

Mental Health Awareness and Improving Connections Through Elevated User Experience

Research Report

Almasi Gathoni, Alaina Chapple, Celine Edouard, & Sukgwan Hong

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Introduction

The following report explains the research we conducted as step one in our Goal-Directed Design Process to create an application about the mental health of college students. This project is for our Interaction Design class in which we go through the Goal-Directed Design process to create a prototype for an application.

Due to present circumstances of the pandemic, we met virtually through Discord and Miro to have team meetings and collaborate on various sections of our report. We held weekly team meetings to touch base and establish which team members would complete which parts of the report.

What is Goal-Directed Design (GDD)?

Goal-Directed Design is a design process designers undergo in order to gain a better understanding of users and their goals. This process allows designers to research the domain of their product, its users, and to learn how to create a product that allows users to easily achieve their goals.



Goal-Directed Design Process



The purpose of our application is to help college students gain a better understanding of what self care is, why it is important, and what actions they can take to practice self-care. Our report will detail our findings and explain how we used our research to lay out our user goals.

The Research Phase of Goal-Directed Design sets the basis of creating an effective product. We conducted research through team meetings, online research, and interviews conducted with potential users. We recruited a small sample of four college students ranging in ages and demographic background for our interviews in order to acquire enough information to specify user goals and expectations.

Kickoff Meeting

Overview

Before we fully dive into the GDD research process, we first had to start by holding a Kickoff Meeting with our group in order to discuss our problem statement, as well as any assumptions about our app. Due to our current state of communication, we had to rely on video chatting on Discord in order to complete the required templates, as well as fill out all of the information that would be needed to get started with our project. The results that we acquired from this process are as follows.



Through our app, our team hopes to address an easier and more affordable way for college-aged students to receive access to any mental health or self care needs they desire. Current self care apps put a lot of emphasis on relaxation methods and making sure the user gets a good night's sleep. What they lack, however, is being a fundamental hub for all things self-care. This includes the ability to schedule an appointment with a counselor within the app. What our app hopes to accomplish is corner the market for self care apps and become a one stop place for all users' mental health related needs.

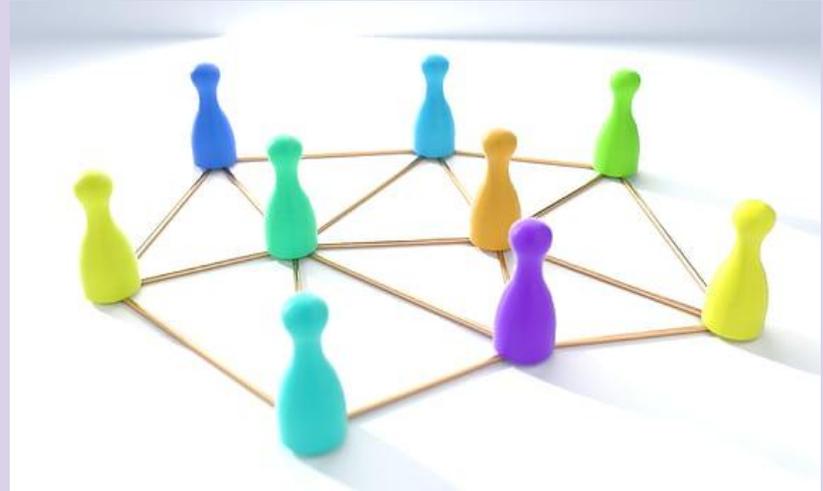
Assumptions

Since our assignment is for class, we did not have stakeholders. So, we created assumptions based on what we believed hypothetical stakeholders would think.

What we gathered from our Kickoff Meeting is that our target audience is college aged students and young adults who would make use of important features like counseling and community social circles in order to better their self care and mental health.

Our product will ideally be a tool that students can access everyday whenever they desire, they can schedule appointments for therapy, and be able to assist a potential user who feels too nervous to speak with a professional in a face-to-face setting.

