

# Juggling feeling capable and different: A grounded theory of studying at uni while living with mental ill-health

**Dr Priscilla Ennals**  
**Prof Ellie Fossey**  
**Ass Pro Linsey Howie**



**@EnnalsP**

**Priscilla.ennals@neaminational.org.au**

## Study aim

To generate a **theory**  
grounded in the **experience of students** themselves,  
about **studying at university**  
while living with **mental ill-health** and distress

## Study method

Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014)

Participatory approach (Mertens, 2009; Freire, 1970; Reason & Bradbury, 2008)

# Participants

**21 people**

with lived experience of mental ill-health and university study

Critical Reference Group

12 meetings over 2 ½ years

15 in-depth interviews

6 follow-up interviews

3 written responses

# 15 interview participants

21-39 years  
(mean 26 yrs)

bachelor (10)  
post grad (5)

Females (10)  
Males (5)

Self-reported  
diagnoses

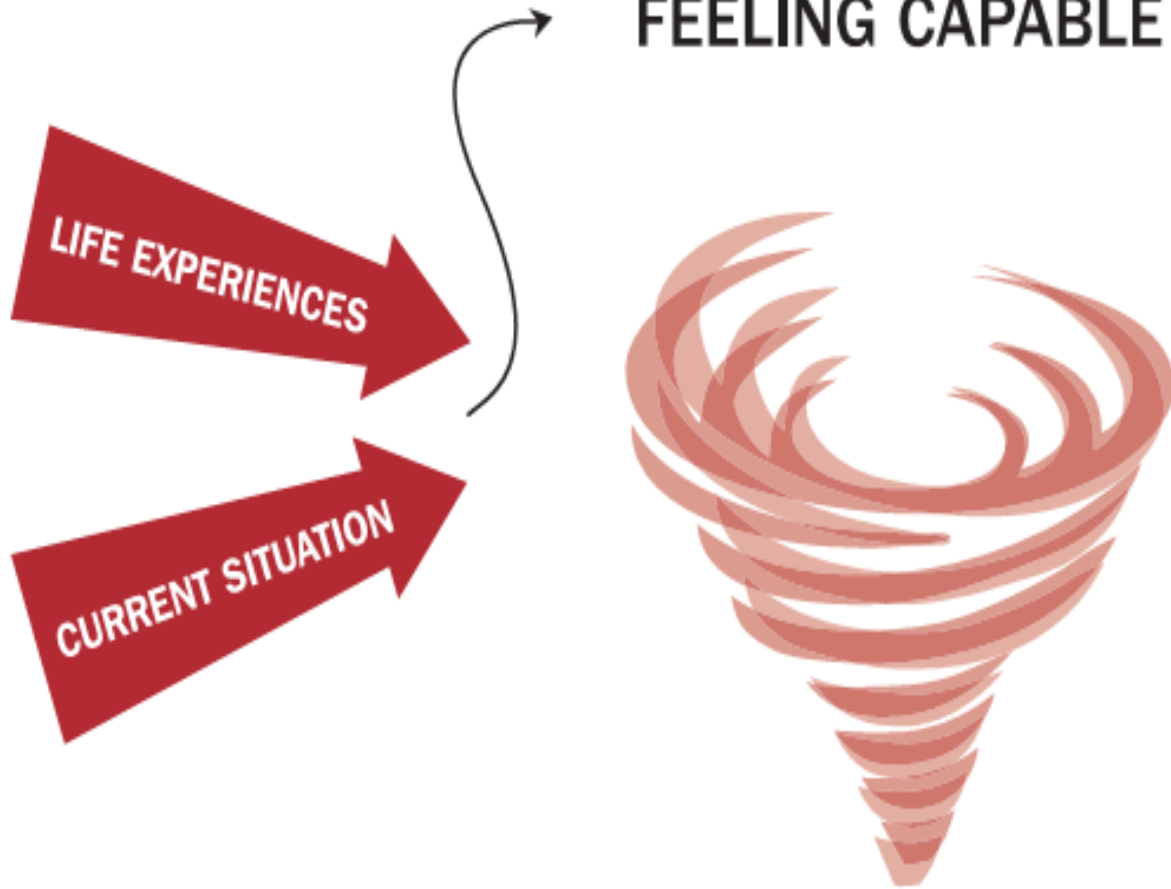
Depression (13)  
Anxiety (6)  
Psychosis (2)  
PTSD (1)  
Bipolar Disorder (1)  
OCD (1)

Additional  
experiences

Past trauma (12)  
Parental MI (7)  
Sibling with MI (6)  
Minimal social  
contacts (2)  
Using supports (6)

