ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY

"KNOWING I'D BE OK":

POTENTIAL PEER MENTORING BENEFITS FOR ONLINE GRADUATE LEARNERS

BY

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The future of learning.

Approval of Thesis

The undersigned certify that they have read the thesis entitled

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my three support teams: the MPE group, my thesis small group and my family.

To the MPE group: your unconditional support and friendship over the past few years has heavily influenced the positive perspective I have on mutual mentorship and support. I am so glad to have shared my Master of Counselling (MC) journey with you all, and I am looking forward to seeing how we continue to support each other as we grow our professional careers.

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Acknowledgements

Abstract

Postsecondaries need learner mental health (MH) supports suited to the online learning environment. Research has demonstrated that peer mentoring is a viable online learner MH support. The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study was to uncover the graduate learner perspective of using an online peer mentoring program (PMP) as a learner MH support. Four graduate learner participants provided data through interviews and writing prompts. Data were analyzed as per IPA with a disability theory lens. Participants characterized peer mentoring as the act of supportively sharing experiential knowledge and as being relevant for student counsellors. Participants' perceptions showed that online education positively and negatively affected learner MH, and they believed that learner welfare is a shared responsibility between themselves and the institution. Emergent research demonstrates that all postsecondary learners will need post-COVID-19 MH supports. My study suggests that a PMP is one way postsecondaries can fill this learner need.

Keywords: interpretative phenomenological analysis, disability theory, graduate learners, disabled learners, mental health, peer mentoring, online postsecondary education, COVID-19, pandemic

Preface: Accessibility

Every effort has been made to make this document as accessible as possible at the time of writing. Alt text directs the listener to written descriptions of tables and figures. The document has been optimized for screen readers through the built-in Microsoft Word accessibility checker. The use of complex tables and figures has been avoided. Appendices in PDF format were checked for accessibility using Adobe Acrobat's built-in accessibility checker.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

List of Abbreviations

APA: American Psychological Association

AU: Athabasca University

CAT: clipped audio transcripts

CFS: Canadian Federation of Students

DT: disability theory

FHD: Faculty of Health Disciplines

GCAP: Graduate Centre for Applied Psychology

GOL: graduate online learners

IPA: interpretative phenomenological analysis

MC: Master of Counselling

MHS: Master of Health Studies

MS: Microsoft

NURS: Master of Nursing: Generalist

OPL: online postsecondary learners

PMP: peer mentoring program

REB: Research Ethics Board

UMUC: University of Maryland University College

VRSP: voice recognition software program

VTT: voice transcription technique

Chapter 1: Introduction

Mental health is a concern for Canadian postsecondary learners, and Canadian online postsecondary institutions are hard-pressed to find mental health strategies that are suited for the online learning environment. Finding and providing online mental health supports for postsecondary learners has become more vital since the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2021. The purpose of this study was to demonstrate that Canadian online postsecondary institutions could leverage a peer mentoring program (PMP) to enhance their mental health strategies, through asking this research question: What is the experienced graduate learner perspective on using a peer mentoring program as a mental health support at a Canadian online postsecondary institution?

Background

Approximately two million learners were enrolled in postsecondary education in Canada in 2016 (Statistics Canada, 2018), of which about one fifth (approximately 360,000) were enrolled in online education (Bates, 2018). In 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic temporarily increased this number to encompass virtually all Canadian postsecondary learners (Doreleyers et al., 2020). Prepandemic, mental health was a significant issue for many Canadian postsecondary learners and a number of Canadian on-campus postsecondaries responded by implementing mental health strategies (Linden et al., 2018). However, Canadian online postsecondaries were at a disadvantage given that research is lacking on mental health strategies tailored to the support needs of online postsecondary learners (OPL). The COVID-19 pandemic added this disadvantage for all Canadian postsecondaries when national and local health restrictions shut down in-person learning, and institutions pivoted to online education (Doreleyers et al., 2020). Emergent research indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly lowered

postsecondary learner mental health (Lee et al., 2021; Salimi et al., 2021; Tasso et al., 2021),

which has correspondingly increased the need for learner mental health supports at

postsecondaries in Canada and around the world.

Definition of Terms

This section defines the key terms used throughout the paper: *disabled learner*, *graduate*

learners, *mental health*, *online peer mentoring*, *online postsecondary education*, *postsecondary*

(*postsecondaries*), and *transactional distance*.

