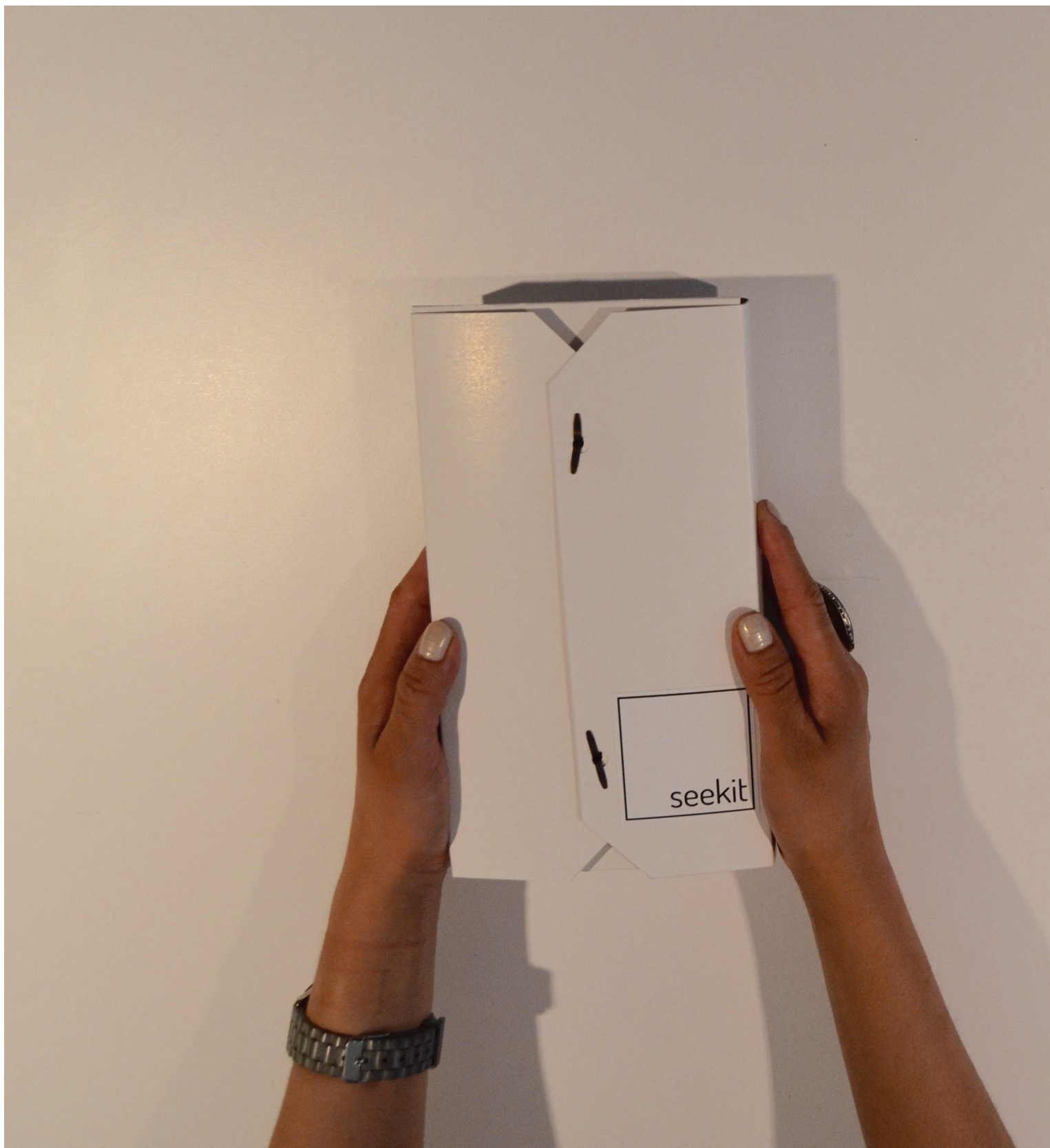


MFA DESIGN FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION
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NAVIGATING AND EXPLORING



DEPRESSION IN NEW WAYS



THE PROBLEM

We are currently experiencing a depression epidemic: researchers estimate that almost 20 percent of the American population meets the criteria for some form of depression at any given time, and that almost 7% of American will have at least one episode of major depression in their lifetime.

