Mental Health Case Study - My Experience at University
By Khola Ilyas

Background

The way we do research to inform policy isn't working. Today, most community based/'led' research is done through collaborations between large science or specialist research institutes partnering with local organisations beyond their institutions. Whilst this is an attempt to enrich the quality of research and of bringing wider social benefits, it still lacks the true representation of the communities they are trying to help. Where such partnerships are formed the experiences are not always productive or conducive to drawing on the knowledge and expertise of all participants, as they remain the subject not the co-authors of the research.

There is a need for a process that places these individuals and communities as the authors of research that considers the issues they face; and develops practical responses and recommendations from the ground up. There is a need for a radical shift and movement in how authentic data and insights are collected from women of Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds.

In response MWC have developed an approach that focuses on the delivery of authentic and appropriate research to create better policy and practice that drive practical solutions that address women's health and wellbeing.

Think + Do Tank

With the support of Wellcome Trust, Smallwood Trust & Friends Provident Foundation, we hope to reverse the current trend of Muslim males and non-Muslims researching and advocating on behalf of Muslim women, especially regarding issues of health, wellbeing and bioscience.

Our approach will straddle the 'Think + Do Tank' between both policy and beneficiaries (Muslim Women) and will offer authentic insight and appropriate solutions, as it will be led by the beneficiaries. We focus on the relevance, credibility, legitimacy and utility of the research we do, ensuring that we position our research for use.

We focus on Muslim Women from Bradford and surrounding areas. Within this group there is a climate of misogyny and patriarchy fuelled by public stereotyping and male-dominated interpretations of women's roles and positions. In short, society is denying these women their ability to think and act independently or contribute to the creation of health, wellbeing and bio-science policies and practices that affect them and their community.

For example, Muslim women have not been engaged as contributors to research and policy reflective of them. It seems that most research is a male bastion, which undermines their effectiveness and puts them at a disadvantage and impacts on how they research and present the needs of women. This project will be women led and women governed, therefore putting these women at the heart of the research.

What This Article Entails

Is university a breeding ground for mental health issues? That's a slight exaggeration of the issue at hand but no, definitely not. It is, however, home to many anxieties and mental breakdowns. Did you know, 1 in 5 students suffer from a mental health issue?That's just the figure of those who come forward to speak about their mental health and get help. The total number of cases is said to be a lot higher as some do not come forward to speak about their mental health due to the stigma attached to it.

This is where I come in. A British Pakistani female with endless mental health issues. The following article looks at a few of my experiences at university, alongside linking in some thoughts from others who've experienced the punch of a low mood and the uppercut of a breakdown.

I'm hoping this will shed some light on the situation, and help others feel at ease. It's okay to feel waves of sadness, so long as you don't let the waves carry you away.

Introduction

I studied at university for 5 years and I graduated in Arabic & Islamic Studies (without a ceremony may I add, thanks to COVID) in 2019.

It's now 2022 and I'm still feeling the effects of being a student.

There are the breakdowns you go through at the beginning of your student life, in the middle, in the end, and then there's also the post–university blues.

There is really a whole lot more to university than just the 'Yay, I'm going to have so much fun!' In all honesty, it truly is a life changing period, so yes there is a lot of fun but like everything in life, there are downfalls too.

It's important to note that not all students suffer from severe mental health issues throughout their time at university. There's some who have the odd anxious moment here and there, but then there's the opposite end of that spectrum where there's students who lose themselves. You forget to breathe, you forget your worth, you hurt everywhere, and your entire life feels like a lie.

Yes, my entire life felt like a lie. I forgot how to breathe. It hurt to breathe because I'd panic so much that my chest would hurt. My mind would spiral out of control so much so that I felt like an imposter and that I scammed my way to where I was. It wasn't true, but in those moments the devil's whisper felt like the only truth there was. Thoughts are not facts.

So, "What was wrong with you?", is what you're probably thinking. Well, a lot really. For those who knew me, they probably thought I was just being a drama queen most of the time. Truth is, I was for the most part but there were times I'd have to run away to the toilets and just catch my breath. Not from running, but from panicking.

There were moments where I'd freeze in class because I found it so hard to learn or to read the passages we were given, to the extent where I honestly stopped showing up. There was so much wrong crippling my brain, but I refused to put a label on it.