Disabled Learner

In this research, I have used the Canadian government's definition of a permanently

disabled learner. A permanent disability is defined as

> a functional limitation caused by a physical or mental impairment that restricts the ability
>
> of a person to perform the daily activities necessary to participate in studies at a
>
> postsecondary school level or the labour force; and is expected to remain with the person
>
> for the person's expected life. (Government of Canada, 2019, Eligibility section, para. 1)

The federal government's definition uses person-first language. Person-first language is

the use of a "noun referring to a person or persons . . . [that] precedes a phrase referring to a

disability" (Gernsbacher, 2017, p. 859). Using person-first language both implies that people are

separate from their disabled identity and devalues that identity (Dunn & Andrews, 2015). The

intent of using person-first language when writing about disabled persons is to avoid labelling or

referring to people as their impairment.

Identity-first language, on the other hand, turns the disability into a neutral adjective that

describes a person (Gernsbacher, 2017). This subtle, yet important, difference may be easier to

understand when I consider how I describe my gender. When I describe it, I say that I am a

female, not a person who is female. When I reflect on why I choose to say female, it is because it is obvious that I am a person. When I introduce myself as a person with a disability, it feels as though I am emphasizing that I am a person. This emphasis is, in my opinion, an internalization of the societal ableist construct that disability makes me less of a person. By using identity-first language, I am rebutting this internalization and thus I say, "I am disabled" in the same way that I say, "I am female." Because not all disabled persons prefer identity-first language over person-first language (Dunn & Andrews, 2015), I have chosen to use person- and identity-first language interchangeably. In the American Psychological Association's (APA; 2019) most recent guidelines, it noted that "authors who write about disabilities are encouraged to use terms and descriptions that both honor and explain person-first and identity-first perspectives" (p. 136).

Graduate Learners

In Canada, graduate learners are persons enrolled in a masters or a doctoral program which may be a specialist, stand-alone, or laddered program (the latter is a program in which the degrees are completed consecutively as a single program), and which may be course- or thesis-based (Canadian Association for Graduate Studies, 2012). In this research, emphasis was placed on the experience of being a graduate learner at the master's level as the participants were master's-level graduate learners.

Mental Health

The APA (2009) has defined mental health as "a state characterized by emotional well-being, good behavioural adjustment, and a capacity to establish constructive relationships and cope with the ordinary demands and stresses of life" (p. 293). Mental health is akin to wellness and/or well-being, defined as being "a state of happiness, contentment, low levels of distress, overall good physical and mental health and outlook, or good quality of life" (APA, 2009, p.

560). Although the terms *mental health*, *mental wellness*, and *well-being* are similar, they are not interchangeable; the key difference is that mental health is the ability to manage everyday life whereas wellness and well-being are tied to a positive emotional affect. Of note, this distinction means that it is possible to have good mental health while feeling emotionally unwell, and vice versa (Canadian Mental Health Association–Ontario, n.d.).

Online Peer Mentoring

The APA (2009) has defined mentoring as "the provision of instruction, encouragement and other support to an individual" (p. 294). For peer mentoring specifically, a wide variety of definitions exist in the literature (Crisp & Cruz, 2009). For the purpose of this thesis, I define peer mentoring as activities done by a fellow learner that have the express purpose of tutoring, sharing practical academic advice, and giving social support. I define fellow learners as any learner enrolled at the same postsecondary, regardless of program, and online as "involving or relating to the use of computer technology" ("Digital," n.d., para. 1.2). I therefore define *online peer mentoring* as peer mentoring done primarily through internet-based communication technology.

Online Postsecondary Education

In the literature referenced in this paper, equivalent synonyms for online postsecondary education were often used, including *online learning*, *distance education by computer*, *distributed learning*, and *e-learning*. I refer to online postsecondaries, which I define as any postsecondary that offers an internet-based distance course (including blended courses, where some of the class is taught on campus and some is delivered using distance digital technology).

Postsecondary (Postsecondaries)

In Canada, a postsecondary institution is a university, college or institute that grants a recognized degree, diploma, certificate, or other qualification (Government of Canada, 2017). These institutions may be on campus, online, or blended. For the sake of simplicity, I refer to postsecondary (or postsecondaries) to encompass all types of institutions. I elected to use the term *postsecondary* instead of *institution* to minimize potential confusion with other meanings of the word institution (e.g., incarceration or medical facilities).