But the idea of depression is frightening, so we shy away from the subject. Those suffering from depression feel like they are alone in their suffering and ashamed of what is going on with them; they fear the stigma that comes along with being depressed. Those who are not depressed fear they might be next. And so we all avoid the subject, even as the crisis gets worse.

Psychotherapist Richard O'Connor describes depression "not as an emotion itself; it's the loss of feelings, a big heavy blanket that insulates you from the world yet hurts at the same time." And author and mental health activist Andrew Solomon says: "You feel in depression, not like you've put on a grey veil, but that the veil has been taken away and you are seeing things as they are."

O'Connor explains that depression makes you see things in a completely new way, it takes over every aspect of your self: how you think, how you feel, how you interact with others, and so much more. And eventually it becomes a part of your self; you can't remember your old self and can't see the world any other way. Even though everything is so hard, this becomes your new normal.

Andrew Solomon, talking about his own struggle with depression, explained that: "The opposite of depression is not happiness but vitality, and it was vitality that seemed to seep away from me in that moment. Everything there was to do seemed like to much work."

Everything just feels so much harder when you are depressed. And for college students these struggles are further exacerbated because the transition to college is challenging on its own.

COLLEGE DEPRESSION BY THE NUMBERS

This is a time when most college students are away from their support systems for the first time, having to balance their newfound independence with taking care of themselves, managing all their school work, worrying about their academic performance, and dealing with the financial burden of a college education.

They are also often sleeping less, exploring their sexuality, having much more access to drugs and alcohol, and exercise and healthy eating habits are no longer a priority.

College is also when many students are getting diagnosed with depression for the first time.



44%

AMERICAN COLLEGE
STUDENTS REPORTED
FEELING SYMPTOMS
OF DEPRESSION.

75%

LIFETIME CASES
MENTAL ILLNESSES
BEGIN BY AGE 24

SUICIDE

#2

LEADING CAUSE OF
DEATH FOR COLLEGE
STUDENTS,

ADDING UP TO

1100

DEATHS EACH YEAR.

DEPRESSION

#1

REASON STUDENTS
DROP OUT OF COLLEGE

THE CONTEXT

I initially set out to understand how creativity, or creative processes, can be used as a tool to help us connect with a deeper, more authentic part of ourselves and how we can learn from that; who we truly are, our passions and purpose, our fears and failures...

I wondered how this might impact a population that could be regarded as being on the other end of the creativity spectrum: people suffering from depression.

My thesis started out exploring how creative processes can be used as tools to help college students suffering from depression to reconnect with themselves and understand how they are affected by their depression.

Psychotherapist Richard O'Connor calls creativity the "antithesis of depression." He goes on to explain that the creative pursuit is about self-expression and making work that makes a difference. O'Connor continues by stating, "depression is not just an illness but a failure of creativity. Depression tells us there is no meaning; to recover means we have to create meaning for ourselves."

O'Connor expressed really well what I set out to do and why I feel this work is important.

There have been many people who have done work on creative processes as tools for personal development and for finding meaning in difficult experiences. The two examples that follow are some of the most interesting ones that I have researched. One of them focuses on a group working with mental health illnesses in general, and the other with Alzheimer's patients.

THE LIFELINES WRITING GROUP

The Lifelines Writing Group was a collaborative project developed by clinical psychologist Alan Dienstag and author Don DeLillo. It was a group for early stage Alzheimer's patients to use writing as a form of therapy.

