THE EMERSON PROJECT

by Shafee Ahmed
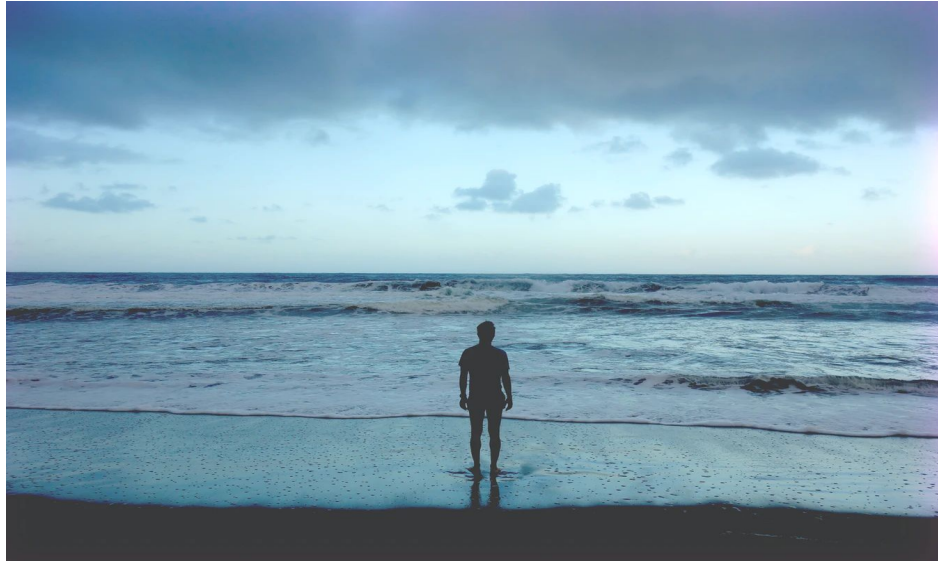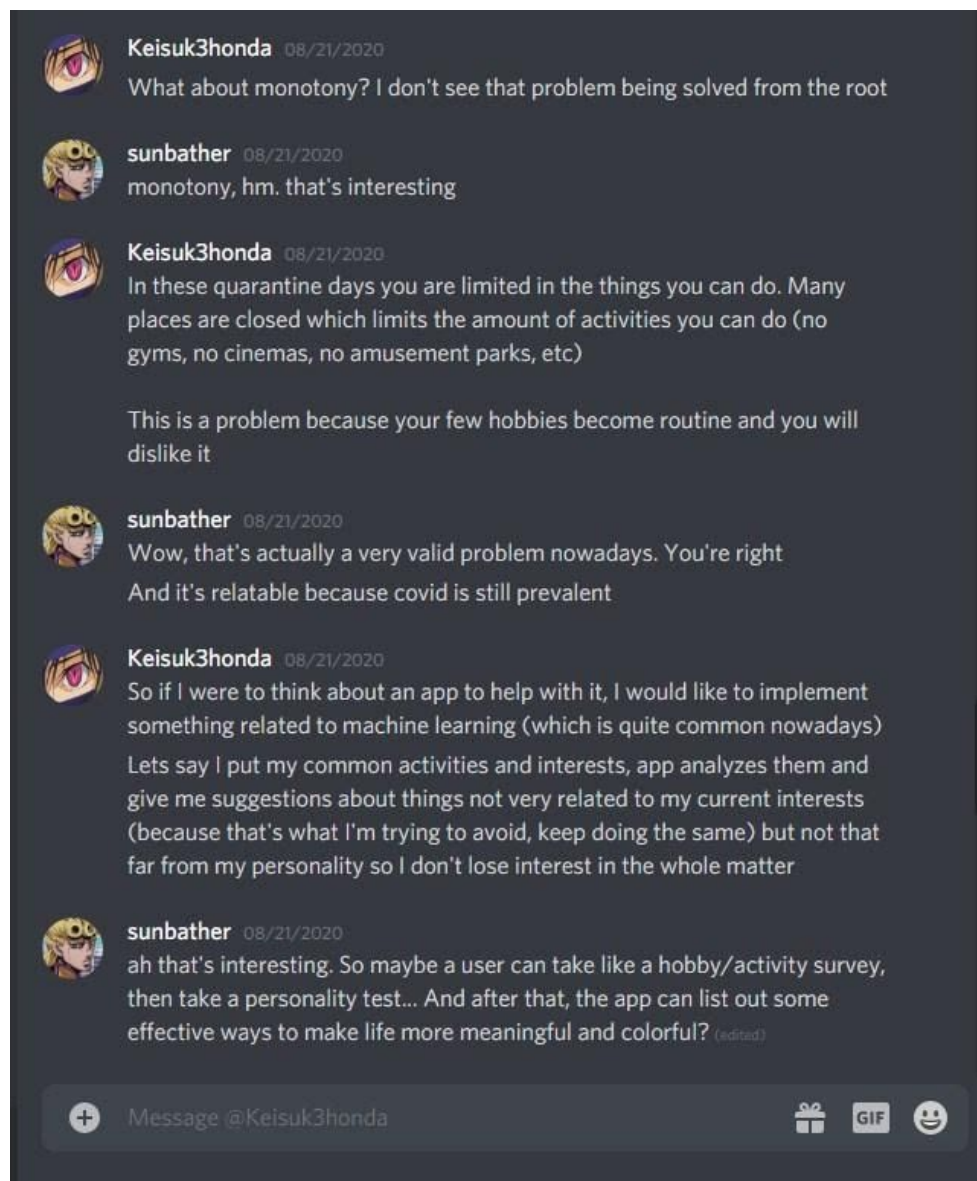

