

Cough Syrup

A Capstone Project

Reflection & Research

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Artist Biography

Andrea Pellizzari is an aspiring film, stage, and voice actor from Groton, Massachusetts. She is currently a senior Performing Arts major with a concentration in Theater and a minor in Psychology at Endicott College. Theater has been her passion since elementary school, and she has been involved in dozens of plays, musicals, and student films throughout the years, both acting and helping with various backstage aspects. She has worked as a technical intern at Stage 284 Community Theater and Gloucester Stage Company, assisting primarily with lighting, sound, and set creation. Though she enjoys working behind the scenes, being on stage is one of her greatest joys, and she is thrilled to be pursuing it. Some of her more notable roles include Mopsa in *Head Over Heels*, Tilly in *She Kills Monsters*, Miss Blacklock in *A Murder is Announced*, and Mark Antony in *Julius Caesar*. Her other interests include digital art, video games, fried rice, and spending time with friends, family, and pets.

Artist's Statement

To me, creation and performance are about passion and fun. As an actor, I perform for the pleasure and entertainment of others and myself, because the act of creating that performance, and knowing that others want to see it, is a joy to me. Feeling that I've done well fills me with a sense of purpose and satisfaction that fuels my desire to keep growing and improving. When I'm acting, I often pull inspiration from other things that I love, like nature or certain media, from other people, and from my own experiences. I think it's this draw from myself and my favorite things that makes me unique as a performer, because only I know these exact experiences. I give the audience little pieces of myself intertwined with the pieces of the world that I use to fuel my performances, and that's what makes my acting dynamic.

Thesis Abstract

Last semester, I spent my time researching general anxiety and the potential effects of humor use and theatrical experiences as a coping mechanism. Despite limited academic research in the area, there were some positive correlations between anxiety relief and expressing oneself through acting and/or artistic creation, and comedy. I often turn to both of these as a way of soothing my own struggles with stress and anxious feelings, and wanted to create a thesis that would be reflective of this. The project, a one-act play, is focused on the way that my thoughts and anxiety interact with each other and myself, and how this affects my life. Although the concept is ultimately more serious in nature, and there are certainly many serious and/or heavy moments within the piece, I wanted to use comedy throughout to keep it light-hearted and therefore more reflective of who I am as a person. I've always found that sharing a laugh with someone is one of the nicest ways to connect with them because that moment is pure joy. Theater has also always served as an escape for me - it is my greatest passion, and as a Performing Arts major, it felt only right to create a project that incorporated acting and theatrics in this way.

Literature Review

Abstract

As mental health struggles, particularly anxiety, have gained more interest and normalcy in the media in recent years, more and more research and discussion has arisen around various ways in which to cope. One that has been observed to be especially prevalent and helpful to people is the use of humor - particularly humor that is more positive in nature, rather than self-degrading. There has also been a rise in creative art therapies as a method for relief and recovery from mental health related issues. This may include the use of drawing, painting, music, dance, and the like as a form of expression that can help ease oneself and provide a sense of comfort. This paper explores theater specifically, and the implementation of comedy in theater, as a means of coping with anxiety, and aims to serve as a prelude to a thesis project that will incorporate these three topics together.

Introduction

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, anxiety disorders are the most prevalent forms of mental illness in the United States today. Around 19% of adults and nearly 32% of adolescents (ages 13-18) have an anxiety disorder of some kind, and one of the most common is Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD). This is defined as “a persistent feeling of anxiety or dread, which can interfere with daily life.” (NIMH, 2022) Not only does Chapter 1 expand more upon the current information on and understanding of GAD, but also seeks to serve as a brief overview of some of the symptoms and struggles that accompany anxiety in general. This serves as the basis for the following chapters, which explore two forms of coping and how they connect to each other.

Chapter 2 provides several articles of insight into the ways in which the use of humor provides relief, not only for anxiety but for stress and depression as well. (Abel 2002) Much of the research suggests that more positive and self-affirming humor (that which does not seek to

degrade or belittle oneself or others) is most beneficial to mood enhancement. (Nezlek & Derks, 2001; Martin et al., 2003; Menéndez-Aller et al., 2020)

Alternatively, Chapter 3 investigates creative arts therapy - theater in particular - as another way of handling anxiety and other mental illnesses. Creative arts therapy has been shown to aid those struggling with mental health by empowering them to express themselves in a deeper and often more abstract way, and by serving as a source of motivation when they may feel otherwise unwell or uninspired. This then allows them to transcend to a place of psychological safety. (Van Lith, 2015) Theater and improvisation, potential facets of creative therapy, have been found to help alleviate anxiety and other mental health issues as patients may see themselves from an outside perspective and thus develop more empathy towards their own struggles. (Moran & Alon, 2011; Poissant, 2013)

The final chapter explores the relationship between humor and theater. While the research done for this area yielded little of use, there was found a connection between the spontaneity of humor in improv and how effective it is in developing a strong and successful scene. (Landbert, 2021) This may be helpful to note as improvisation, though it may initially elicit feelings of fear and anxiety, may also help relieve them as a scene continues and the player feels more comfortable in the absurdity that is often wrought. (Poissant, 2013)

Overall, this paper examines the relationships between general anxiety, the use of humor, and theater arts, and aims to serve as the prelude to a project that would incorporate these topics as they all pertain to the author's life.

Chapter 1 - Anxiety

This chapter is focused on providing some background information on anxiety, particularly Generalized Anxiety Disorder as it is one of the most common anxiety-related disorders and can encompass a wide range of symptoms. This will serve to give readers an idea of some of the anxiety-related struggles that are frequently faced by others, as the purpose

of this thesis is to provide insight on ways of coping, specifically through artistic self-expression and humor.

In Wittchen, Hans-Ulrich, and Jurgen Hoyer's "Generalized anxiety disorder: nature and course", the authors provide a brief overview of Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) and its effects. Definitions and parameters of GAD have changed in past years, but symptoms are currently considered to include excessive worrying, stress, issues with concentration, and hypervigilance. More appropriate instruments for measurement were developed in the 1990s, but different means of diagnosis still vary greatly in their determination styles. Despite this, there is still evidence to suggest that GAD has been stably present in around 5% of the general population. According to longitudinal studies, GAD is most heavily present in older participants and women, in particular, than younger age groups and male participants. This is somewhat unique for anxiety disorders, as most are clearly developed by the early 20s, GAD increases significantly with age. It was also found that of lifetime GAD sufferers, only about one third experience full remission - for most, it is a constant struggle. (Wittchen & Hoyer, 2001)

There is not an intention to focus specifically on Generalized Anxiety Disorder in this project, but as it is one of the most common forms of anxiety, it was worth researching as a point of interest. As such, the following article by Risa B. Weisberg, "Overview of generalized anxiety disorder: epidemiology, presentation, and course" also touches upon GAD and some of the current research findings surrounding it. Similarly to the above, Weisberg details how Generalized Anxiety Disorder has shifted from being defined as persistent anxiety to excessive worry that must continue to occur for more than six months. As also found by Wittchen & Hoyer, GAD is more prevalent in adults and approximately 50% of cases have an onset between 20 and 47 years, which is unlike most other anxiety disorders that are more prevalent in youth. GAD has also been found to afflict women twice as often as men, and other factors such as a low income, being separated, widowed, or divorced, and bisexuality or lesbianism also contribute to a higher likelihood of GAD development. It is often also associated with

dissatisfaction with familial relationships and/or primary life activities, but less so with friendships, hobbies, and/or income. A greater possibility of suicidality has been linked with GAD than with many other anxiety-related disorders. (Weisberg, 2009)

As previously mentioned, GAD gives some insight into the kind of overview of anxiety that may be explored. In the following chapter, the use of humor as a form of anxiety relief is examined. Research has found a strong connection between the two - specifically positive humor and the easing of mental health struggles. (Nezlek & Derks, 2001; Martin et al., 2003; Menéndez-Aller et al., 2020)

Chapter 2 - Humor

Use of certain kinds of humor has been found to be one of the more effective ways of coping with feelings of depression, stress, and anxiety. Several studies have found that positive and/or self-affirming humor (that which does not degrade oneself or others) can help enhance mood and lessen bad feelings surrounding various situations or events. (Nezlek & Derks, 2001; Martin et al., 2003; Menéndez-Aller et al., 2020)

The study "Humor, stress, and coping strategies" was done on college psychology students and used self-evaluations of humor, stress, and anxiety to determine if there was any correlation between a high/low sense of humor and how well a person copes with stress and anxiety. Three different scales were used to assess stress and anxiety based on certain moods and situations experienced, and problems frequently and/or recently encountered. Two additional scales were used to measure sense of humor (as perceived by the individual subject) and ways of coping (subjects were asked to consider what methods were used for their most stressful situation of the past week.) It was found that students with a higher sense of humor reported less day-to-day anxiety/stress than those with lower senses of humor, despite encountering a similar number of problems. A typical facet of research studies but one that wasn't initially mentioned in the abstract was the division of results based on sex. Women as a

whole had higher levels of stress, anxiety, and everyday problems as compared to men, but women also seemed to benefit more overall from a high sense of humor. (Abel, 2002)

The article also mentions two other studies in particular done on a similar topic; Kuiper et al. (1993) and Kuiper et al. (1995), which also focused on humor as a way of coping with stress. In their study, it was found that those with higher senses of humor had more positive appraisals of challenges and stressors.

