



March 2023

Brave Choices: Student Journeys in Mental Health



Introduction

The Health Promotion Programs team leads all of the non-clinical mental health supports for students offered through Health & Wellness at the St. George Campus of the University of Toronto. As a continuation of an existing partnership, the Health Promotions team has enlisted the Innovation Hub to engage in design research with students focusing on one key question: how do students support their mental health? We hope that the insights from this research will help the Health Promotions team co-create future program and service offerings.

Methods



At the Innovation Hub, **we strive to understand students' experiences, as told to us through their stories, and allow that understanding to inspire design.** We explore the 'problem space' in all textures—moving beyond the what questions to the underlying whys and hows—rather than jumping to solutions. To achieve this, students describe their experiences to our student researchers in dialogue to ensure that we generate authentic data that helps us to understand their diverse perspectives and reveal unmet needs that will inspire future designs.

In September 2022, we initiated a widespread call for participants for an event entitled “Tell us how you Take Care of your Mental Health” across various communications channels. We received interest from 446 students who responded to the call and shared brief comments in their responses.

We then hosted **four open-dialogue feedback sessions in October using empathetic and story-based methods for data collection.** Invitations were sent to a diverse set of students, prioritizing students from equity-deserving populations and ensuring that students represented a variety of programs, study levels, international and domestic students, commuter and non-commuter students, and those with both positive and negative sentiments about their own mental health based on their responses.

A total of **32 students attended these sessions**, and an additional **2 students participated using an alternative format of submitting responses via a written journal** for accessibility purposes. Our data set was transcribed and de-identified and included the feedback session transcripts, journal responses, and short-answer question responses.

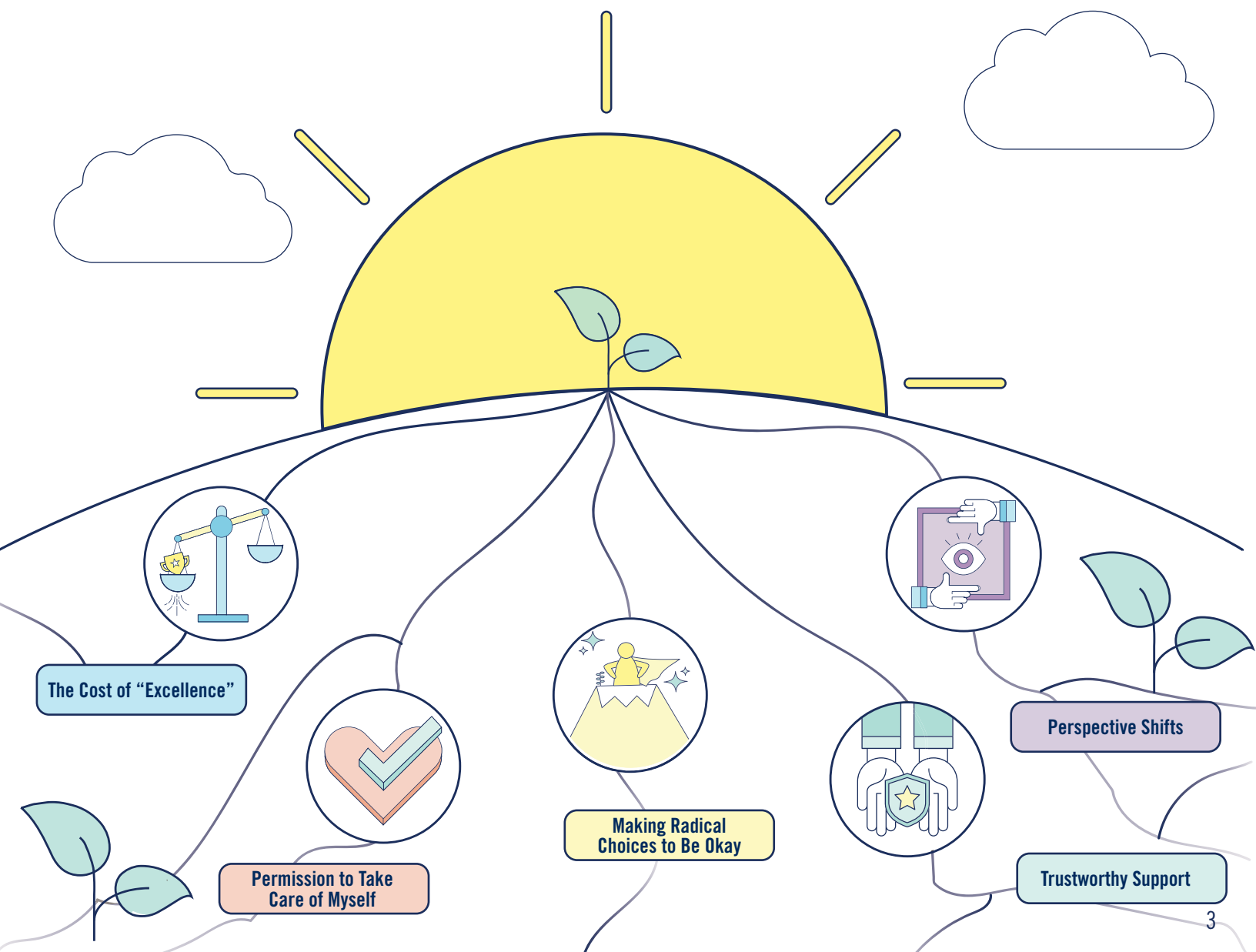
In our examination of the data, we used grounded analytical techniques to gain a deeper understanding of the core needs students communicated and developed a vision based on our insights. We synthesized stories into personas to bring student needs to life. We also developed design principles intended to serve as guidance for future co-creation sessions and the design of future programs and services.

For the second phase of the project, we hosted co-creation sessions to share key findings from the January 2023 report and hear students' thoughts and reactions. We also engaged in idea generation activities to hear students' ideas for non-clinical programs and resources that can be implemented to take care of mental health. We spoke to **24 students across 2 co-creation sessions.** Insights from the co-creation sessions and ideas generated by students are contained in the *Co-Creation at Health & Wellness* and *Design Principles* section of this report.

Our Findings

Vision: When students make brave choices, they build lifelong resilience.

We found that students face significant challenges with transitioning into university and navigating the academic rigour required to succeed. In almost all situations, students put academics above anything else, usually resulting in a decline in their ability to care for their mental health. We noticed that students who prioritize their mental health find the courage to take radical action that defies the status quo of pushing harder to achieve their academic goals. When students take these brave steps, they experience perspective shifts, empowering them to create more balance between academics and other aspects of their life. These perspective shifts enable students to experience positive mental health while facing the same academic rigour.



The Cost of “Excellence”



Pursuit of Achievement

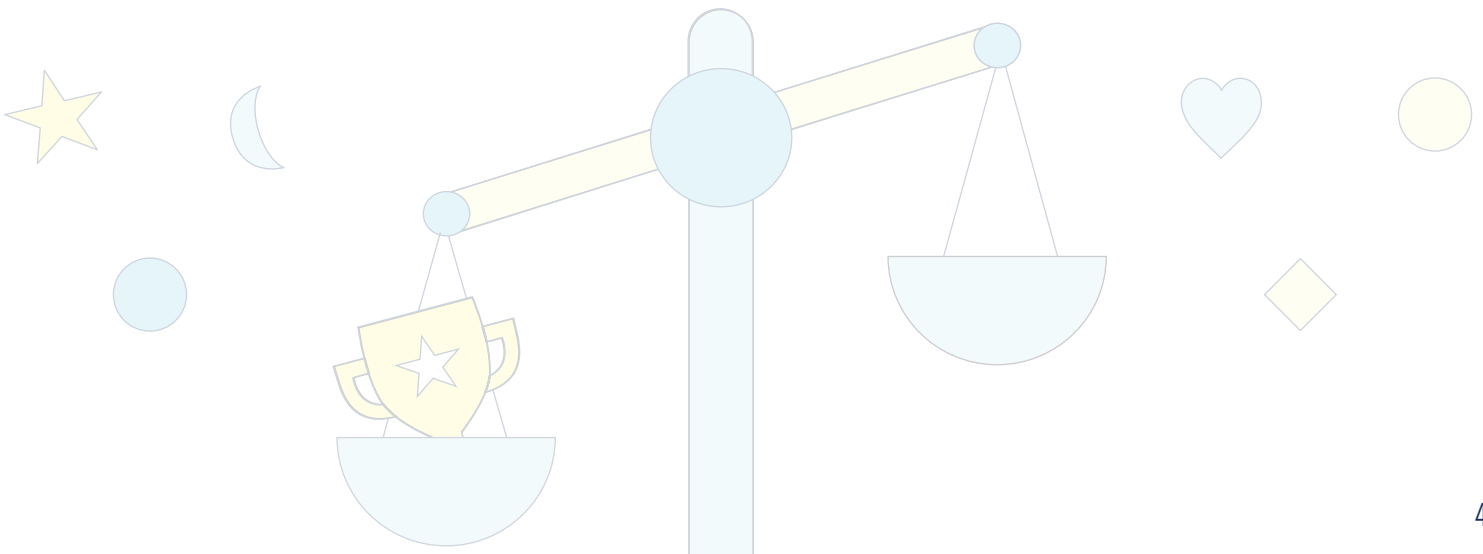
Students are **achievement-oriented and generally place a higher value on their academic endeavours more than anything else**. Student stories revealed that they feel pressure from themselves and others around them. The inner drive for achievement is strong for students and often results in pushing hard academically while deprioritizing other activities that support their mental health.