These users will also have the option to join support groups which would encourage them to build relationships with potential new friends as well as give them the opportunity to express their feelings in a judgement-free environment.





Assumptions (cont.)

Our biggest competitors would be other self care apps like Headspace, which help to encourage meditation and mindfulness. In order to combat them, we hope to add more calming colors and more self-care options within our app, as well as being universally accessible.

We also understand that our app will most likely be used as a way for people to make friends, as well as give them access to free mental health care. We hope an app like this will be successful around college campuses where students can encourage their peers to download the app and make use of its plethora of self care possibilities.

Assumptions (cont.)

We plan to generate app revenue using advertisements that will tailor to the intended audience as they interact with the app. This may include a quick, skippable ad before a relaxation video or before the loading of an in-app game. Overall, we hope to gain support from sponsors and advertisers in order to make our app a free downloadable experience for users.

Our team will know we have been successful once we are able to see more and more students downloading and interacting with our in-app services. We will check in with users occasionally to see if they want more from the app. We will also allow users to rate their experience with the app.

An assumption that, if proven false will cause our project to fail, would be if college students do not wish to improve their self care daily and are unwilling to devote time in order to make an improvement.



Lit Review



Before our team got started with the stakeholder interviews, it was important for us to find any literature that would pertain to the domain that we are hoping to achieve with our app. Our goal is to create a comfortable experience for college aged students to get the mental health assistance that they need from the safe space of their home, along with giving them access to adequate and affordable health care all in the palm of their hand. So in order to accomplish this, we needed to review what other sources do that works, as well as discuss how we will achieve the above stated goals for our app.

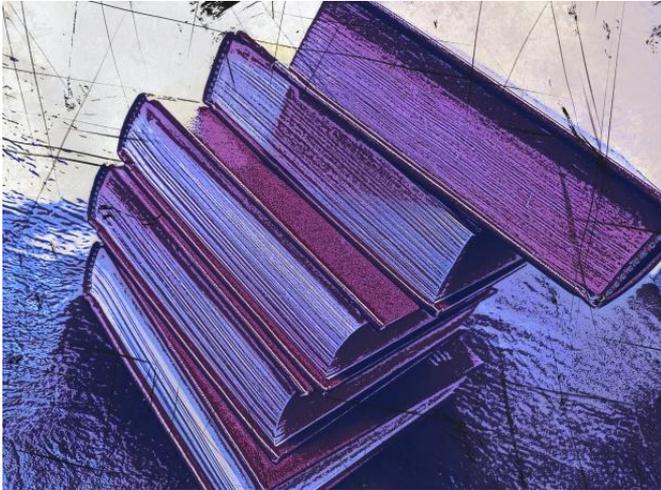
Mental Health and Self Care Discussion

In the past mental health has been seen as something taboo that no one felt comfortable talking about or admitting to having. Even though millions of people struggle with their mental health, society and the media have depicted it as a negative thing that we should just ignore. However, especially during our current times with the COVID19 pandemic, people have become more encouraged to talk about their feelings and open up about any struggles they might be facing with their mental health.



Mental Health Problem

We can see how much mental health affects college students through some articles. According to a report in 2018 from the American College Health Association, more than 60 percent of college students said they had experienced “overwhelming anxiety” in the past year. Over 40 percent said they felt so depressed they had difficulty functioning. As such, many college students are suffering from mental pain and depression. There are several reasons why they are suffering from them.



According to an article from *New York Times*, college students have great uncertainty about their career prospects and feel pressure to excel academically or risk losing job opportunities. Victor Schwartz, a psychiatrist and medical director of the Jed Foundation (which helps colleges improve their mental health programming), said there’s a much more radical feeling that you’re either a winner or a loser and that’s put tremendous pressure on college students and is feeding a lot of the anxiety we’re seeing. This implies that mental health problems should be appropriately taken care of while the students go through their current and future career path.