This source strengthens the belief that humor can be very helpful in dealing with everyday stress and anxiety, and while the implementation of any major focus on sex in the project is unlikely, noting how especially helpful it seems to be to women in society was a point of interest, and as such was further explored in the following article, "Gender and humor: The state of the art." As can be expected, "Gender and humor" primarily examined gender disparities in humor and the marginalization of women in comedy, but also discussed various styles of humor - situational humor, humor as a means to empower or demean, etc, and humor as a status symbol in society, groups, and even in workplace settings. It touched upon aggression, compassion, and play differences between men and women, which can all be contributing factors to a person's sense/preferred type of humor (i.e. men's humor tends to be more physical and blatant whereas women's humor is often more subtle and intimate as men are encouraged to be aggressive and women are encouraged to be passive.) Though many additional sources were included, the mention of gender differences is only intended to be a facet of the main topics of humor and anxiety, and thus none will be further explored. (Kotthoff, 2006)

This article strengthens current views on typical humor and behavioral differences between men and women, and the unfortunate belief that women throughout history have had to mostly repress their humorous sides, along with many aspects of their true selves, so as not to appear improper. Sex differences in humor were not originally planned on being included, however this article does encourage incorporation as not only can sexism be a major cause of stress and anxiety at times, but also something that can elicit humor as a coping response.

Thus, including mentions of gender disparities could be an interesting perspective. However, as this is not intended as a main topic, the focus was shifted back towards general humor and coping.

Nezlek and Derks' "Use of humor as a coping mechanism, psychological adjustment, and social interaction", similarly to Abel, also measured how people cope with stress/anxiety/depression using humor. Beyond that however, this study examined how humor and social interaction could be connected in relieving the aforementioned. The article described, as mentioned in the abstract, the scales used for determining stress/anxiety/depression and sense of humor, as well as the social interaction assessment forms used for describing enjoyment, confidence, and intimacy felt during interactions with at least one other person that lasted more than ten minutes. The results, as expected, found that those who used humor to cope were much more likely to experience more frequent and positive social interactions, however they were also found to be more closely linked to feelings of depression (supporting theories that the strongest laughs often come from the saddest minds.)

Nezlek & Marks mention a study by Cann et al. (1997) that found that sharing a laugh with a dissimilar stranger can help overcome a negative reaction to them, which is worthy to note when considering the effects social anxiety can have on new encounters. This and the main source both support the belief that humor is a great way to connect with people and form positive relationships, which in turn can be very helpful for relieving stress and other mental health issues. (Nezlek & Derks, 2001)

Mention of social interaction will likely be incorporated into the project because it may serve as another angle through which to explore how humor can be a great way to break down barriers and help ease social anxieties that can come from being around others. The use of humor scales in this article segues into the following, "Individual differences in uses of humor and their relation to psychological well-being: Development of the Humor Styles Questionnaire." This article highlighted the development of the Humor Styles Questionnaire and its assessment

of four different types of humor: self-enhancing (benign humor that enhances one's self), self-defeating (humor that insults self to appeal to others), aggressive (enhances the self at the expense of others), and affiliative (benign humor that enhances relationship with others.) Research was done to see how the different styles can impact mood, well-being, and relationships. (Martin et al., 2003)

In order to create the questionnaire, humor was initially conceptualized in several ways: as a cognitive ability, as a habitual behavior pattern, as an aesthetic response, as an attitude, an emotion-related temperamental trait, and a coping mechanism. The parts of the questionnaire on self-enhancing and affiliative humor greatly overlapped with other previous scales of humor while the self-defeating and aggressive styles "tapped different dimensions." It was found from the research conducted with the questionnaire that men scored higher than women on aggressive and self-defeating humor (Martin et al., 2003), which is congruent with findings from Kotthoff's previously mentioned "Gender and humor: The state of the art" (2006).

This article better solidifies other research articles related to humor that are to be used as references for the project. It also gives further insight into the four primary ways in which humor may be categorized, which is similar to the idea of positive vs negative humor that's explored in the article "Humor as a protective factor against anxiety and depression." This states how use of humor can elevate optimism and defend against feelings of anxiety and depression. It was as it said on the tin, but went beyond just sex differences, and also included differences in age, geographical location, and education level. It also makes note that while affiliative and self-enhancing humor helped with optimism and reduction of anxiety and depression, aggressive and self-defeating humor had the opposite effect, showing that positivity of the humor itself can have a big impact on the positivity that it generates in turn. While similar to some of the previous sources, this source is influential because the project will be related to using humor to cope with and help overcome anxiety, which is exactly what it's about. (Menéndez-Aller et al., 2020)

The article referenced the previously mentioned Martin et al. (2003), the results of which went hand in hand with those of Menéndez-Aller et al.: more positive humor elicits more positive feelings and relations, which may be worth considering as a point of interest for the project.

This information further cemented current perspective and the findings of the previous articles that humor, particularly positively affirming humor, can be a very beneficial coping strategy for anxiety and stress. This is likely to be the focal point of the project, and this source along with the others will serve as the informational basis for it.

As this thesis is to be a creative project, it was fitting to explore humor and coping in a creative context. As such, the use of humor in theater and how creative art therapies like theater can impact mental health was a point of interest in the following chapter.

Chapter 3 - Theater & Creative Expression

As stated, this chapter explores the benefits of theater and theatrically expressive activities in coping with mental health issues. Theater, particularly improv, has been found to help those with anxiety and other mental illnesses come to terms with some of their struggles from a more empathetic and outside perspective. (Moran & Alon, 2011; Poissant, 2013) Firstly, a look into the use of creative arts therapies, and theater specifically, on the effects of and recovery from various mental health struggles.

It is established in the introduction of Van Lith's "Art Making as a Mental Health Recovery Tool for Change and Coping" that the recovery of mental health struggles is best served by a positive relationship between therapist/practitioner and patient. In order to assist clients with recovery, many art therapists prefer to take on the title of 'guide' as to diminish any connotations that they have expert authority over the patient. In these therapies, art is used as a method of expression of psychological issues that may not be easily articulated through words. Oftentimes, as patients proceed through the creation of their art, they become more connected with it and thus are able to better relay their emotions through it. This study observed twelve mental health

recovery patients with unidentified issues and varying levels of interest and experience in art making. The participants were asked to complete a recovery assessment as well as engage in an open-ended conversation regarding their recovery three times over the course of one year. Upon analysis of the data, four common themes emerged; that the patients felt an inner connection through art-making, that they use art as a motivator when they feel unwell, that they strive for a sense of achievement through their art, and that they feel psychologically safe while creating art. These findings drew Van Lith to the conclusion that art therapy is especially beneficial in eliciting a spiritual element among other clinical, social, and self-care related aspects, allowing for a greater sense of transcendence from one's mental health struggles. (Van Lith, 2015)

While this study was primarily focused on the use of visual art (drawing, painting, etc), it does give insight into how more theatrical art expression could have a similarly positive effect on mental health, which is the basis of the project as a whole.

The article "Creative arts therapy as treatment for child trauma: An overview" takes a somewhat different approach from the previous, as it looked at children suffering from some form of abuse or PTSD in particular, and how creative art therapies could have the potential for positive change. Van Westrhenen and Fritz discuss how common child trauma is and the factors that can cause it, including household or community violence, natural disasters, war, illness, and/or terrorism. The article defines any children with symptoms of PTSD as having suffered some form of trauma. Creative arts therapies encompasses therapy that utilizes music, visual art, poetry, theater, or dance to help treat those suffering from mental health issues.