- Students expressed that when stress and anxiety arose from working on challenging assignments and studying for final exams, their initial reaction was to push through until the end of the semester before taking care of their mental health.
- Students shared that they put tremendous pressure on themselves, which was reinforced by the pressure they felt from families and instructors. For example, one student shared that they placed a lot of pressure on themselves to meet their subject POST (program of study) and continued to place more pressure on themselves to stay in the program and achieve a certain GPA.

Stress is the New Normal

Students want to feel **accomplished at university and will set high standards for themselves to achieve academic success**. Students told us that pressure to excel academically causes them to tirelessly meet the expectations they set for themselves, leaving them feeling overwhelmed and exhausted.

- Student stories demonstrated that driving hard to achieve academic success feels strenuous to them and leaves them feeling that struggling is normal, ignoring warning signs of waning mental health.
- One student shared they had strong emotional reactions to physical spaces on campus because they associated them with failing to meet their high academic standards.
- Students expressed that they constantly compared their academic performance to their peers, making them feel stressed and doubting their skills and abilities. The pressure students feel to excel and be competitive academically amongst their peers made them feel frustrated with themselves if they did not feel they were “good enough” academically.



The Cost of “Excellence”



I Can Do it All by Myself

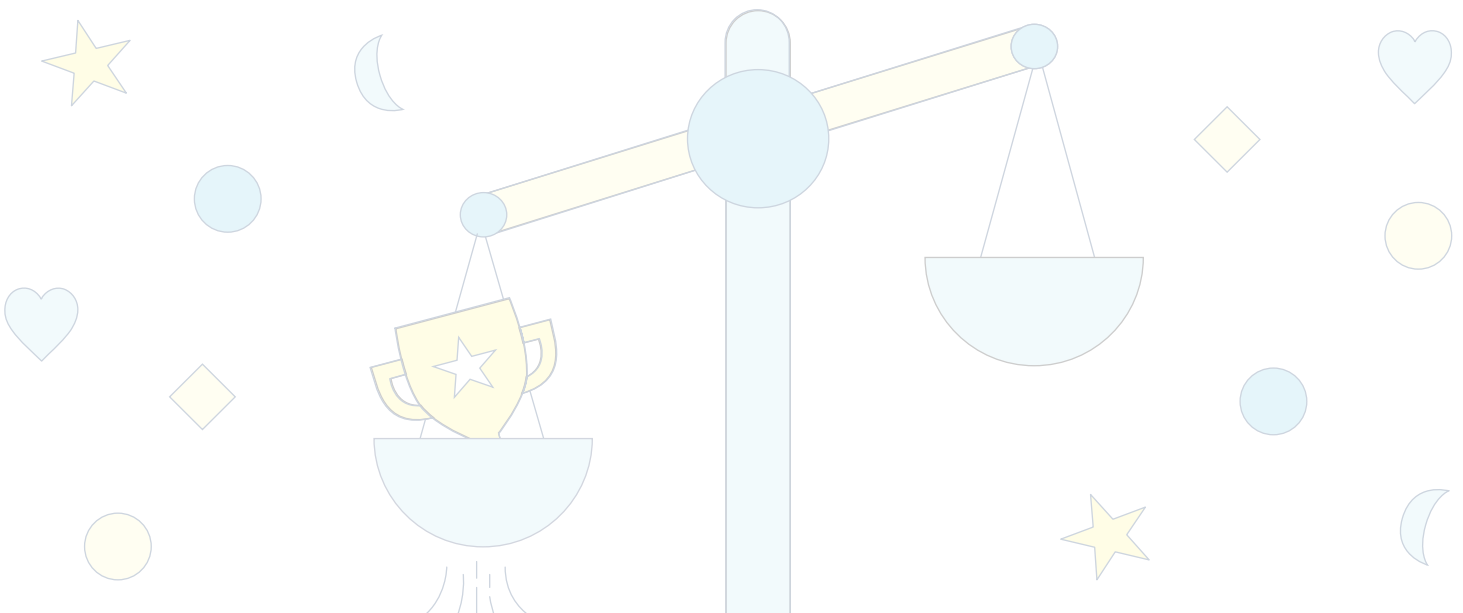
Students want to feel **capable of success both socially and academically during their time at university**. Student stories demonstrated that they feel strongly that they must manage challenging moments on their own without asking for help. A belief that fellow students are not struggling with similar challenges can create a sense of imposter syndrome, increasing the difficulty that students face in asking for help.

- Some student stories showed that they don't reach out for help until they are almost at the point of crisis. For example, one student described feelings of increasing despair about a challenging relationship with a supervisor that turned to feeling hopeless. When this student finally confided in a friend about their struggles, they found the courage to discuss the issue with their supervisor and resolved the issue.
- Many students spoke of the frustration they felt when the coping strategies they used in high school were not as effective in university. Rather than ask for help, students shared with us that they pushed harder to overwork themselves in hopes of meeting expectations from courses and supervisors, even to the detriment of their mental health.

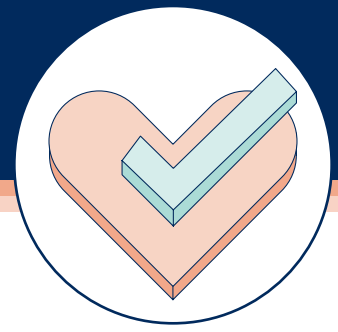
Recognition is Validation

Students value **receiving recognition for their academic work**. The significant amount of effort that students put into their studies creates a need for tangible validation to help them feel they are meeting the expectations of excellence they think the university embodies.

- One student shared that they experienced a lack of recognition from their peers and professor for their contributions to an academic project. The student felt that the lack of recognition was unfair, negatively impacting their mental health and sleep.
- One student mentioned that when a professor acknowledged the challenges of being a student, they felt energized to meet their academic obligations. Receiving acknowledgement from professors about their academic performance seems to strengthen students' self-esteem and boost their confidence.



Permission to Take Care of Myself



Meeting Basic Needs

Students value feeling **secure in their daily lives**, especially when it comes to living conditions and the ability to afford necessities. Students shared that when their basic needs were not met, it made all other aspects of being a student more difficult and took attention away from caring for their mental health.

- Students reported that financial aid granted them a sense of security that positively impacted their mental health. For example, a graduate student shared that their financial funding enabled them to worry less about finances and therefore spend more time doing activities they enjoyed, which helped them better cope with academic stress.
- Many students shared stories of housing insecurity. One student shared that the paid work they needed to do to afford housing occupied so much of their time, making it difficult for them to begin to consider their mental health.

Invited to Take Care of Me

Students expressed that feeling **invited to take care of their mental health by trusted individuals was important** for their mental health. Student stories demonstrated that when a trusted individual recognized their challenges and encouraged them to seek support, they felt like they deserved to feel better and that it was okay to ask for help.

- One student shared that they felt validated when their instructor encouraged students to prioritize mental health over academics. The student mentioned that hearing their instructor speak about the importance of mental health gave them an opportunity to reflect on their mental health needs and act accordingly.
- Students shared that when they felt staff and instructors were supportive of efforts students take to prioritize their mental health, they felt a sense of approval to take care of their own mental health.

Learning from the Example of Others

Students shared how **seeing others take steps to care for their mental health encouraged them to prioritize their own well-being**. In an environment where students feel compelled to prioritize academic success above their well-being, they looked for examples around them to affirm that prioritizing mental wellness while fulfilling academic responsibilities is a wise and normalized choice.

- Students highlight the significance of seeing their peers and instructors bravely prioritize their mental health. Many students shared that the examples of others made them feel that they were not alone when building up the courage to finally act on taking care of their mental health.
- Students valued connecting with and getting support from peers, friends, and mentors who came from a similar cultural background as them. Students shared that when reaching out for guidance on academic challenges or developing healthy coping strategies, they preferred reaching out to peer support they could relate to.

Making Radical Choices to Be Okay



Courageous Acts

Students need to have the **courage to take actions that deviate from their usual priorities**. Student stories showed us that their default priorities were always to focus on academics, but there were times when their mental health started to suffer. During times of suffering, students had to challenge their expectations of themselves and do something different in favour of their mental well-being. When students took action to take care of their mental health instead of dismissing it in favour of academic goals, they described these actions as requiring bravery to defy the status quo.

- Students explained that they often reached a low point in their mental health that pushed them to do something they had not done before, such as reach out for support.
- Some students described engaging in self-care activities such as volunteering, socializing, and trying to get organized. Engaging in these activities was a turning point for students, where they gained a better sense of how to care for themselves.
- Students often felt overwhelmed during their transition between their undergraduate and graduate studies. As they progressed further in their programs, some students took a brave leap of faith to attend workshops to develop coping strategies and an increased awareness of the ability to handle adversity.