Transactional Distance

In distance education, transactional distance is the measurable communication and engagement gap created by the learners use of technology to engage in their online learning community (both peers and instructors) and learning materials (Moore, 1993; Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2018). Transactional distance can be thought of as a continuum with three influential variables: *instructional dialogue*, which is the intentional creation of conversations that increase learner knowledge and includes the technology used for dialogues; *program structure*, which is the pragmatic method of instructional delivery (for example, watching a prerecorded video or attending a live video conference on a topic); and the *autonomy of the learner*, which is the presence of instructor- or learner-led learning (Moore, 1993).

Researcher Location

In qualitative research, a synopsis of the researcher's location provides context through disclosing why the researcher chose the topic, what influenced their analysis, and how they will benefit from the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I briefly address these topics here.

Graduate online learner (GOL) mental health and peer mentoring are personally relevant topics. I have been enrolled in the Athabasca University (AU) online Master of Counselling

(MC) program since the summer of 2017. Peer mentoring has been a significant experience throughout my MC journey; it played a key role during my first year, during which time I was mentored by a fellow disabled classmate. This classmate mentored me through the process of registering with AU as a learner with a disability. She also gently challenged my internalized academic ableism and encouraged me to consider my disability as a source of unique strength, rather than a weakness. I was inspired by my experience as a disabled GOL to explore online peer mentoring in the wider context of all graduate learners in my thesis research.

My personal experience of being a GOL with a physical disability influenced my analysis in three key manners. The first is how I interacted with the data while analyzing it. Typically, I use a voice recognition software program when working on my computer. While the program is robust and capable of both dictation and command functions, it is cumbersome to use with large documents; compatibility with software programs is also an issue. This meant that I did not interact with the data through a data management software program (e.g., NVivo); rather, I created custom analytic tools. Secondly, managing my disability requires me to balance my energy limitations with my workload. Traditionally in IPA, the researcher immerses themselves in extended readings of the data (Smith et al., 2009). However, in my case, I took short dips into the data by analyzing it in small amounts of time scattered throughout a day and/or work week. These short dips influenced my analysis as I usually worked with small portions of data as opposed to the entire data set; this enabled me to stay focused on discrete themes but made large-scale cross-comparison challenging. Last, as a disabled person I am keenly aware of systemic and internalized ableism. This awareness made me attuned to instances of ableism and related issues in my participants' lived experience. Having said this, I am mindful that my experiences

do not equate their experiences; I continue to lean into self-reflection to be aware of my own biases and assumptions.

I will benefit from this research in two ways. The first is a professional benefit. The study is my MC thesis; not only will I be able to graduate after this project is complete, but I hope that it (and any related dissemination) positively influences my future applications to a doctoral program. The second is a personal benefit. Through the process of completing my study, I developed my identity as a researcher with a disability. This has served to rebut the wider societal ableist assumption that disabled people cannot be academics. I was challenged by my experience of this assumption at several points during my MC journey, both from my postsecondary community and my internalization of the assumption. I am thankful for the support given to me by my fellow disabled learners, allies, AU learner support services and AU faculty to pursue a thesis. I am glad to be proof that one does not need to be an able learner with perfect grade point average to successfully complete a thesis that contributes to the body of research on GOL mental health and peer mentoring.

Impact of COVID-19 on My Study

Researchers around the world were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021. My thesis research was not an exception, and like nearly all researchers, I had to pivot in response to the pandemic. This resulted in a major alteration my project.

The original focus of my research study was on the GOL perspective of peer mentoring; this did not change. However, the original version of my study was a multi-perspectival action research project. I had planned to recruit graduate learners from the Faculty of Health Disciplines (FHD) at AU. I would have recruited experienced learners from the MC program to mentor first-year learners in the Master of Nursing program through a 4-week online peer mentoring group.

In the months prior to the pandemic, I created a peer mentoring group framework and obtained

ethics approval. I was actively planning the recruitment phase when COVID-19 reached my part

of Canada, and widespread public health restrictions were put in place by national and local

governments.