Neurological evidence has supported the idea that creative therapy can affect the nature of traumatic event memories that are stored in the brain. Though there exists very little empirical research in this area, this paper sought to examine the prior twelve years worth of research on the positive effects of creative art therapies on children. A total of 38 articles were included, with age ranges from 16 months to 18 years, and a wide range of trauma and creative therapies

used. The results concluded that the effectiveness of such therapies couldn't be properly measured due to the research being too poor quality. It is difficult to empirically measure creative therapy as it can be very abstract and unstructured, and focused on the needs of the specific patient. However, Van Westrhenen and Fritz argue that it would be possible to assess whether such therapy has had a positive effect on a patient's wellbeing, and argue that a qualitative or quantitative study could be conducted to do so. (Van Westrhenen & Fritz, 2014)

This article was initially thought to be helpful in regards to further establishing the usefulness of art therapy on mental health issues, which would be applicable when considering how theatrical expression could positively impact anxiety. While this article yielded little in terms of definitive conclusions, it did advocate for further research on the use and effectiveness of art therapies in the future. However, since this article did not talk specifically about any sub-genres of creative art therapies, a further look was taken into theater specifically.

Moran & Alon's "Playback theatre and recovery in mental health: Preliminary evidence" is a study on the effectiveness of playback theater in the treatment and recovery of adults with psychiatric disabilities. Playback theater in this case involves a person who relays a story about themselves, and then actors improvise a scene that depicts the story in an empathetic and non-judgemental way. This is meant as a way for those struggling with an issue to see it played out from an outside perspective and connect with others through greater understanding of personal challenges. For this study, 19 adult students of BU's Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation program participated in a 10-week playback theater course and completed a self-report measure of their well-being. The Playback Impact Scale was created based on the self-report surveys from the initial course and has 20 Likert questions on self-esteem, social connection, creativity, and confidence. Results found that playback stories became more detailed and personal in nature as the sessions continued, participants felt more comfortable sharing and had heightened self-esteem, and many exhibited more social behavior over time. (Moran & Alon, 2011)

While playback theater may likely not be fully included in the final project, it's an interesting concept and way of coping with mental health through theater and improvisation that could be worth mentioning or incorporating in some form.

Little academic research could be found on the benefits of performing pre-written or fully formed plays/musicals on mental health, and thus it was difficult to delve much further into this area. However, there was a found interest in the positive effects of improvisation.

While David Poissant's "Yes, and: Overcoming Anxiety with Improv" was a personal narrative, rather than an academic research article, it was included for its relevance to the topics of comedy, anxiety, and theater - a combination that, as mentioned, yields little fruit in terms of research. This article discussed how improv has helped the author overcome his performance anxieties because improv does not allow time to think, and therefore worry, allows for mistakes as they often only enhance the comedy of the performance, has supportive teammates built in, and how the answer can always be 'yes and...' (Poissant, 2013)

The final project will likely, in some capacity, be an acting piece, and this paper has inspired the consideration of including improvisational comedy in - not only as a fun and exciting aspect, but also because improv can often be a source of anxiety and by including it, it only further establishes how useful it can be.

Thus far, this paper has made connections between mental health and humor, and mental health and theater. Now, a brief look will be taken into the connection between humor and theater. As with mental health and theater, there were few academic articles that could be found that had an form of relation to the topics and interest of this thesis, but the research that was discovered has been examined.

Chapter 4 - The Melding of Comedy and Theater

As the project will be theatrical in nature, theater as a topic was pursued in relation to humor and coping. It initially seemed as though "Comic relief: Subversion and catharsis in

organizational comedic theatre” would pertain to actual theater and the styles and effects of humor in comedic plays. However, it was more about the intentions behind comedy and its use in corporate and organizational settings, and talked at length about a man named Marks who would hold fake seminars at corporations and act as a caricature of the organization itself as a way to entertain, enlighten, and undermine authority. (Westwood, 2004)

This source did not greatly affect current perspectives, as the use of comedy in organizations is not something that was being considered as a point of interest for the project; however the mention of comedy often being used to undermine authority and make a statement was a noteworthy point, and one that may be incorporated.

Similarly to the previous chapter, research articles on pre-established theater were hard to come by, but there was an interest in improvisation, which is often a source of humor as improvisers most often aim to create scenes and bits that are comical for the pleasure of the audience and each other.

The abstract of Daniela Landert’s study, “The spontaneous co-creation of comedy: Humour in improvised theatrical fiction”, described how the study compares improvised theater with standard fictional theater work, mentioning differences such as production process emphasis, presence of an audience during creation, and time between creation and performance. It then mentions how three strategies of humor are examined: non-contrived humor (any action or speech that does not come from the intention to be humorous, but is so due to circumstance), metafictional frame breaking (when performers reference the real world and/or fact that they are performing in some way), and the co-construction of exchanges of humor. The study itself was focused on the analysis of eight episodes of *TJ & Dave*, a comedy improv show. Researchers looked for uses of the different comedy styles as mentioned above, and recorded how many times the audience would laugh. Landert then goes into further detail on fictional telecinematic (tv show) discourse and the different levels of communication. This was then, as stated in the abstract, compared to improvisation, with Landert speaking at length

about the effects of such aspects as differences in timing and audience interactivity. From there, the strategies of humor previously mentioned are more clearly defined with several in-depth examples included. (Landert, 2021)

While many additional sources were mentioned throughout, one in particular was of interest, Napier (2015), which expressed how difficult it can be to try pre-planning any sort of humorous elements in an improv setting, as issues can arise trying to implement into the randomness of a scene and allowing fellow performers to join in. This sort of information may come in useful when devising ideas for the creation of the project.

Conclusion

From the research assembled in this paper, an argument could certainly be made in favor of the usage of humor and theater arts to help soothe and combat mental illnesses, particularly anxiety. Although the topics of humor in theater, and the impact of theater on mental health could especially benefit from further academic research in the field, that which has been analyzed reflects support for the positive impacts that can be made. Those who engage in therapeutic art-making may feel safer and more at ease (Van Lith, 2015); those who use humor may suffer less stress from day-to-day problems (Abel, 2002); those who combine the two may find themselves becoming more comfortable with making decisions, making mistakes, and feeling willing to put themselves out there. (Poissant, 2013) All of these factors can be related back to the high prevalence of anxiety in the US, and how positive and creative outlets like these can be one of the healthiest ways of coping. (NIMH, 2022) As such, the subsequent project will focus on combining humor with theatrics on the topic of anxiety (particularly that which is most applicable and relatable to the author) in an informative yet entertaining way that will bring about a sense of accomplishment and comfort throughout the creative process.

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Project Components

My thesis script, *Cough Syrup*, is a one-act play consisting of ten scenes totalling twenty-five pages, and would likely run at about 45 minutes to an hour in length. It paints the picture of a college-age girl struggling with mental health as she maneuvers various scenarios. Her primary issue is that she is plagued by a constant nagging by “Normal Thoughts” and “Anxiety”, the two main facets of her mind that are personified as characters that follow her around and comment on her actions. Normal Thoughts is reflective of her more logical, analytical, and sometimes more self-soothing side, whereas Anxiety (as the name clearly suggests) represents her more worried and neurotic side. Throughout the course of the show, the two often find themselves at odds with each other, with the girl herself trapped in the middle. In addition to this, other aspects of her mind appear from time to time as well; including Music, Fanfiction, and Monkey Brain. Music is, quite simply, the part of her brain that is often playing some song, regardless of whether or not it may be applicable to the situation at hand. Fanfiction serves as her escapist, always thinking about the fictional worlds that she finds comfort in when stressed. Monkey Brain repeats phrases and/or shares thoughts that are often strange or irrelevant, but that are innately produced.

The show is rather abstract in its progression of time, with many flashbacks and events that could take place over the course of several days, weeks, or months. This is accounted for using the role of the therapist. They are a vehicle I used in many of the scenes in order to provide context for what was about to be shown. For example, in order to initially establish each of the characters that are supposed to exist within the girl's mind, I depicted her explaining them to the therapist at the very beginning of the show. This way, it sets up for the audience to know who those characters are and why they interact with the girl in the way that they do. Throughout the show, the girl will periodically have meetings with the therapist that transition into scenes of her with her thoughts and/or other characters that are representative of what she's been discussing in therapy.

Some of the situations that the girl touches upon include struggling to write a paper, feeling left out with her friends, and mistakenly believing that someone is interested in her. Each of these are depicted for the therapist and audience to watch, and the interaction between the girl, her normal thoughts, and her anxiety are showcased within them. The other characters, such as the girl's friends, who exist within the 'real world' of the play, cannot see or hear the Normal Thoughts and Anxiety characters. They only interact with the girl herself because they exist inside her mind.

Many of the scenes in this script are rather repetitive in nature; however, most of the scenes are purposefully ended with the girl alone with her thoughts in order to make the final scene, in which she is surrounded by her friends, more meaningful and impactful. Had I more time to work on this script, I might have tried to create more scene variation, but I am mostly content with how it is currently.

