Despite Active Minds' incredible presence on campus, I noticed during my research that many students either are unaware of the group's existence or seem to avoid the group during events. I sat at the National Day without Stigma table for a few minutes just before the table was to officially open, and as I sat and spoke with the chapter vice president who was currently

manning the table, I noticed that quite a few students who were passing by seemed to be curious but avoided eye contact with us, as though they did not want to be bothered. They avoided our attention the way one would avoid a salesperson in a crowded mall.

When I spoke with both the vice president and the president of the University of Indianapolis chapter, independently and on two separate occasions, they both stated that the organization is comprised mostly of graduate students, and though the attendance of undergraduate students is on the rise, they still represent a minority of the group. Indeed, I reviewed the membership roster and saw that out of 36 registered members, only nine were undergraduate students. This may have unfortunate implications, as the age range of the average undergraduate student is also the age range during which many mental illnesses are likely to arise in an individual (Kessler, Berglund, Demler, Jin, Merikangas, and Walters 595).

Curious as to how many undergraduate students knew of Active Minds' existence and unable to find an existing secondary source, I conducted a small survey. I created a questionnaire and sent it out to 27 students, 15 of whom are in my Advanced Composition class and 12 of whom are in my Creative Nonfiction class. Of those 27 recipients, 12 students, or slightly less than half of the sample, responded; however, one of the respondents identified his- or herself as a graduate student. Because the goal of my survey was to identify UIndy undergraduate students' awareness of the existence and services of Active Minds, the graduate student's responses were eliminated from my analysis, leaving 11 responses from undergraduate students.

Of the 11 undergraduate respondents, five indicated that they had heard of Active Minds before; however, one of the respondents who said they had heard of the organization listed hearing of my research as their first time hearing about Active Minds. This means that, had I not undertaken this project, only four of those 11 students would have heard of Active Minds. Though the sample size of my survey is too small to apply to the entire campus, only 36.4% of respondents had heard of Active Minds prior to my influence.

My survey also sought to determine how well the students who are aware of the organization know what services Active Minds provides. Active Minds does not do any counseling or directly provide mental health services; the group focuses only on raising awareness of mental health, making professional resources such as counseling services more visible and accessible, and discussing mental health issues to help eliminate stigma. Of the five undergraduate respondents who indicated they had heard of Active Minds, four indicated that what they knew of Active Minds was "not much," with the last respondent indicating they knew only slightly more. Four undergraduate respondents indicated that they experience mental illness, and four also indicated that they know someone else who experiences mental illness. All undergraduate respondents indicated that they wish their peers knew more about mental illness. Only one respondent, however, indicated that they had ever attended an event hosted by Active Minds, and none of the respondents had ever attended one of the group's meetings.

An Underutilized Resource

As stated earlier, young adults, the age group which coincides with the ages of the average undergraduate college student, are at a higher risk for developing mental health issues. Indeed, a number of respondents to my survey indicated that either they or someone they know experiences mental illness, all respondents indicated that they wish their peers knew more about mental illness, and nine out of 11 undergraduate respondents reported that they themselves want to learn more about mental illness and how to support those who experience it.

Peer support is important to the continued health of those with mental illness. As cited earlier, many people who experience mental illness turn to a peer for support, and the story of Active Minds' founding illustrates just how crucial it is for people who experience mental illness to be able to talk about their experiences and reach out to others. My research, however, shows a severe lack of awareness of or interest in an easily accessible source of resources on the University of Indianapolis campus.

As a student, I have noticed that registered student organizations tend to be difficult to learn about in general – information on them is tucked away in small corners of the university's public website and in the MyUIndy site. Given the prevalence of mental health issues amongst college students, much more could be done to raise awareness of the existence of Active Minds on the University of Indianapolis campus.

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