Academic Success and Wellness Can Co-Exist

Students want to feel **empowered to complete their academic obligations without compromising their mental health**. Students shared that, at times, they felt it was not feasible to work towards their academic goals while maintaining wellness. Prioritizing wellness can go against the status quo amongst students, so feeling capable of managing both priorities can allow them to feel like they can succeed in future endeavours.

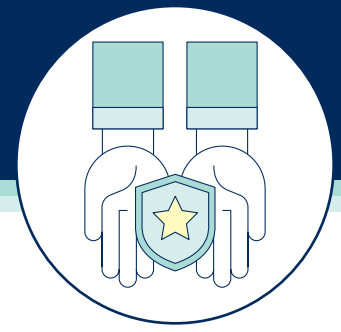
- Students shared that when academic workloads were particularly heavy, they de-prioritized mental health because they felt they did not have the time and resources given their academic obligations.
- Students expressed that receiving support through academic accommodations allowed them to feel like they could manage both academics and taking care of themselves. Feeling like they could manage both priorities improved their emotional states and empowered them to perform to the best of their abilities in their studies.

Finding Meaning Beyond Academics

Students value having a **sense of meaning and purpose outside of their academics**. Students shared that when they took steps to care for themselves and make mental health a priority, they began to realize the value of non-academic activities. Students expressed that finding fulfilling activities provided a sense of meaning and purpose which helped them recognize their strengths and build their self-esteem.

- Some students shared that joining student groups and organizations helped them discover more about themselves, cope with their mental health effectively, and find meaning in life beyond academic work.
- Some students mentioned that speaking to someone at the university or a healthcare provider helped them put things in perspective and gave them a sense of purpose beyond academics.

Trustworthy Support



Can I Trust You?

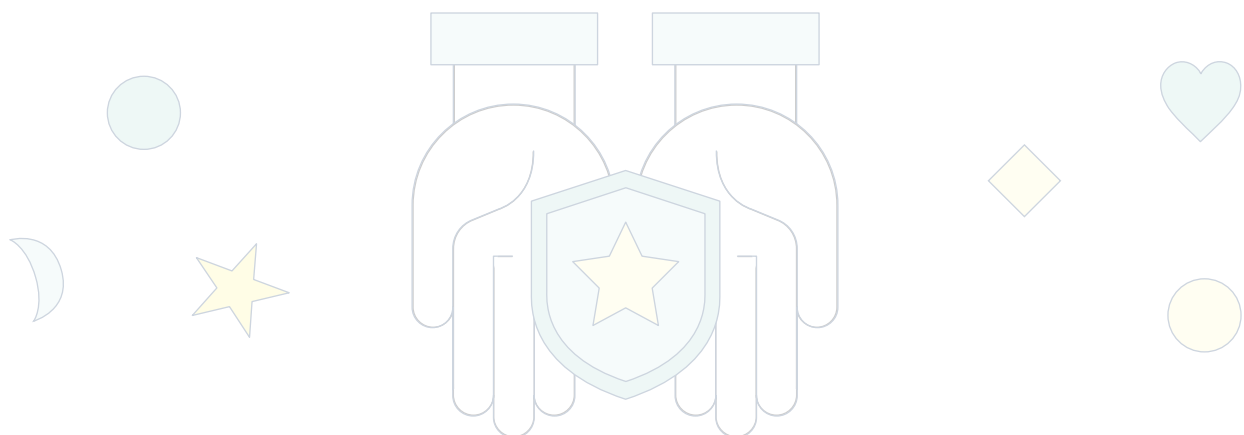
Students want to feel **safe and have a sense of trust during vulnerable times** when they reach out for help. Feeling a sense of trust towards resources or people helped students feel safe to share their mental health struggles. Connecting with trusted people helped students realize that they could adjust priorities to improve their mental health without compromising their academics.

- Some students shared that they felt they were only comfortable connecting to certain peers, staff or professors whom they trusted for support. One student stated that seeing professors and a counsellor in person allowed them to open up more.
- Students expressed that sharing their struggles with trusted people helped them identify next steps to address their challenges. For example, one student mentioned that talking to their mom and best friend helped them identify what they needed in times of difficulty and prioritized actions that addressed those needs.

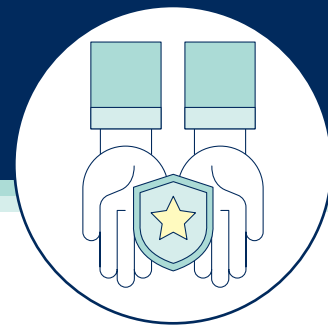
Relating to Peers

Students appreciated being able to **relate to peers who had encountered similar challenges**. Students shared that it was most helpful and validating to speak to people who have already found solutions or new wisdom about challenges they were facing. Students expressed that they learned a lot from coping strategies they received from peers and that discussing these strategies left them feeling hopeful and less intimidated by their problems.

- Students shared that connecting with their classmates can give them space to exchange difficulties which helped them feel less intimidated by academic challenges and decreased their school-related stress.
- One student told us that when speaking to a classmate about their struggles with academic commitments, they shared how their sibling experienced similar challenges during university and how they overcame them. Afterwards, the student felt that it was okay to experience challenges and felt assured they would find a resolution.
- Students shared that being able to connect and relate to others who experience the unique stressors associated with being an international student helps them receive support with their challenging situations. One student shared that they were grateful to find friends from a similar cultural background because connecting through shared experiences motivated them to practice self-care.



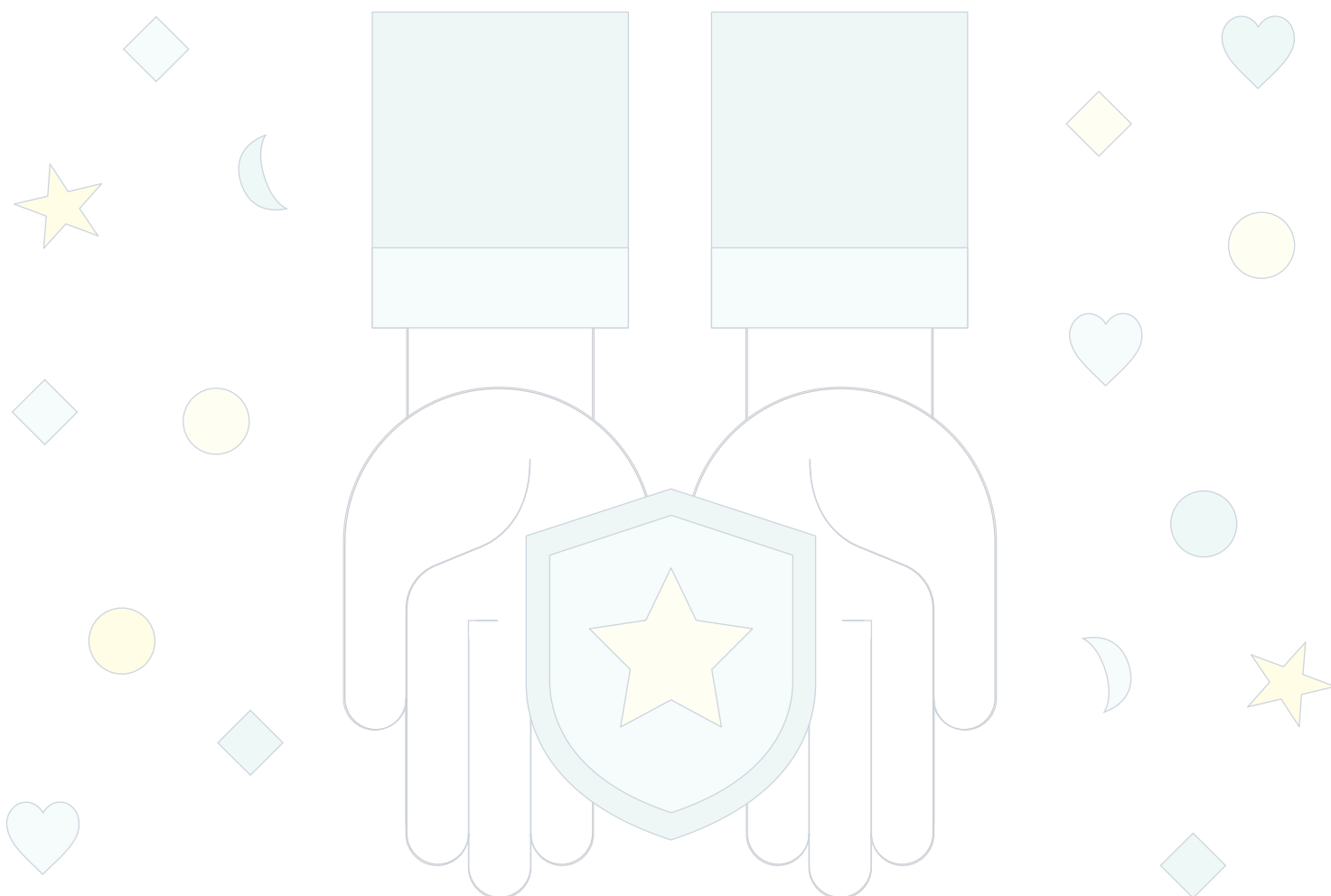
Trustworthy Support



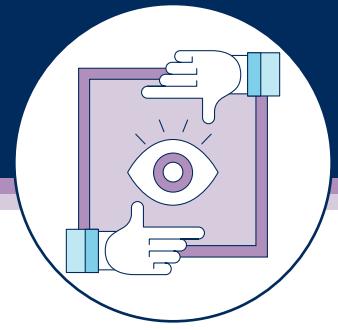
Feeling Heard and Understood

Students expressed that it was important to feel **heard and understood by others when deciding how to care for their mental health**. Connecting with classmates and other students in person helped students feel that they could talk about their experiences openly without judgement or being offered solutions. In some cases, sharing out loud with others helped students better understand their challenges and helped them take the initiative to locate the appropriate resources.