This show is written to be performed in a fairly traditional way - standard proscenium theater with an audience on one side. It requires very little in regards to set, costuming, and props. Each main character has their own color to distinguish them - The girl wears black (reflective of her dark moods), the therapist wears white (reflective of light - hope), Normal Thoughts wears blue (soothing), Anxiety wears red (danger and excitement), and so on. All smaller supporting roles, such as the girl's friends, wear gray. Only a few platforms, some chairs, and a couple of tables/desks are needed to set the stage, which is plunged into a blackout at the end of each scene to better distinguish a time break. There is a lot of music used throughout - a strong constant in my life, and thus, the show - though much of it is provided by the character of Music herself.

All of these components come together to form and help bring to life the script, which is entitled *Cough Syrup*: both a hard-to-swallow method for helping people feel better, and a song by Young the Giant that has provided comfort through many a dark time in my life.

Cough Syrup

SCENE 1 - Poopy Brain (working title)

[The stage is mostly bare. Two chairs are positioned on a platform USL to serve as the THERAPIST's office. Center stage is located relative to this and the end of SR. GIRL and THERAPIST sit across from each other in the chairs.]

[NOTE: The THERAPIST will remain seated at their chair for any scene they appear in unless otherwise indicated.]

GIRL: Sometimes, oftentimes, I feel like I have all these different voices in my head. And they're all me. They all sound like me (mostly). But they represent different parts of myself. Like what I think are probably fairly normal thoughts *[NT enters and stands DSL. They are distinguished by a blue shirt that says 'Normal Thoughts' across the front.]*, and what I think is anxiety *[ANXIETY enters and stands DSR. They wear a red shirt that says 'Anxiety']*. Like in TV shows, when they show someone with the little angel and devil on their shoulders. Except sometimes I'm not always sure which is the id and which is the superego.

THERAPIST: What do you mean by that?

GIRL: Sometimes I think they switch. Like my anxiety isn't always a bad thing. Sometimes it keeps me safe. And my normal thoughts aren't always good or productive.

THERAPIST: How can you tell the two apart?

GIRL: I'm not sure. Sometimes I just know and sometimes I don't. They're not always two opposing forces. Sometimes they sound alike.

THERAPIST: Can you give me some examples of those distinctions?

[GIRL moves downstage center as a friend, MELODY, enters.]

GIRL: Hey, are you still down for dinner tonight?

MELODY: Actually I can't anymore. I have a lot of work to do. *[exits]*

GIRL: Okay no worries!

ANXIETY: She hates you.

NT: What? No she doesn't, she's just busy.

ANXIETY: This is the second time she's said no this week. You've annoyed her.

NT: I doubt that and even if you have it doesn't mean she hates you, she's your friend.

ANXIETY: Or so you think. But maybe she's grown tired of you.

NT: You're being dramatic. *[NT and ANXIETY glare at each other. GIRL looks distressed.]*

THERAPIST: Do you get these thoughts a lot?

GIRL: Sometimes, yeah. This is usually when my anxiety is hardest to deal with...

THERAPIST: But sometimes it's helpful?

GIRL: It tries to be...

[GIRL walks over to fridge, pulls out package of ham and sniffs it.]

NT: Uh... are you sure you want to eat that? It's a bit old at this point and the guys at the olfactory are telling me it smells a bit off.

ANXIETY *[suddenly buddy-buddy with NT]*: Yeah I'm gonna have to second that. What if it tastes bad and ruins your lunch? Or what if it makes you feel sick? What if you get a stomach ache and it hurts all through work and rehearsal and it causes you to not be able to act as energized as you should be? Or what if you have to miss rehearsal because of it?

GIRL: Relax, that almost never happens.

ANXIETY: I think it's a bad idea. You're gonna regret it.

GIRL: Well, *[takes another sniff]* I think it's fine. It's just a slice of ham. Yolo I guess.

[GIRL places ham slice on sandwich as NT and ANXIETY look at each other.]

THERAPIST: Haha, what happened?

GIRL *[to NT and ANXIETY, clenching stomach in pain]* Oh god, why didn't you stop me??

[ANXIETY throws hands up in the air in frustration]

NT: What you have to understand is that a certain amount of your dumbassery is just innate; we can't be held responsible for it.

THERAPIST: I see.

GIRL: And sometimes I feel like my regular thoughts can be even worse than my anxiety.

THERAPIST: How so?

[GIRL moves to sit at computer with NT and ANXIETY beside her.]

GIRL: Alright 600-800 word reflection of *Newsies*. We got this.

ANXIETY: Oh that's barely two pages, that's nothing. We got this.

NT: First things first; header. [GIRL begins to type.] Name. Class. Teacher. Now we need a title.

GIRL: Ooh how about "This just in! *Newsies* was relatively good." Get it? Cause it's like a news story?

NT: Not bad, not bad.

ANXIETY: I don't know, maybe a little too kitschy?

[MUSIC enters wearing a purple shirt labeled 'Music' and begins loudly humming "Scheming Weasel"]

ANXIETY: We can come back to it. Now what should we write about first?

GIRL: What is the difference between a ferret and a weasel?

NT: That's a good question. We should look that up.

[GIRL begins typing.]

ANXIETY: I'm not sure that's what we should be doing right now—

GIRL: Okay so it seems like the only real difference is that ferrets are thinner and have shorter tails. Weasels are usually bigger and longer.

NT: Huh. [into headset] Hey did you guys at Long-Term get that? This info could be useful later.

GIRL: Didn't that guy from *Kim Possible* have a weasel? Or was that a ferret?

NT: I don't know, we never watched it.

GIRL: Maybe we should, I know a lot of people who seem to like it.

NT: Maybe. We have so many other things we should watch though.

ANXIETY: I know, we really should get on that but it's just hard to start something new. We have to put like all of our focus on it– wait fuck, the paper. Okay c'mon let's focus.

GIRL: Yes. Okay. *[beat]* what should we write?

NT: The set was good. We could say something about that.

GIRL: Oh yeah that scaffolding was a cool idea.

[Around this point, MUSIC starts singing parts of "I Can't Decide" by Scissor Sisters on and off throughout the scene.]

NT: I don't know why but when it wobbled slightly it made me think of that scene in *The Walking Dead Game* where the balcony comes loose when they're trying to jump across to that building.

GIRL: Oh gosh yeah. Man. There's also scaffolding in Fallout. I want to play more Fallout.

ANXIETY: No Fallout. Not right now. We have to write this paper.

[FANFICTION enters wearing an orange 'Fanfiction' shirt]

FAN: Did someone say Fallout? With us playing 4 and Sam playing New Vegas for the first time, I literally cannot stop thinking about it.

GIRL: Dude omg I knowwww I can't stop thinking about Deacon.

NT: And Joshua Graham. That video we watched last night? GUH I'd love to write an essay on him.

ANXIETY: Omg that would be awesome. But first maybe we should WRITE AN ESSAY ON *NEWSIES*. Please for the love of god this is already late!

[GIRL looks guilty but NT and FAN ignore them and continue talking.]

GIRL: Right! Okay, the set... *[begins typing again]* really integrated that inner-city slums feel...um...

[The next many lines are said overlapping and/or in quick succession. GIRL sits looking increasingly more overwhelmed.]

NT: I mean his internal struggle between moral and religious piousness and the burning lust for violent revenge is just *chef's kiss*

FAN: I KNOW! Ugh we should have talked about that in that presentation we did senior year of the pit-falls of revenge. We could've included it with *Bioshock Infinite* and that Avatar episode—

NT: The Southern Raiders!! God I love that one so much it's so good— *[NT and FAN continue talking.]*

ANXIETY *[starts pacing]*: We need to do this paper we need to do this paper we need— *[beings nudging GIRL]*

[MONKEY BRAIN enters wearing a brown 'Monkey Brain' shirt.]

MONKEY BRAIN: Taste the goodness of the biscuit with the honey sauce. With the honey sauce!

ANXIETY: Where did that even come from??

FAN: But anyway back to Fallout. Deacon's travel and battle quips are so funny!

MUSIC *[gets louder]*: I can't decide whether you should live or die though you'll prob-ly go to Heaven please don't hang your head and cry I wonder why—

ANXIETY: If we don't get this done we'll get a bad grade and if we get too many bad grades we'll fail and then we won't graduate...

FAN: I don't know what it is but we just have such a soft spot for himbo characters.

NT: The loveable dumbass.

FAN: Exactly.

MONKEY BRAIN *[Cave Johnson voice]*: THE LEMONS!

MUSIC: —my heart feels dead inside; it's cold and hard and petrified—

NT: Wait so what is a mink?

GIRL *[as the others continue talking/singing, trying desperately to do work]*: Okay... I... okay, um...