Shortage of Counselors

Although many suggests that the mental health issues are severe, it is difficult for college students to receive mental health treatment. An article from the U.S. News suggests that nearly 1 in 10 students were coming for help by last year, but the number of licensed counselors changed little, from an average of 16 to 19 over five years.



The Associated Press of the U.S. News obtained five years of data from the largest public university in each state, and result indicated that only few of the universities met a minimum threshold (a minimum of one counselor per 1,500 students.) Many universities are trying to hire licensed counselors to take responsibility for the mental health of their students, but the lack of counselors is causing these cases. College students have to wait up to a month for an appointment with a counselor, and on average, they can only meet once a month. This means that the number of counselors is far shorter than the the number of students.

Mental Health Apps for College Students

As one example, Parker et al. found that mental health apps were successful due to ease of use and minimal effort required by the user (Parker et al. 2018). Moreover, mental health apps for college students address issues such as anxiety, panic, and depression, according to College Consensus.

While regular therapy sessions typically cost upwards of hundreds of dollars per visit, mental health apps offer college students professional counseling at a lower price and also offer free options. There are several apps to help students alleviate their mental health issues, though only few of them effectively provide students with a variety of treatments. Thus, we plan on developing a mental health app for college students to reduce their financial burden as well as to better deliver the mental health treatments.



Mental illness affects college students

3 in 10
college students reported feeling "so stressed that it was difficult to function!"

Student health fee of **\$11 = 6** visits with school psychologist per semester

Ages 25-34
SUICIDE is more common than **HOMICIDE** as cause of death*

Get help
Student Health Center
(818) 710-4270
www.piercecollege.edu/offices/health_center
suicide prevention
1-800-SUICIDE
www.lognrc.com/ozc

*American College Health Association
*Source: National Injury Prevention

Programs by Seth Perlow

Competitive Audit



In order to understand what market we are competing in, we evaluated our top competitors on how they approach the topic of self-care through their apps. This competitive audit helped us better understand the context of our application. It also helped us understand what features we will need to include in our final product as well as what details we need to add in order to stand out against competitors. After researching what applications are currently most used among college students, three applications showed up more than once. Our top competitors are Headspace, Happify, and Mindshift.

After exploring the application, Headspace appeared to be the app that had the most to offer among the three competitors. Unique details it had to offer included personalized courses that varied depending on which category/subject the user wants to focus on. These courses were professionally filmed and show real people practicing self-care habits and being open about their mental health.

One unique feature Happify had to offer was making the 'Create an Account' process more personal. It dove deeper into the user's personal life in order to better understand their needs and goals.



Mindshift had many great features that stood out. One was the personalized name greetings it included. As a user, this feature made me feel more of an individual rather than someone who just downloaded the app for help.





We noted some consistencies among these three apps. They all made sure to get to know their user before the user was able to really interact with the app. Evaluating these three competitors made us more knowledgeable on what other apps are already offering users. It made us strategize on what we need to include in our app that would provide users with something they cannot receive from our competitors. This audit also allowed us to see what basic details we need to include in the foundation of our app. All the details we gathered helped us take note of what actions need to be taken in the Frameworks Phase of the Goal-Directed Design Process.