- Students used many avenues to connect with fellow students to create bonds with people they felt understood them, such as connecting with students in their program, international student services, Hart House events, and volunteering. When students felt heard and understood, they opened up more about their stories and gain useful recommendations from others to improve their mental health.
- Students expressed that the pandemic made it challenging to connect with others and made the learning environment feel more isolated. For example, one student mentioned that through the transition back to in-person learning; they aspire to reach out and check in with others in their class and exchange their experiences with their classmates.



Perspective Shifts



Ready for the Future

Students expressed that the **confidence they gained from overcoming challenging moments allowed them to feel competent in navigating future challenges**. Building resilience with the experience of overcoming a challenge gave students confidence in their own abilities. Students were able to navigate future challenges and had reduced feelings of self-doubt.

- Upper year students shared they were more comfortable navigating academic stressors after gaining experiences navigating challenging moments in earlier years.
- One student explained that learning about what university supports were available made them feel more confident accessing accommodations in the future if they ever encountered similar situations.

Control Over My Time

Students value **autonomy over their time and appreciate the freedom to make time for fulfilling activities**. Students revealed that learning to manage their own time and learning more about themselves and what they enjoy was helpful in allowing them to clarify how they wanted to spend their time and empowered them to act accordingly.

- Students shared that taking the time to reach out for support helped them better understand what was impacting their mental health. Afterwards, they developed coping skills that helped them gain agency over how their time was spent and made them feel in control of how they take care of their mental health.
- Accessing time management resources helped some students manage time effectively. New time management skills allowed students to improve their mental health by helping them incorporate activities that foster social connection and time to recharge.

Holistic Mental Health

Students need to be more **knowledgeable in this area to help them achieve a holistic understanding of mental health**. Students shared that they were unaware of the numerous factors that contribute to mental health and one's ability to prioritize caring for oneself. Student stories showed that when students had a better understanding of mental health, they took steps to care for themselves, which created greater awareness of their overall health and wellness. When students understood how to take care of their well-being, they started to prioritize other factors like physical health in addition to mental health.

- Students shared that recognizing how physical health goes hand in hand with mental health has been valuable for them as they learn how to take care of their overall health. Students expressed how physical health and mental health can be intertwined with each other.
- Some students shared that taking walks helped them feel recharged, grounded, and mindfully connected with their surroundings, which helped them relieve stress and promote feelings of calmness.
- Other students shared that taking gym breaks felt like a mental reset and helped them relax as they could momentarily forget about work and school responsibilities.

Personas

Mohammed A first-year international student

I was nervous about going to U of T because it was my first time at a Canadian university. I felt isolated because I just arrived in Canada and I didn't know anyone. Seeking mental health support wasn't socially acceptable in my home country, so I didn't know how to start taking care of myself. I wanted to talk to other students about my mental health but because of my culture, I didn't feel comfortable doing so.

Although my culture made me afraid to open up about my mental health, I realized I needed to start somewhere so I mustered up the courage to join an international student group on campus and shared my struggles. This community was like a second home away from home and helped me feel less lonely. Hearing their stories about how they struggled through university and navigate the system felt relatable and helped me find resources and supports that allow me continue taking care of my mental health. It took time to get to where I am today, but I am thankful for all the support from my peers and can't wait for the future.



Imani A recent graduate

During my undergraduate, I felt lonely from having no friends on campus and it was hard to adapt to the high academic expectations I felt in my program. The competitive atmosphere lowered my self-esteem, and I began doubting my skills. During my final year, I became physically, mentally and emotionally overwhelmed by the stress of applying to graduate school. **I was embarrassed to talk about my fear of failing to meeting graduate program expectations, but I confided in a friend I trusted who was also applying to graduate school.** They suggested I reach out to academic and mental health supports, so I took a leap of faith and did just that.

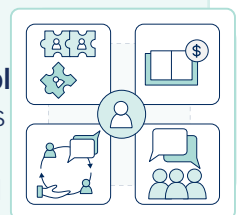
After I reached out for support, I got the academic support I needed to put me on the path to success and feel more confident in navigating conflict using resources and tools provided by U of T. I've realized the importance of my mental health and make it a priority by scheduling breaks between onerous tasks to move my body, get some fresh air and socialize with other students. I also complete weekly journals to reflect on current events and express my emotions without judgment.



Jingyi A mature graduate student

In the first year of my master's, I juggled academic, family, and financial responsibilities. As a mature student, I felt lonely in my program because no one could understand my situation. Everyone in my program was younger than me and it seemed like they already formed their own social groups. I also struggled with securing graduate school funding. It was also my first time navigating U of T's resources, so I felt lost and uncertain about handling all of these problems.

In the beginning of the semester, my supervisor told me to reach out if I ever needed help. Although my supervisor appeared approachable, I felt like I was letting them down by struggling to manage my responsibilities. **Despite feeling wary of reaching out for help, I made the brave choice to approach them about my problems because of the trust we had built early on in my graduate school journey.** Things changed for the better when I went to them for advice. Their empathy and suggestions on how to secure financial assistance helped me feel more optimistic and hopeful, and made me recognize the importance of getting support and taking care of myself. My mental health has improved a lot and I now know that I can reach out for support when I need it.



Personas

Gabriela A third-year undergraduate student

The first two years of undergrad went by smoothly as I made many friends and found study strategies that worked well for me. This year, I decided to take on a work-study position to gain some professional experience in my field. However, the stress from balancing my new responsibilities while adjusting to the academic rigour of upper-year courses made me feel overwhelmed. This was the first time that I experienced burnout. It felt like everyone around me was doing fine so I was ashamed of my inability to perform well academically, but I made the nerve-wracking decision to reach out to my family because I didn't have anyone else I trusted.

When speaking with a family member who has gone through similar struggles, their emotional support was comforting, and it helped validate my experiences. From hearing their stories, I was compelled to reach out to supportive resources to take care of my well-being. **The only resource I knew that could have been helpful was my registrar, but I felt nervous approaching them because I wasn't sure how to open up about my challenges. With the support and encouragement of my family,** I bravely decided to reach out to them despite my fear of opening up about my struggles.

When I spoke with them, they recommended that I contact support services to receive accommodations. The accommodations I was granted allowed me to take care of my emotional well-being without feeling guilty. I'm glad I made this decision and moving forward, I will seek resources when I experience a low point in my mental health.



Sofia A second-year first-generation undergraduate student

I completed my first year of undergrad online due to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Virtual learning was difficult because I did not feel passionate about the courses I took, and no one in my family could relate to my problem and only added to my pressure as the first person in my family to go to university. I became overwhelmingly stressed and anxious about school and my future. This made it difficult to engage in course materials, and my academic performance began to decline.

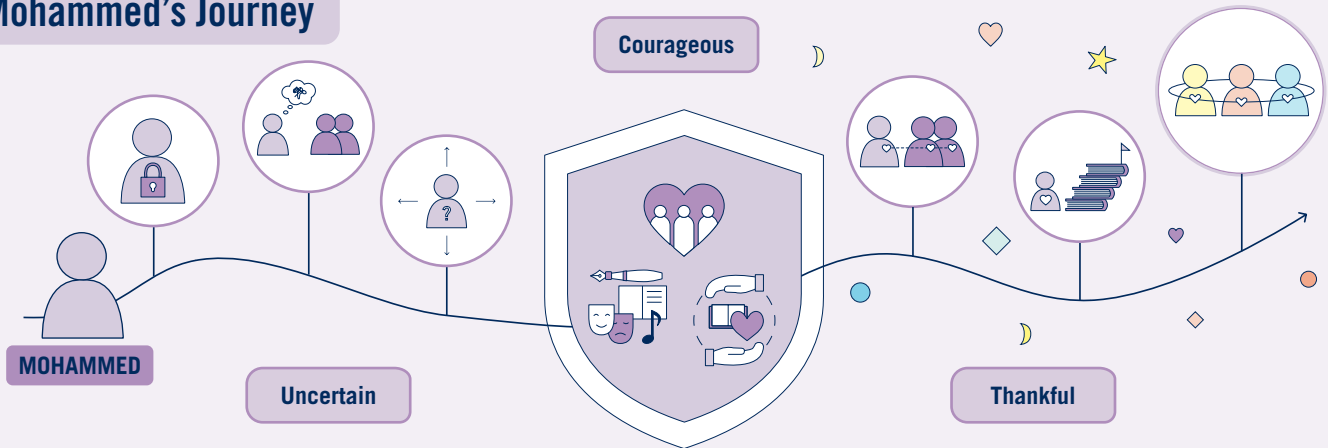
After returning to in-person school, I met other students in my program. **I was worried about what others would think of me if I talked about my experiences because I thought that nobody else was struggling with the same thing I was.** However my trust in my friends helped me be brave in expressing my uncertainty about my career path to one friend. That friend shared they had a sibling experience the same thing and they encouraged me to book an appointment with student services, which made me feel hopeful about navigating my problem. With the guidance of an academic advisor, I made the tough decision to switch programs that aligned more with my future goals. I felt uneasy afterwards because I wasn't sure if I made the right choice. However, once I started taking courses in my new field of study, I saw improvements in my academic performance and emotional well-being. I felt confident in my learning abilities again and know to consider my mental health when making future decisions.



