INCLUSIVE
CAMPUS PROJECT

FEB 2021

VOICES OF N(US):
OUR MENTAL HEALTH STORIES

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION
GRANT 2020

SUPPORTED BY THE
OFFICE OF STUDENT AFFAIRS

Content Warning

Anxiety | Stress | Panic Attacks | Depression

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed herein are those of the author(s) and do not represent the views and opinions of the National University of Singapore or any of its subsidiaries or affiliates.

About us

The Inclusive Campus Project brings together collective voices in the NUS community to produce a series of publications. Through the process of narrating our experiences, we seek to encourage both the contributors and readers to reflect on our current state of inclusivity and inspire changes.

Each “Voices of N(US)” publication features:

- The personal experiences of students on campus
- The reflections of a student group after reading the personal stories
- A staff member’s response to the students’ perspectives

The title “Voices of N(US)" represents the project team’s vision of inclusivity. We want to bring across the idea of inclusivity as a state where every individual is valued within the community. Additionally, the pronoun “us” was used intentionally to highlight that inclusivity is a collective effort from us, for us.

We hope that these entries will give you new insights and inspire you to contribute to the diversity and inclusion efforts.

Xin Hui, Khye Bin, Wee Ling

Inclusive Campus Project

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Preface

By the Inclusive Campus Project Team

The poor mental health of university students is a well-established trend and a growing concern worldwide[1]. This is not at all surprising as most of us can personally testify to the stressors associated with academic pursuits. Therefore, for students facing other mental health conditions, university experiences and transitions into university would no doubt be an additional detriment to them. In fact, the onset of common mental illness occurs in adolescence and early adulthood which is precisely the age group of most university undergraduates[2].

Despite the prevalence and increase in awareness about mental health concerns, it remains a mark of stigma and exclusion. Worryingly, the public tends to perceive mental health conditions as an indication of personal failure and that people can recover from it if they wanted to[3]. Some also see that mental health conditions make people burdensome and incompetent to handle their responsibilities[4]. Furthermore, as meritocratic societal values tend to coincide with a worldview that we get what we deserve, this could reinforce the stigma experienced in Singapore. Specifically, people may hold the opinion that persons with mental illness have only themselves to blame if they are not achieving enough[5]. Therefore, in a highly competitive university setting, students may be fearful of seeking treatment or disclosing about their mental health for fear of affecting their prospects[6].

Nevertheless, the silver lining is that the student body and faculty members can make a difference in changing the status quo. In this instalment of Voices of N(US), we feature entries centring around the theme of mental health inclusion in the National University of Singapore (NUS). It contains perspectives from students who have experienced mental health challenges, a student group, and a staff from the Student Wellness Team. These contributors have advocated for mental health causes both within and outside of campus.

Read, reflect, respond.

Admittedly, meaningful change requires much more than our publication alone. As you read their entries, we encourage you to reflect on how you may play a role in this journey towards greater inclusivity. Most importantly, we hope that these perspectives can inspire you to respond in your various capacities.

Section 1:

Stories about Mental Health

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

By Tasneem M.

I struggle with anxiety.

I understand how you feel.

I feel nervous interacting with everyone around me. I could be sitting in a room full of strangers and feel that everyone is scrutinizing everything that I do. I worry that everyone is judging my character or appearance. When walking down the streets, I take note of every person that has glanced at me for more than 3 seconds; perceiving it to be a negative impression formed that is based on my appearance. I replay every conversation I've had during the day in my head. I scrutinize each one to ensure I didn't provide a response that was ambiguous enough to be interpreted negatively.

I understand how you feel.

Exams are a blur to me. Hours before the paper, I was told by a classmate that my hands were shaking uncontrollably. I hadn't noticed. My body would secrete so much adrenaline that I would be able to get by exam week with less than 2-3 hours of sleep a night. I would barely feel a difference. When the anxiety does escalate into a panic attack, I wouldn't realize it until I'm struggling to

breathe. I would experience sudden memory lapses; forgetting the simplest of things such as how to switch on my calculator…or where my eraser was placed…or what my student ID is. Two years ago, I had to be supervised by two teachers during my papers as there's always a possibility I could have a panic attack and collapse.

I understand how you feel.

I take a long time to get used to a new environment. I've always struggled with change. Even without having to speak to anyone, I feel extremely uneasy around large crowds. My heart starts pounding in my chest. My legs feel like jello. The adrenaline rushes through my veins. This feeling never goes away, even after being around the same group of people for a prolonged period of time. I can go hours without eating a proper meal due to the fear of ordering. Even among my closest group of friends, I keep questioning whether I am good enough and am wary of saying something wrong.

I understand how you feel.

I cannot stop worrying. There's this tiny voice inside my head that keeps telling me I am forgetting something. The voice never goes away. It causes me to wake up in a state of shock 3-4 times a night. I have checked everything but feel as though I am missing something.

I understand how you feel.

Anxiety is not…

The humiliation you feel when you fall on your face in public, and everyone stares at you.