# Findings

**FEELING CAPABLE**



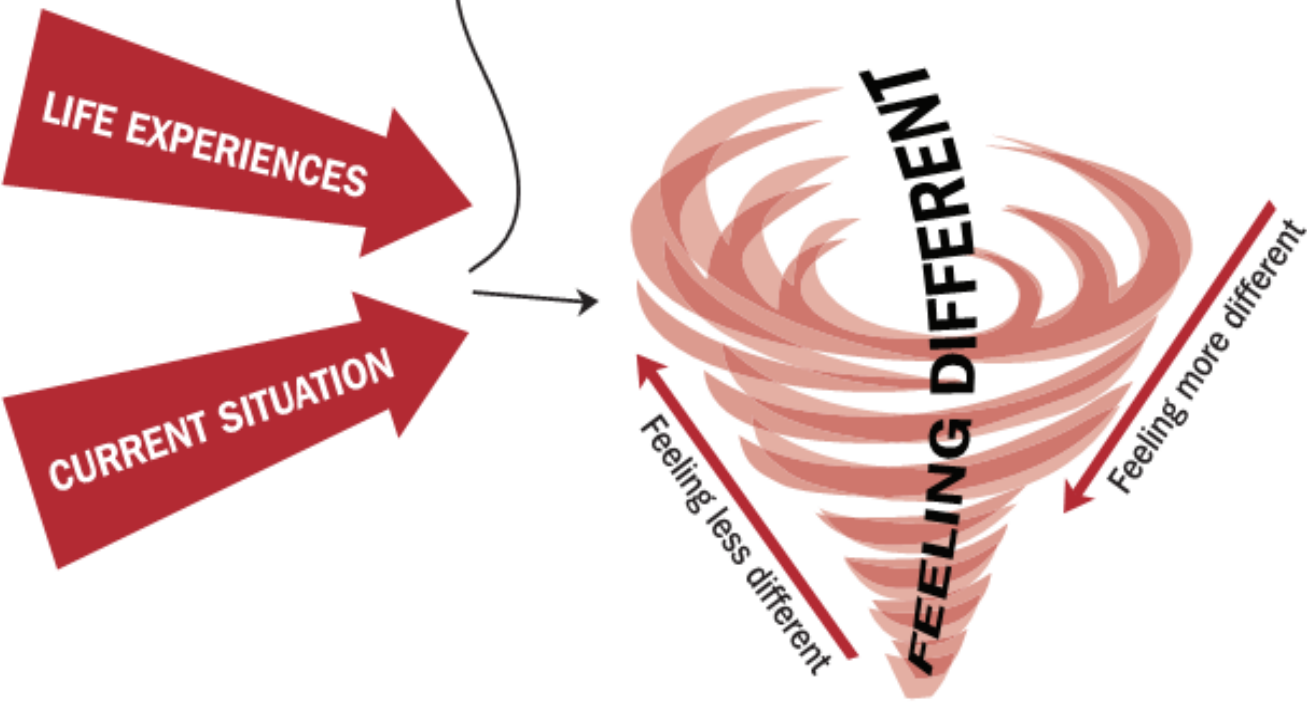
# Feeling capable University – the right place for me

I guess I was just naturally gifted with learning. I had a really good memory in terms of remembering the content and I always did well in my tests. (Kate)

An appetite to learn  
(Maxwell)

Study is something that I'm good at. I'm good at reading, I have an inquiring mind, I'm curious and I like to write and think. (Betty)

# FEELING CAPABLE



# Feeling different University – do I fit?

**I really felt like an  
outsider. I felt like  
nobody understood  
me. (Maxwell)**

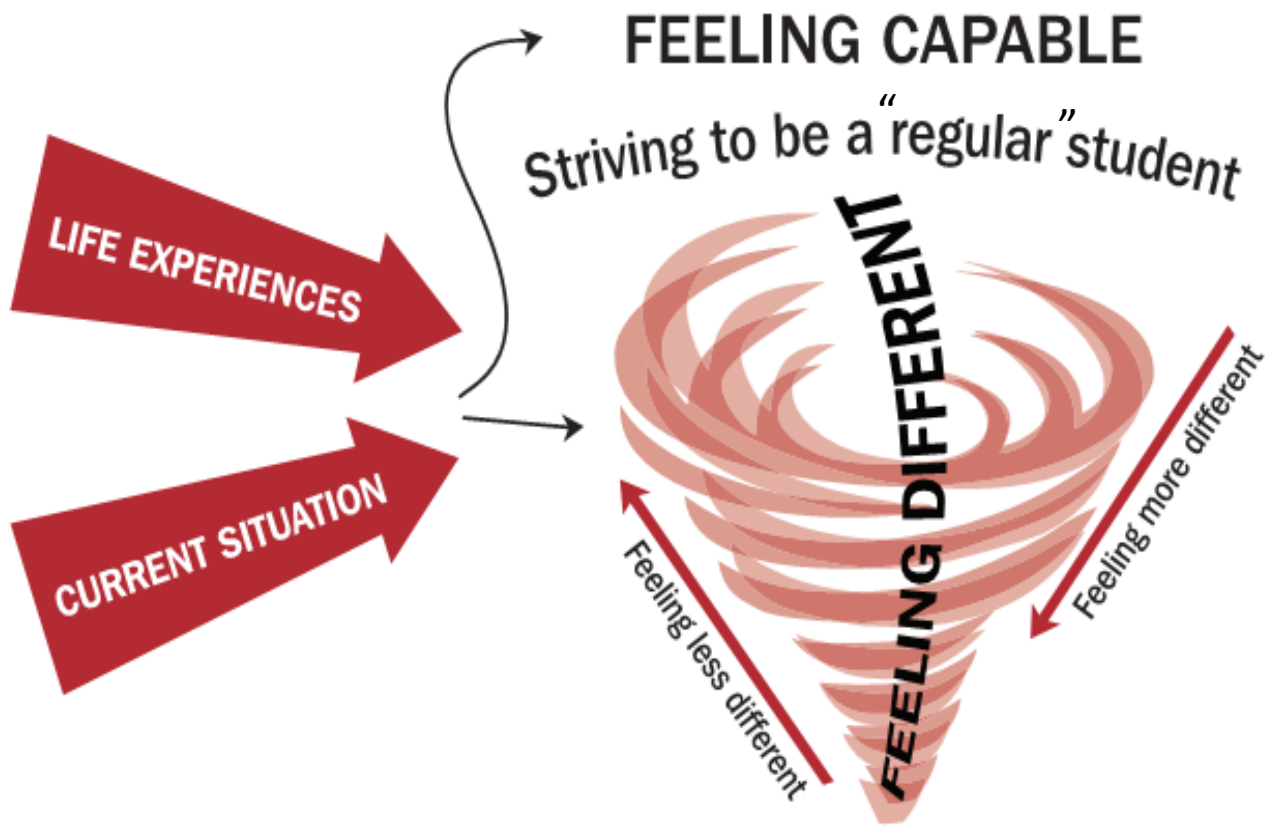
**The world expects you  
to be normal, and I  
don't think I live up to  
that expectation.  
(Stacey)**