Dienstag was initially unconvinced this would work, but explained he was intrigued by DeLillo saying that "writing is a form of memory." This new way of looking at memory had never crossed his mind; he had always thought about the loss of memory that occurs, he says, but "it had never really occurred to me to think about other forms of memory and the possibilities inherent in them." With this new way of looking at memory, both men started to develop a framework for the group.

Dienstag and DeLillo agreed that the group was "neither a class nor therapy" and that the group's focus would be on self-expression and that "writing would not be taught or critiqued." Their goal was to inspire members to write by stimulating their memories and emotions.

Dienstag talks about how he was surprised even by the early work from the group, in particular by how articulate they were, how much emotion they were able to convey, and how through their writings they were able to reveal and explore new facets of their memories, that they could not articulate in therapy, for example. He explains, "The writing seemed to open a different door into the lives of these people."

Dienstag explained how while working in groups many things are transmittable, but admitted he had not considered the fact that the act of writing and remembering might be one of those, and suggested "we should surround people who are forgetting with acts of remembering."

Dienstag talked about one of the member's story: "it was a heroic act of recollection and self-expression at a level of emotional connectedness and specificity that was not readily available in other ways" and that through writing, the group was able to turn a weaknesses the memory loss, into a strength.

MAD MAPS

Mad Maps is a project developed by The Icarus Project, a support network developed by and for “people who experience the world in ways that are often diagnosed as mental illness.” The group wishes to help them find their own definitions of health and wellness, and their ultimate goal is for them to “not just survive, but thrive and transform.”

They define Mad Maps as “documents that we create for ourselves as reminders of our goals, personal signs of struggle and strategies for well being.” Inspired by the idea of medical Advanced Directives, the project evolved into creating documents, often in very creative ways, which help them define and understand their journeys with mental illness and get through moments of crisis in their lives. The documents are intended to be not only for the users themselves, but also for their family and friends, who support and take care of them, when they cannot.

Based on these 2 examples, and others I have not included in this paper, I believe that I will be successful in developing a tool for college students suffering from depression. The fact that I’m working with a smaller subset of the mental health population will make it possible for me to make a tool that targets their specific needs and challenges.

DEPRESSED COLLEGE STUDENTS

Throughout the year I spoke to a number of college student who are currently suffering from depression and also with people who have already graduate from college, but who were diagnosed with depression while in college. Some of the key learnings from these conversations were:

> Depression feels exhausting; every small action takes a lot of effort and energy to get done and you feel drained all the time. This often evolves into a feeling of not being good enough, because you can't do even basic tasks of daily life. It feels like you are constantly wasting time and in a constant battle with yourself. But, one of the people I spoke to explained that maintaining a schedule and giving yourself constraints helps, because this way things feel less overwhelming.

> Depression manifests a lot of negative thinking and feelings of hopelessness, even about small things. There's a sense of not being worth much, never being good enough, and even though you know these thoughts are ridiculous, you can't see a way around them.

But, some of the people I spoke with talked about how changing the language you use and practicing reframing things in a positive light can be helpful, and that focusing on what makes you feel well and happy is important. Another person talked about how "in my pain I found my purpose and my passion," explaining that there's an opportunity to take something you feel is completely negative and finding your power within."

> One of the people talked about how outsiders often have no clue as to what is going on with you. He explained that while others saw him as a friendly, loud, jokester type of personality, he often felt sad, depressed and lonely; and yet very few people around him even knew about this.

> One person talked about knowing that there was a lot of pain below the surface, but that he's not ready to acknowledge it. So he pushes it aside, because there are more interesting things he could be doing.

DEBORAH

Deborah, is one of many the many students who were diagnosed with depression in college.

In hindsight, she recognizes that she had felt and lived some of the symptoms for many, many years, but that for her that had become “normal.”

However, all the new experiences and adjustments of college life brought her to the realization that something was wrong and that brought its own set of problems, like isolation and feeling as though she didn't belong. And that developed into a lot of sadness and isolation, worsening her depression.

