

## **Mental Health Open Letter**

Being an engineering student at the University of Michigan is an incredible opportunity, yet with this opportunity can come challenges both inside and outside the classroom.

Every respondent and organizer of this open letter is well-acquainted with these struggles. It is overwhelmingly common to experience various mental health struggles, like isolation, imposter syndrome, burnout, and anything in between during your life, and your time as a student is not spared from this.

We are a group of anonymous leaders in the College of Engineering, including both undergraduate and graduate students, who collaborated to share our experiences with mental health during our time as students. Through sharing our lived experiences, it can be seen these struggles are not unique to any one person, and if you think you are alone in a particular struggle, someone else is probably feeling that way, too.

Our purpose in compiling this open letter is two-fold.

First, we are demonstrating that all Michigan Engineers experience low points during our time as students here, whether or not you can see it. Critically, we do not want to draw distinctions by sharing our identities as “engineers” or “leaders”; these are simply the backgrounds we represent, and we hope for this message to be relevant to any and all who come across it. We are hoping to give you some descriptors of traits you recognize in yourself.

Second, we have prevailed. Our unseen challenges have cultivated inner strength and best practices, both in isolation and within our unique support networks. We are sharing key lessons, insights, and advice that have immeasurably helped us to navigate our time as students here and thrive where possible. Here, we aim to go beyond the basics of “take care of yourself” by providing new tips and perspectives.

Thank you.

## Mental Health at U-M:

While mental health has rightfully gained recognition as critical to all aspects of life in recent years, we recognize that the term “mental health” is incredibly broad. In addition, we find ourselves at a unique time in our lives and in the world.

While everyone’s experiences vary, we have broadly grouped the struggles we’ve experienced into subcategories to discuss our personal experiences with them and how they’ve affected us.

Our goal is to show that no one is alone, as we have found that we are not alone.

## Anxiety, Depression, and Isolation

Anxiety, depression, and loneliness are running rampant across society, and younger generations are particularly afflicted. Coupled with a university environment that is simultaneously overflowing with people, overwhelming with opportunities, and that offers unique, individualized paths for every single student, we have felt these afflictions firsthand, yet we continue to prevail.

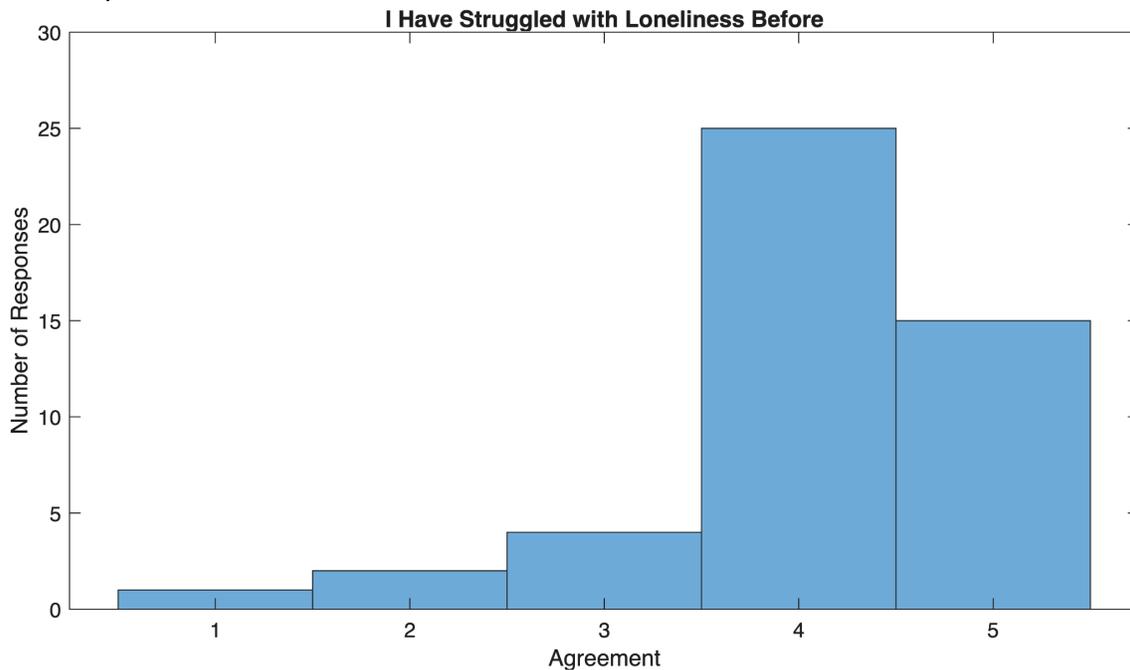


Figure 1. Statistics from members of the general student body of the College of Engineering answering “I have struggled with loneliness / isolation before” with answers 1: Strongly Disagree - 5: Strongly Agree.