## Feeling different University – do I fit?

**My parents separated when I was a baby and my dad is an ex-bikie and my mum has a mental illness and we were always quite poor when I was growing up so I feel like I had all these things that made me feel different from a really young age....I have internalised being different a lot, it's part of my identity.**

**(Mackenzie IV2)**



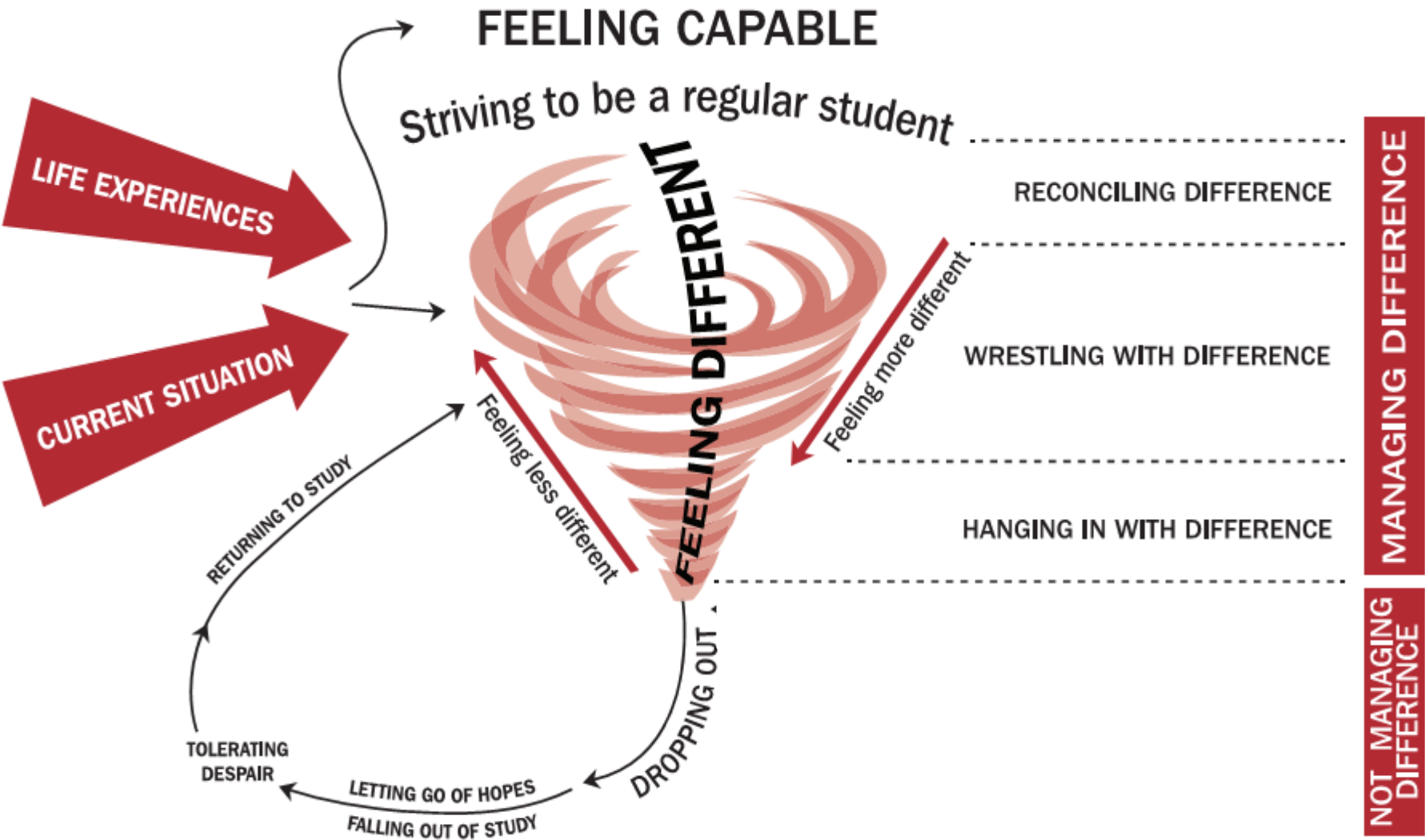
**MANAGING DIFFERENCE**

**NOT MANAGING DIFFERENCE**

# Striving to be a 'regular' student

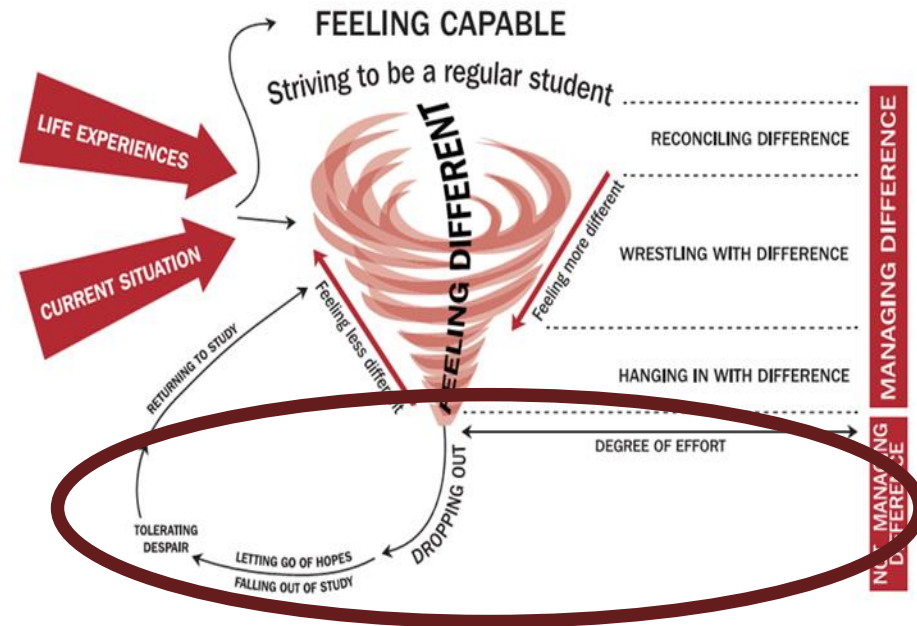
**Don't wanna' be different.  
Just wanna' be a regular  
student. (Nicole IV2)**