For me, it was just a moment of weakness. It wasn't anxiety, it wasn't depression, it wasn't an eating disorder, it was just a slight blip in my day-to-day life. And for me to do that, further made me realise that I also thought mental health was the shadow place, the place beyond my acceptance, the stigma of South Asian culture. I got past this, thankfully, because now I can't shut up about literally losing my hair over university stress.

An Insight

Let's get a little grittier with my experience. There's so much that occurred, and I'd be lying if I told you I'm writing it all down. But let's take you through a few mentally scarring moments:

Rooftop Breakdowns

In my year abroad, I spent a lot of time sitting on the rooftop and watching the world go by. I'd climb the roof and honestly it was scary to be up there post-maghrib but that pushed me more. It's as though I was putting myself in harm's way. But that's not the part I want to highlight.

During my first semester, it was really difficult because of the cultural shock, language barriers, and constant comparisons sending me down a dark path. I remember spending more time cleaning the apartment rather than cleansing my soul. I exerted my energy on the wrong thing because it's easier to mop a mucky floor than it was to unravel all the layers of sadness. I found it hard to focus and learn, so I missed classes.

When you miss one class to try to catch up on another, you miss the third class and then this snowballs out of control, and you just stop turning up. It also takes a toll on your social life. You feel guilty for having fun because you feel as though you don't deserve it, so you just stop turning up and spend all your time hiding. Which is crazy because, having the social life is what made me happy.

But, back to the roof. I would listen to the saddest songs and just sit on the edge and cry because I didn't know how else to deal with the emotions bubbling inside of me. The time I want to highlight is the one where I reached out to my best friend mid breakdown. It was a lazy day, and we were all watching Gilmore Girls, which was my comfort show. I can't exactly remember what had happened, but I went to the roof and life slapped me in the face. I felt like a failure. I felt as though I didn't belong. I felt like I wasn't me. How can a clown get so sad and confused? So, whilst I sat on the floor questioning my existence, my best friend came up and hugged me. Mind you, I could barely breathe because I was shaking and crying, but at that moment in time it was all I needed.

When I returned to the UK, there weren't really any rooftops to cry on, which is a little sad, but it just meant I had to adapt. Toilet cubicles were great. Curling up in a ball and crying whilst trying to sleep was also a top contender for the rooftop spot. Accidentally breaking down in the office and trying to hold in the tears but your lecturer compares you to his daughter and you break down even more, was fun. So, I mean, all in all some pretty great spots but nothing beats sitting on a roof and just releasing the negative energy.

Lectures
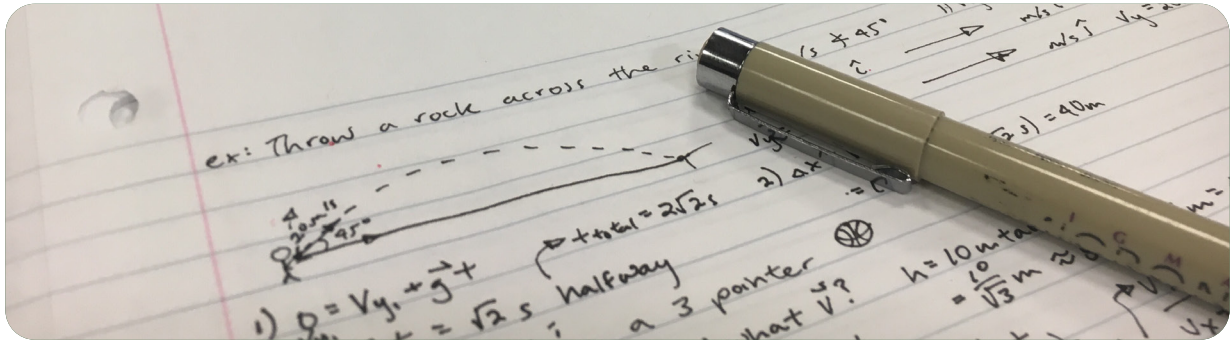
You know how I previously mentioned missing classes? Well, this went on for the longest time. From my first year to my last, I spent a lot of time outside of class learning about the work we went through during class because I'd constantly miss them.
Lecturers would often ask you to contribute, and I'd panic at the thought, so I rarely turned up. On my really good days, I was there in class having a laugh and being the class clown I was, but on my bad days I was sleeping till late, eating junk, choosing 'motives' over a study session at the library.