At first, I thought that my study would remain unaffected as it was designed to be entirely

online. However, as the serious repercussions of the pandemic became widespread, I realized

that me and my participants were in fact significantly affected by it. The pandemic created

additional personal demands on my time (such as unexpectedly homeschooling my junior high

child and managing multiple household quarantines); as such, my available time to devote to a

complicated action research project was drastically reduced. I became increasingly aware that the

pandemic would disproportionately affect my available pool of participants; this pool comprised

FHD learners, many of whom were mental health workers and frontline nursing staff. I also felt I

could not ask my participant pool to take on more responsibility during this time by committing

to my study. After much consultation with colleagues and co-supervisors, I made the decision to

alter my study. The alteration eliminated the Master of Nursing participant pool and significantly

reduced the time commitment for the MC participant pool. This decision and thesis project

alteration were summarized in my Research Ethics Board (REB) rationale for modifying the

project:

> The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the world, the way we navigate our lives and the
>
> tools we use to conduct psychological research. In an April 2020 webinar hosted by
>
> NVivo, noted researcher Dr. Janet Salmons depicted research plans prior to the pandemic
>
> as a peaceful river calmly flowing beside a green space; Dr. Salmons depicted research
>
> plans during the pandemic as a rocky riverbed at the bottom of a deep dark chasm. This

imagery of the same river before and after resonated with me, and prompted a significant

amount of thinking, discussion, and reflection on my current thesis research plan. I am

proposing that I revise my study to make it feasible within a pandemic setting. I will limit

my research to planning the peer mentoring intervention and have only potential peer

mentors as participants; their role in my research is expanded. I will not test the

intervention with mentees. (REB Revision Request, May 2020)

What I did not write about in my REB rationale was how emotionally challenging it was

for me to make this decision to substantially change my thesis project. When I first considered a

change, I placed the emphasis on the participants and their ability/inability to commit to a time

bound project within a pandemic. It took many in-depth conversations with trusted people and

much soul searching for me to realize that the impetuous for changing the project was actually

about me and my needs as much as it was about the participants. It was intimidating for me to

admit that I felt overwhelmed about the prospect of doing a thesis during a pandemic. I wrote

about these feelings in my reflective journal:

> I woke up this morning thinking about my project. . . . I do think that my own fears about
>
> handling a disability, homeschooling, pandemic, my upcoming [medical] checkups/tests,
>
> [an MC course] and my thesis study in a defined time span are legitimate. I think I might
>
> actually be telling myself that I need to place an extra boundary around my commitments.
>
> In my personal life for example, I have bailed [on two projects], which is unusual for
>
> me . . . because I found myself super stressed out by the thought of having to do
>
> something in a timeframe. This sounds very much like what I've been talking about in
>
> terms of my participants committing to a four-week plus project. . . . [I've] already put
>
> the project off for a month due to the pandemic, which means my entire project timeline

got bumped forward and even if I were to run the program I would then be having to be

writing [the thesis] while I'm getting ready for and starting my practicum. . . . So, I think

in the end it is a double-edged sword, in that I am concerned about my ability to commit

such a time bound project and am concerned about my participant's ability to commit to a

time bound project. Without the pandemic (e.g., the stress of the pandemic itself, the

extra workload I've picked up at home to protect my family's health, and homeschooling)

I think I could have stretched myself to do the study – and stretched myself quite happily.

However, the pandemic has taken all of that extra energy and ability to stretch. (MC

Thesis Reflective Journal, April 27, 2020).

I am grateful for the support of my co-supervisors, thesis committee and AU faculty who

supported the change to my thesis project. I revised my ethics application and received REB

approval to move forward with the altered project.

At the time of writing, Canada is in what is hoped to be the last stages of the COVID-19

pandemic. Postsecondary learners are publicly sharing stories of not only how the pandemic

affected the past 16 months of their education, but how it will affect the rest of it. Research is

beginning to emerge on how the pandemic affected the mental health of on-campus learners and

OPL, and theories about how postsecondaries can support learner mental health considering the

effects of the pandemic are beginning to be formed. Reviewing this emergent literature, and my

participants' lived experience, has caused me to realize that a PMP has the potential to be a post-

pandemic mental health support for learners at all types of postsecondaries.

Summary

My experience as a disabled GOL inspired my research on the feasibility of a PMP as a

mental health support for GOL. The COVID-19 pandemic has expanded my view of the

potential of a PMP to not only support GOL, but to support the mental health of all learners in a

post-pandemic world.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

In this chapter, I review the existing body of literature on PMPs and graduate learner mental health. An overview of literature on peer mentoring for all levels of OPL showed the efficacy of online PMPs. A summary of research on graduate learner mental health indicated that online and on-campus learners struggle to maintain good mental health. Pressures specific to online and minoritized learners—in other words, learners who with a cultural identity that is diminished by society (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017)—revealed that these learners face additional barriers to good mental health. A survey of the literature demonstrated that Canadian postsecondaries can respond to the mental health needs of their learners in part by establishing a PMP (Linden et al., 2018).