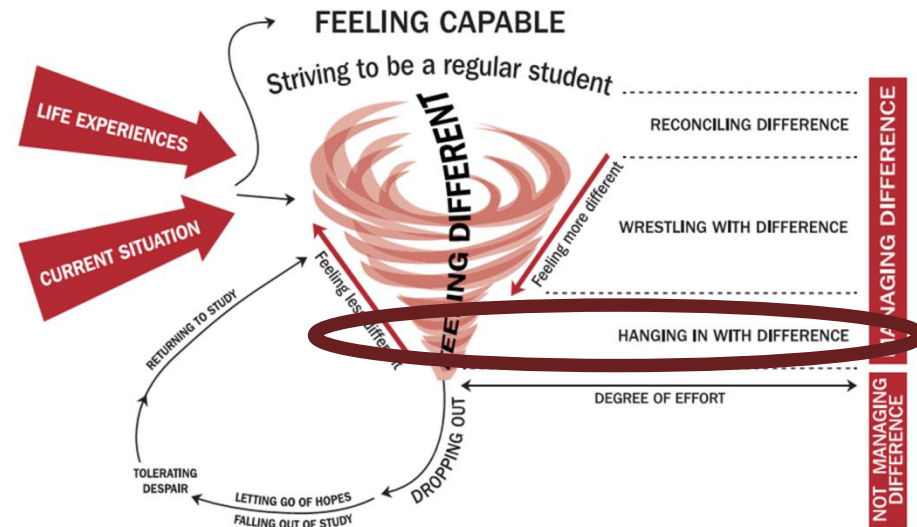
**I just want to be accepted as  
normal...and not have anyone else  
know. (Reggie IV2)**



## Not managing difference: Dropping out

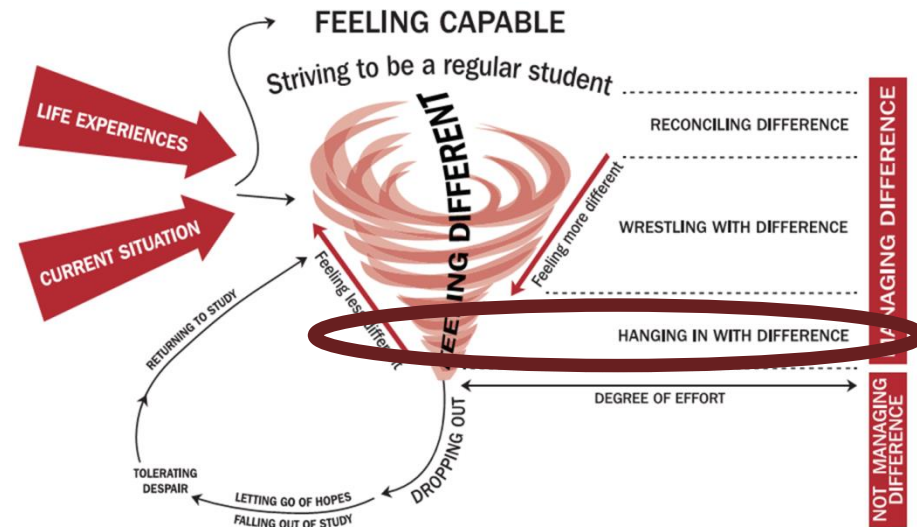
- Letting go of hopes
- Falling out of study
- Tolerating despair
  - Giving up on academic dreams
  - Giving up on life
- Returning to study





## Hanging in with difference

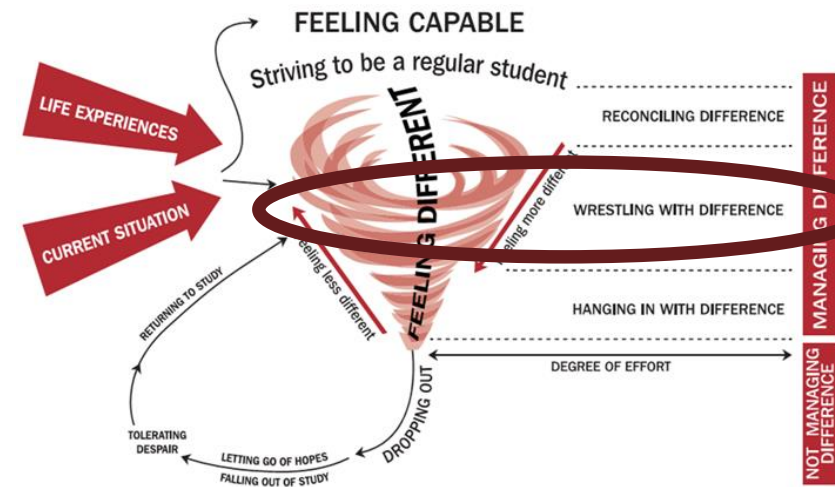
- Alone
- Identity dominated by difference ( where difference is wrong, deficient etc.)
- Limited options/ feeling stuck
- Hard to work out what would help/ who could help
- Living in the moment/ surviving day to day
- Reducing distress, keeping safe, doing what works



## Hanging in with difference

- Concealing who I am
- Retreating from the social world
- Numbing distress
- Battling my thoughts