BUT

Feeling like everyone is looking at you; scrutinizing your behaviour and appearance, making judgments on your character, and trying to make you feel bad about yourself, except there is no one in the room.

It is not…

The butterflies in your stomach that come and go with every major event such as an examination, job interview or presentation.

BUT

Continuing to feel nervous long after the event is over, without knowing why.

It is not…

The awkwardness felt when meeting a group of people for the first time.

BUT

The consistent fear of judgement and abandonment, even among the same group of friends you've known for years.

It is not…

The nervousness felt when texting someone important like your crush or boss.

BUT

The fear of having to text anyone at all.

It is not…

An excuse to get out of something.

BUT

A reason to work even harder.

It is not…

A fleeting emotion.

BUT

A lifestyle.

Inclusion is…

Acknowledging that everyone has different boundaries and personal limitations. An experience considered “exciting” or “thrilling” to one person may be overwhelming to someone else. An experience that is “normal” to most may be uncomfortable, or even painful for some.

Recognizing that not everyone will be open to talking about their condition. Many people with mental health conditions fight to keep their struggles hidden. Being candid about past negative experiences takes guts. It takes time for such courage to be nurtured.

Being open to multiple perspectives. Just because someone doesn’t fit a particular “mould” for someone struggling with mental health, doesn’t mean that their experiences or needs are invalid.

Not imposing biases onto someone else’s experience. It’s not appropriate to compare someone’s experience with what is portrayed in the media or stated in textbooks. It is even less constructive to decide on the validity of someone’s emotions based on your personal experiences and views.

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Anxiety is not a fleeting emotion, but a lifestyle.

Not assuming that I would be vocal about the distress I am feeling. Not everyone would be comfortable with voicing out their needs. An “out” should be available to everyone. Furthermore, everyone should have access to safe spaces without further questioning.

Accepting that people have different styles of working. Outside of class, the preference to work in solitude should be respected. Not everyone gains their energy from being around other people.

Understanding that problem-solving isn’t always the way to go. It is not sensible to propose therapy or medication. Sometimes, space is what someone needs most.

Looking beyond the label. We are so much more than our diagnoses. We are individuals with our own unique opinions, hobbies and personalities. No matter which stage of our mental health journey we are at, we deserve to be treated with kindness and respect.

How can we do better?

Professors…

Recognizing different forms of expressions. I do see the value of “class participation” as an assessment component. However, it must be acknowledged that the expectation of having to speak and communicate may be daunting for some. Not every student will willingly speak up in front of the entire class. It is not because such students are reluctant to contribute or any less invested in their education, but have the intense fear of negative evaluation by others or speaking itself. At the same time, the loudest student may be the most comfortable speaking in a public setting, but they are not an accurate representation of what the entire class knows or feels.

Hence, assuming the sustenance of “class participation”, I would propose the allowance for alternative forms of expression. Tutors could give students the option of either verbally expressing their answers or typing their ideas onto a padlet sheet. For typed responses, all entries should be within a word limit and uploaded during the tutorial itself. A different student could assist the tutor in reading out the typed responses to each tutorial. He could receive participation marks as compensation for his assistance.

Alternatively, a buddy system could be set up for students struggling with social anxiety or selective mutism. Before the inception of tutorials, these students could write-in to their respective tutors to request assistance.

They would then be assigned a “buddy” who could help them voice out ideas or opinions in class until the student feels comfortable speaking for himself. In this case, both the student and his “buddy” should be credited for ideas raised. This initiative would promote greater collaboration in the classroom, as well as instil greater awareness about anxiety disorders among students.

School Leaders…

School leaders, whether it be teaching staff or students, should recognize the importance of taking breaks. “Taking breaks” doesn’t mean lounging off or failing to optimize the time given for an activity, but instead refers to the provision of intervals for students to recharge after an emotionally-taxing endeavour.

For example, rather than resuming class after an examination, lecturers could allow for early dismissal to allow students to release any anxiety felt during the assessment. Although this is practiced by some lecturers, it is not consistent across all teaching staff. Teaching staff should also be granted more autonomy in removing assessments if students vocalize feelings of excessive stress, or feel that the assignment is not as beneficial to their learning.

Student leaders could likewise introduce more and longer breaks in between orientation activities to prevent burnout. A strict limitation should also be placed on the time in which all social activities (official and unofficial) are allowed to continue to allow for sufficient opportunities for rest without feelings of FOMO.

Student Affairs Committee…

The student affairs committee could improve on recognizing different forms of leadership. Many students have the leadership capacity but are deprived of the opportunities needed to nurture their potential.

Based on past experiences coordinating events on campus, I've found that the university favors students who focus entirely on results and efficiency, sometimes at the expense of the team's well-being. This defeats the purpose of an extracurricular activity as providing a respite from the stress of the classroom. The goal-oriented nature of such leaders may not be ideal when guiding students who struggle with anxiety. Students who are more anxious by nature are able to make significant contributions and value-add to the team, just not under the pressures of having to consistently produce results. True enough, I have had classmates who dropped out of non-academic initiatives due to the inability to cope with the additional deadlines.