Mid way through university, I adapted a new thought, 'if you look good you feel good'. I chopped my hair, started to pay more attention to the clothes I wore and stopped caring about societal views.

The university lifestyle birthed an anxious me, I didn't need society or South Asian culture making me hate myself more. I hoped that in 'looking after myself', my mental health would improve. A part of me hated myself for doing the things I was doing but these behaviours became a norm to me. Instead of focusing on the topics that caused my brain to shut down, I'd focus on the little serotonin rush when buying a new pair of shoes.

For short bursts of time, I was happier. But when it came to attending classes, I'd get thrown back into the hole I tried to climb out of. I'd start to stutter more, doubt myself, I felt as though I didn't deserve my seat because I saw peers who would sacrifice a lot just to get what they had, whereas I was literally walking to my own beat.

There were many times I didn't feel smart enough to speak, so I laughed and made jokes. A lot of the times I knew the answers, but I couldn't form the sentences. My thoughts were like a jigsaw puzzle, the whole picture was there but piecing it together seemed like a long process and so I'd either ditch it, or wait until everyone had said their piece, so I could use their words to string together my thoughts. *Comparison is the thief of joy.*

Dissertation Meltdowns

I feel as though quite a lot of university students can relate to this. Dissertation is the final step of university and it's the one where you feel like you're dropped off to a deserted island with nothing. You may have received training on how to survive before you went there, but once you're there, you realise the training made little sense. This was me.

I had no idea what I wanted to do, both in life and in my dissertation. All I knew was that I wanted to leave the UK and run off elsewhere because starting afresh sounded like the only feasible plan. When dissertation time came along and this fight or flight situation hit me, I didn't know what to do. It felt like so much responsibility had befallen me and all the years leading up to this meant nothing, seeing as my brain crashed and I did everything but my dissertation.

My problem was that I had too many ideas, not enough direction. Everything fascinated me, but not enough fascination to sit down and spend hours researching. This is when I realise it's not just about passion. There are times where you need to motivate yourself and discipline yourself to get through something, and that was something I struggled with a lot.

I spent many months, weeks, days crying about this. It got more intense as the deadlines got closer, so much so that my brain would switch off and it would take me hours to understand a sentence.

My mind was like a computer with 101 tabs running consecutively, one of which was a 90s song playing in the background. Previous deadlines were only 3000 words max, but my dissertation required 12,000.

At first, it was daunting but many months down the line, I managed to split it up into sections. All the guidelines were there, but there was this fog clouding the logical side of my brain which made me think I had nothing. Though the fog never truly lifted, there were moments of clarity, and I began to write.

I changed my topic a handful of times, which didn't really help. I rarely reached out, but in all fairness, the topic of 'tutors and dissertation meetings' requires an essay. I thought it was just me, but quite a few of my peers had similar issues too. Emailing lecturers and waiting forever for a reply had to be one of the worst things as a final year student.

There were times I almost quit.

I applied for mitigating circumstances which required a note of my mental disarray. I wasn't one to reach out to my GP for help with my mental state, but a girl got to do what she got to do.

I remember speaking to my GP and her words were "just do it", which honestly made so much sense. I panicked so much that I didn't think I could 'do it'. Yes, she gave me the note before anyone thinks about throwing hands, but she also told me that it's just another hurdle and I'm probably much more capable than I think.

My friends echoed the same sentiments. I'd witnessed a few of them break down a year before me and I honestly didn't think I would be in that situation but hah, there I was crying my way through a chocolate cluster pack. I did it in the end. Mood swings, breakdowns, unhealthy eating habits, sleepless nights. I did it.

Exam Season

Although both exams and essays share a similar trait in that they're both deadlines we work towards, essays had more leeway. For exams on the other hand, you needed your mind to be at its sharpest. My mind was not at my sharpest whilst at university.

I always say I was smarter before I came to university but what I mean by this is that my brain worked at a much faster speed. I was young and I guess the stresses of life didn't affect me as much back then. Your time at university is a critical time for development, but if your mental health is constantly deteriorating and you have no healthy coping mechanisms? Bye, bye positive development, and hello fried gunk I call brain.