Overview of Peer Mentoring Programs

Research has shown that peer mentoring can be successfully implemented in an online environment (Ainsa & Olivarez, 2017a, 2017b; Baranik et al., 2017; Beckton et al., 2016; Fayram et al., 2018; Rashid & Sarkar, 2018; Sansone et al., 2018; Smailes & Gannon-Leary, 2011; Urrutia et al., 2016). PMPs have been found to benefit the mentee and the mentor, have particular gains for minoritized learners and provide a return on investment for postsecondaries.

PMPs benefit the mentee though increased well-being and academic success. Examples of increased mentee well-being include enhanced confidence (Ainsa & Olivarez, 2017b; Fayram et al., 2018), belonging (Chester et al., 2013), and normalization of the need to access learner support services (Kees et al., 2017). Instances of improved academic success for mentees include higher engagement in the online classroom (Baranik et al., 2017), published papers (Mayer et al., 2014), and graduation rates (Yomtov et al., 2017).

PMPs likewise benefit the mentor though increased emotional well-being and academic success. Mentors also benefit from skill development and personal and/or professional growth. Well-being in mentors increased through gaining feelings of altruism, belonging, self-efficacy, self-awareness, and motivation (Ainsa & Olivarez, 2017b; Baranik et al., 2017; Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Fayram et al., 2018; Goodrich et al., 2018; Gunn et al., 2017; Holt & Lopez, 2014; Sansone et al., 2018). Mentors experienced academic success through increasing the depth of their knowledge, strengthening their education, increased time management abilities, enhanced online classroom navigation capabilities and general skill development (Ainsa & Olivarez, 2017a; Brown & Sheerin, 2018; Chester et al., 2013; Geng et al., 2017; Goodrich et al., 2018; Gunn et al., 2017; Holt & Lopez, 2014; Lim et al., 2017; Sansone et al., 2014; Urrutia et al., 2016). Participating in a PMP provides areas of personal and professional growth for the mentors that may aid their transition to employment (Christie, 2014; Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Geng et al., 2017; Gunn et al., 2017; Holt & Lopez, 2014; Lim et al., 2017; Urrutia et al., 2016).

Additionally, PMPs have specific benefits for minoritized learners (Ainsa & Olivarez, 2017a, 2017b; Daughtry et al., 2009; Markle et al., 2017; Ross-Sheriff et al., 2017; Russell & Horne, 2009; Williams-Nickelson, 2009). These learners have an increased risk of a decline in mental health, which may be mitigated by successful participation a PMP (Ainsa & Olivarez, 2017a, 2017b; Daughtry et al., 2009; Markle et al., 2017; Ross-Sheriff et al., 2017; Russell & Horne, 2009; Williams-Nickelson, 2009). A subsection of learners from minoritized backgrounds, namely disabled learners, benefit from increased awareness of resources and positive examples of receiving accommodations (Daughtry et al., 2009; Markle et al., 2017).

Although creating a PMP requires investment of resources by the online postsecondary, the institution's return on investment (in addition to benefits to the institution's learners) includes

enhanced mental health strategy outreach and increased learner retention (Ainsa & Olivarez,
2017b; Baranik et al., 2017; Boyle et al., 2010; Chester et al., 2013; Horgan et al., 2013; Kees et
al., 2017; Mayer et al., 2014; Smailes & Gannon-Leary, 2011; Yomtov et al., 2017).

Mental Health of Graduate Learners

Understanding the current state of graduate learner mental health is the foundation of
exploring how a PMP could be an effective learner support. In this section I explore graduate
learners' mental health and main sources of challenges to it. Graduate learner mental health is an
issue that directly affects more than a quarter million Canadian graduate learners (Statistics
Canada, 2020). Graduate learners encounter challenges to their mental health as they "are neither
fully students nor fully professional, but rather betwixt and between" (Grady et al., 2014, p. 6).
In addition to this academic–professional source of mental health concerns, these learners are
typically at a "betwixt and between" developmental stage of life and thus also face
developmentally related challenges to their mental health (Grady et al., 2014). Disabled graduate
learners face additional challenges to their mental health due to experiences of ableism,
intimidation, and undermining (Canadian Federation of Students [CFS]–Ontario, 2018).