From the outside, she looked like any other student; she went to her classes and had a good grades, but behind the scenes, once classes were done, she would return to her dorm and lie in bed all day, sometimes crying uncontrollably. She would not do her course work until the last minute, not because she didn't care, but because her depression kept her from being productive.

Deborah also explained that she decided to seek help in college, because she knew she needed to, as she deteriorated, so did her health and her grades begun to get worse. However, she did not have a positive experience on campus, partly because of how the university system is set up. But she also acknowledged that looking back, she recognizes that she was not ready to be truly honest with herself, so she would go to her counseling sessions and not really \ tell the truth. She explains that although she had a longing to be liberated from what she was experiencing, she was definitely afraid of taking those steps, of being open and honest about who she truly was and what she was experiencing.

So she just went through the motions, said what she had to say and she signed on the dotted line, and from there she went back into her cycle of depression.

COURTNEY COOK

Courtney Cook has suffered from depression for over 20 years, and has, over time, been able to learn how to separate herself from her depression. She has learned to recognize the warnings signs of an incoming slump, and because of this she has been better prepared to deal with the struggles that happen in those moments.

She has begun to ask others for help and planned for moments when she's not at her best, thus ensuring that she can still make the decisions she knows she should.

She says, "I know all these things. It's just that my depression doesn't know them."

So she has begun to make plans ahead of time so that when she notices an oncoming slump, she can quickly take action, feel supported and begin her recovery.

I wondered what were the main differences between Courtney and the college students I had been talking to?

Courtney has experience. Over time she has been able to recognize patterns and understand how she is affected by her depression.

College students on the other hand are mostly new to their experiences with depression and are struggling to understand what is happening to them. They don't feel like themselves anymore and feel lost.

It was clear to me that the difference between the two was that preparedness. So I began to wonder, how could I help college students be better prepared for their depression?

Unlike Courtney, college students are still learning to cope with their depression, but I wondered if there were tools that would help them get answers to these questions earlier, so they could be better prepared to cope with the ups and downs of their illness, without having to wait 20 years to come to some of the conclusions that Courtney has come to.

REFRAMING THE PROBLEM

I believe that looking at these questions through a different lens may help college students understand themselves and their depression in a way.

During this process I struggled many times with what my role as a designer working on a mental health issue was. I often found myself trying to solve problems I wasn't equipped to, or in ways that did not reflect my expertise. I am a designer, not a therapist or a psychiatrist.

I am a designer, and what I want to do is understand how creative processes can help students look at their depression through another lens. I am not hoping to cure depression, but I want to help students be able to deal with it better, using their creative resources, so they don't feel so overwhelmed.

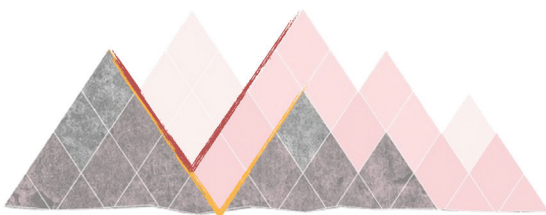
What I can offer them as a designer are tools and processes that will help them look at themselves and their depression under a different light, and plan and prepare for times when they feel like depression is winning the battle.

Like a mountain range, people's journey with depression is full of ups and downs.

My goal is to reduce the depth of the valleys these students experience in their depression

So that, if they are better prepared, they will be able to recognize indicators of incoming slumps and take action before getting to a really low point in their depression.

My intention is for students to work on this when they feel well. I certainly don't want to add to an overwhelming list of things they feel they have to do when they are in a slump



SEEKIT

SEEKIT is a tool that helps college students explore and navigate through their experiences with depression.

The main goals of this toolkit are:

- 1) To help students better understand how they are affected by their depression.
- 2) To enable students to prepare for its ups and downs.

The main elements of the toolkit are the activity cards.

They prompt students to explore themselves and their depression in different ways, through reflecting, writing and drawing



ACTIVITY CARDS

I chose to use cards because they provided the most flexibility for users. In previous iterations I explored other formats, like booklets, which were less successful because users felt they had to follow a chronological order, even if the instructions said they didn't have to.