The university could move towards encouraging a more visionary leadership style; a leadership style which drives progress and usher periods of change through inspiration. This would necessitate greater leniency with deadlines for non-academic events.

Students…

Students could be equipped with resources to better engage in open conversations about mental health, as well as communicate respectfully with their peers who have a mental health condition.

I feel that most students are curious to find out more about mental health and have open conversations about the topic of stigma. However, many are afraid to approach people who are suffering from mental health conditions due to the fear of saying something offensive or inappropriate.

Hence, I feel that students should be granted access to free webinars or workshops on respectful communication when speaking to someone struggling with mental health. These same webinars could be recommended to lecturers and other NUS staff. Furthermore, as mental well-being on campus is a prevalent concern, students could attend a mandatory module on Psychological first-aid vis LumiNUS. Similar to the “respect and consent” module, students would be imparted with the basic skills e.g. active listening, self-care to offer emotional support to their peers in times of crisis.

"I'm Fine."

By Hannah

My journey with depression and social anxiety started in secondary school but I didn't really understand what these two conditions were then. I only got diagnosed in my second year of university, when I was still in my original faculty. Initially, I didn't seek clinical support because I didn't perceive the symptoms I experienced as signs of depression and anxiety.

During that period, I was struggling with the responsibility to care for my family members who were battling with critical illnesses. There was once when I fainted because of my social anxiety and I ended up missing a major examination. That was when a professor in charge of student affairs in my faculty sensed that something was wrong and she asked to have a conversation with me. Later, she booked an urgent appointment for me at the University Health Centre, where I got diagnosed and started regular counselling and medication.

From then on, I started meeting regularly with this professor as well. My experiences with her and the other faculty staff were mixed though. While there were moments when she was empathetic, there were also times when she made me feel like I was at fault for responding in the way that I did. When my family members' conditions worsened, I decided to take a leave

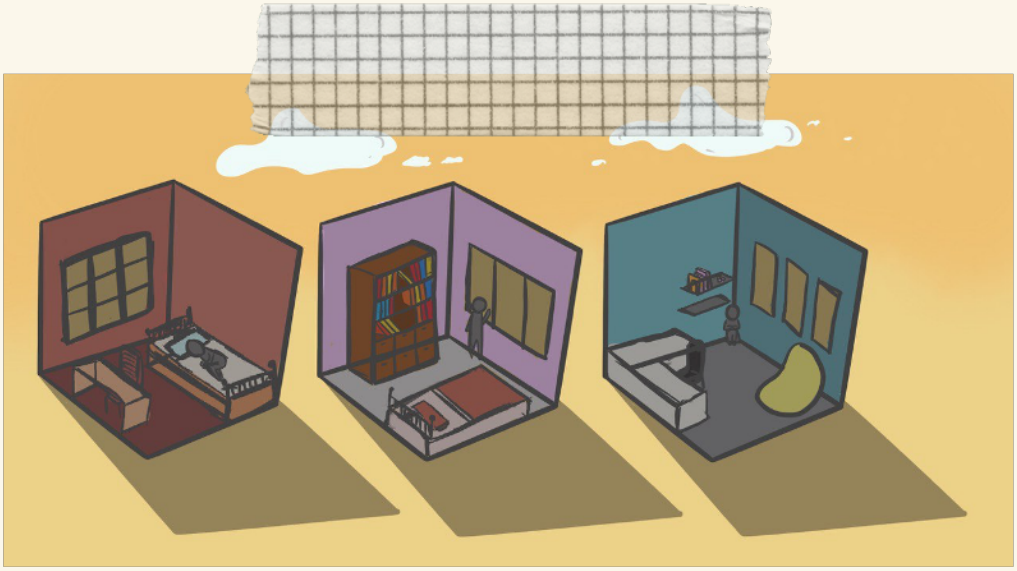
of absence. But returning back to school wasn't easy either. Some of the faculty members that I had encountered while trying to resume my studies also left me feeling incompetent about my ability to handle stress, but my depression wasn't just the result of stress alone.

After a prolonged period and various factors of consideration, I eventually transferred to another course in NUS whilst recovering from depression and anxiety. I'm thankful to have met very kind professors who extended their understanding to me when I needed more time to complete my assignments. Some of these professors also took the initiative to make conversations with me beyond just teaching. In university, there is a general tendency for professors to only focus on teaching and not connect with students at a more personal level, unless students reach out to them. However, not many students would do that.

Ultimately, inclusivity is about empathy. You can't make someone feel included if you don't understand what they are going through. Without this understanding, some might unintentionally make comments that invalidate a person's mental health experiences. For instance, in my own journey, some of my acquaintances have told me that I need to be "mentally stronger". While this is not meant to be hurtful per se, it can make a person feel as though they haven't been strong enough and hence they are struggling.