[THERAPIST enters the scene and crosses to GIRL. The others continue talking/singing but more quietly.]

THERAPIST: Is this what it's always like?

GIRL: Pretty much whenever I'm alone. Or trying to do work. Sometimes even if it's work or something that I like. That's why I don't like being alone often, and usually have to keep watching or listening to stuff if I am. Otherwise it can get to be too much. Especially if I'm in a bad place.

THERAPIST: Can you tell me about a bad place?

[GIRL looks off. Blackout.]

Scene 2 - A Bad Place

[THERAPIST corner is in darkness. Lights focused CS on GIRL as she paces. MUSIC is singing 'In My Blood']

NT: Just calm down okay? It's not that big a deal. He was just being friendly, he didn't know. Most people don't have a problem being touched there.

ANXIETY: Couldn't get away. Stuck at the table. Why did he have to come from behind? That made it worse.

NT: Just stop thinking about it.

GIRL: I can still feel his hands.

ANXIETY: The squeeze. *[GIRL drops into fetal position, wraps herself in a blanket.]*

MUSIC: –I'm crawling in my skin–

NT: He knows you don't like it now. I'm sure it won't happen again.

GIRL: You saw how defensive he was.

ANXIETY: What if they don't like me anymore? What if they don't want me to go there anymore?

GIRL: I wish I didn't feel like this.

NT: It's not your fault–

GIRL: There's something wrong with me.

ANXIETY: Why did they have to talk about all that stuff after. Graduation, the future when we're gone–

GIRL: They're gonna forget about me—

NT: I'm sure they're not—

ANXIETY: Just like everyone else.

GIRL: Once we graduate it's over and everything will be different. We'll never be back here the same way.

ANXIETY: It's going too fast it's going too fast it's going too fast—

NT: Calm down, it's okay. We'll handle it—

ANXIETY: And they'll forget you. Your friends. They say they won't but they will. Once you leave it'll be different. You won't be in their world anymore.

GIRL *[rubbing shoulders and shaking]*: God I can still feel him on me—

NT: That's not going to happen—

ANXIETY *[echoing from backstage]*: Every step forward is closer to death. It's like a movie—

GIRL: Please—

ANXIETY *[echoing from backstage]*: But once it's over that's it. Everything is gone forever. It's darkness and you can't wake up.

GIRL: STOP *[screams and curls into ball]*

SAM: Are you okay?

NT: No.

ANXIETY: Don't burden them.

GIRL *[wipes off tears]*: Yeah I'm fine. Sorry.

SAM: Are you sure? You're crying...

GIRL: Yeah no it's okay. I'm just in my feels. It do be like that sometimes.

SAM: Okay... well I'm here if you wanna talk about anything.

GIRL: Thank you, I appreciate it.

[SAM leaves. Light comes up briefly on THERAPIST in their corner]

NT & THERAPIST: It would probably feel better to talk about it—

ANXIETY: I'm sure they have enough on their plate without having to listen to our bullshit.

[THERAPIST and corner light goes back to darkness.]

GIRL *[rubbing fist. Beat.]*: So... what is a polecat? Is that in the same family?

[Blackout]

Scene 3 - Mr. Lonely

GIRL: I've had a lot of friend groups, and so many times in my life I've felt like... the third one. The fifth one. The other one. The one that people like, who they think is funny and nice. But she's not their best friend. She's not their favorite. She's not their 'first choice'. And maybe it's conceited to want to be those things. But is it so wrong?

THERAPIST: Can you think of any times recently when this really affected you?

GIRL: Yes.

[GIRL gets up from chair and moves DSC. Voices come from backstage. ANXIETY and NT join her.]

VOICE 1: I just spoke with housing. They said we'll likely only get the suite if we have the full eight people needed. So it's really important that you find a roommate, since the rest of us are already paired up. Is there anyone else you can ask?

GIRL: All of my friends are already paired up.

ANXIETY: I don't want to go random. Not again.

VOICE 2: Well you should really start trying to find someone because we really want this suite and we need the eight.

GIRL: I'm trying.

ANXIETY: We're trying.

VOICE 1: Okay well we'll be sure to remind you of this periodically every few days.

ANXIETY *[angry]*: Why don't you just—

GIRL: Okay, I'm sorry, I'll keep looking. I'll find someone.

THERAPIST: Did you find someone?

GIRL: I did. But it didn't work out. They were nice, I liked them. But it just didn't work. They moved out in early October. I was alone the rest of the semester.

THERAPIST: Did you talk to your friends about how you were feeling? Perhaps they would have—

ANXIETY *[interrupting]*: Don't bother them. It's our problem not theirs.

[THERAPIST fades out. GIRL brings chair DSC and sits, pretends to type at a computer. Multiple conversations abrupt from backstage, with frequent laughter. GIRL is clearly upset by it.]

NT: Why don't you go knock on one of their doors? See if you can hang out?

ANXIETY: No, you don't want to intrude.

NT: Yes but we're lonely. I'm sure they wouldn't mind. They're your friends.

ANXIETY: Yes but... it's too awkward. What if they don't want you? You don't want to be a bother.

GIRL: You're probably right. I'll just play a game or watch something in here until bed.

[MUSIC enters. Begins singing "Mr. Lonely." All look over at them and glare.]

NT: Does this look like a Bobby Vinton moment to you? Fuck off.

MUSIC: Sorry... *[continues playing]*

[Blackout]

Scene 4 - Good News

[GIRL is seated at a table with MARIE in the middle of a conversation.]

MARIE: She keeps coming into my room when my roommate and I aren't there and taking our stuff without permission. The other night she came home drunk with a guy at like 2:00am and they were practically screaming in the common room. It was awful. I need to get out of there.

GIRL: Are you guys going to try and move somewhere else?

MARIE: I am. My roommate is going abroad next semester and I do not want to stay in that suite.

NT: Ask her.

ANXIETY: She's not going to say yes.

NT: Why not?

ANXIETY: Because you're too much. Clearly nobody wants to be around you that much. Every time you've had a roommate it hasn't worked out.

NT: That's not necessarily your fault. She's your friend. You get along. She needs a place to live. You have one. Just ask her.

ANXIETY: No.

NT: ASK HER.

ANXIETY: But what if she says no?

NT: DO IT!

GIRL: Would you maybe be interested in living with me and the others in our suite in Thoreau Hall? My roommate moved out last month and I've just been alone. If not, no worries, I understand.

ANXIETY: Oh god. This is going to be embarrassing.

MARIE: Actually yeah, that would be great.

[GIRL, NT, and ANXIETY all look at each other.]

GIRL: Really?

MARIE: Yeah, I would love to live with you guys.

GIRL: That's great. We should email Res Life.

NT: Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus!

ANXIETY: Now we won't have to be alone all year.

NT: And we love Marie!

ANXIETY: We do love Marie!

GIRL: Maybe things are finally looking up.

ANXIETY: *Narrator Voice* but things were not looking up.

GIRL: Haha. *[beat]* Wait, that was a joke, right?

[Blackout]

Scene 5 - A Wheel Not Even Ezekiel Would Love

THERAPIST: Tell me more about this 'otherness'.

[GIRL, MARIE, and SAM are getting ready for a formal dance. There is a knock at the door.]

MARIE: Oh that must be Tim, I'll go get him. *[Exits and comes back with TIM as GREG enters from opposite side.]*

GREG: Hey is that Tim?

TIM: Hey man! What's up?

GREG: Not much, you?

MARIE *[to TIM]*: You look great.

TIM *[to MARIE]*: And you look beautiful. *[The two embrace as SAM moves over to join GREG. GIRL watches the couples slightly from afar.]*

MARIE: Hey Nat, could you take a picture of us together? *[Holds out phone.]*

GIRL: Yeah sure. *[takes several photos of them standing romantically together.]*

SAM: Us too please!

[GIRL takes some of SAM and GREG.]

GIRL: We should probably head out soon.

TIM: You ready babe?

GREG: Yes dear. *[Both couples laugh and exit SR in pairs one after another. GIRL is stuck alone in the back. She goes to exit as NT and ANXIETY enter SR from where the others exited.]*

ANXIETY: Yeah this is gonna be fun...

NT: I'm sure we can still all dance together. And there will probably be other single friends there that you can dance with too.

ANXIETY: Yeah but it won't be like last year when it was just all friends, no couples.

NT: You can't be upset that people want to dance with their significant others. If you had one, you'd want to dance with them a lot too.

GIRL: Yeah I guess. But I don't even wish I had a date, I just want to dance with my friends.

NT: I'm sure we will.

[MARIE, TIM, SAM, and GREG all enter SL as party music begins playing. GIRL runs over and begins dancing with them for a few moments as music builds.]