Student Journey Maps: Making Brave Choices

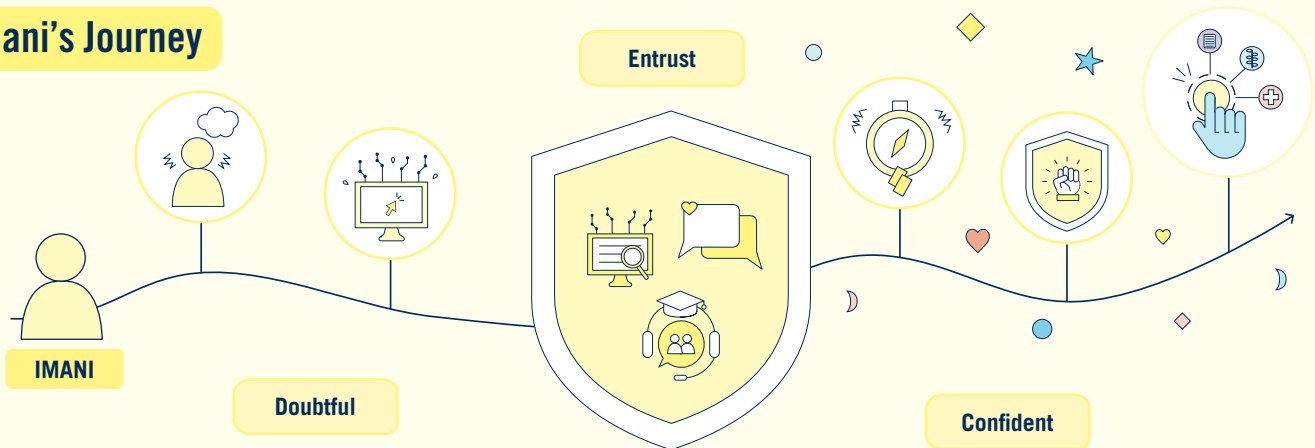
Here we show the journeys of three different students as they made a brave choice to prioritize their mental health. Stories are based on real data, fictionalized to protect anonymity of the participants.

Mohammed's Journey



Mohammed was unsure how to take care of themselves, then made the brave choice to join an international student group and found ways to connect with peers.

Imani's Journey



Imani had self-doubt about graduate school applications, then made the brave choice to trust a friend with their experiences and seek out academic and mental health support.

Gabriela's Journey



Gabriela felt overwhelmed by school and work, then made the brave choice to share their struggles with family members and seek support from university resources.

Co-Creation at Health & Wellness

The Innovation Hub in collaboration with Health and Wellness hosted two 90-minute co-creation sessions entitled 'Supporting Our Mental Health: A Co-Creation Event' that took place on February 8th and 13th, 2023. The events included a presentation hosted by the Innovation Hub about our initial findings and provided an opportunity for students to share their feedback. We also had an ideation activity where students generated ideas for the future of Health and Wellness programming and services, as well as other supports and services at U of T, based on the data presented.

Overall Findings

During the co-creation sessions, students shared that they recognize the difficulty in finding ways to help students balance their academic aspirations while taking care of their mental health. Although students were excited to share their ideas about the future of mental health programming and services at the university, they found it challenging to brainstorm solutions given the complexity of mental health.

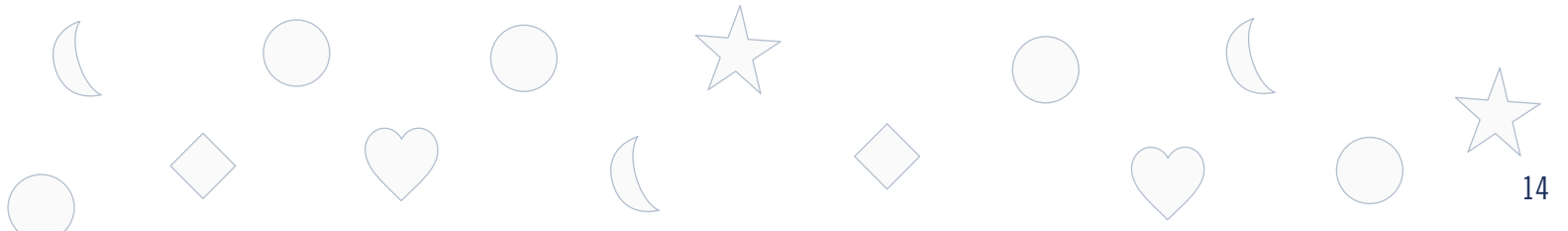
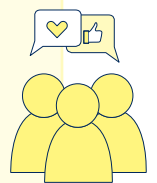
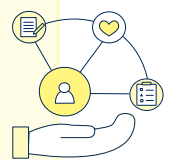
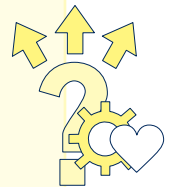
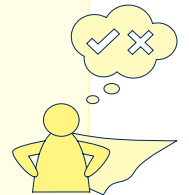
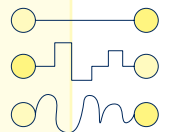
When the Innovation Hub team shared the vision of *making brave choices* with students at the co-creation sessions it was met with polarizing reactions. Some students resonated with the vision because they could easily see its application in their lives. Others felt strong resentment with the idea that the onus would be on them to make a brave choice.

Upon further analysis, our team noted that students who struggled with day-to-day choices around simple mental health issues resonated with the idea of making different choices to support their own mental health as courageous. On the other hand, students who had strong negative reactions to the idea described circumstances where they had experienced some series of harmful or traumatic events, and these students described needing more intensive clinical support.

Students also spoke of systems of oppression, and pressure they feel from the university's structures and academic rigour and how these factors deeply impact their mental health. When it comes to these factors, students feel that changes are needed to ensure the university can be a more caring community that prioritizes their mental health.

Ultimately, we discovered that students want to normalize taking care of their mental health so it is seen as part of their everyday life rather than as a brave choice. Students expressed that they want taking care of mental health to be integrated into the daily life of being a student instead of being something they do above and beyond their academic obligations.

Students spoke of the importance of input from others when it comes to prioritizing mental health. Encouragement from faculty members, TAs, and other staff members that students interact with on a day-to-day basis to prioritize mental health helped them because it gave them a sense that it's normal to make choices in favour of one's mental health.



Co-Creation at Health & Wellness

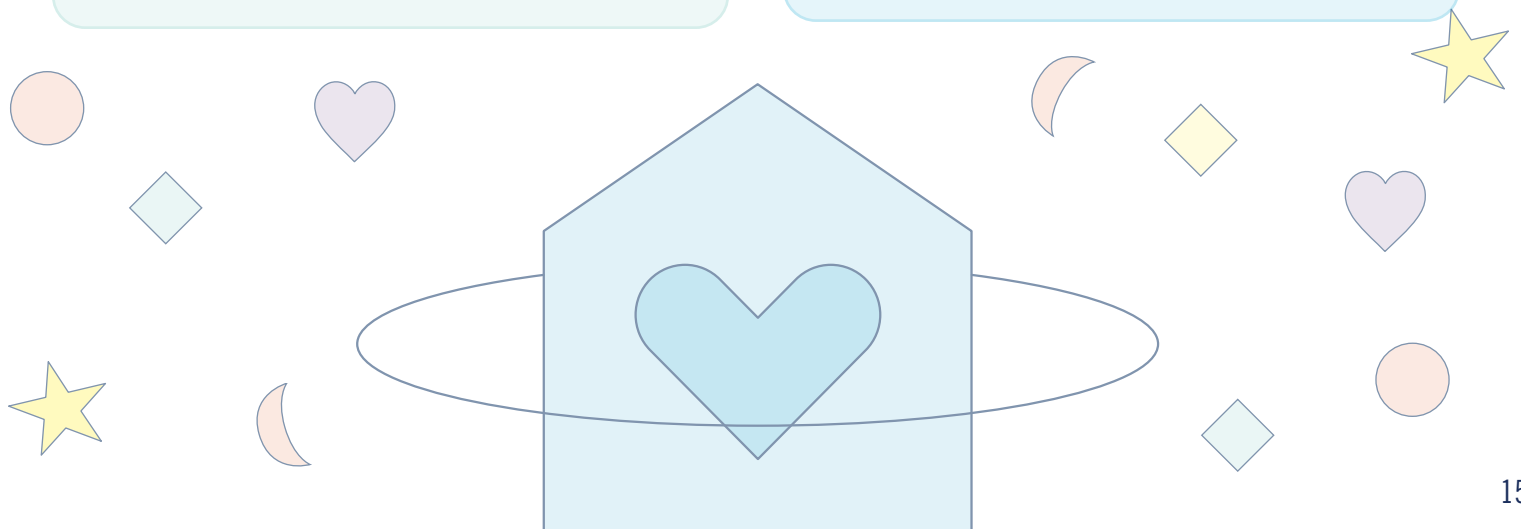
What Students Told Us...