“I struggled severely with anxiety, depression, and mild OCD during my time as an engineer.”

- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

“My grades and lack of interest in anything going on in my life both dropped significantly. I did not want to go to class, pay attention, study, do my work, get out of bed, go out, see anyone.”

- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

“Isolation - often when you are a leader, people look up to you, they need you, but you aren't always their friend. I can understand this; leaders are often intimidating, but it can be incredibly lonely.”

- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

## **Personal Struggles and Navigating Life Events**

Life happens.

Being in a university environment already geographically separates many students from their pre-existing support networks, and this can, unfortunately, exacerbate the setbacks and tragedies that everyone experiences at one point or another.

“Personal Struggles - during sophomore year, I lost my dad, and it was an incredibly hard time for me.”

- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

“[Mental health struggles] became especially bad after I got COVID-19 and broke my ribs, leaving me bedridden for a month and a half. This affected my ability to get my schoolwork and org work done and caused major problems in my life for the next year.”

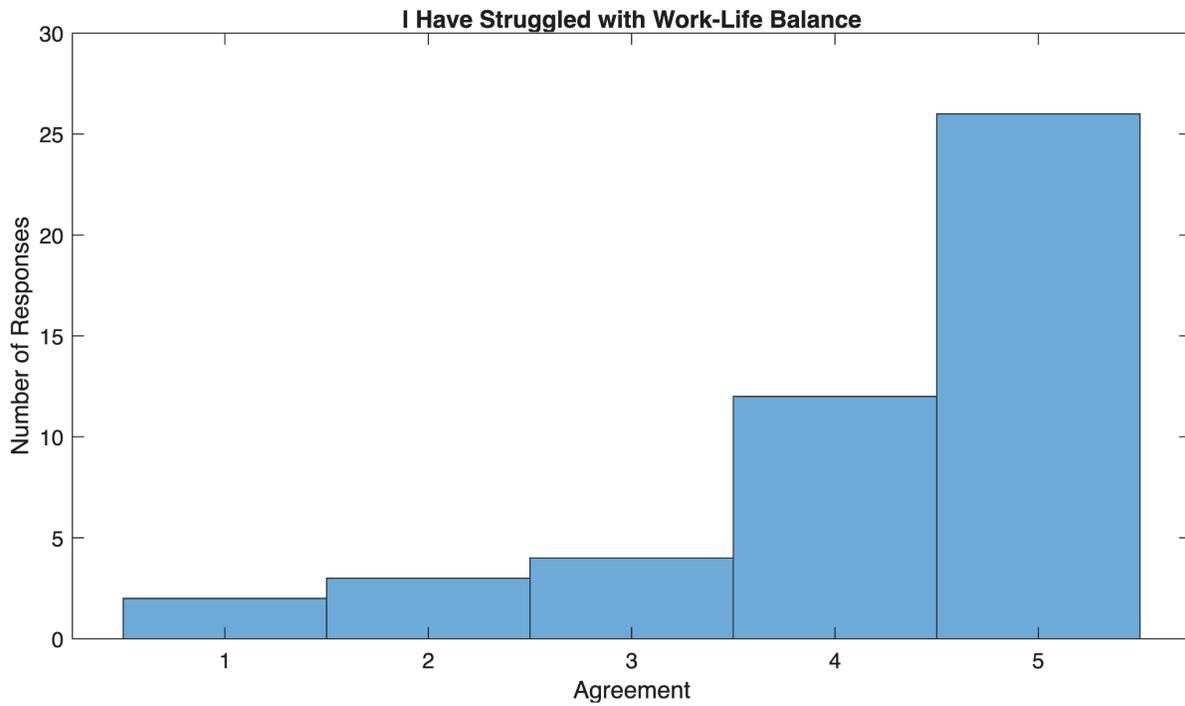
- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

“This time in my life, I was juggling too many things between classes, jobs, and [my project team]. Instead of enjoying my senior year of college, I was actually not myself. I gave no time to myself. Every second, I thought I should have been doing something more, either more studying ... or preparing and worrying more about my future. I gave almost all of my thoughts, stress, energy, and time to [my project team]. It was never "good enough". There was always more to do. Smarter things I could have said. Another task on the to-do list. Another issue or conflict that came up. Another meeting to have. More time wasted ... I gave up a lot of things ... job opportunities, grades, my family, my mental and physical health, my friends, and mainly myself. I was not myself during this time; I was a shell of who I was.”