Nevertheless, I observed that the state of mental health inclusivity on campus has improved over the years. During the period when I was diagnosed, I barely knew about any

avenues to seek support. Now, I receive many email blasts about mental health support on a regular basis. There is also a burgeoning of student-led mental health projects, with students becoming more open to share about their mental health journeys. These stories are very helpful because people who read them would feel that they are less alone. Readers who are not experiencing any mental health challenges are also able to gain a better understanding of what their friends are going through. Speaking from personal experience, I also healed in the process of being vocal about my mental health journey. My vulnerability allowed others to reach out and connect with me, allowing me to realise that I wasn't alone. Of course, there is room for improvement to normalise conversations about mental health and increase the state of inclusivity. To do so, interventions at different levels are required.



It feels like it, but you are not alone.

As mentioned earlier, professors can play a pivotal role in creating an affirming environment for their students. Beyond the focus on academics, I think students would appreciate professors who are willing to get to know their students over informal chats about non-academic matters. More often than not, professors can give very good advice based on how they coped while pursuing their undergraduate and masters' studies. Furthermore, these attempts to build a relationship with the students are crucial for the student's self-esteem. As my peers are slightly younger than me since I transferred course, I noticed that they are still finding their identities. For many of them, grades still heavily influence their sense of self-worth. When professors seek to know students outside of the classroom context, it can help the students to realise that their value is beyond their grades.

Ultimately, inclusivity is about empathy.

Therefore, it is also important that professors say the 'right' things to the students. Professors definitely don't have it much easier than us, the students. As much as the work environment may not allow professors to open up about their difficulties, there should still be attempts to create a safe and supportive space for the professors at the management level. There can also be programmes and interventions to raise their awareness about mental health support. Ultimately, if professors are unable to cope with their own struggles, there would be trickle down effects to the student body.

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...having different layers of intervention is what it takes to create a more inclusive campus.

Last but not least, student initiatives would go a long way at improving mental health inclusivity. Rather than organising ad hoc events, I think students who are interested to start mental health projects on campus can consider connecting people with similar experiences to build a more sustained peer support. This may allow students to be more open to sharing as those with similar experiences may be able to understand better. At the end of the day, having different layers of intervention is what it takes to create a more inclusive campus.

Our Faith can Move Mountains

By KX

My mental health journey is definitely a roller coaster ride, but I believe that it is one that is always going higher. As with each dip, there are always lessons to be learned. I'd like to share some of my struggles and lessons.

1. Focusing on the right issue

For someone who has been struggling with on-off depression, I often find myself at lows which I promised myself not to end up in and thus, being really hard on myself. I realised that the issue isn't to avoid ending up at similar lows that I was in. In fact, life is bound to have lower lows. The issue was that I was hard on myself.

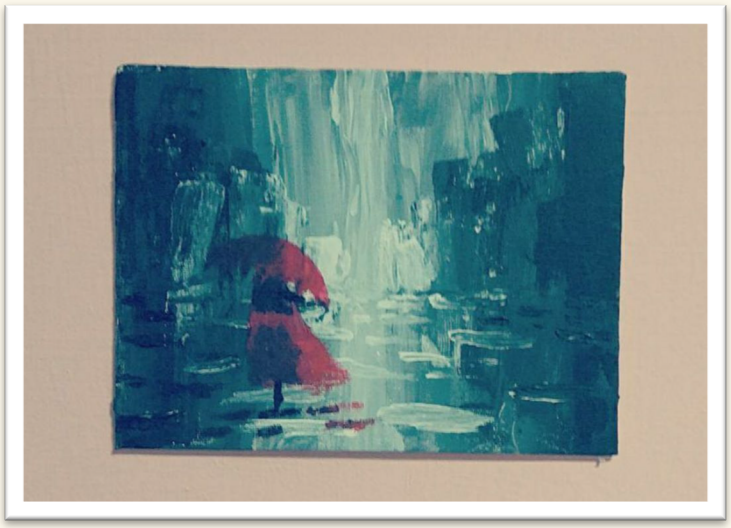
2. Self-awareness needs to be complemented with the right actions

I am also someone who prides myself for being highly self-aware and always having a growth mentality. Hearing this, it may sound like I possess skills that will enable me to get through dark periods. But with depression, it is quite the opposite. Being self-aware and mentally ill can be so exhausting as not only do I know when I am being self-destructive, I watch myself do it anyway. Even though I believe that self-awareness is the first step towards recovery, finding the capacity to take action and constantly practise self-loving and caring habits is what ultimately gets me through the days.

Being self-aware and mentally ill can be so exhausting as not only do I know when I am being self-destructive, I watch myself do it anyway.

3. It is better to seek help and get a diagnosis (if there is one)

In 2016 when I was first diagnosed with my mental illness, I was terrified of the stigma, I was worried that my mental health records will affect whether I get a job in the future, I was worried whether my peers or future peers will look down on me etc... But I realised that I didn't need to worry about all of these as they are not true. Future job prospects will unlikely be affected as I don't have to declare my mental health history if I do not want to, I still managed to make new friends, and all of them accepted me even after I shared about my past illness. All these stigmas are false and are not as important as my health. As of 2020, when my depressive episode hit again, I've learned to seek help immediately even if I need to get a new diagnosis. It is important to remember that our diagnoses do not define us. Instead, they are our stepping stones to receiving help. We also need to be mindful not to accept our diagnosis as an identity, because we are not our diagnosis.