Your memory, understanding of the topic, and the ability to answer questions in an articulate manner, are what play a part in your grades. My memory was a joke, I'd understand the topic, but I'd find it hard to articulate my thoughts.

I went from being able to write essays and getting 2.1s, to staring at the questions and trying to understand what was being asked. This wasn't always the case but being blank did affect my ability to perform. If it wasn't for my friends, I genuinely would have lost myself.

Spending time sledging down the hills, skateboarding, having mini raves, spontaneous hikes, and attending events improved my mental health a lot. Maybe I spent too much time having fun, but it's genuinely what kept me afloat during the dark times.

However, during exam season, there's frustration and shared stress in the air. For me, it was another battle: your logical side telling you to study vs the side that's literally telling you you're worthless and there's no need for you to revise because you're going to fail anyways. The toxic mindset made me think the worst and made me hate myself.

It's one thing knowing you're feeling a certain way, but have you ever felt guilty for feeling that way? Have you ever felt like you weren't allowed to feel the things you felt? Have you ever felt as though your mind was lying to you to the extent where you're like, I'm perfectly fine, but you're not. Imagine these thoughts rushing through you whilst sitting alone and trying to revise. I did it though, I got past it. Maybe not in the healthiest manner, but what matters is I made it through.

What Made It Worse

Believing Toxic Thoughts

The negative thoughts that come with feeling stressed, anxious and depressed can really hit hard. I spent a lot of time battling my own mind, but sometimes I'd let them eat me alive. One thing about your thoughts is that you can't run away from them, they'll follow you. It scared me to think of the things I did. I believed I was an embarrassment to everyone. I believed I wasn't good enough, so I started to hate myself for even existing. I believed I didn't deserve to study here. I told myself I was crazy and better off alone, and people were better off without me so I isolated myself. But, thoughts aren't facts. I can't control the thoughts, but I can control my reaction. I was resilient until the student lifestyle broke me down, but then built me back up again, and then broke me down again. It's a rollercoaster ride that will probably last a lifetime.
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Lack Of Sleep

Not getting enough sleep is detrimental to your mental state. My sleep cycle was an absolute mess, inconsistent and just horrible. If you were to see it on a paper, you'd throw it in the recycle bin in the hopes it'd get turned into something better. I took this path because I believed I worked better during the night. I'd binge eat and stay up all night. Sometimes this would work, but when I'd do this for days on end, I'd cry. I told myself I worked well under pressure, but I barely worked. The lack of sleep and the pressure would at times have me sat in the corner watching Instagram videos because I'd shut down. I do think I have the ability to work, but when you're running on little to no sleep with no routine and a crazy amount of stress, it breaks you down in many ways.

No Routine

I had little to no routine. I tried many times to implement one by drawing calendars and timetables and colour coding the things I had to do. But then I'd end up watching Netflix for 3 hours straight. When the time came to focus on a module, I'd get side tracked half way and start looking at the cost of flights, or weekends away. When it came to studying at the library, I'd tell myself I could have a break every hour or so, but then my table became the banter circle and I'd barely get any work done. I tried to sit in the quiet parts of the library, but then it felt awkward to breathe or move, so I decided to go back to civilisation. I tried to attend my lectures to implement some form of structure, but we can all see what happened there (refer to Lectures). It was both a blessing and a curse to have no structure. Blessing in the sense that, I did things when I could, but a curse in the sense that I was everywhere. By this, I mean I'd go from one social event to another then to another, simply because I didn't feel stupid or judged or inadequate.

What Helped

Faith

You may not be 'religious' and you may not be 'practising but knowing there's a higher power out there who's there for you, brings a form of comfort. Your friends and family won't always be there, and that's fine. It used to hurt at one point because I'd expect too much from them, only because I was willing to do the same. Doing so made me lose myself. Why was it okay for my friends to feel better at the expense of my fragile mind? This wasn't their doing, it was me. I spent time and energy on their issues because it was easier to do that than it was to sit with my own mind. But I slowly learned to stop and put Allah and myself first. You can't pour from an empty cup. The times where I felt like nothing, I'd cry to Allah. I replaced my Zack Knight playlist with Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. I started singing about the love of God rather than the love of the world. Though this wasn't an instant shift, it helped. A lot. It made me realise that ultimately, we're nothing without Allah and that's where I found myself again. *You have to lose yourself, to find yourself*.