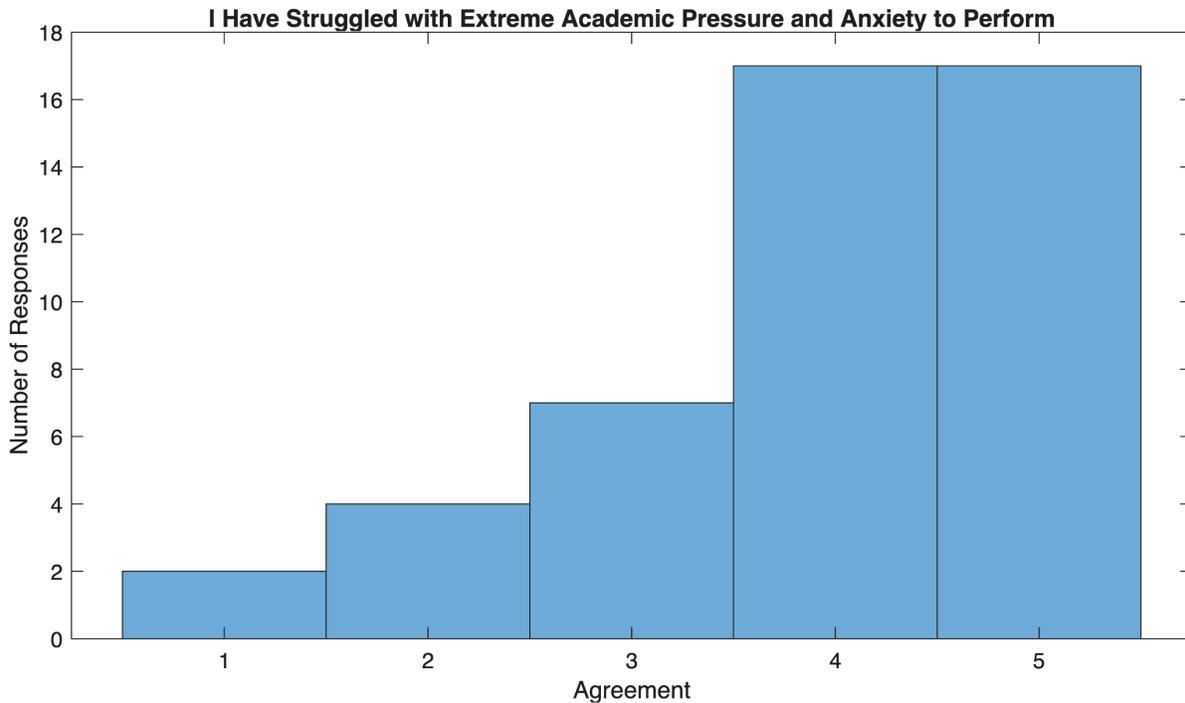
- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

## **Pressure to Perform in Academics and Responsibilities**

A faculty member once stated, “To get into the University of Michigan, you have to have essentially made no mistakes”. What's more, the grind to dive into involvement through extracurricular and co-curricular activities is ingrained into students at younger and younger ages, with the promise that a college education will provide security for the rest of our lives. The combination of these pre-college influences can easily culminate in feelings of drowning in the pressure to excel in our tasks at U-M.



*Figure 2.* Statistics from members of the general student body of the College of Engineering answering “I have struggled with work-life balance” with answers 1: Strongly Disagree - 5: Strongly Agree.



*Figure 3.* Statistics from members of the general student body of the College of Engineering answering “I have struggled with extreme academic pressure and anxiety to perform” with answers 1: Strongly Disagree - 5: Strongly Agree.

“Pressure - I wish there was an easy way to describe exactly what this means to me, but as a leader, especially, there is an inherent feeling that I need to be successful, not for myself but for those around me. When people depend on you, your success is often indicative of their success, but often it spans many aspects of your life. For example, as [President of an engineering student organization], I felt I needed to have a successful professional career (internships, etc), to reflect positively on the organization. I think some of this is warranted, and even good to have, but there has to be a limit. Knowing others felt this way all along would have helped tremendously.”

- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

“The end of my freshman and beginning of my sophomore year, I struggled with my mental health due to academics, grades, and the major I had originally chosen. I was in a major I thought I wanted to be in, but it was not a good fit ... I thought switching my major would mean I was a failure, I was not smart enough, or good enough for CoE.”

- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

“It’s a lot of pressure being in engineering, especially as a student leader, where your focus may not entirely be on school.”

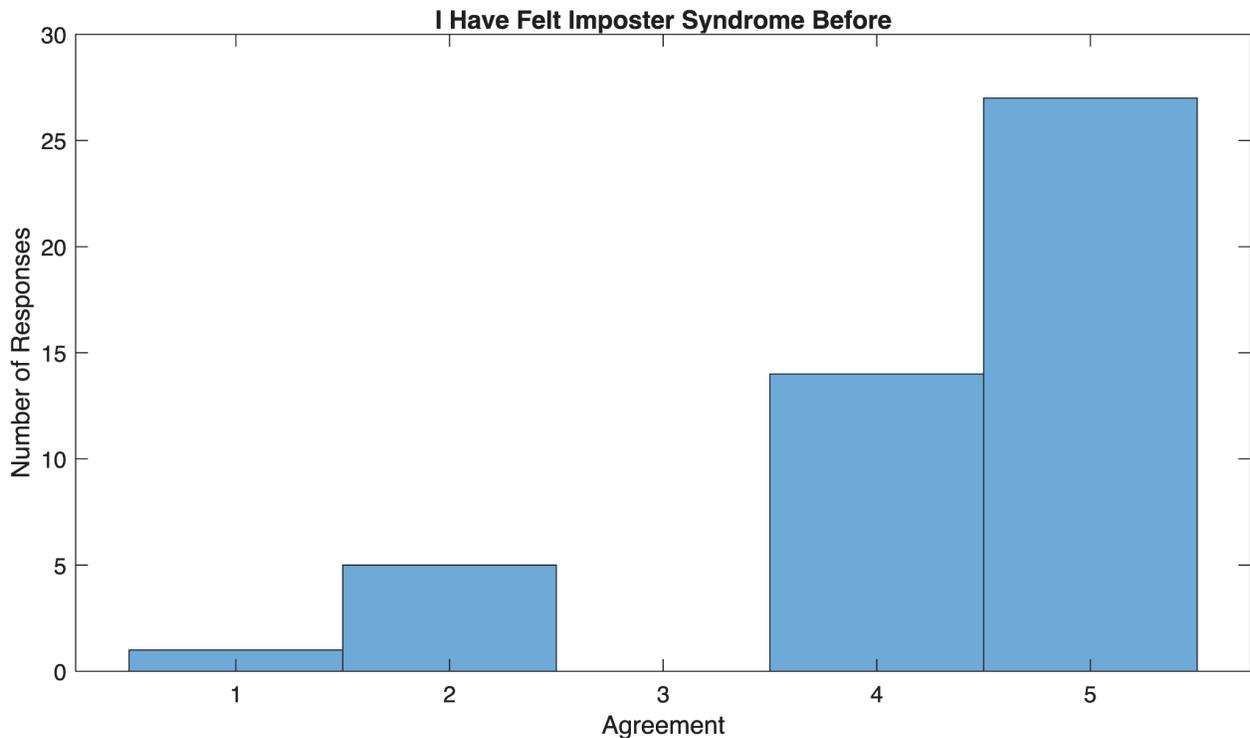
- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

“That pressure to succeed I mentioned was just too much, but within the organizations I worked in, people depended on me. What kind of person, let alone leader, would I be to let them all down? Sometimes, you have to separate your empathy from your professional roles, just a little, to give yourself that same empathy. The way you show up for others needs to be the same way you show up for yourself, and when you can’t do both, you come first.”

- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

### **Imposter Syndrome and Self-Doubt**

Making it into the University of Michigan is no small feat. Despite earning our way into this setting, self-doubt can be persistent, and we all too often do not allow ourselves to depend on the evidence of our prior accomplishments (of any size or scale) to assuage the doubts of the voice in our head.



*Figure 4.* Statistics from members of the general student body of the College of Engineering answering “I have felt Imposter Syndrome before” with answers 1: Strongly Disagree - 5: Strongly Agree.

