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

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## Slide 2

## 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)

## Slide 3

## Participants

21 people

with lived experience of mental ill-health and university study15 interview participants

Critical Reference Group

12 meetings over 2 ½ years

15 in-depth interviews

6 follow-up interviews

3 written responses

## Slide 4

## 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)

## Slide 5

## Findings

Feeling capable

Life experiences

Current situation

## Slide 6

## 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)

## Slide 7

## Feeling capable

Life experiences

Current situation

Feeling different

Feeling less different

Feeling more different

## Slide 8

## 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)

## Slide 9

## 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)

## Slide 10

## Feeling capable

Striving to be a ‘regular’ student

Life experiences

Current situation

Feeling different

Feeling less different

Feeling more different

Not managing difference

Managing difference

## Slide 11

## 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

## Slide 12

Feeling capable

Striving to be a regular student

Feeling different

Life experiences

Current situation

Feeling less different

Feeling more different

Not managing difference

Managing difference

At the top- reconciling difference

In the middle – wrestling with difference

Towards the bottom – hanging in with difference

## Slide 13

## 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

## Slide 14

## 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

## Slide 15

## Hanging in with difference

• Concealing who I am

• Retreating from the social world

• Numbing distress

• Battling my thoughts

## Slide 16

## 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

## Slide 17

## 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.

## Slide 18

## 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.

## Slide 19

## Wrestling with difference

• Seizing control of what I can

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

Being proactive, Talking to teachers, Finding a friend

## Slide 20

## Wrestling with difference

• Coming to know self

* Acknowledging & revealing difference
* Allowing vulnerability

• Accepting limits

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

• Seizing control of what I can

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

## Slide 21

## 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

## Slide 22

## 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.

## Slide 23

## Supporting movement in the vortex

Downward spiralUpward spiralConfirming differenceAllowing space for differenceCategorisingAllowing differenceNegative messages from

othersPositive connectionsIsolationBelongingSilencingSpeaking out

## Slide 24

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

Image: one lone blue dot amongst a page of red dots.

## Slide 25

## A goal? Supporting students to realise

“I am less different than I thought” OR “We are all similar AND different”

Image: multiple blue dots amongst a page of red dots

## Slide 26

## 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

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