Photo by Lenart Lipovšek on Unsplash (https://unsplash.com/photos/QHjXgPQkUTk)

A.   On connectedness

B.   Disconnected

C.   Pain points: monotony, loneliness and meaninglessness

D.   Accepting solitude; being comfortable with ourselves

E.   A companion app that promotes solitude and personal growth


A.) **On connectedness.** Living in the digital age has never been more unifying for people. We can, with a click of a button, connect to our friends, join livestreams of events happening across the world, and follow and unfollow people. Many large companies have made it a point to make connecting with others an easy thing. Facebook's mission runs on connectedness. With Twitter, people can share their thoughts on just about anything and have instant feedback. Instagram and Snapchat make it possible to share precious moments in picture-story form. Tinder is there too to make the options for relationships seem endless. All of these apps have one thing in common. That is to connect one individual to a world where others exist. Everything on social media is about requiring more than one person, and it's exciting to get replies and retweets, video calling one another and sharing screenshots with friends. In a world where staying up to date, being connected has never seemed more necessary, to the point where an individual would be looked at oddly for not 'connecting'.

B.) **Disconnected.** In December 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic started its reign as one of the biggest pandemics in modern history. Many places around the world were ill-prepared, and as a result many have lost their lives. In New York City, we faced one of the biggest waves of covid in the nation, with over 260,000+ positive cases. Problems erupted in our NY communities; shortage of masks, sanitizers, and most importantly being social in-person was largely disrupted and limited to social media. Employers had no choice but to discharge employees from work and many were left jobless, stuck at home with little to do. A sudden meaningless infiltrated the lives of people.

I asked my friend Keisuke to help me think of some community problems. This is a bit of the brainstorming we did:

Keisuk3honda 08/21/2020
What about monotony? I don't see that problem being solved from the root

sunbather 08/21/2020
monotony, hm. that's interesting

Keisuk3honda 08/21/2020
In these quarantine days you are limited in the things you can do. Many places are closed which limits the amount of activities you can do (no gyms, no cinemas, no amusement parks, etc)

This is a problem because your few hobbies become routine and you will dislike it

sunbather 08/21/2020
Wow, that's actually a very valid problem nowadays. You're right
And it's relatable because covid is still prevalent