"It is cliché, but a lot of students deal with imposter syndrome, and the impacts are real. Throughout my time at Michigan, I've often compared myself to others, and it can be damaging."

- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

"I think my biggest struggle is imposter syndrome, which I feel is a pretty common experience. For me, it comes in the form of negative self-talk, especially when preparing for a milestone like a thesis preliminary exam or a conference. During that time in my second year, the dominant narrative was believing I was going to disappoint everyone ... I think imposter syndrome generates a harsh cycle of not feeling good enough, overworking yourself, then not being able to celebrate wins as they come."

- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

"Do I actually belong in this program, or is it all a fluke?"

- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

## **Burnout and Feeling Overworked**

Does this one even need an introduction? The high demands for our time and focus create impacts many of us are well acquainted with.

“I’ve dealt with many mental health and interpersonal struggles during my time as a [student leader]. Things that I can’t even put into words. It came from my own thoughts, how much I was pushing myself, the culture of stress, burnout, and [toxic relationships]. Project teams are supposed to be a fun time working towards goals with your peers, not something you sell your soul to.”

- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

“For lack of better words for some of these things, here are things I have struggled with as an engineering student and org leader: anxiety, stress, burnout, isolation, reluctance to seek help, poor work-life balance, conflict and interpersonal stress, high expectations, identity crisis, depersonalization, derealization, and people pleasing through distraction.”

- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

“Burnout is another huge thing. I haven’t experienced a single semester where I haven’t felt lethargic on at least one day and questioned why I was pushing myself so hard.”

- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

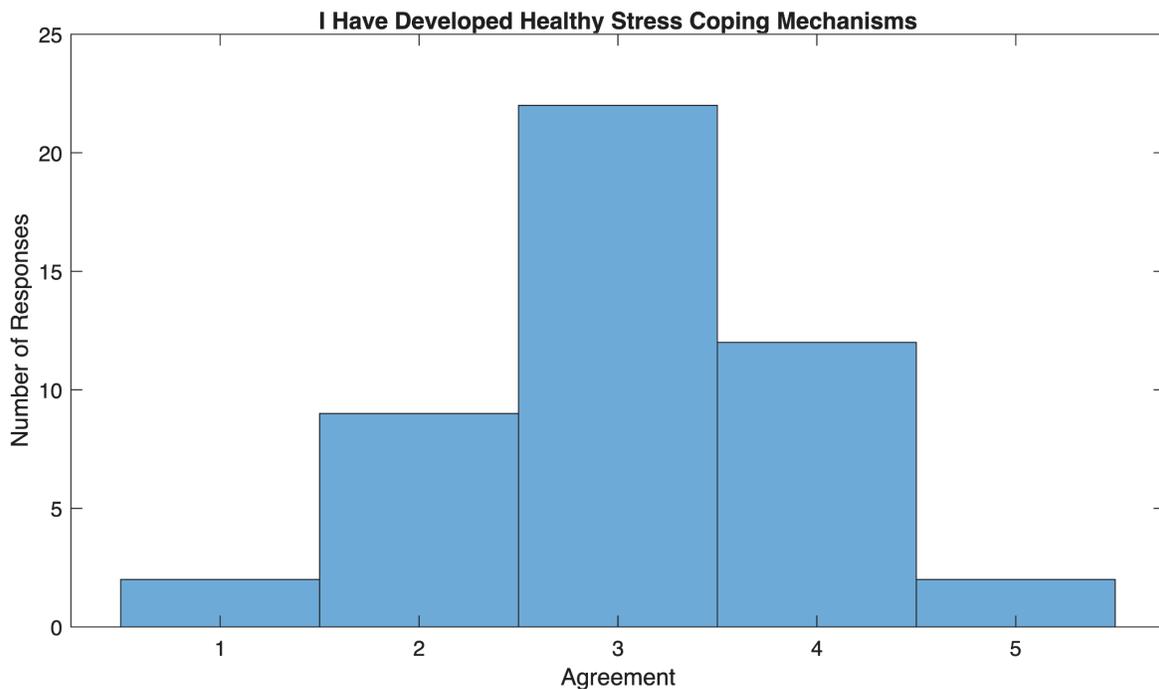
## Practices for Wellbeing:

Okay, so we all have struggled in one way or another... what now?