What's Working Well for Students

- Students expressed that they deeply appreciate comfortable physical spaces and green spaces for connecting with other students. Students shared that these spaces foster a sense of safety for students to take a pause from completing their academic obligations.
- Students expressed that social connections within courses and beyond academics are important because they develop their social support network which fosters a sense of belonging and improves their mental health. Student stories demonstrated that their vulnerability during conversations about mental health with peers helped normalize and destigmatize discussions around mental health.
- Students shared that they appreciated activities where nutritious food was offered. Students expressed that events that offered food allowed them to feel at ease about taking care of their mental health. Students felt understood by the university that mental and physical health is important to them. Students also felt that the university focused on promoting calm and safe spaces for students, which are efforts they appreciated.

What's Challenging

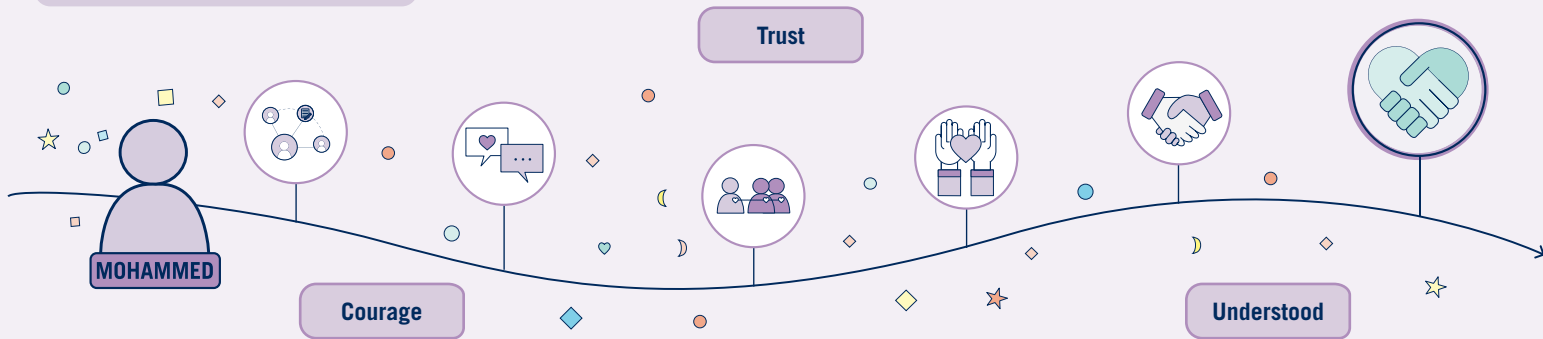
- Students shared that they often were not aware of the mental health supports that were available to them and felt lost in where to begin finding mental health resources and programs. Student stories demonstrated that they would appreciate guidance in choosing resources that are right for their unique needs since they are often overwhelmed by the options once they have located them.
- Students shared that they value taking care of their mental health because it provides them with a sense of balance. However, given time constraints from their academic workload and aspirations, it was challenging to find the capacity for taking care of their mental health.
- Students shared that they would appreciate mental health programming and initiatives that were more human and involved connection on a peer-to-peer level. Students expressed that having mental health support that is less medicalized and technical would help normalize topics of mental health and allow them to feel comfortable in reaching out for help.



Student Co-Creation Journey Maps

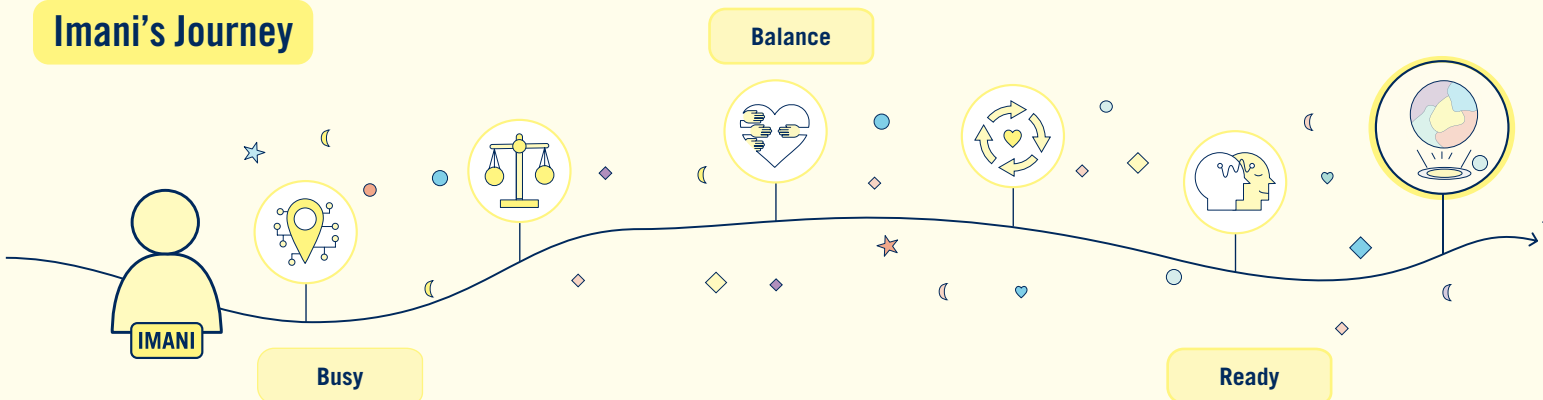
Here are the journeys of Mohammed, Imani, and Gabriela, as they continue to build resilience with the support of university resources.

Mohammed's Journey



Mohammed is still uneasy about reaching out for support, but they are hopeful about the future knowing that they can connect to the peer support services that they trust to feel understood.

Imani's Journey



Imani recognizes that schoolwork can become overwhelming but feels prepared to maintain a sense of balance by attending events that encourage movement.

Gabriela's Journey

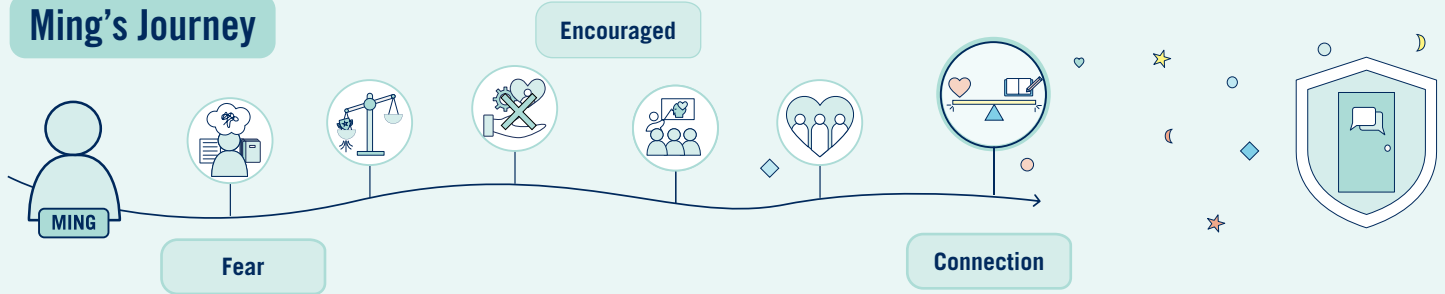


Gabriela still feels overwhelmed by coursework sometimes but feels confident about using university resources to find exactly what they need, no matter what they are struggling with.

Student Co-Creation Journey Maps

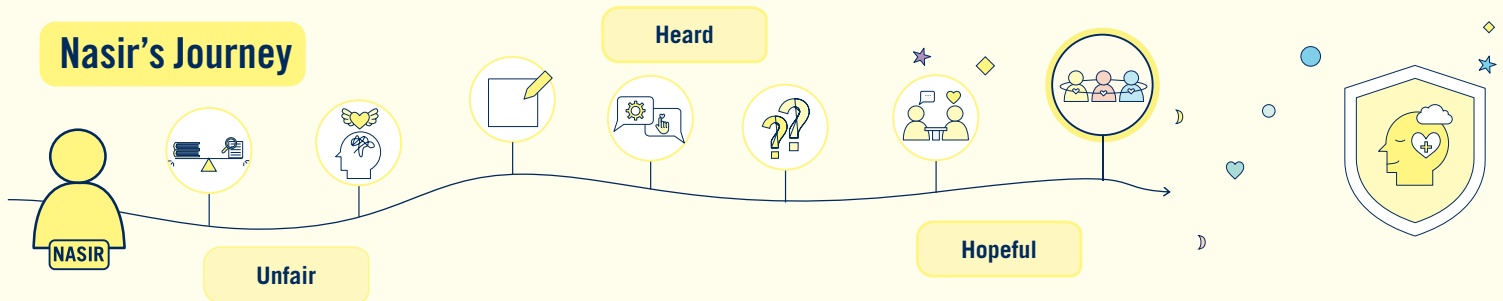
Here are the journeys of four new students: two of them have had a history of struggling to take care of their mental health, and two others who would benefit from clinical intervention.