# Wrestling with difference

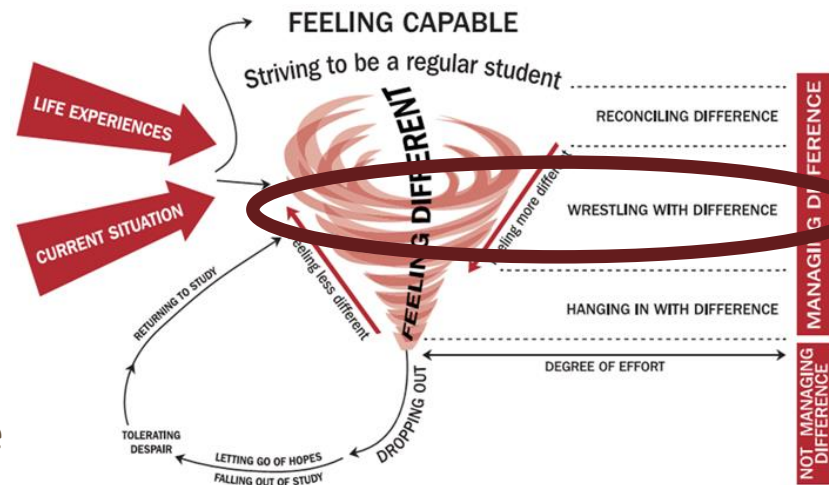


- Dynamic, oscillating
- Relationship with difference is unsettled, being (re)negotiated
- Making and losing ground
- Difference has varying impact on identity
- Greater agency/ choice/ control
- Broader perspective/ space to reinterpret experience
- Increase in future focus



# Wrestling with difference

- **Coming to know self**
  - Acknowledging & revealing difference
  - Allowing vulnerability

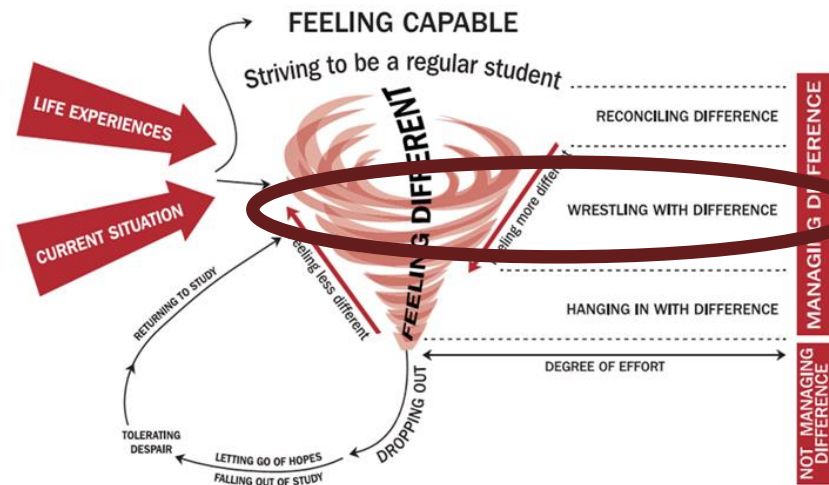


I'm just really at the moment fixated with allowing myself to breathe emotionally and maybe take stock of what I have learnt through uni. It's been a real process of self-discovery,...., God, I've come so far from being like every day just suicidal and anxious and unhappy. To actually just be able to go for a walk and just feel at peace, rather than just always in my head, criticising myself, that is huge.

# Wrestling with difference

- **Accepting limits**

- Adapting expectations of self
- Knowing limits- keeping death as Plan C

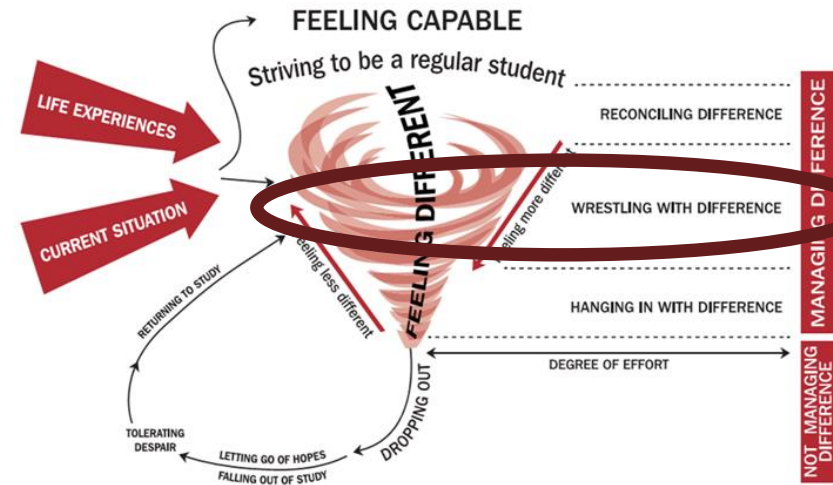


it's always been my Plan C. Plan A - try to do something. Plan B - try again. Plan C – f\*!@ it die. It has been the plan for years. I'm not going to accept failure. I'm not - the problem with that is suicide as a motivator. I don't want to be a kitchen hand so I must study. Start to fail in study; well I'm not going to be a kitchen hand again. I'll choose death.