Keisuk3honda 08/21/2020
So if I were to think about an app to help with it, I would like to implement something related to machine learning (which is quite common nowadays)
Lets say I put my common activities and interests, app analyzes them and give me suggestions about things not very related to my current interests (because that's what I'm trying to avoid, keep doing the same) but not that far from my personality so I don't lose interest in the whole matter

sunbather 08/21/2020
ah that's interesting. So maybe a user can take like a hobby/activity survey, then take a personality test... And after that, the app can list out some effective ways to make life more meaningful and colorful? (edited)

Message @Keisuk3honda

C.) **Pain points: monotony, loneliness and meaninglessness.** The key word here: monotony. A monotonous and colorless atmosphere engulfed the entire city during quarantine and lockdown. For seven to eight consecutive months, many people were (and still are) routinely going about their day in constant mental fatigue. Many of these people have lost their jobs, and many are youth who can't go back to school or hang out with friends. What happens when life is so dull and monotonous? Meaninglessness ensues, a social inertia envelops everything. There's also the fear and anxiety of what's to come; the chilling question of *who will covid claim next? Are we safe? Are the cases increasing or decreasing?* Questions like these are a cause for pain for many. A July 2020 study[1] projects that mental illness and suicide rates will increase as a result of covid affecting the mental health of many. Mental health is undoubtedly something not talked about *enough* in the media sphere. So ultimately the question is, how do we add meaning to our lives with a global pandemic limiting us?
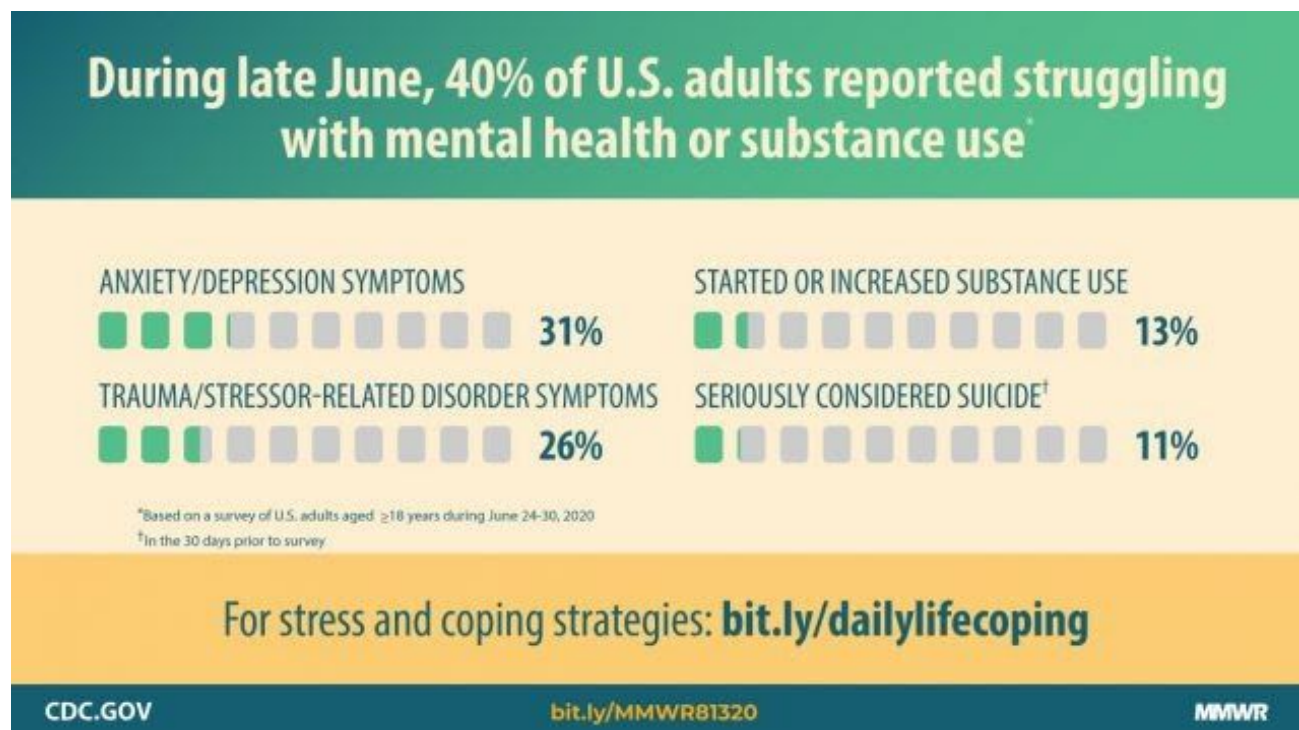
(source: Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic — United States, June 24–30, 2020, https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6932a1.htm)