Ming's Journey



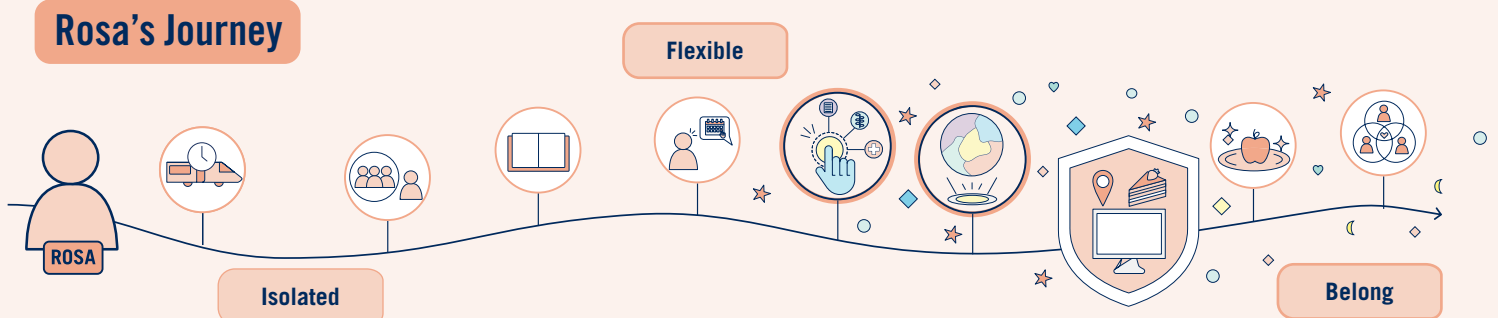
Ming was afraid to reach out when they were feeling overwhelmed due to a painful past experience. Then, a professor's encouragement inspired them to connect with a counselor.

Nasir's Journey



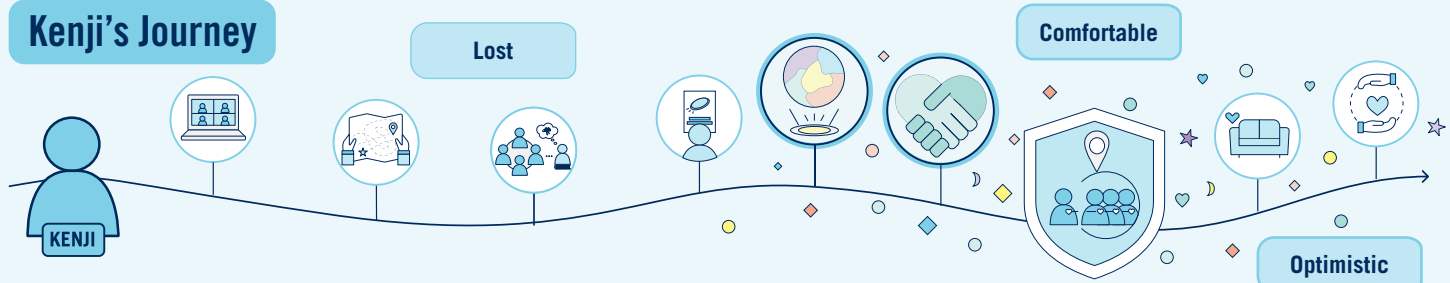
Nasir has felt resentment toward the institution's role in making it difficult to take care of mental health, but a connection with a trained peer gave them hope in reaching out to a counselor.

Rosa's Journey



Rosa commutes and finds it difficult to bond with students, but events that offer flexible programming and provide food helped them find a sense of belonging.

Kenji's Journey



Kenji found the transition from online to in-person classes difficult to navigate. Then, green spaces and comfortable indoor spaces helped them find safe and welcoming spaces to socialize.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES

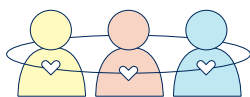
The principles presented here are guidelines for designing to meet people's needs. The principles suggest issues to keep in mind while prototyping solutions and offer criteria for refining and prioritizing design ideas.



EMPATHY CREATES TRUST

Empathetic interactions where students feel heard and listened to create trust. Students feel vulnerable reaching out for support and need to know that the people who they will interact with when discussing aspects of their mental health are empathetic and safe.

- Create safe spaces for students to share their mental health experiences and concerns
 - Inform students that this space is judgment-free, not recorded, and information is held confidential when disclosing mental health challenges
 - Respect students' privacy by providing in person anonymous groups for in person opportunities connection and anonymous forums/chats online (on Discord, Gathertown, etc.)
 - Ensure that interactions with staff maximize approachability and limit barriers to entry
 - Normalize talking about mental health and reaching out for help
 - Ensure that students' feelings are validated
 - Ensure activities have trauma-informed practices by including ground rules, asking participants what they need to feel safe, and being aware of people's comfort levels
 - Create physically comfortable spaces to foster a sense of safety for students
- Create transparency and improve the accessibility of services, websites, and programs by providing details about what they entail so it's easy for students to navigate resources
- Incorporate peer-to-peer support to build trust with students and help them feel supported when reaching out for help

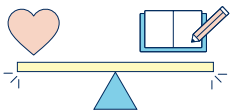


SHARED EXPERIENCES FOSTER CONNECTIONS

Create opportunities for students to connect with one another and share their experiences with mental health. Hearing that others experience similar challenges can help students feel less alone and learn about new strategies to take care of their mental health.

- Have an interactive community space where there are weekly drop-in programs
- Provide on- and off-campus events and opportunities for students to connect in round table discussions, focus groups, and "deep listening" circles
- Provide more 'optional' conferences and meetings for students to participate and involve themselves with mental health discussions
- Conduct feedback sessions each semester by course code that are judgment-free to allow students to share their perspectives on mental health and hear from their peers
- Provide an online platform where students can interact with each other online (such as Discord or create a new platform)
- Have a buddy system or a university pen pal for students to connect with
- Pair/group students and have them go through resources specific to their situation
- Have crafts nights/game nights self-compassion activities
- Have a mentorship program to connect students with shared experiences
- Have workshops on how to respond to mental health topics/conversations

DESIGN PRINCIPLES



HARMONIZE ACADEMICS AND MENTAL HEALTH

Prioritize showing students that taking care of one's mental health can co-exist with their aspirations of academic excellence and empower them to pursue their dreams.

- Integrate mental health resources with the classroom by fostering a more supportive environment between students and professors
- Provide university faculty and instructors with mental health training and education on how to encourage students to take care of their mental health alongside completing academic obligations
- Create meaningful opportunities for students to connect with faculty and TAs to receive one-on-one, personalized support
- Collaborate with instructors to advertise or promote available resources before lecture, through Quercus, and tutorials
- Bring peers into instructors' classes to give short presentations on the importance of taking care of mental health
- Create a built in no questions asked extension policy without academic penalty into all classes
- Provide advocacy support for students when requesting extensions and/or accommodations and students who need time to attend mental health programs, such as having someone to go with them to work with faculty/ departments
- Showcase outcomes from educational workshops that teach faculty and departments how to support student mental health to show students that U of T as a whole institution is making changes to support student wellness and relieve pressures on students

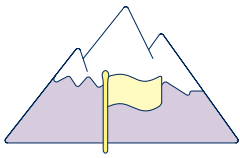


CELEBRATE HOLISTIC MENTAL HEALTH

Encourage students to be more aware of the various dimensions that can shape mental health. Encourage students to embrace the many different approaches and strategies that lead to positive mental health.

- Create physical spaces where students can be reminded about the different forms of mental health
 - Use coloured rooms to demonstrate how mood can be affected and relate the results to outdoor environments
 - Circulate simple symbols around campus and in emails to students to remind them of the different dimensions of mental health
- Provide students with options to engage in activities that involve movement to take care of their mental health
 - Advertise more physical activities such as taking advantage of gyms/recreational activities, working mental health into workout classes, collaborating with Hart House Wellness walks, scheduling visits to Hart House, visiting different parks in Toronto, and holding distress group sport events (yoga, frisbee, skating)
- Host art-based events such as art shows, drawing and other creative workshops (listening parties/baking)
- Show students the different forms of mental health in resources provided to students (e.g. websites, presentations, surveys, etc.)
 - Get input from students (what they think are the different dimensions) and share it on websites and through social media posts
- Host monthly self-care/skills development workshops to teach students evidence-based tools and strategies to help them build good habits and map out their wellness

DESIGN PRINCIPLES



ACKNOWLEDGE BRAVERY

Recognize and celebrate students' courage to make choices to take care of their mental health. Taking care of oneself can be unconventional and supporting students' efforts to do so can affirm that caring for oneself is important.