Paintings from KX's art therapy in 2016

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I am extremely grateful for all my friends and loved ones who have stood by my side, to check in on me, and to always show their concern for me. My support system is really what kept me going at every stage of my life. I will also like to note that recovery and healing is not a linear journey, there will be highs and lows and revisiting of issues you may think you have already resolved. However, through it all, you have to believe that you are getting better, and you will.

I was very fortunate to have supportive peers all around me who will often check in on me via text. My professors were all very understanding and were very willing to extend the deadline of submissions for me. The counsellor in University Counselling Centre assured me that I will be able to finish my academic semester and was liaising with the faculty student support system to help me through my academic year. All these supports really alleviated a lot of academic stress off me and I am so grateful for them.

To me, mental health inclusivity means being completely comfortable to reach out or to seek help when one is experiencing a mental health difficulty. Right now, I think the mental health inclusivity on campus is rather good. There is a clear support structure on campus (faculty student support group, counselling services, understanding professors) and the campus as a whole is rather inclusive. However, I feel that more mental health awareness is still needed.

We can increase awareness through various mental health campaigns and publicity efforts, in hopes that one day we will eradicate the stigma behind mental illness completely and strive towards normality. I would also like to propose the hiring of more counsellors in school. With increased awareness, we will expect more people to reach out for help. The waiting time for a counselling appointment usually takes weeks and often students who reach out for help are in need of help rather urgently. Nonetheless, the University Counselling Centre has a walk-in option for emergencies which is very important. Lastly, I would like to see more students taking the initiative to facilitate conversations and activities with regards to mental wellbeing and mental illness, this will act as a pillar of support for everyone involved.

Reflections

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Empathy is... simply listening, holding space, withholding judgment, emotionally **connecting**, and communicating that incredibly healing message of, **'You're not alone**'.

BRENE BROWN

What stood out for you as you read about the students' experiences?

Section 2:

Student Group's Response

We're Listening: A PSS Perspective

By NUS Peer Student Supporters

We are grateful for the authors of the essays for trusting us with their experiences. Reading them has only highlighted the importance of sharing more such experiences to create awareness.

What struck us most was the diversity of experiences. While all authors had been/ are struggling with mental health issues, the responses they received from the peers and faculty were varied. Some received adequate support from their surroundings while others felt that people were lacking in empathy. This highlights a gap in the homogeneity of the mental health support practices being undertaken across campus.

The diversity in their approaches to managing their challenges was also eye-opening. While some turned to art, others tried therapy. It was heartening to see that they have found solutions that work for them.

A key takeaway from reading the essays is the importance of registering the feedback provided by those facing mental health challenges while trying to make our campus more inclusive. They would be able to suggest solutions that plug the gaps in present policies that may not fully address the problems faced by the students.

But what does mental health inclusivity mean for us? Google defines inclusive as “aiming to provide equal access to opportunities and resources for people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized, such as those having physical or mental disabilities or belonging to other minority groups.”

We believe that mental health inclusivity is precisely that – equal treatment for individuals who might be facing mental health challenges. It means not shunning them as being “abnormal” or “weird”. It means recognizing that mental health issues do not define a person, just like one’s race should not. It is a part of them but not all of them. It also entails accepting the choices people make and not enforcing our opinions on them. Everyone has their own journey to make, and while it is important to be empathetic and encouraging, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Hence, anyone facing mental health issues should be free to choose their healing path. In an ideal inclusive world, everyone would feel psychologically safe, accepted for who they are and respected for the choices they make, regardless of their mental health state.

While the members of the NUS community are generally accepting towards those with mental illnesses and are willing to make friends, there exist many who are hesitant to forge close relationships. Moreover, although students are largely willing to extend help to those affected by mental illnesses, they appear to be less willing to help themselves, implying that they still continue to view it as a mark of shame.

However, the state of mental health inclusivity on campus has been constantly improving. In addition to existing support services such as the University Counselling Centre and the Peer Student Support Services, there has also been a rise in new projects (i.e. NUSFriendlyBot), and de-stressing events recently. These identify and target gaps in current solutions to encourage more students to seek help. The fact that many of these are student-led suggest that students within the NUS community are becoming more concerned about mental health inclusivity on campus and are working to abolish the stereotypes associated with mental illnesses. Along with regular email blasts reminding us to care for our mental health and the sharing of personal stories (e.g. A Library of Unspoken Stories), these initiatives are a step towards increasing awareness among the NUS population about the stigma associated with mental illnesses, cultivating a better educated and empathetic cohort.