NT: See? What did I tell you? This is fun!

[Slow dance music begins to play. The couples move to dance together. GIRL is left alone.]

ANXIETY: Yeah. So much fun.

[Music fades. SAM and MARIE approach GIRL]

MARIE: Hey I think Tim and I are gonna head out.

SAM: Us too.

GIRL: But the dance doesn't end for over an hour still.

SAM: Yeah but Greg is tired and we kind of just want some alone time together.

MARIE: And Tim and I got invited to this other party with some friends.

GIRL: Oh, okay.

SAM: Do you want to walk back to the suite with us now?

GIRL: No that's alright, you guys go ahead. I'll probably stay here a little while longer.

MARIE: Okay, have a good time!

[MARIE and SAM return to TIM and GREG and the four exit SL.]

ANXIETY: That's okay, why don't you go dance with some of your other single friends? Oh, that's right. They all have better friends they came with. Let's just get out of here.

NT *[defeated]*: Yeah, maybe we should.

[GIRL starts to leave as "Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!" by ABBA starts playing. GIRL, ANXIETY, and NT look at each other.]

NT: Okay well friends or no friends we have to dance to this before we can go. It's ABBA.

[The three start dancing together as the scene fades to blackout.]

Scene 6 - He

[GIRL and THERAPIST sit across from each other.]

THERAPIST: Did you talk to your friends about feeling left out?

GIRL: No... I don't want to bother them or make them feel bad. That's just how it goes when you have significant others I guess.

THERAPIST: Do you wish you had a significant other?

GIRL: It's not that exactly. I just... I watch all my friends with their people and I envy that they have someone they can always talk to and go to. And I wish that I had that. I wish I felt special to somebody. Not even necessarily in a romantic sense, just in general.

THERAPIST: Have you felt 'special' to somebody before?

GIRL: Once. His name was John.

[Transition moment - JOHN enters and GIRL moves DS to him.]

GIRL *[fiddling with hair]*: Ugh it looks like shit.

JOHN: No it doesn't. I like it.

GIRL: I hate it, it looks terrible.

JOHN: Hey, imagine I showed you a beautiful painting and told you that it was one of my favorite paintings. You wouldn't tell me you thought it was ugly and you hated it. You would respect the fact that I like it and appreciate its value.

GIRL: Yeah, I guess you're right. *[leans against him]* Thank you bean. *[forehead or nose kiss]*

JOHN: You're the painting.

GIRL: Yes that's what I figured, thank you.

JOHN: And the critic.

GIRL: Yes I knowwww *[JOHN laughs and GIRL joins in]* I love you.

JOHN: I love you too stinky. *[goes to give kiss on the hand but instead makes a mouth fart.]*

GIRL: NEH.

[JOHN laughs then freezes. THERAPIST becomes present again, this time with NT and ANXIETY there too.]

THERAPIST: What happened?

GIRL: He went back to college far-ish away. We didn't want to do long-distance.

THERAPIST: Did you try it at all?

GIRL: It just wouldn't have worked for us.

ANXIETY: What if we get too busy and struggle to make time for each other?

GIRL: Sometimes I really struggle with staying in touch with people who are far away. It's not that I don't care about them and want to talk...

NT: We just have no fucking object permanence.

GIRL: We've seen what trying long-distance has done to other couples, friends of ours...

ANXIETY: They hate each other now. I don't want that to happen to us. I can't stand the thought of creating a scenario where he resents me.

GIRL: So we ended things amicably, and sometimes we still talk as friends. It hurts but I know it's better this way.

ANXIETY: He's better this way.

THERAPIST: And you're sure about that?

GIRL: Yes.

NT: No.

ANXIETY: I'm not sure we've ever been sure about anything other than being unsure.

Scene 7 - The Skooma Den

[At a loud, crowded party. GIRL sits alone]

NT: God this sucks. Why did we want to come to this? We don't even know anyone here.

ANXIETY: Too many people. Who are all these people?? Where did they come from?

GIRL: Yeah... I want to go home now.

NT: We have to find Melody first and let her know we're leaving.

ANXIETY: Look at that hoard! You think we'll find her in there?? She's gone, let her go. We can mourn when we're back home in bed.

NT: No no don't be rude, we'll find her.

[GUY approaches her.]

GUY: Hey are you alright?

[NT and ANXIETY look at each other wide-eyed]

GIRL: Oh um yeah, I'm okay thanks.

GUY: Oh okay, I just noticed you were sitting alone so I just wanted to ask.

GIRL: Thank you, I appreciate it.

GUY: I'm Sean. What's your name?

NT *[into headset]*: Okay listen up everyone we've got a code 82B. A clearly straight, non-theater boy has expressed interest in us. Unclear yet whether there may be potential romantic interest.

ANXIETY: Okay okay our name we got this we got this.

GIRL: I'm Natalie. Nice to meet you.

ANXIETY: Hoo okay that was a success.

GUY: I don't think I've seen you before. What's your major?

ANXIETY: Oh gosh. Here we go.

NT: It shouldn't be this embarrassing to admit.

ANXIETY: Here comes the condescending "good for you" or "how brave!"

GIRL: Performing arts - theater.

GUY: Oh cool! So do you do all the shows and stuff?

NT: That had a surprising lack of judgemental undertones! Maybe he actually admires artistic pursuits.

GIRL: Yeah! I'm actually in the show they're doing right now.

GUY: Oh cool! What's the show?

GIRL: It's called *Love and Tragedy*. It's a story about love, and tragedy. I play one of the tragic lovers.

ANXIETY: That's it. Now look into his eyes more.

[GIRL looks intently into GUY's eyes during his following line.]

GUY: So do you prefer to be acting or do you do backstage stuff too?

ANXIETY: Not that much! Look away.

GIRL *[looking away periodically]*: I prefer acting but I have done technical work too. I'm actually working at a theater on the side doing a lot of little jobs like helping build the set and stuff.

ANXIETY: Our mouth feels weird. We need to do something with it.

[GIRL moves mouth around slightly]

GIRL: So, um, what do you do?

ANXIETY: Shit our lips are so dry. We've gotta wet them.

GUY: That sounds cool. I'm a business major... *[descends into some brief improvised monologue about himself. GIRL tries to discreetly lick her lips and/or tuck them into her mouth]*

NT: Should we stand up? I just became tragically aware of the height difference here.

ANXIETY: Yes but we can't stand up now. He's in the middle of just a normal description about his life. It would be awkward if we randomly stood up now. We need to wait for a proper moment of motivation.

NT: Jesus fuckin— theater major.

[GUY ends his speech as another chair nearby becomes available. GUY pulls it over and sits.]

ANXIETY: Oh thank god. Crisis averted.

[GUY and GIRL continue talking either in hushed tones or simply mouth words to each other.]

NT: Omg this is such a main character moment cliché! The jockey boy takes interest in the shy nerdy girl at a party. Jeez. Just thinking that made me want to slap myself.

ANXIETY: There's no way he's actually into us. Have you seen the other girls at this party? They're all a lot hotter than me.

NT: True... but our hair looks good and this shirt really accentuates the titties.

ANXIETY: You got that right. But still. This sort of thing doesn't happen to us.

NT: Maybe this is god's way of apologizing for the last two times we thought a guy might be into us. One of them has gotta work out eventually... right?

ANXIETY: I don't know. I've been starting to think John was the one piece of romantic happiness we're allowed for a long time.

[GUY and GIRL exchange snapchats aloud.]

NT: No, I really think he may actually be into us. He's been talking to us for a little while now and he requested a method of communication!

ANXIETY: I think you might actually be right! This is so exciting!

NT: Thank god because our self-esteem could really use this right now haha

[GIRL takes sip from water bottle labeled 'Emotional Support Water Bottle.']

GUY: Hey can I ask you a question? Are you drinking tonight?

NT: After that last time? It'll be a miracle if we ever drink again.

GIRL: Oh no it's just water. I did take an edible earlier but it's not really hitting much.

ANXIETY: Cause we didn't eat enough.

NT: And we're just tired.

GUY: Oh do you prefer edibles? Where do you get them?

GIRL: Just at the dispensary.

GUY: And how much does that run you? Thirty, forty dollars? Because you know, I actually sell them. I'd be willing to sell you some if you like.

GIRL: Oh, umm...

GUY: I know sometimes it can be worrying buying from a private person rather than an industry. That's why I'm willing to offer you the first one free to try, and if you like it, then you can come back and buy more. If not, no worries!

GIRL: Uhh thanks, but I think I'm all set.

