

# **Mentor, Teacher, Advocate, Academic: The Roles Academics with Mental Illnesses Play**

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# Academic Stress

- Academic environments are notoriously stressful
- Factors influencing stress include pressure to publish, salary, academic freedom, governance, and work conditions (Shin & Jung, 2014)
- Job control and flexibility in working schedules can mitigate some of this stress (Kinman & Jones, 2008)

# Experiences of Instructors with Mental Illnesses

- Typical stressors can exacerbate mental illness symptoms (Quijada, 2020)
- Stigma is common, partly due to underrepresentation (Brown & Leigh, 2018)
- Instructors may be approached more often to provide emotional labour (Berheide et al., 2022; Supiano, 2022)
- Most institutions are ill-equipped to provide accommodations for faculty and staff (Quijada, 2020)

# Current Study

**How do instructors with mental illnesses engage with the academic profession, including instruction, research, and service?**

# Methodology

## Collaborative Autoethnography

- Researchers use data from their own lives to investigate socio-cultural experiences and issues
- Team-based inquiry: experiences around a shared topic are examined
  - Since most research in this area focuses on individual's experiences, this method allows us to draw together a spectrum of experiences to better examine similarities and differences

# Researcher-Participants

Six post-secondary instructors from the University of Saskatchewan

- 5 female, 1 agender/nonbinary
- All white
- Ages 36-45 (mean age = 41.7)
- 5-15 years of working in post-secondaries (mean = 10.7)
- Colleges: kinesiology, education, engineering, arts/science
- All lived with at least two psychiatric conditions (mean = 3.3):
  - ADHD (n = 3)
  - Autism Spectrum Disorder (n = 1)
  - Bipolar Disorder (n = 1)
  - Borderline Personality Disorder (n = 1)
  - Postpartum anxiety/depression (n = 1)
  - Disordered Eating (n = 1)
  - Dyslexia (n = 1)
  - Generalized Anxiety Disorder (n = 4)
  - Major Depressive Disorder (n = 4)
  - Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (n = 1)

# Procedure

## Prior to Focus Group

- Researcher-participants are asked to draft written responses to a reflexive prompt three weeks prior to the meeting
- Prompts are compiled by research coordinators and used to finalize questions

## Focus Group

- In-person
- Each meeting focused on a specific aspect of living with mental illness as a post-secondary instructor
- Approx. 3 hours per focus group

# Analysis

- Collaborative
- Analysis teams identify portions of data of interest
- Actual analysis done using **reflexive thematic analysis** (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019) and **deep structure analysis** (Good, 1994; Rothe, 2000)



# Results

## The Teacher

- Universal Design
- Personas
- Exhaustion & Burnout

## The Advocate

- Microadvocacy
- Role Modelling

## The Mentor

- Student Mentorship
- Colleague Mentorship

## The Career Academic

- Work-Life Balance
- Interacting with the Institution

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# The Teacher

## Universal Design

- Instructors put themselves in the shoes of students like them to plan their teaching
- Instructors made deliberate choices in what kinds of assignments to give to students, how to break them into parts, how to share instructions, etc.
- Class format was adapted for various different learning styles

## Personas

- Instructors often had ‘teaching personas’ which included outfits, headspaces, props (e.g., briefcases), notes
- The teaching persona allowed instructors to work safely even when they were struggling with their mental health, but often led to exhaustion as well

# The Teacher

## Exhaustion & Burnout

- Although instructors prioritized universal design, they also found it time consuming and difficult to accomplish
- Instructors also struggled with creating boundaries with students to protect their own time and mental health; e.g., not letting an extension go past the end of a term.

*I've had feedback from the students that it's heroic, you know, thank you. Thank you for taking me on and getting me out of that situation. And that's rewarding, but also concerning. That we have people on campus that are making students feel unsafe, and they have to turn to others with mental illness to help get them through that.*

*-Elizabeth*

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# The Advocate

## Microadvocacy

- Instructors encouraged students to engage in acts of microadvocacy, such as considering where their resources were coming from, or whose voices were and were not being included in course material

## Role Modeling

- Instructors often acted as role models by serving on panels and committees
- Students often returned to instructors to ask for help with challenges years later, as they remembered these instructors as safe people

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# The Mentor

## Students

- Instructors focused on how to best help their students succeed, such as providing help with planning assignment timelines
- Mentorship extended into areas such as graduate student choices (e.g., choosing to mentor “non-cookie-cutter” students)

## Colleagues

- Instructors also mentored their colleagues, by helping them work towards work-life balance and creating environments that minimized stress and competition whenever possible



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# The Career Academic

## Work-Life Balance

- Instructors often described prioritizing their and their family's well-being
- Work-life balance was encouraged by the flexibility and variety of academic life

## Interacting with the Institution

- Instructors sometimes struggled to interact with academic institutions, as they felt that expectations for them were unreasonable, that the culture of academia encouraged anxiety, and that there were unwritten rules that prevented success

# Discussion

- Wearing Many Hats
  - a) Instructors with mental illnesses engaged with many aspects of academic life, some of which went above and beyond what is typically expected (e.g., the advocate role)
  - b) However, this led to struggles with exhaustion and boundary-making
- The Institution
  - a) While some aspects of academic life helped instructors thrive, the institution as a whole was often unhelpful at best, and a barrier at worst

# Discussion

- The Impact

- a) Over and over again, instructors described times in which students had thanked them profusely for their dedication, mentorship, and encouragement
- b) While instructors appreciated this feedback, they also struggled with creating boundaries with students that protected their own time and well-being

# Conclusions

- Policies and resources that encourage universal design implemented at the institutional level can help reduce the burden these instructors experience
- Instructors with mental illnesses play important roles in supporting and advocating for students, particularly students with mental illnesses
- Future research is needed on how to best support these instructors in all roles

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