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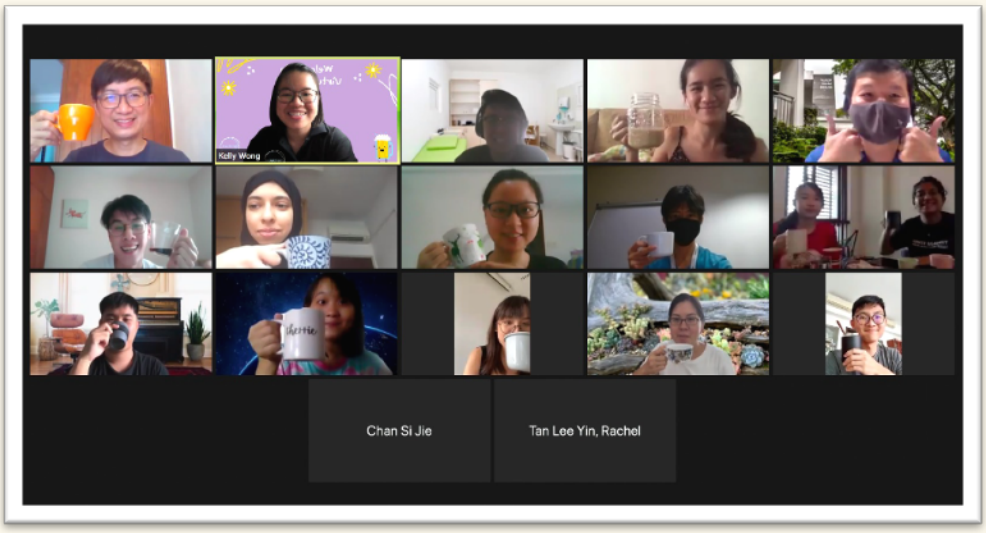
these initiatives are a step towards increasing awareness... cultivating a better educated and empathetic cohort.

In the midst of these initiatives, Peer Student Supporters (PSS) came about as a long-term project to maintain continuity in student efforts to promote mental health. Our work mainly surrounds mental health advocacy and lending a listening ear to fellow peers. In our interactions

at Pitstop, we incorporate mental health topics into the conversation with the hopes that one day, mental health will no longer be a 'Too Much Information' topic. In these conversations, we also seek to validate the struggles that fellow peers face, no matter how small or big it may seem. However, we recognize that not everyone finds comfort in talking or socializing. Hence, our projects such as the mental wellness week workshops, virtual pitstop and podcast aim to provide diverse outlets for self-care which will hopefully hit the mark for all of us on campus. PSS are students just like everyone else – we are not counsellors, neither can we change the world overnight. However, small as we may be, we want to forge a place on campus where conversations about mental health are encouraged. Singapore is slowly but surely progressing toward better mental health recognition and inclusivity – this is our effort to play a part in supporting this progress.

Overall, members of the NUS community should be able to understand that being mentally distressed does not equate to being mentally weak. Perhaps more stories of people who had experienced mental illnesses and sought help - either on their own accord or encouraged by those around them - eventually leading to their lives being filled with greater contentment and fulfilment, can be published across the community to emphasize that help-seeking is not a sign of weakness and that it is important to do so early. We would like to see more students affected by mental illnesses come forward and approach for help without feeling shameful about it.

Participants with their plant babies after a Terrarium workshop (February 2020)



Mindful coffee brewing workshop during our wellness month (October 2020)! ☕

Those around affected individuals should also be more supportive towards them, be able to identify signs and not hesitate to talk about it instead of avoiding the topic. This can perhaps be achieved through widespread events that allow people to understand how to react and offer support to distressed individuals, as well as the importance of doing so. While as Peer Student Supporters, we are a small group of individuals equipped with skills such as lending a listening ear, we also believe that such skills are akin to life skills and should be instilled among other members of the NUS community.

...We incorporate mental health topics into the conversation with the hopes that one day, mental health will no longer be a 'Too Much Information' topic.

For any general enquiries about NUS Peer Student Supporters, you may contact them via their Instagram (@nus.pss). If you need a listening ear, you may arrange a time with them via email (OSAcares@nus.edu.sg).

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I cannot do all the good that the world needs. But the world needs **all the good that I can do**.

JANA STANFIELD

What can you do to make your community more inclusive?

Section 3:

NUS Staff's Response

Those who help, find help

By Ms Teo Li Mian, Sharon

I was asked to be part of this project and share my thoughts with regards to mental wellness and health in the university from a staff perspective from student wellness. This is a topic close to my heart and keeps me always on the “GO” trying to create more awareness through education. After reading stories of student experiences gathered for this project, one word came to mind: Thankful. Thankful that there are students who are willing to share their personal vulnerabilities so that others can find strength through their times of weakness. Thankful that we as a community acknowledge the importance of supporting one another through their struggles, be it physical, emotional, social, or identity struggles. Thankful that there are resources in place at the university so that no one needs to go through it alone. Thankful that there are rooms for discussion on these topics of mental health. To all who shared their stories, may you find the light at the end of the tunnel, and may the light you found be the lighthouse for others to be guided. Never apologise for being sensitive or emotional. It’s a sign that you have a big heart and that you aren’t afraid to let others see it. Showing your emotions is a sign of STRENGTH.

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Never apologise for being sensitive or emotional. It’s a sign that you have a big heart and that you aren’t afraid to let others see it. Showing your emotions is a sign of STRENGTH.