# Wrestling with difference

- **Seizing control of what I can**

- Just doing something
- Managing environments and demands
- Connecting with others and using supports



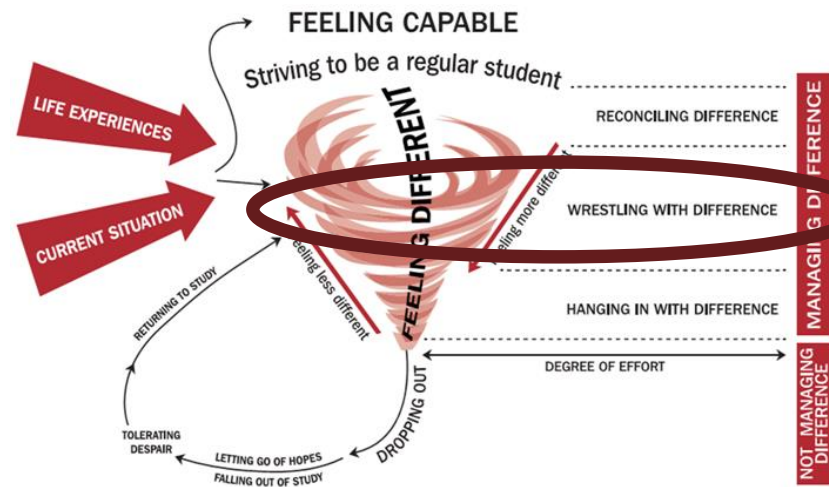
Being proactive

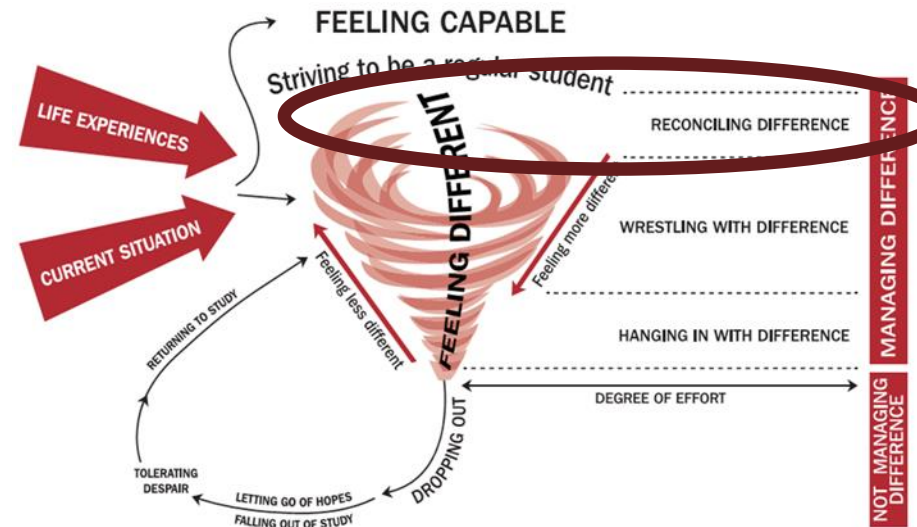
Finding a friend

Talking to teachers

# Wrestling with difference

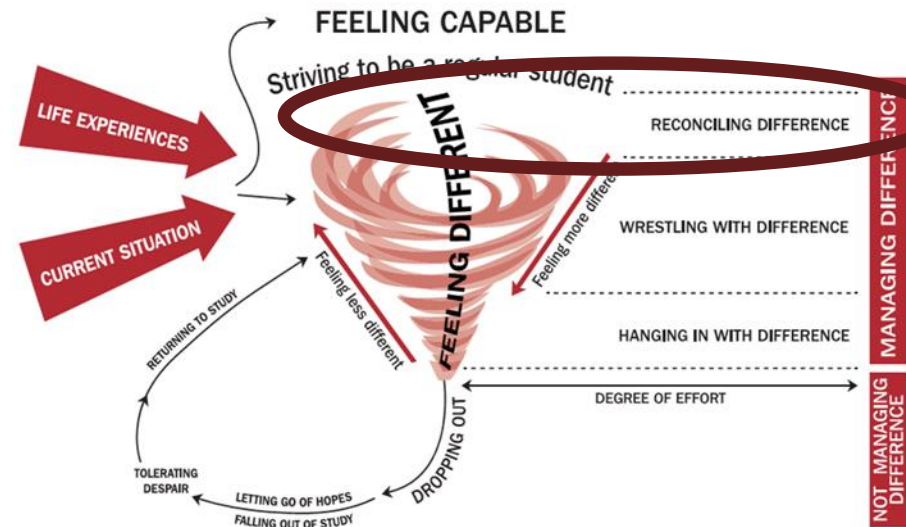
- **Coming to know self**
  - Acknowledging & revealing difference
  - Allowing vulnerability
- **Accepting limits**
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  - Knowing limits- keeping death as Plan C
- **Seizing control of what I can**
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## Reconciling difference