The cards allow users to pick and choose which activities they want to focus on.

Cards are split into 4 main categories:

>> Understanding the landscape: cards help users identify habits and spot indicators of behavioral change.

>> Planning ahead: cards help users plan and prepare for slumps.

>> Shifting Thinking: cards help users shift negative thinking and behaviors into positive ones.

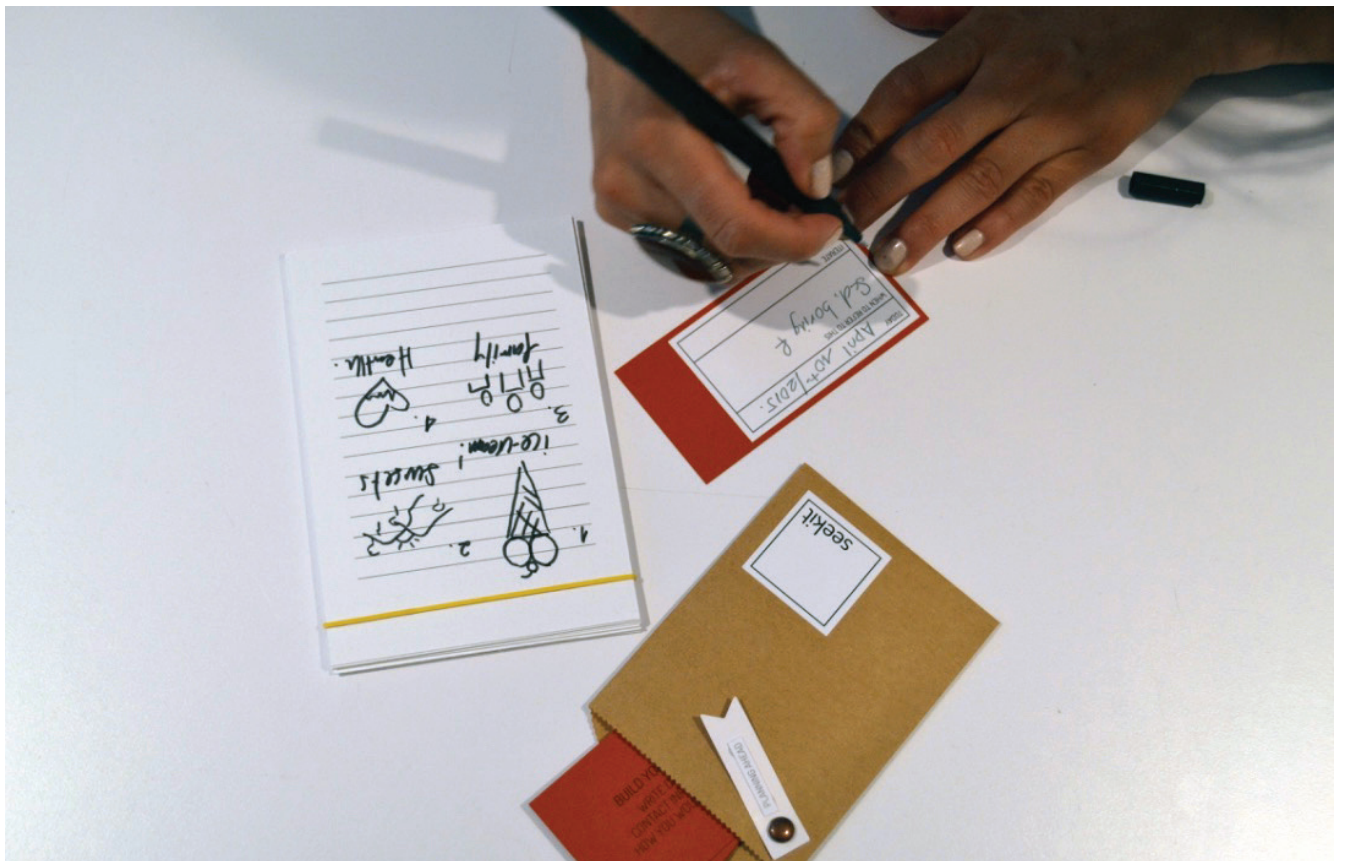
>> Being well: cards help users consider ways to support themselves and identify what makes them feel good