Being in a society where a large population is given equal opportunities to education, jobs, and all, we learn to also live harmoniously together in Singapore. Inclusiveness often tugs the hearts of people because that is how we were taught and learnt to live in this country, a home for everyone and no man left behind. Of course, there are always rooms for progression and changes to accommodate every denomination. Someone once shared this perception of what inclusivity means: Inclusivity is not Tolerance but Acceptance. We can tolerate for a short time but acceptance requires clarity. Until an individual learns new perspectives that open up their eyes to see the differences, understand them, and accept them, there will always be strife and disputes among one another. Being inclusive can be divided into three categories: body, mind, and soul. Body refers to the biological makeup of a person. Mind refers to the mental state of mind – sane or sound, ill or fine. Lastly, the soul refers to belief systems and customs. To tolerate can be seen as staying away or having a time frame before a negative expression occurs but acceptance embraces the differences every individual, race, or culture brings to the

pallet. When we allow our eyes to understand and find, we can include one and all. I do not want to sound nationalistic but if we have reflected well in the Singapore pledge which should not be unfamiliar to those who have been through Singapore's education system, it is the best reminder of what inclusivity means and how we as citizens or people living in this country can practice tolerance and acceptance for one and all. We can begin with tolerance but ultimately we should find clarity and strive towards acceptance.

We, the citizens of Singapore,
pledge ourselves as one united people,
regardless of race, language or religion,
to build a democratic society,
based on justice and equality,
so as to achieve happiness,
prosperity and progress for our nation.

The next possible question which may be asked would be, what is the state of inclusivity on our NUS campus? Being in a multicultural environment has become part and parcel of growing up in Singapore. In a country that consists of many different categories of people in our living spaces, we learn how to live and learn harmoniously. We are as inclusive as we can be with much room for societal growth. Our campus at the National University of Singapore is a reflection of our society where it includes many individuals from all walks of life and nationality. Education at the university does not discriminate against an individual based on their colour, health nor wealth. From my lens of observation, there are great works within

the campus to provide students an environment to feel safe and homely. For example, we have many students from China and they can easily find their home-style cuisine around campus which brings them comfort. Students with special needs can continue to join in school activities with the help of our support officers who assist students with navigation around campus. Students who are faced with a mental illness can easily find someone to speak to or seek help from the University Health Centre. Of course, there will always be a flip side to the coin and nothing is perfect. Students often reflect that they face loneliness even though there are so many activities or people with whom they are living together. Some may be left out from social circles because they have different interests and ways of life. Will there ever be perfect inclusivity? In my opinion, no. Unless we are all robots and we function and think the same manner, inclusivity will only be based on a certain level of tolerance because not everything should be accepted nor condoned. Every human being will have their prejudice due to their exposures, experiences, and belief systems. There will always be room for improvements such as being open to listening to one another's ideas and opinions rather than allowing past achievements to be the blockage to communication. Mix around with international students, learn about their culture, and don't allow prior discriminating knowledge to hinder your interactions. Enjoy making new friends with eyes of openness rather than using a judgemental lens.

As a staff member who advocates for wellness, I applaud many good works and initiatives set up on our campus to aid students who are faced with mental health difficulties. Below are the offices working towards providing a safe space for all students.

Office of Student Affairs, Student Wellness

1. Every semester, the Office of Student Affairs offers a Design Your Own Module: Peer Supporting Peer to students who are passionate about mental health and want to stretch out their hands to the university community. Students can find support from our trained peer student supporters regarding academic or personal life issues. All peer student supporters are supervised by a staff member to better support the student body.

2. We are also constantly on the lookout to encourage training and workshops to faculties, halls, residences, clubs and societies, and varsity teams to be trained and educated with mental health literacy and befriending skills. This would increase the number of students on the lookout for other students who need help with mental health.

3. Trained Peers Student Supporters serving under OSA are dedicated to creating opportunities and awareness, promoting inclusivity, and advocating for mental wellness through events and peer helping sessions.