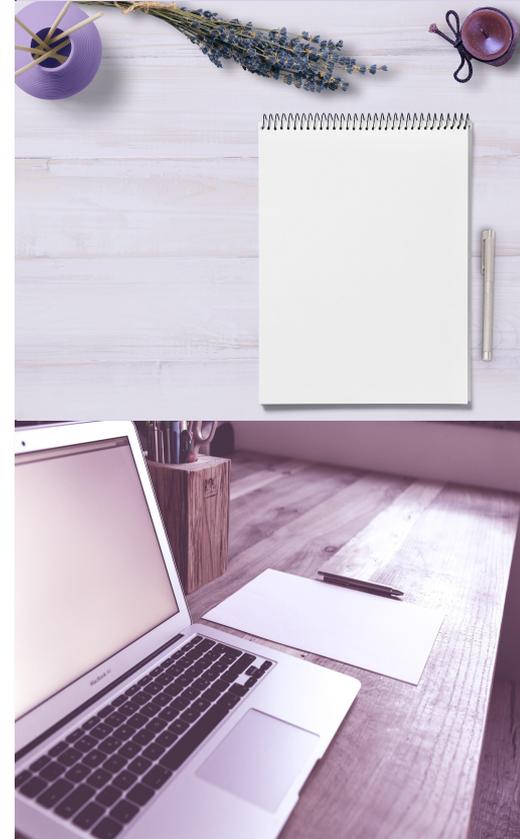
Our audit of our competitors further helped us outline how we can better assist our users in achieving their goals. Exploring our competitors' apps gave us the opportunity to be put in place of the user. This helped us gain more perspective as to what we would expect from an application focused on mental health and self-care. This audit showed us what details will really make the user's experience not only effective, but personal.

Interviews

Stakeholder Interviews

For this project, we did not have any real clients. However we did have to figure out what the Stakeholders would expect from from the app and the team. The stakeholders would be interested in the goals of the app and how we would achieve them. Understanding the current state of mental health and self care in the country and the need of improving it would prompt them to see the need for such an app. The stakeholders would also be informed of the timeline and deadlines for different sections of the app creation process.

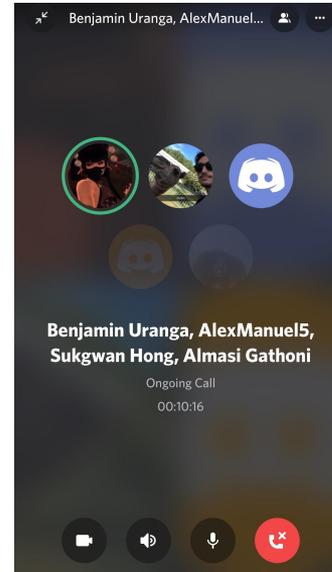
One concern the stakeholders would have, would be the volunteering and sponsorship of the Psychiatrists working with the app. We would explain our availability of large corporation partners such as Nike who would be willing to sponsor the Psychiatrists. The stakeholders would also be interested in the users and their end goals which ties into the importance of GDD and why we are conducting these interviews in the first place. By following the GDD process, we as designers are able to better understand any potential users of this product and can thus create our own personas to test our app's usability. For this project, we interviewed 4 college-aged students on their self-care habits.



User Interviews

People engage in different activities to unwind and relax the mind and take a break from the usual taxing routine of life. Of the group of students that we interviewed, some people cited meditation, walking and even cleaning, as ways that they practice self-care. Research does show that a routine of meditation develops concentration and reduces stress, just by redirecting your thoughts.

When asked how much time they would be willing to dedicate to self-care on themselves, the female responses inclined towards an “entire day” while the male responses inclined to just about “an hour a day”. With this, the app will have specializations in accordance to sex so that the user is as comfortable as possible with the information and news they receive.



User Interviews (cont.)

Since our idea is to build an app for self-care, when asked what the potential users would want to see in such an app, there was a very motivating response of having a community of people to talk to. The app will therefore, be like a social media platform for people to share their personal experiences with different issues. In addition to that, it will be a platform to learn new ways of self-care and of taking care of your mental health. As earlier mentioned, self-care was not commonly spoken about, and how important it is to practise self-care. Our interviewees mentioned that they were well informed on self-care, and know how important it is to care for yourself first, but some of them want to know more, to learn more.



Our app would provide for self-care, but it definitely isn't the same as receiving therapy face-to-face, like with a trained professional. Responses about the comparison on face-to-face therapy and self-therapy showed that both work, though face-to-face therapy could be more effective. Having learn this, we would like to work on our app to make it as interactive as possible for the users for a closer face-to-face experience.