GUY: Hey look, you can trust me okay. I'm a nice guy. I've got a girlfriend. She hates me but she's still my girlfriend. Haha just kidding! She doesn't hate me.

GIRL: Yeah that's... um... that's nice. But I'm really all set actually.

GUY: Okay, well let me know if you change your mind! *[Leaves]*

[GIRL is left standing there alone. NT and ANXIETY look at each other. GIRL turns and walks off stage solemnly.]

NT: There's no way that's a real conversation that actually just happened.

ANXIETY *[under breath]*: Should've known business major was a red flag.
[ANXIETY runs after them. NT is left center stage.]

NT *[into headset]*: Come in Stomach? Prepare yourself. Another night with Ben and Jerry.

[Blackout]

Scene 8 - It's All a Matter of Trust

THERAPIST: You know Natalie, we've been working together for some time now, and I think I've noticed a couple of patterns that, if altered, really might help you feel better.

GIRL: Like what?

THERAPIST: Well there are a couple of things we could try, including some grounding techniques for when you're feeling overwhelmed, and maybe some medications that could help you manage your thoughts better. And we can discuss those more in a moment. But I think one of the most beneficial things you could try doing is opening up more to your friends. I know you worry a lot about being a burden to them, but it's not burdensome to ask for help from the people you care about, and who care about you.

GIRL: I know that. Logically, I do. But I'm just worried that I'll put too much on them and they'll feel too overwhelmed and will start to find me draining or annoying.

THERAPIST: Do you find it annoying when your friends come to you for help because they're feeling sad or stressed?

GIRL: No, but—

THERAPIST: You want to help them, right? Because they're your friends. You care about them. You love them.

GIRL: I do, but—

THERAPIST: They love you too Natalie. They wouldn't be your friends if they didn't.

GIRL: I know that, but—

THERAPIST: And sometimes, one of the most reassuring aspects of love in a friendship, is having the trust to be able to turn to each other in difficult moments. A lot of people find it

touching when their friends feel safe coming to them with their problems, because it means that they have a strong bond. Have you ever felt this way?

GIRL: I have. I do.

THERAPIST: Then maybe it's time you trust that they feel this way too. Maybe it's time you trust that they care.

[Blackout.]

Scene 9 - Breakdown

[THERAPIST corner is in darkness. GIRL sits CS while ANXIETY and NT stand on either side of her.]

ANXIETY: You've been acting way too mentally ill lately. Your friends are probably all sick of having to deal with you. They probably kind of hate you now tbh.

GIRL: Oh god do you really think so?

NT: No, don't be ridiculous, your friends don't hate you. We've been in a bad place lately but they understand that it's been a tough few weeks.

ANXIETY: Weeks? It's been a tough few months. Remember last year when we were so happy all the time?

GIRL: I miss those days.

NT: They'll come back, it's just been harder this year with internship and thesis and graduation and the shows.

ANXIETY: It figures really. We can never seem to be too happy for too long, can we? Something bad always has to happen to balance it out.

NT: You're being ridiculous.

ANXIETY: Am I? Just look at some recent examples. Cute boy spends all night talking to us, rejects us the next day. Get a nice, good-paying job, but don't get to do almost anything fun all summer. Excited to be back on campus in the fall, then spends all the time either lonely or at work. Gets a big part in the show, but cursed with an incurable jealousy and longing. Lives with best friends, constantly convinced they hate us.

NT: Okay stop it. Yes it's unfortunate that things seem to go like that a lot but our life is not that bad. Most of those problems are really not that big a deal compared to most people. And some of them are just problems that you invented.

ANXIETY: Oh sorry I forgot I can't ever be upset because other people have it worse. And I didn't *invent* these problems, I'm merely pointing them out.

GIRL: Guys stop it.

NT: I never said that. There are always going to be people who have it better or worse, it doesn't make our feelings arbitrary. I'm just saying that maybe you're being too dramatic and need to learn to worry less and let things go.

ANXIETY: I'm being too dramatic? You think I'm being too dramatic?

NT: All I'm saying is that things aren't that bad and your worrying isn't helping anything.

ANXIETY: Oh I'm sorry that my being stressed and upset over having to try and balance homework and classes and rehearsal and therapy and friend time and alone time while dealing with constant stress dreams and medication side-effects and anticipatory grief for graduation and the loss of what feels like my whole world is bothersome to you.

NT: That's not what I—

[MUSIC comes in and begins playing "The Mob Rap: Part 1"]

ANXIETY and NT: Do you mind? We're trying to have a conversation here.

GIRL: Sorry. *[focuses hard for a moment as MUSIC fades slightly but does not fully leave.]*

ANXIETY: *ahem* where were we? Oh yes, I believe you were angry at me for being aware of all the shit that keeps going on like it's my fault.

NT: I never said it was your fault but you can't change most of it so what good is fixating going to do? You're just adding heat to the fire!

ANXIETY: Well forgive me but maybe if you took charge more often and actually helped us get things done once in a while maybe we wouldn't have all this stress to deal with! Are you aware that you still haven't turned in that paper that was due three weeks ago?

GIRL *[rocking slowly]*: please stop.

NT: Oh yes that's right, blame it all on me! Like I'm the reason she can't go five minutes without procrastinating. I'm doing my best over here but maybe we could get more done if you weren't freaking the fuck out all the time.

[MONKEY BRAIN *enters.*]

MONKEY BRAIN [*quoting Megamind*]: Ollo!

ANXIETY: How is procrastination **my** fault!? You're the one who's supposed to control all the intellectual knowledge and most of the free-flow of thought. So why don't you just stop thinking about random shit all the damn time and *focus*?

MONKEY BRAIN: Uh, sir, I believe it's 'hello.'

ANXIETY: I'm the one who has to keep luring us into a deadline-induced panic so that we actually get shit done! If it were all up to you, we'd never turn anything in.

MONKEY BRAIN: Oh, uh, *hello...?*

NT: You think it's just that easy? I have a lot of areas of thought I have to deal with and they never fucking listen to me when I tell them to tune in or shut up. [*runs offstage briefly and comes back on dragging FANFICTION*] I'm sure you're well aware that she's back in her Fallout phase, so now she only ever seems to listen to the ramblings of this idiot! Now who's fault is that?

FANFICTION: I'm sorry! It's just that I had this great new idea for the scene when you first see the Ant-agonizer in Canterbury Commons...

ANXIETY and NT: Shut up.

FANFICTION: okay...

ANXIETY: I'M SORRY IF VIDEO GAME ESCAPISM IS ONE OF THE FEW THINGS THAT MAKES US FORGET AND BE HAPPY.

[MONKEY BRAIN *begins making random owl noises.*]

NT: Few? FEW?? There you go again! Being overly dramatic! OUR LIFE IS NOT THAT FUCKING HARD.

[GIRL *begins heavily stimming in some way - rocking back and forth, leg bouncing, etc.*]

GIRL [*muttering to herself*]: Five things you can see... four things you can hear...

NT *[motioning to GIRL]*: See? Now look at what you're doing; you're making things worse! Why don't you just leave her alone!? I— *[to GIRL]* Can you stop? I'm not doing that stupid focusing exercise right now!

ANXIETY: IF I COULD JUST LEAVE HER ALONE I WOULDN'T EXIST. You think I want to be here? You think I want us to be like this??

[MUSIC gradually starts playing louder.]

MONKEY BRAIN: Quit bitchin' in my goddamn kitchen, alright??

NT: The way you act sometimes it seems like it yeah. You love the pity. You LIVE for the pity. You come in and make the both of us feel like shit just so we can all wallow in self-pity because for some reason that fulfills your creepy little need for attention.

GIRL: Stop it.

[MUSIC gets louder. MONKEY BRAIN drums on their legs.]

NT: Attention that you seem to desire and despise at the same time! You're so desperate for people to care about you and feel sorry for you and yet when they try to help you push them away. It's like you crave their support but only from afar. Never too close because then you might accidentally feel better and you won't be in the center anymore.

MONKEY BRAIN: Why do they call it oven when you of in the cold food—

ANXIETY: Oh that is bullshit and you know it. If I close us off from people it's because I don't want to burden them. I'd rather help with their issues than make them deal with ours—

MONKEY BRAIN: Of out hot eat the food—

ANXIETY: Sorry if that concept is so ridiculous to you, but that's why we have any friends at all. If I wasn't here, you'd act on even more stupid impulses than you already do and then everyone would actually hate us for real.

GIRL *[in fetal ball crying]*: Please, stop it.

[MUSIC gets even louder. GIRL is sobbing and keeps whispering 'stop it' periodically and progressively more loudly, throughout the next several lines.]