In this portion, we detail a wide range of practices that have personally helped us to overcome the low points we've experienced during our academic career.

While the well-known suggestions of “take care of yourself”, “get enough sleep”, “be physically active”, and “get outside (when it's not freezing)” are beneficial and are mentioned in our responses, we aspire to offer new or more detailed ideas to cope and ideally overcome mental health challenges, through a variety of responses. Everyone is different, what works for one won't work for all, but hopefully the diversity of responses will inspire you to try new things that could help you.

These strategies have worked for us, but building strategies can be hard.



*FIG X. Statistics from members of the general student body of the College of Engineering answering “I have developed healthy stress coping mechanisms during my time at UM” with answers 1: Strongly Disagree - 5: Strongly Agree.*

## Self-Care and Mindfulness

In our most populated subsection by far, we go in-depth to share the practices we use to preserve and amplify our holistic well-being while keeping our relationships with our minds in check. We do not bypass our emotions; we learn to live with them as best we can.

“When my dad died, a lot of my grief manifested in a very physical way, a literal hollow tightness in my chest and excessive panic attacks. When this is the case, you need to literally just hug yourself. Mentally picture coming out of your body and picturing it for what it is, and the experience you have at that moment. Love that person, hold them. It sounds corny, and hopefully no one needs that, but it's important.”

- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

“I repeat affirmations when I feel stress creeping in. Some of my go-tos: I choose peace. I trust myself. I'm a problem solver, and I don't back down. Action is the best antidote. Nobody expects you to know everything or be perfect; we're all lifelong students.”

- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

“Journaling: word vomit about all my stressors, then hype myself up with the things I think I'm great at, and how I've always gotten through things, and I'm still okay. It clears up space in my mind to think about other stuff.”

- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

“I take walks and just do things that I enjoy when stressed. I like playing piano, writing poetry, and working out, so those have been good outlets for me to thrive in a less fun environment.”

- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

“Maintaining physical health: I like to run, bike, lift, or play soccer. Any movement (and sunshine!) releases my stored stress, and dopamine that makes it feel like everything's okay again. Eating protein, carbs, and fat + fruits. These might seem basic, but the healthier I am, the clearer I think and the calmer I feel.”

- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

“Sleep - still working on this one, but I try to set an alarm for when I want to go to bed, that's my queue to turn the screens/lights down.”

- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

“If I am getting caught up in grades, student org drama, or other things, I take a break from my phone. If I feel overwhelmed with my tasks or over-stressed, I make lists of what NEEDS to get done to prioritize and feel accomplished. If I feel burnt out, emotionally, or physically exhausted, I take time to myself to recharge and sleep.”

- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

“Relying on Healthy Habits from before University - Everyone who's gotten accepted into University got there because of not only hard work and dedication, but also because they had healthy habits outside of academics that built them into the person they've become. For me, ingraining these stress-releasing, enjoyable habits into my schedule as often as possible has been foundational to my sustained success in our current academic and professional environments. Of course, these beneficial habits can be different for everyone.”

- *Anonymous Graduate Engineering Student Leader*

"Making sure you have time for non-school things (including time outside clubs). Getting outside and exercising, as well as making time for friends, has helped me a lot."

- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

"For coping mechanisms, I still love meditation and find it a helpful way to center myself. I also write letters to my future self in the form of diary entries whenever things get to be too much, since my future/past self will always be there for me. Hanging out with friends, listening to music, and taking a walk outside also help get me out of a depressive spiral, usually."

- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

### **Building and Relying on Support Systems**

Knowing you are not alone is fantastic. Modifying our actions to allow this fact to benefit us takes our mental health journey to the next level. Here, we touch on experiences that have helped us to cultivate a support network, which may not necessarily be easy, and simple yet impactful methods to allow this network to support us in day-to-day life.

"If I am in my head and my thoughts are consuming me, I talk to a trusted friend, family member, or advisor. If I am struggling with the reality of being an engineer or student org leader, I turn to [trusted College of Engineering faculty]. If I need time to not stress or have anxiety, I go hang out with my friends or do something fun."

- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

"I also call people because being able to rant about things or talk about something completely unrelated is good for the soul."

- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

"Getting around the isolation just requires opening up. Make mistakes, publicize them. Crack jokes. Eventually, the friendships will follow."

- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

"Connections - call or hang out with a friend."

- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

"I will say that just taking time off, while not being practical, can often instill guilt and isn't very helpful. When this is the case, we need to learn how to really rely on the people around us. If effort is put into really, really organized delegation, teams are often self-sufficient onwards, and you can take a load off."

- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

## **Mindset and Deep Perspective Shifts**

Oftentimes, we are so caught up in our internal narrative for so long that we don't take time to step back and assess it. Likewise, many feel disempowered with respect to changing this internal dialogue, or have not even considered it a possibility. In the pursuit of truth, one may find that the voice in their head perpetuates false narratives that are destructive and utterly useless.

On a similar note, revisiting why we've chosen our academic and professional paths can widen our perspective while restoring inspiration, motivation, and excitement.

"Remembering What Drives Me - I chose my educational path not only because I love it but also because I want to derive empowerment from it to change the world ... Remembering the grander purpose behind my education can allow me to reframe my everyday grind from merely "work" to steps along the path to fulfilling my mission, and the unlimited potential ... to transform the world and innumerable lives in the best way possible."

- *Anonymous Graduate Engineering Student Leader*

"Allow my passion to drive me rather than a fear of failure. If I'm working on a product because I care about telling a story, teaching others, or making advancements in sustainability, rather than to impress people, I feel more agency during the process and am proud of the outcome."

- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

"Investigating the Nature of the Mind - Questioning my thoughts is fundamental to my mental health. Given that humans have been evolving for millennia with the preeminent goal of survival, it stands to reason that each of us comes with pre-installed mental "software" to prioritize our survival ... Understanding that I am not consciously choosing my thoughts, but rather that they simply pop into my head automatically without my input, allows me to separate these unwanted thoughts and feelings from the illusion of them being the product of my own doing. For example, nobody would ever consciously choose to think thoughts that make them anxious or depressed, yet such thoughts are currently running rampant in our modern world. By gaining awareness of this automatic, pre-programmed survival mechanism, I can question the thoughts that arise in my mind and choose to starve them of attention if they do not serve my mental health and the highest good. I do this as often as possible."

- *Anonymous Graduate Engineering Student Leader*

"Investigating the Nature of Reality - Exploring the bigger picture of our existence can allow one to widen their perspectives, reducing the minutia of the daily grind by putting it into the proper context of the grand scheme of life and existence, and potentially uncover ideas that logically satisfy their curiosities, and possibly even unlock their highest potential ... This practically looks like investigating existential and philosophical topics of interest using any resources that make sense to me. Even upon finding logically satisfying postulated conclusions to my curiosity, the exploration of knowledge within this realm is constantly supplemented by new information to ponder and potentially incorporate."

- *Anonymous Graduate Engineering Student Leader*

## **Setting Healthy Boundaries and Self-Prioritization**

If you cannot dedicate time to intentionally caring for yourself, it is just a matter of time before you will struggle to effectively take care of your responsibilities and those who depend on you.

Saying “take care of yourself” is easy. Actually taking care of yourself, while not inherently having to be difficult, takes practice, learning, and iteration to maximize your holistic well-being, thus allowing you to contribute to the well-being of those around you, if you choose.

"I mentioned that putting yourself first is crucial, but what does that actually look like? Often it can mean REALLY taking time off, and not just missing a meeting and being on Slack, really taking a break. Yes, the organization may suffer, so it isn't a decision to be made lightly. But when you need it, you have to take it. You can think of it like servicing yourself to perform better later, if you can't get back the performance pressure thing I mentioned above."

- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

## **Seeking Professional Help**

Many people courageously dedicate their professional lives to supporting the mental health of others. Such individuals exist within the College of Engineering, the University of Michigan, our surrounding communities, and far, far beyond. It may feel intimidating to reach out (which partly motivated the format and creation of this open letter), but many of us have found it profoundly beneficial and subsequently wished we had sought professional help sooner.

"For my overall anxiety and stress, I go to professional help and resources."

- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

"I started taking medication after years of therapy and coping strategies weren't working for me. This helped immensely and almost immediately solved the major mental health problems I was having. I think it's important to know when a medication approach to mental health would be helpful, mainly if other methods don't work effectively for someone. I wish I had done this sooner, but the stigma got in the way for me, and it wasn't presented as an option for me until I asked about it myself."

- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

"I also got accommodations through the university, which was extremely helpful in reducing my anxiety and letting it not affect my schoolwork."

- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*

"Seeking professional help through therapy and medication."

- *Anonymous Undergraduate Engineering Student Leader*