- Normalize the conversation around reaching out for help and acknowledge that reaching out can be nerve wracking but is courageous by telling students that there won't be consequences in talking to someone and validating their negative feelings
- Acknowledge the existing resilience of some communities that have already had to be resilient in their current lives
- Provide opportunities for students to hear stories from faculty and other students about seeking help
 - Create opportunities for students to hear from alumni/counselors to learn from their experiences taking care of their mental health, such as times when they reached out for help
 - Provide anonymous quotes as posters in physical spaces from students who have experienced mental health challenges and achieved more balance by accessing supports
- Coordinate with faculty members to gain their assistance with acknowledging the bravery of students to create safe spaces for students to speak about mental health
- Provide workshops that educate students about the bravery it takes to seek help



CHOICES CREATE AUTONOMY

Ensure students know that they have choices about programs and services available to them to support their mental health. Use communication strategies to ensure that students understand mental health resource options to give them agency in pursuing options that are right for them.

- Provide programs and services with options for a variety of schedules, needs, etc.
 - Provide virtual, in-person, and evening options across the 3 campuses for programming and services, ensuring that students with and without lived experiences provide information about these events
- Provide information in many formats, such as: group emails, YouTube videos, posters, booths, especially in high-density places: Robarts, Sidney Smith, etc.
 - Centralize information in newsletters so that the information can be found in one space and share self-care habits (i.e., facets of self-care, examples, tips for different facets, etc.)
- Make tailored, culturally relevant programs for a diverse variety of specific student identities (LGBTQ+, Indigenous, immigrant family, graduate vs. undergraduate etc.)
- Make Health & Wellness orientation mandatory and provide options for follow-up
 - Make orientation presentations by Health and Wellness more human by telling real stories and scenarios
 - Have introductory orientation sessions on culturally tailored services, wellness top 10 cheatsheets, and different topics/dimensions of health
- Make it easier for students to access mental health supports in terms of accessibility
 - Provide a general advisor with no red tape to refer students to appropriate resources
 - Provide tailored guidance by creating a survey/Buzzfeed quiz/Tree diagram UI/Chatbot that matches students with programs/services that meet their needs based on their situation
 - Personalize/explain resource categories instead of listing

DESIGN PRINCIPLES



ENCOURAGE MEANING MAKING

Encourage students to develop an interest in non-academic pursuits by being active in extracurriculars or hobbies. Connecting to activities beyond academics can help support student mental health by helping them find new passions or social connections.

- Use communication strategies that help students become aware of the importance of non-academic activities
 - Leverage social media platforms like Reddit and Instagram to inform students about upcoming events and include messaging around how vital extracurricular activities are
 - Present research about the benefits of participating in extracurricular activities and academics
 - Use positive language such as “good for mental health” when promoting physical/emotional/social events
- Improve access to non-academic activities, supports, services, and resources
 - Connect students with local non-profit organizations for mental health support
 - Make CLNx more useable, such as having separate sections, sending email updates, and having a weekly agenda to inform students about upcoming events
 - Have several timeslots for events to accommodate students’ schedules
 - Provide support to student clubs and club fairs by promoting the spread of information
 - Provide incentives to participate in mental health events:
 - Provide scholarship recognition or funding opportunities to students involved in non-academic activities
 - Provide free food at events and programming
 - Create an innovative reward program (e.g. chance to win a draw by participating in certain number of events)
 - Ensure incentives encourage students to work cooperatively together to take care of their mental health rather



BROADEN HORIZONS

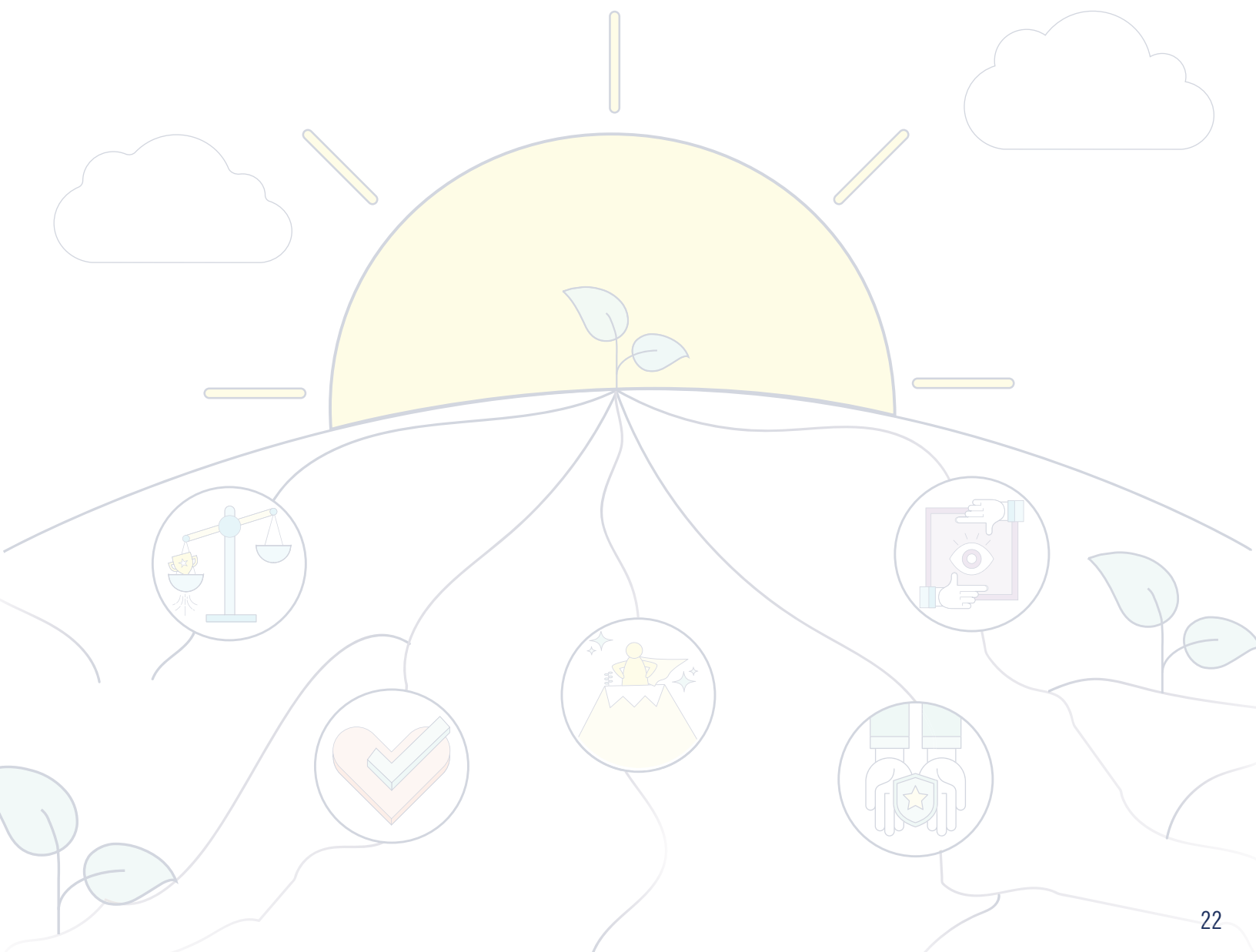
Support students to prioritize exploring their core needs, desires, and values. Discovering new dimensions about themselves can help students build resilience and open doors for new ways to take care of their mental health.

- Incorporate more fun in Health & Wellness programming initiatives (e.g., crafts, destressing activities, collaborating with wellness walks, visiting different parks) to explore students’ needs, desires, and values
- Create mentorship opportunities for students to explore their potential
 - Provide opportunities for students to connect with professionals in industries and different research fields
 - Create a mentor resource navigator to connect students with shared experiences
 - Have alumni share their experiences with taking care of their mental health, especially “non-typical” choices
 - Coordinate workshops with different departments to encourage students to engage in self-exploration
 - Host self-exploration workshops in different departments/faculties and potentially host events where students from different departments attend to encourage safety/anonymity when sharing
 - Partner with Career Exploration and Education to encourage students to conduct self-exploration
- Encourage students to think introspectively rather in a goal-oriented manner
- Offer self-compassion and mindfulness workshops
- Create opportunities for students to connect with each other to help them identify new interests

Conclusion & Next Steps

Empowering and supporting students to make brave choices to prioritize their mental health amidst the competing priorities in their daily life is key to helping them build lifelong resilience. Acknowledging students' efforts to take care of themselves and providing space that allow them to feel heard and understood can support students as they take care of their mental health.

From our co-creation events, we learned that students want to see taking care of mental health normalized and as part of their day-to-day life as students. Students recognized the difficulty in finding ways to help them balance their academic aspirations while taking care of their mental health, but are hopeful solutions can be implemented and changes can be made at the university to foster a caring community that prioritizes their mental health. The data and insights discussed in this report will help inform Health and Wellness, as well as other supports and services at U of T, on the design of non-clinical resources and activities that could be implemented for U of T students to help individuals and diverse populations with different mental health challenges.



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