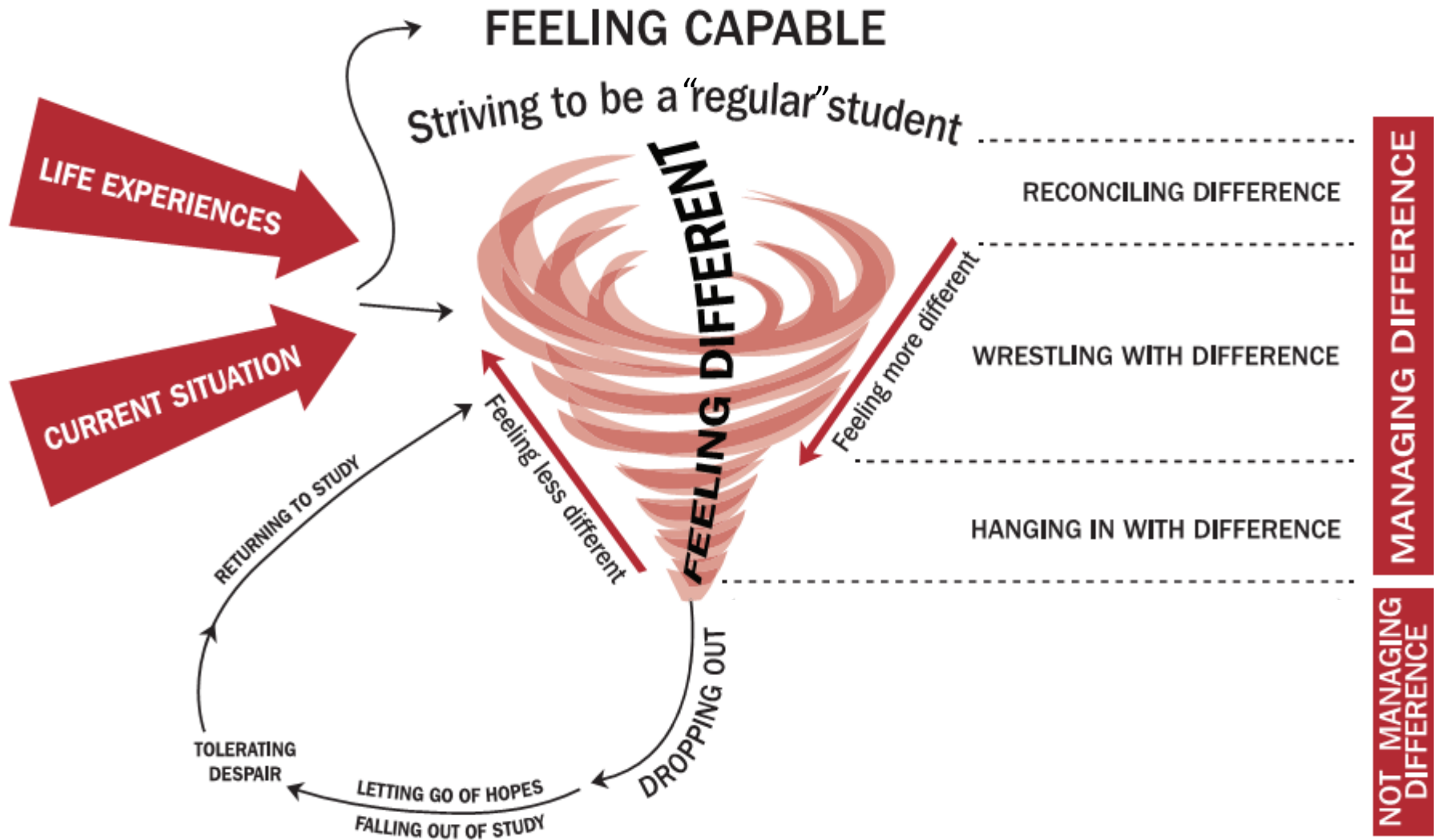
- Difference less dominant/ space for other identities to co-exist
- Space to accommodate/ accept/ or celebrate difference (difference has less negative power)
- Less pressure, range of options, reframing impact of influences
- Future orientation
- Activism, pursuit of rights





## Reconciling difference

- Embracing wellbeing
- Holding hope
- Positive risk taking
- Watching out for ill-health

You know what? I can still be whatever I want and I can still go out and get a job. I can, not be whatever I want, but I can still have a good life and do these things that everyone can do, and that I'm not limited really at all. All I've got to do is have a plan and just follow it and I'll be okay.