User Interviews (cont.)

Sometimes, one feels so caught up with everyday life that time for self-care is hard to come by. We asked if they have ever felt the need for self-care. It was almost unanimous that they all felt the need for self-care with the mounting pressures of school work and whenever anxiety came knocking at the door. Our app could help with this by allowing the user to set reminders for setting time aside for themselves, just to relax.



Despite the fact that there are therapists who someone can talk to when they are faced with certain problems, very few people make an effort to see them. Only one of the interviewees spoke candidly about their visits to the therapist, but didn't feel as though the therapist understood them entirely. Although an app is not the equivalent of a person, its rate of interaction can be boosted to make the user feel heard and assisted. As a mode of communication, we received responses of preference of texts and social media over calls. This way, the users can receive updates from the app directly through text, then proceed to check on the app.

User Interviews (cont.)



In finality, we also wanted to hear what concerned them when it came to getting help on self-care. The most common answer was the ability to share without feeling judged or being afraid to share what is happening in their lives. Basically, they want a safe space to feel like they can speak openly. We want our app to provide this for users.



As a concluding statement, self-care has proven to hold a place of significance for a number of people, just based on the little sample group we carried out interviews on. Being passionate about how self-care contributes to your well-being is what pushed us in a direction of creating such an app. We want to create awareness, provide a place of comfort and wellness and help people find their way of maintaining positive vibrations for their mental health.

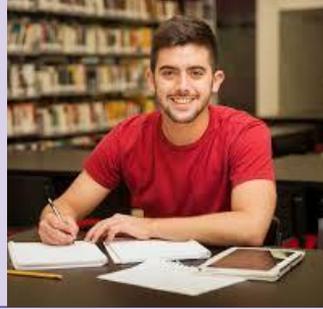
Personas



Primary Persona

Katie Stevens

Katie is a college student who is hoping to improve their mental health and self care habits. Currently, Katie understands that her mental health is important, but she hasn't found the perfect solution for herself yet. Since she's focused on school, she's hoping to find something flexible that will allow her to set her own schedule which she can work around.



Secondary Persona

Jonathan Henry

Jonathan is going through a particularly strenuous time period in his life. He's juggling school, personal problems, and a part-time job which is causing a lot of stress. He's struggling with how to cope with everything and is seeking out the assistance of a mental health care professional. But the problem is that a therapist can be expensive and he's also dealing with money problems. He's hoping for an affordable way to organize his life and help destress.

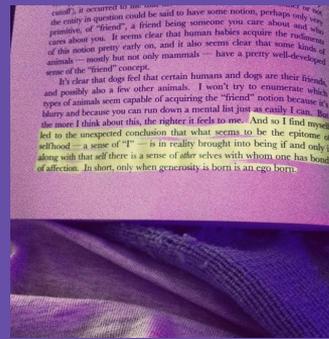


Secondary Persona

Mona Fredricks

Mona Fredricks is a college student with a lot on her plate. She participates in a lot of extracurricular activities and feels overwhelmed by her work load. Because of this, she feels like she's too busy to set time aside for her mental health. By throwing herself into her work, she thinks all her problems will go away since she'll be too busy to think about them. She recognizes that this isn't healthy, so she is hoping to find an easily accessible way to work on bettering her self-care habits.

This report detailed the extensive research we conducted in order to determine our application requirements. We explain the research process and how we concluded our users end goals. Through holding a kickoff meeting we realized the first steps needed to conduct our process. The lit review was used to better understand the psychological and health care sector and how we can integrate it into our app while the interviews , which was our main method of research was conducted to better understand our users and their perspective. The competitive audit was used to determine how we can positively stand out from our competitors while the stakeholder meeting was used set business expectations. We wanted to make the application as useful and as interactive as possible and detailed our findings in this report.



Conclusion



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