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[1] **The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on suicide rates**
https://academic.oup.com/qjmed/advance-article/doi/10.1093/qjmed/hcaa202/5857612

D.) **Accepting solitude; being comfortable with ourselves.** What is to be done when we are stuck in the confines of our homes? Many have lost touch with their inner selves. It's hard to sit down alone and think of activities to do without others. In a world where everything is about connectedness to others, what about connecting to our inner selves? The way to accept solitude into our lives is to do things that are meaningful, things we don't mind doing alone. But finding what that is might be a bit of a hassle. Even as things eased down in the city and we're able to go out more, the pandemic has warned us of a danger that is not only a virus, but a reminder that we are not leading a meaningful life. For my project and solution I am proposing an app that helps fulfill the four components of '**ikigai**', for leading a more meaningful life and exercising solitude.

ikigai (from Wikipedia): *ikigai is a Japanese concept that means "a reason for being". The word refers to having a direction or purpose in life, that which makes one's life worthwhile, and towards which an individual takes spontaneous and willing actions giving them satisfaction and a sense of meaning to life.*

This concept is an *attempt* at being happier in life. And ikigai's metric to having a more meaningful and happy life boils down to four questions:

1) What do you love?
2) What are you good at?
3) What does the world need from you?
4) What can you get paid for?

Target market: There are some who may have answered one or two of those questions in their life, but are 'stuck' when it comes to answering another. For instance, someone may be getting paid well, but can't really answer what they truly love in life. Some may be good at a certain thing, but can't get paid for it or contribute to society with it. What can they do? This is exactly what this app is for. There are strengths and weaknesses in all aspects of our lives, even if we may think we have all the answers. So with this app, I want to make it easier for people to make life more meaningful, arriving at their own answers, especially in lockdown, and post-lockdown.

Ikigai Diagram

original diagram:
Mark Winn / Dan Buettner

So, how can technology come into play?

E.) **A companion app that promotes solitude and personal growth.** The solution here is not simple. There's no clear-cut solutions when it comes to the well-being of someone's mental state. Life, after all, is a series of ups and downs, and there's no running away from grief and sadness. Nothing is perfect. But things like grief and sadness, loneliness and lack of meaning can all be manageable and abated with a little introspection and effort.

How about an app that realizes that we can add more meaning to our lives. Let's call this app 'Moriko' for now— Japanese meaning of Moriko: female name for "forest". Moriko would aim to take a users personality, by a standard personality test, and another small quiz to determine their likes and interests. After that, this app's algorithms would run and give an analysis of what they need to work on. It would also give inspiration, book recommendations, and more. Users can input their passion/ambitions into this app. It'll return a plethora of resources and activities they can do to make life more brighter. In essence, it would use the questions and motives of ikigai to suggest to a user how they can improve themselves in the form of "Quests".

The app process - logistics and execution:

1. User comes across website/app

2. User sees the minimum viable product (MVP) of the app. Realizes (hopefully) this app would be a good addition to their life. Perhaps the mvp will include something like a slogan. Or, on the landing page, a submission form with a mascot animal, asking them "What would you do on a rainy day?", and three choices. Here the user would answer, and receive some response from the animated mascot like, "You would love this movie", or "There's a book based on that, it's called *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka!". Of course, they may not like the choices. So here, we introduce the app "Moriko" to them, transitioning to the page: "Not your preference? Check out Moriko. A companion that makes life a little more meaningful." Something similar would be displayed if the user is happy with the suggestion, to make the user interested and keep them hanging

3. After user is interested, they decide to go further and install the app on their phone. They make an account

4. User takes a fun comprehensive test that asks them about their personality, their interests and activities. The algorithm would return an analysis based on psychology, and give feedback. So, after the analysis, these are some of the sections that **may** be available to them:

   a. A section that displays what their personality is like

   b. A gratitude section, user fulfills five things they are grateful and logs it, once daily

   c. A tab that leads them to an inspiration section based on ikigai:

      i. "Here's some things to can help you on your journey to finding a passion"

         ● Books, music, and movies recommendations

         ● Meditation feature

         ● Podcasts and blog resources catered to their aspirations

         ● Mini-quests: visit a place in the city that is suggested. This could be a museum of art, a library, a monument. Or go out on a research Quest.