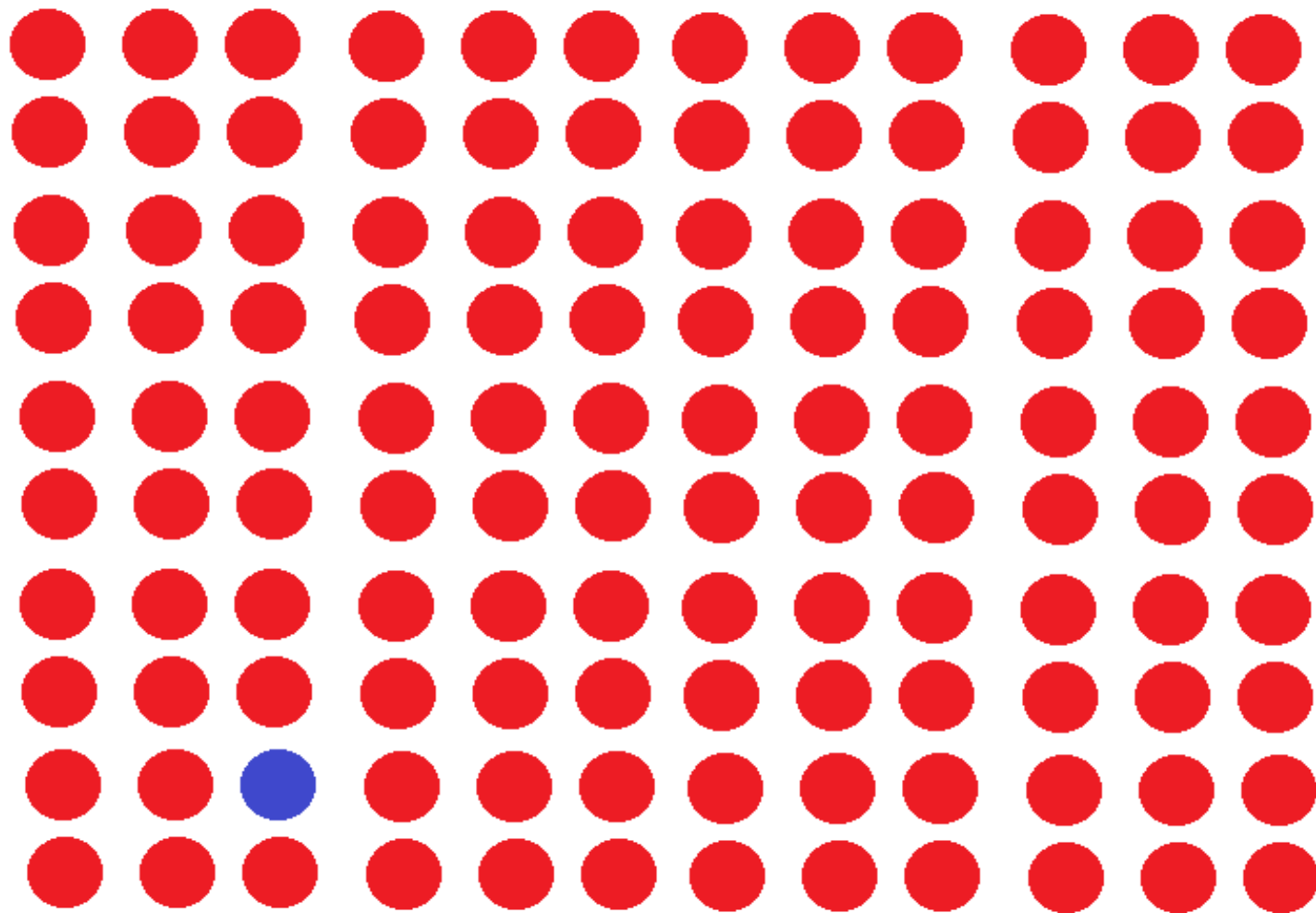


# Supporting movement in the vortex

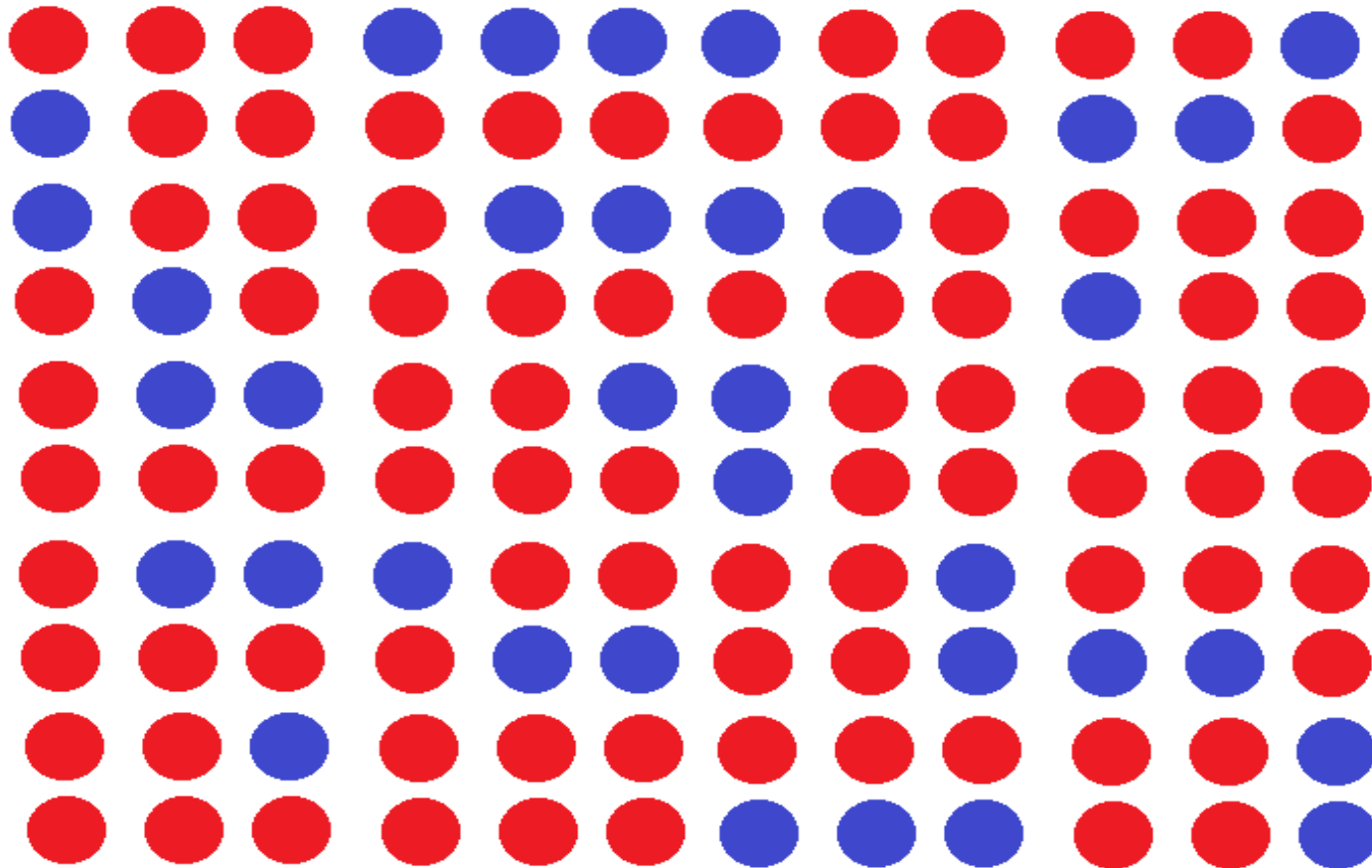
 <b>Downward spiral</b>	 <b>Upward spiral</b>
<b>Confirming difference</b>	<b>Allowing space for difference</b>
Categorising	Allowing difference
Negative messages from others	Positive connections
Isolation	Belonging
Silencing	Speaking out



The experience of study for people living with mental ill-health and distress: **feeling different**



A goal? Supporting students to realise  
“I am **less different** than I thought”  
OR “We are all similar **AND** different”



## Final questions to ponder

How do students come to know about the experiences of other students?

- their struggles, successes, dropping out and coming back, feeling alone, wondering if they are the only one.

Do our current approaches support students to feel more or less different?

[priscilla.ennals@neaminational.org.au](mailto:priscilla.ennals@neaminational.org.au)



@EnnalsP

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