NT: You're the one who sends me those stupid impusles! You convince yourself that you're too much of a coward to do anything which is not untrue most of the time but then you feel the need to satiate that by acting out spontaneously in the most asinine and regrettable ways!

MONKEY BRAIN: What if we jumped out that window right now? Yahoo!

ANXIETY: You're blaming that on me? YOU'RE the one who does that buddy, not me. I'm perfectly okay with being a coward all the time—

NT: Well that's obvious—

ANXIETY: You just can't stand that I have so much power over you. You can't get rid of me, no matter how hard you try, no matter how many exercises you do or drugs you take or therapists you talk to. I will *always* be here. And I will always control you.

[MUSIC hits climax as NT starts towards ANXIETY]

GIRL *[Slams fist into the wall a couple times]*: SHUT UP!

[Everyone goes silent]

GIRL: I can't take it anymore! You don't control me. *I* control me. Now shut up. Just shut up and leave me alone!

I just want silence.

No bad thoughts,

no worries,

no noise,

just silence.

[Fade to black. MUSIC starts up again softly with "What's New Scooby Doo?".]

GIRL: Fuck my life.

Scene 10 - To be Loved is to be Changed

[GIRL lays alone in a ball in soft lighting CS. "Cough Syrup" by Young the Giant plays quietly in the background. SAM, MARIE, and MELODY enter and stand by GIRL.]

MELODY: Hey, what's wrong babe? We're worried about you.

SAM: Yeah you can talk to us.

GIRL *[sits up and wipes away tears]*: It's nothing. I don't really want to talk about it.

MARIE *[squats down next to GIRL]*: Are you sure?

GIRL: I— *[beat.]*

THERAPIST *[voices echoes from backstage]*: Maybe it's time you trust that they care.

GIRL *[stuttering at first]*: I just feel so sad and overwhelmed all the time lately. I keep getting upset about things and then I'm upset at myself for being upset. And it's like logically I know most of the time that my feelings are stupid and that I should just let things go but I just can't seem to do that.

SAM: Hey, your feelings aren't stupid. It doesn't matter what's making you upset, you're always valid in feeling that way.

GIRL: I know it just... I don't know... *[starts tearing up again and looks down.]*

MELODY: Hey, it's okay.

[MELODY and SAM join MARIE on the ground and all pull GIRL into a hug.]

MELODY: We're here for you dude.

SAM: Always.

MARIE: Tell us what's been bothering you.

[All the characters freeze except for GIRL who looks up and over at ANXIETY and NT, who have appeared US opposite of the Therapist corner in a dim light. ANXIETY starts forward looking upset and as though about to say something, but NT pulls them back and the two exchange a knowing look. NT nods to GIRL, and the light over them fades. The others become unfrozen.]

GIRL *[wipes eyes and clears throat]*: Okay. It all started on a snowy Friday, March 2nd, 2001...

[They all laugh. Blackout.]

END

Thesis Reflection

Creating this thesis was, in a way, as easy as it was challenging. The idea for it actually came to me in the summer, whilst having a panic attack in the middle of the night. I knew then that I wanted to do something that explored anxiety and what it is like to live with voices constantly nagging in the brain. However, I wanted it to be strongly reflective of the self and applicable to my major. Thus, I formulated the idea to write a play (nothing too long - just a one-act) about a girl experiencing similar feelings and situations to me. Since many of the things I have written about are reflective of real life experiences, this project became somewhat of a catharsis. If I had moments of great stress or anxiety, sometimes I would open up my document and just begin writing, and a lot of this did end up, in some form, in the final product. While this was helpful for getting it done, it also contributed to making it difficult to share at times, especially with teachers and advisors. Being open and honest and vulnerable in this way is not something that I am used to, and it can be frightening to share such aspects of yourself with other people. Especially when you don't have a great grasp on how they are going to react to it. I actually felt a lot of shame and embarrassment when first introducing this to others, but I was fortunate to have received a lot of positive support and also a lot of messages of solidarity that helped me feel a lot better about my work. I think even though this is very personal, it is also a story that a lot of people might be able to see aspects of themselves in.

The research I completed for my literature review during the fall semester, while interesting, did not have a very large overall impact on my actual project. I tried to focus my area of study on the relationships between anxiety, humor, and theater, as my play was a combination of the three. I discovered the unfortunate truth that there is very little available in terms of academic, peer-review papers on humor and theater. This is likely because humor can be a very abstract and difficult thing to define and study, and theater is a subjective art form. However when combined with anxiety, my research did yield several studies that connected the use of comedy and theatrical performance as a means of coping with mental health issues. As

someone who often uses silly and/or sometimes self-deprecating humor to deal with stress and uncomfortable situations, this information did not come as a particular surprise to me. However, it did help reaffirm what I wanted to do, and that a lot of people might find it relatable to some extent.

This past semester, I focused my research more on explorations of the self, through introspection, experience, and discussions with my own therapist. I tried to reflect more on the ways in which my thoughts and feelings interact with each other, and how that impacts my mood and actions. I also tried to take more notice of the kinds of activities and sentiments that helped me feel better while especially anxious or upset. In terms of the writing itself, I was able to receive feedback on selected parts of my work throughout the semester, primarily from my advisors Katie Clarke and Becca Kenneally, and my peers Chloe Castellano and Brie Randazza. They were helpful in making suggestions as to where to take the story, how to weave the scenes together, and what additions might make it easier to follow.

For my fall internship, I worked as a production assistant at Gloucester Stage Company. This experience did not have a huge overall impact on my thesis, but while there I was able to work backstage crew for a new play called *Monkey* by Rachel Greenhoe. The focus of this show was similar to the idea I had for my own - a woman is followed around by the personification of her “monkey mind”, the part of her brain that’s always nagging her about everything and trying to get her to act a certain way. The story follows how she copes with this part of herself while entering a new relationship and living with her hermit cousin. While it wasn’t quite the same as what I did for my project, I did pull some inspiration from it. I enjoyed watching how the monkey mind character was brought to life and the balance between how the woman would talk to others vs herself and her monkey. It was used not just as a nuisance, but also at times as a comforting presence because the woman knows what to expect from it. Watching it initially however, I did feel that it was not made clear enough from the get-go who the monkey mind was; it seemed to be a character that only the lead could see and hear, and it took some time

before it became obvious that it was a personification of what was in her head. I tried to curb such confusion in my show by establishing what each 'mind' character was in the beginning.

Even with this precaution, I was still worried that it could be perplexing for audiences. Sometimes we become so caught up in the world of what we are doing, it can be easy to forget that it might not be as clear from the outside looking in. However, this worry was mostly put to rest after viewing the taping we did. Since I did not have the time to create a normal-scale production of the play, I decided instead to select three scenes to record staged-readings of. For this, I selected "Scene 1 - Poopy Brain", "Scene 7 - The Skooma Den", and "Scene 9 - Breakdown". I tried to choose three that I thought highlighted different aspects of how the girl's thoughts interact. Scene 1 establishes the parts of her mind as characters and introduces some more basic ways in which they affect her. Scene 7 depicts her in a situation that takes an emotional turn, with her normal thoughts and anxiety more in tandem. Scene 9 is when her mind is most at conflict with itself, causing her the most emotional struggle within the whole show. With the help of some of my friends from the Performing Arts Department, I was able to record these scenes being read aloud in our black-box theater. I tried to further distinguish the characters by having each actor wear a shirt the color of their corresponding character (i.e. Anxiety in red), and wave when introduced. I believe this, along with the stage directions being read aloud, helped make the clips easy to follow and understand.

Had I more time and resources, I would've loved trying to fully stage the three scenes and give the actors more notes on their characters and how I wanted different parts to be portrayed. I do think one of the issues of doing a staged-reading was that even with distinctions in place, it can be hard to follow who is talking to who. Hearing it read aloud didn't necessarily make me want to change any of the dialogue, but it did make me appreciate how important staging can be in establishing connections and nuances between characters. It was also a bit difficult to hear it read aloud at some points - particularly the breakdown scene due to its heavier nature - but that came from a place of hurt in remembering it rather than a dislike of how it was

being portrayed. Though there were a couple of line slip-ups here and there, the actors I chose did a wonderful job, especially considering the limited time they had to familiarize themselves with the script. I am proud of what we were able to achieve.

Conclusions

In doing this project, I simultaneously learned that a.) writing a one-act play can be a lot more strenuous than one might think, and b.) work that comes from the soul is the easiest and most fulfilling kind. This year has been fraught with many moments of great stress, and this thesis was undeniably the cause of several of them. The script, of course, is far from perfect; but it is a reflection of who I am and I am glad for the catharsis and clarity that writing it was able to provide me. I hope that those of similar minds and experiences are able to gain some sense of visibility or comfort from it as well.