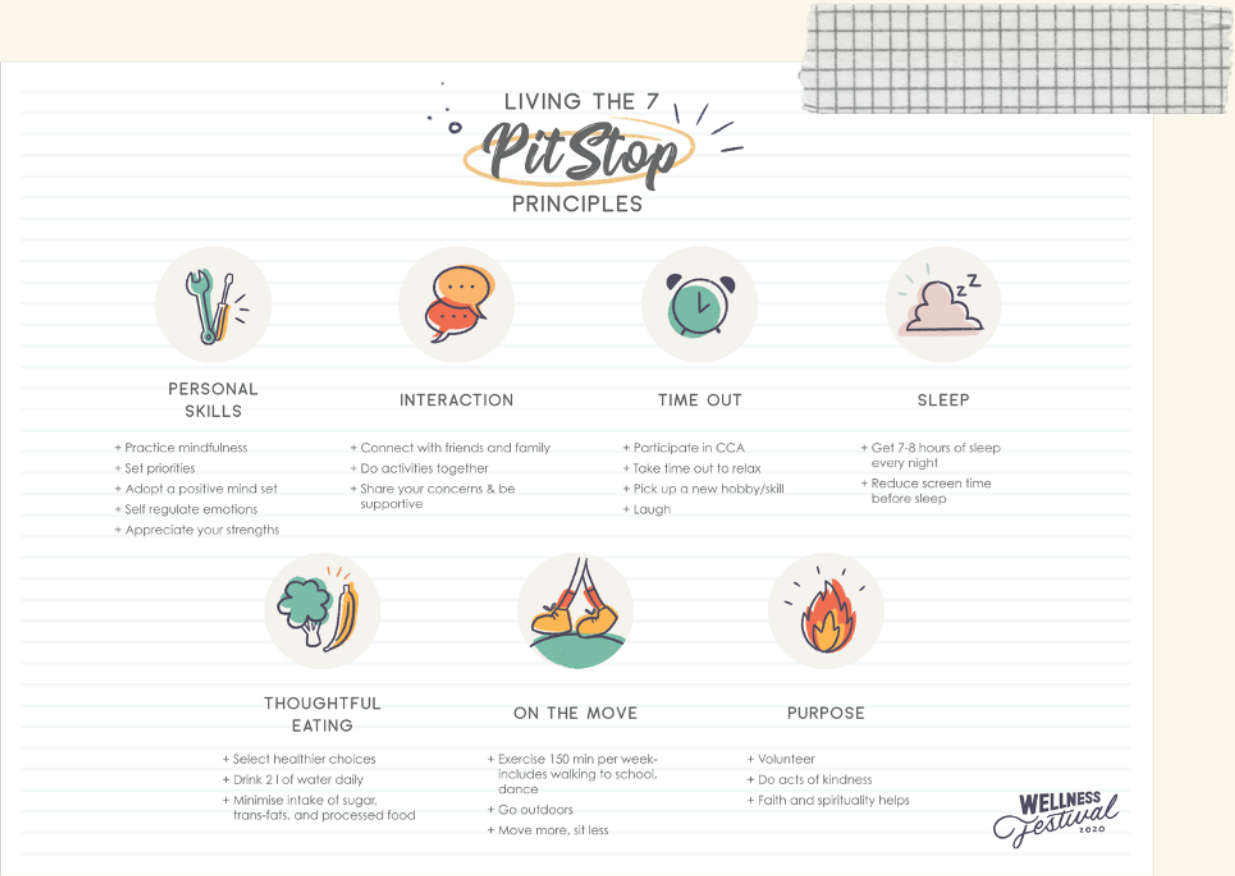
University Health Centre

1. Students can seek medical advice from professionals at University Health Centre. Services such as Medical Assistance, Mental Health Assessment, and Counselling can be sought after.

Hall and Residences

1. Teams of pastoral care staff and student leaders living on campus to provide care and assistance to those in need. Students with mental health difficulties can also speak to their trusted student leaders or Masters from their Halls or Residential Colleges.

If there could be a target for change or progress, it would be working towards a cohesive and inclusive university together. It would be a delight to see students finding enjoyment in acquiring knowledge and professors finding satisfaction in passing on their experiences. This is especially since many reflected that their poor mental health stems from the overemphasis on grades. Relationships, being the next concern for many, also affects mental health greatly. Finding comrade spirit rather than stepping on one another to climb the success ladder. To be at the top alone is lonely; it is always better when we have others around us. Mental Health starts with maintaining yourself. Meanwhile, to support those among us with mental health challenges, you can be their friend, provide a listening ear (but not overwhelm them with solutions), and watch out for differences in behaviours, especially during periods such as project deadlines or exams. In addition, you can also read up more on mental health, observe the people around you, and if in doubt, seek help from professionals within the campus. This way, we can make the campus more inclusive for people with mental health challenges and improve the mental health of members of the community as a whole.



7 PITSTOP Principles

If you would like to speak to the OSA Student Wellness Managers, please feel free to reach out to them.

Email: OSAcares@nus.edu.sg

?

Our lives begin to **end** the day we become **silent** about the things that **matter**.

MARTIN LUTHER KING

What would you advocate for?

Section 4:

Now What?

Now What?

By the Inclusive Campus Project Team

Putting together this publication was a journey of learning for us as much as it hopefully was for you, our readers. Indeed, this learning journey was what we set out to do – to use the process of bringing together the voices of the community to understand the state of inclusivity, what we are doing well, and what we can do better.

Now that you have read the perspectives of our contributors, what stood out to you? What stirred an emotion in your heart? What made you pause for another second to think? Sit with those thoughts and emotions.

Admittedly, meaningful change requires much more than our publication alone. We titled our project the “Inclusive Campus Project”, but it should not be the end all be all. Making the campus inclusive does not end with the release of our publications. Your actions matter as well, if not even more.

So… now what?

We leave you to answer.

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* Names marked with asterisks are aliases to protect the identity of the contributors who preferred to be anonymous.

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Share with us your thoughts after reading the publication!

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Scan the QR code or click on this link to complete our survey. For any queries, comments, and feedback, please email to voicesofnus.icp@gmail.com

INCLUSIVE CAMPUS PROJECT

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