The State of Graduate Learners' Mental Health

Research on the state of graduate learners' mental health reveals staggering percentages
of graduate learners who experienced depression, anxiety, and stress:

- 70% have a level of stress that significantly affected their academic performance (El-
  Ghoroury et al., 2012);

- 50% often felt overwhelmed (Hyun et al., 2006);

- 50% reported clinically significant anxiety symptoms (Rummell, 2015);

- 40% reported clinically significant depressive symptoms (Rummell, 2015);

- 47% of doctoral students and 37% of master's students qualified for a diagnosis of being depressed (The Graduate Assembly, 2014);

- 66% experienced more stress than normal (Pfeifer et al., 2008);

- 77% were exhausted (Wyatt & Oswalt, 2013); and

- overall, graduate students were six times more prone to encounter episodes of depression and anxiety than the average person (Evans et al., 2018).

Taken together, these statistics paint a vivid illustration of the bleak state of graduate learner mental health. These results are found in studies of all sizes and types, from smaller studies such as Pfeifer et al.'s (2008) mixed-methods study with 29 participants to Evans et al.'s (2018) large-scale quantitative study with more than 2,200 participants from 234 postsecondary institutions in 26 countries.

Academic Challenges to Mental Health

Graduate learners encounter many mental health stressors related to their academic requirements. In Cesar et al.'s (2018) integrative literature review on this topic, they found that graduate learners are significantly negatively affected by academic challenges including "difficulty managing academic workload, meeting deadlines for graduate activities, prioritizing [academic] commitments, and coping with overload related to academic activities" (p. 92). Of note, Cesar et al. also found that about 68 percent of learners reported that the "pressure of academic responsibilities" (2018, p. 92) was a substantial detriment to their mental health. This sense of pressure for graduate learners is mirrored in a report on the mental health of graduate learners by the CFS–Ontario (2018), which found that 70% of 2,001 participants had either been pressured to overwork or saw a fellow learner be pressured. This pressure to overwork can impair mental health, as evidenced in Evans et al.'s (2018) large-scale, international study that

found that graduate students' poor academic–life balance resulted in negative mental health consequences.

Developmental Challenges to Mental Health

Graduate learners are typically in their early to mid-30s. For example, the average age for a graduate student is 30 at the Vancouver campus of the University of British Columbia (n.d.), and at AU, the average graduate student age is 35 (AU, 2019a). Adults in this age bracket are squarely in the middle of early adulthood, a development life stage wherein individuals typically form long-term romantic partnerships, enter parenthood, and establish careers (Sugarman, 2001). Harmonizing these developmental tasks can be personally challenging for these adults (Sugarman, 2001). In their integrative literature review of the body of research about graduate learner stress, Cesar et al. (2018) found that "the challenge for graduate students lies in reconciling the stress experienced at this time of life" (p. 86), stress caused by the demands placed on them at home and at school.

Online Learning Environment Challenges to Mental Health

There is an absence of research on the effects of the online learning environment on graduate learners' mental health. Studies that I found on related topics have indicated that GOL find the online learning environment to be stressful (Martinak, 2012) and that as many as one third of GOL would like to increase their emotional wellness (Scheer & Lockee, 2003). On the other hand, in a comparison of stress levels between graduate learners taking a course online and those taking one on campus, Ramos (2011) found no discernible difference. All three of these studies found that GOL encountered mental health challenges related to maintaining a positive school–work–life balance (Martinak, 2012; Ramos, 2011; Scheer & Lockee, 2003).

Challenges to Mental Health for Disabled Learners

Graduate learners with a disability have specific influences on their mental health, as they experience "greater instances of bullying, harassment and discrimination than those who do not identify as having a disability" (CFS–Ontario, 2018, p. 14). The following statistics on Canadian disabled graduate learners highlight the unique additional stressors they face:

- 52% had been the target of, or had seen an incident of, intimidation, whereas abled learners had a corresponding number of 43%;

- 57% had been the target of, or had seen an incident of, ableism, whereas the rate for all learners was 30%;

- 68% had been the target of, or had seen an incident of, undermining, whereas the rate for all learners was 37%. (CFS–Ontario, 2018, p. 14)

Given these findings, it is clear that graduate learners with a disability have challenges to maintaining good mental health that their able peers do not have, highlighting the need for disabled graduate learners to have specific supports in place. One of those supports could be positive peer mentorship from successful graduate disabled learners through participation in a PMP that focuses on issues of disability.