I created the categories because while prototyping, I identified 2 problems:

The first was that users initially felt overwhelmed by the number of cards and had trouble selecting activities. The second was that I noticed that, each person's experience with depression is unique, and so are the areas each user may choose to explore. While one user, for example, can only recognize slumps were coming in hindsight and wants to start to recognize slumps before they are fully set in, another may be aware of indicators of oncoming slumps, but is frustrated by all the negative thoughts that arise when depression begins to set in, and wants to learn some new thought patterns.

On the back of each card, I have created a label for students to fill in. I added this detail to the design because while prototyping I learned that most users had not considered referring back to what they had produced.

I understood it was important to make them actively think about when it will be useful for them to look at what they've created.



INTRODUCTORY SESSION

Student's first interaction with SEEKIT is in an introductory session.

Having someone guide students in their first interaction with the kit helps them get started.

During my prototyping phase, I learned that although students were interested in doing the activities, they would often put them off.

Having them do it with someone gets them over that initial hurdle.

When Hannah came to the workshop, we started by having a conversation about her experiences with depression and about how SEEKIT works.

Before tackling any of the activities in the kit, I invited Hannah to make the toolkit itself her own.

This helped get her comfortable with making things on the spot, so she could embrace the kit's activities.

We then moved onto choosing the activity cards.

We talked about what she felt she needed to understand better and what she was comfortable in doing around me, and we picked 3 cards to work on together.

During the workshop, Hannah confirmed that she was more comfortable because I was doing the activities alongside her, because it didn't feel as though I was just watching and judging the work she was producing.

The first card that Hannah picked asked her

"What were some of your favorite things".

The card also suggested she add them to the kit, but she decided she would prefer to draw them for now.

She then filled the back of the card, making a reminder to go reach for one of the things in her list when she felt sad, bored or empty.

At the end of the workshop, we talked about how she felt while doing activities and made plans for how she would continue to use the kit on her own.

She decided to spend the following couple of weeks doing a few activities in the morning.





FEEDBACK

I have received encouraging feedback from the users I have spoken with.

One of the people I prototyped with talked about the kit being a good way for her to start her day. She explained that she had felt as if she was coming into a slump and that when that usually starts to happen she delays starting her day for as long as possible, but that Seekit gave her something to work on and think about first thing in the morning. This helped her feel like she had already accomplished something that morning, and made the rest of the day a little easier.

Another user explained that doing these activities didn't fix anything or made her depression better, but it gave her a place to start from. She also mentioned it gave her some space to look at her life more realistically.

Multiple users talked about how the kit made tangible some things that aren't normally. One of the users developed on this, explaining that she was "able to see what is happening as it's happening, instead of just letting it overwhelm and paralyze me like it normally does."

Finally, one user expressed surprise. First she said, "I had more than I thought I did and that was empowering." She went on to say "I didn't realize I could write such nice things about myself."

WHAT'S NEXT?

The sessions I have carried out so far have been one-on-one, because of student's desire for privacy, but there's definitely potential for the work to be done in small groups.

This is one of the ways I envision this project scaling to reach a larger number of students in the future.

Another possible way is by developing partnerships with university's health and counseling services, so they provide kits to students and become facilitators of the workshop

There is also the possibility of the development of a digital platform where students can order the kit and do the instructional session through a series of videos

But in the long term, I believe it is truly important for us to build a community that connects students and where they can share their experiences with one another because it is important for them to recognize they are not alone in their struggles, and that depression is more common than we all think.