Friends

The people you surround yourself with have such an impact on you, it's always wise to choose them carefully. Alhamdullilah, the people I met during my time as a student improved my experience. I literally would not have had the experience without my little group. From random hikes, midnight walks, crying sessions in the toilet cubicles, to even running away from white vans. Having people you can reach out to when you're breaking down, is truly a blessing. To know that they'll randomly give you a card when you're sad, or tell you that they love you when you feel nothing. It chips away at the sadness and makes room for you to breathe..

Exercise

It's a scientific fact: exercising improves mental health by releasing endorphins that make you feel good. It also helps improve concentration levels. But actually making the effort to exercise is a journey in itself. I had many gym memberships, but I was never consistent. I started running in my first year, but I stopped because it got 'too much'. However, I'd work out at home, and I'd walk to university with a backpack that felt like it weighed half of me. I walked around quite a lot, now that I think about it. I guess these were the perks of having lectures on the opposite ends of the campus. It was during these moments of workout that I felt a little sane. It was as though I was burning the negative energy disguised in the form of extra weight from all the junk I consumed.

Understanding And Embracing Your Emotions

One thing I have to keep telling myself is, my emotions don't control me. Feeling a certain way doesn't mean I have to act that way. I have to constantly remind myself, it's okay to feel the wave of sadness. I have to remind myself the intrusive thought is not me, it's a whisper that needs to disappear. But with anything, these things take time to understand and control. It takes patience with oneself, compassion, understanding. You know the term 'self–love', this is what it refers to. It means learning to love oneself despite feeling flawed and feeling like nothing. I learnt how to deal with emotions and setbacks by researching into it. I decided to learn more about the human mind and body and how we can be the best versions of ourselves. Granted, the consistent 'zen' lasted about a week but it's a learning curve. *It's okay not to feel okay*.

Post University

The assumption that my mental health would significantly improve once I finished university, was a lie. Yes, it improved slightly but I never truly learned how to deal with my emotions, intrusive thoughts, lack of routine etc. I feel as though I was in a constant flight or fight mode: flying = thoughts of dropping university or neglecting work. Fighting = crying and panicking my way through my deadlines. Now that I finished studying, I don't have the impending doom of essay deadlines which removes quite a lot of stress, but it also means I never truly learned how to deal with my demons in a healthy manner. I'm still quite anxious, I get random bouts of sadness, and I sure as hell still struggle to formulate a coherent sentence but life is a healing journey and one day I won't be as 'blank' as I am today. But I must admit, I do miss learning and hearing students argue absurd views. They were the real ones who made me feel happy to be me.

Others' Experiences

I compiled a short survey and received quite a few responses because I thought it would be interesting to view and compare. There were many similar responses, but each individual had their own story to tell. Although the participants studied different courses such as Philosophy, Languages, Business and more, the experiences were very similar.

Did studying at university negatively impact your mental health?

Majority of those who answered this agreed with the statement: increased levels of anxiety, feeling inadequate, the stress and pressure of working in a new and foreign way, student loans and debts, living away from home, not receiving support when struggling with personal issues, imposter syndrome.

Though there were a few who agreed but disagreed. Although the university lifestyle caused a lot of stress, especially during the pandemic, the upside was that participants were able to meet new people and attend the society events (pre–COVID). One participant didn't realise the negative impact of university until after they'd graduated.

What were your lowest moments?

Majority of the responses referred to: the deadlines, balancing social life with academic life and living away from home. Final year was mentioned quite a bit too, but a few participants mentioned personal issues such as family deaths. A few participants mentioned wanting to drop out of university. Whilst one mentioned struggling with the first year.

What helped when you were at your lowest?

Most participants mentioned friends and family. Among these, there was also a few participants who stated their personal hobbies helped. Alongside this, a few mentioned nothing helped and they decided to power through their low moments and not reach out to others. One mentioned having a set goal helped keep them afloat, whilst another mentioned a healthier lifestyle. University societies was also mentioned, as having extra curricular activities helped provide a lot of support.

Have you graduated/finished studying? If yes, would you say your mental state has significantly improved? If no, do you believe finishing your studies will help improve your mental state?

Though the reasons varied, most participants agreed with this statement. Graduating from university saw the increase of positive mental health attitudes. A few had not yet graduated but believed they would feel a lot better once the trials of university were behind them.