Viability of Online Peer Mentoring

Recent research has shown that online peer mentoring in academia is a viable means of promoting learner wellness (Ainsa & Olivarez, 2017a, 2017b; Baranik et al., 2017; Beckton et al., 2016; Fayram et al., 2018; Rashid & Sarkar, 2018; Sansone et al., 2018; Urrutia et al., 2016). As well, online peer mentoring has been successfully used to support the emotional wellness of minoritized preservice teachers (Ainsa & Olivarez, 2017a, 2017b), create a sense of community amongst OPL (Baranik et al., 2017), increase class participation in an online class (Beckton et

al., 2016; Sansone et al., 2018), increase learner academic success (Rashid & Sarkar, 2018),

improve morale amongst postsecondary learners (Fayram et al., 2018), and increase self-efficacy

in pedagogical skills (Urrutia et al., 2016). Online postsecondaries in Canada could leverage this

existing international research in online mentoring to create successful PMPs that are tailored to

their learners and capitalize on these programs as a practical avenue to support and enhance

learner wellness.

Benefits for the Mentee

Learners participating in a PMP as mentees at on-campus or online postsecondaries may

experience positive participation effects such as increased well-being (Ainsa & Olivarez, 2017b;

Chester et al., 2013; Fayram et al., 2018; Kees et al., 2017) and enhanced academic success

(Baranik et al., 2017; Mayer et al., 2014; Pullmann et al., 2014; Yomtov et al., 2017). Other

mentee benefits of participation in a PMP include increased academic satisfaction (Ainsa &

Olivarez, 2017b; Bailey & Phillips, 2016; Mayer et al., 2014; Yomtov et al., 2017),

normalization of learner access to mental health supports (Horgan et al., 2013; Kees et al., 2017),

and increased social connection to fellow learners (Baranik et al., 2017; Boyle et al., 2010;

Horgan et al., 2013). Canadian online and on-campus postsecondaries could offer their learners

the opportunity to experience the positive mental health and academic benefits of mentee

participation in a PMP.

One benefit of participation in a PMP, normalization of learner access to mental health

supports, may increase the likelihood that mentees access mental health resources when needed

(Horgan et al., 2013; Kees et al., 2017). Studies have shown that mentees responded

affirmatively when a peer mentor offered practical mental health supports and advice, such as

personal recommendations of when or how to access counselling (Freeman et al., 2008; Horgan

et al., 2013; Kees et al., 2017). Academic satisfaction, access to mental health supports, and connection may interlink to positively affect the well-being of postsecondary learners (Bailey & Phillips, 2016; Baranik et al., 2017; Laux et al., 2016; Raley, 2016).

Due to the inherent isolation in online education, OPL are at risk of a decline in mental health (Barr, 2014; Gillett-Swan, 2017; Raley, 2016). Online peer mentoring can encourage the development of a sense of connection through the establishment of a social network that creates a sense of belonging and connectedness (Baranik et al., 2017; Boyle et al., 2010; Horgan et al., 2013). This creation of a social network may reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation that are common in OPL (Chester et al., 2013; Kees et al., 2017). Therefore, OPL who participate in PMPs as mentees may therefore see an increase in their overall well-being (Ainsa & Olivarez, 2017b; Chester et al., 2013; Kees et al., 2017).

As well, OPL who participate in mentoring programs as mentees may see an increase in their academic success (Baranik et al., 2017; Khan & Gogos, 2013; Mayer et al., 2014; Pullmann et al., 2014; Yomtov et al., 2017). Some of the indicators for academic success that have been linked to participation as a mentee in a mentoring program at online postsecondaries include higher rates of successful course and/or program completion (Khan & Gogos, 2013; Rashid & Sarkar, 2018), enhanced engagement with learning materials (Ainsa & Olivarez, 2017a; Baranik et al., 2017; Boyle et al., 2010), and higher grades (Baranik et al., 2017; Rashid & Sarkar, 2018). Research has likewise linked academic satisfaction to positive well-being (Bailey & Phillips, 2016; Lipson & Eisenberg, 2018; York et al., 2015).