         ● Miscellaneous-quest: suggests something the user is not familiar with. A person may not have any experience with learning languages, so this snippet in the app will suggest something like learning a new language. Or even exercise. I'm a firm believer that spontaneity and diverse activities will make life more interesting

5. User carries out said tasks, adds checkmarks to what they completed. Then find new exciting things as soon as they complete, or abandon a quest suggestion.

6. There'll be a weekly report on how they are doing, and this will add to a diagram, perhaps made in Vue.js, which illustrates an ikigai diagram. The more fulfilled they are in one aspect, the bigger that part of the diagram gets. Like a skill-tree in a rpg game.

Note: the app gives suggestions on activities that one can do alone without needing company. This is driving the point home that our lives can be meaningful even in solitude

Where this app would be used:

This app would be a web app and a phone app.

As a mobile app, users would have the same functionality as the PC in a responsive compact form, preferably in both iOS and Android systems.

As a PC app, I've supplemented a demo of how **ONE feature** in the landing page might look for **MVP purposes**, with the features added in. It is listed in my GitHub (/shafeetkh) as the repo "Moriko-Demo". This is not my own work, but a free template I found online.[2] Upon clicking Analyze, users will see a list of suggestions, such as book recommendations, movie, music, and activities they can do based on those two questions.

Screenshot of MVP sampler under landing page:

[2] **Contact Form 12 by Colorlib** https://colorlib.com/wp/free-html5-contact-form-templates/

Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has made the world more 'indoors' and as a result, boredom, monotony, loneliness, frustration and meaninglessness have become more widespread. Mental health issues have spiked. Low-income families are most affected by mental health issues.[3]

Moriko is a would-be app for adding more meaning during a period of history where connecting to ourselves is not talked about as much. Being comfortably alone with one's self can prove a beneficial way to combat the stagnant state during times in our lives.

This app is for personal growth, which makes the user take an engaging test to analyze their interests, preferences, spiritual factors, and perspectives. In turn, the app would return *Quests*. Quests include sections of suggestions such as a personal analysis summary, daily gratitude log, and inspiration motives: books, movies, and music suggestions. As well as mini-quests that direct them to do activities alone outdoors. Miscellaneous quests are there to broaden our horizons, giving us Quests that we may not necessarily be interested in, but doing so would add variety to our lives, slowly breaking the monotony pain point.

Users, upon completing Quests, have their ikigai diagram expanded in the areas they've completed. Like an RPG game, in which a character completes a quest from a class trainer and gains experience in a certain skill-tree, so too does Moriko add to the ikigai growth diagram. Users can see which part of the ikigai they need to work on, and opt in to receive more Quests pertaining to that specific area, e.g., "my 'Calling' section needs more attention - I should check what Quests and suggestions are in there."

The goal of this app is not to give people a buzz. It's about adding color to the colorless parts of life. It's about commitment. In a world where everything is about "being connected", Moriko aims to shine a light on the individual.

"To put it another way, imagine raindrops falling on a broad stretch of land. Each one of us is a nameless raindrop among countless drops. A discrete, individual drop, for sure, but one that's entirely replaceable. Still, that solitary raindrop has its own emotions, its own history, its own duty to carry on that history. Even if it loses its individual integrity and is absorbed into a collective something. Or maybe precisely because it's absorbed into a larger, collective entity."

— Haruki Murakami —

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[3] **Mental illness by household income**
http://inclusivedbq.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/30-Mental-Illness-by-Household-Income.png