Benefits for the Mentor

Postsecondary learners at both on-campus and online institutions participating in a PMP as a mentor may benefit from increased emotional well-being, enhanced academic success, and

professional learning opportunities and skill development (Ainsa & Olivarez, 2017a; Ainsa & Olivarez, 2017b; Brown & Sheerin, 2018; Baranik et al., 2017; Chester et al., 2013; Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Fayram et al., 2018; Geng et al., 2017; Goodrich et al., 201; Gunn et al., 2017; Holt & Lopez, 2014; Lim et al., 2017; Sansone et al., 2018; Urrutia et al., 2016). Canadian online postsecondaries with PMPs could offer their learners the opportunity to experience these positive effects of mentor participation, as well as the additional benefit of opportunities to enhance their online communication skills (Sansone et al., 2018; Urrutia et al., 2016).

Research has indicated numerous positive effects on the mentor's emotional well-being while participating in a PMP in postsecondary institutions, both on campus (Goodrich et al., 2018; Gunn et al., 2017; Holt & Lopez, 2014) and online (Ainsa & Olivarez, 2017b; Baranik et al., 2017; Fayram et al., 2018; Sansone et al., 2018). These benefits to the peer mentor include increased satisfaction (Ainsa & Olivarez, 2017b; Goodrich et al., 2018; Holt & Lopez, 2014; Sansone et al., 2018), heightened self-efficacy (Ainsa & Olivarez, 2017b; Goodrich et al., 2018; Holt & Lopez, 2014; Sansone et al., 2018), and a strengthened sense of belonging to a community (Baranik et al., 2017; Gunn et al., 2017; Holt & Lopez, 2014). Peer mentors in an online postsecondary may be as vulnerable as their mentees to the negative influences on their well-being inherent in online education, such as loneliness and isolation (Barr, 2014; Chester et al., 2013; Gillett-Swan, 2017; Kees et al., 2017; Raley, 2016). By participating as peer mentors in their online postsecondaries' PMP, the learners may be able to bolster the positive influences on, and thus safeguard, their well-being.

Enhanced academic success has been shown to be another benefit for postsecondary learners who participate as mentors in PMPs at both on-campus and online institutions (Ainsa & Olivarez, 2017a; Goodrich et al., 2018; Gunn et al., 2017; Holt & Lopez, 2014; Sansone et al.,

2018; Urrutia et al., 2016). This outcome was particularly true for peer mentors at online postsecondaries (Baranik et al., 2017). Researchers linked academic success to peer mentoring at online postsecondaries and found that the "mentoring relationships help to fulfill students' basic needs in online classes and that this need fulfillment allows students to thrive in online contexts" (Baranik et al., 2017, p. 68). Other studies have shown a more direct link between academic success and participation in an online postsecondary PMP as a mentor (Sansone et al., 2018; Urrutia et al., 2016). In a recent study, learners who enrolled in an online course and took their turn as the class's mentor demonstrated significantly increased participation in learning activities compared to those same learners' participation rate when they were not taking a turn as class mentor (Sansone et al., 2018). Similarly, when doctoral learners were mentors in an online course, their academic knowledge base was reinforced by answering the mentees' questions (Urrutia et al, 2016).

Participation in a PMP as a mentor also provides opportunities for professional development, such as fostering interpersonal skills, advancing pedagogical abilities, and cultivating communication skills (Abdolalizadeh et al., 2017; Brown & Sheerin, 2018; Chester et al., 2013; Geng et al., 2017; Goodrich et al., 2018; Gunn et al., 2017; Lim et al., 2017; Matney, 2018; Sansone et al., 2018; Urrutia et al., 2016). These opportunities for professional development have been demonstrated in recent research studies at on-campus postsecondaries around the world, including Australia (Chester et al., 2013; Geng et al., 2017), Canada (Gunn et al., 2017), Iran (Abdolalizadeh et al., 2017), Southeast Asia (Matney, 2018), and the United States (Brown & Sheerin, 2018; Holt & Lopez, 2014; Lim et al., 2017). Recent research has shown that opportunities for professional development as a mentor also exist in online postsecondaries (Sansone et al., 2018; Urrutia et al., 2016). Furthermore, research has shown that

this professional development is applicable across a wide variety of academic disciplines such as engineering (Lim et al., 2017), teaching (Geng et al., 2017; Holt & Lopez, 2014), medicine (Abdolalizadeh et al., 2017), and commerce (Gunn et al., 2017). Urrutia et al.'s research found that "participants tended to perceive gaining confidence in their professional skills as a result of participating in MOOCs [massive open online courses] as mentors" (2016, p. 5) across three academic subjects (oceanography, archaeology, and web science) at the same online postsecondary.

In addition to the benefits at on-campus postsecondaries for learners who function as peer mentors (namely, enhanced well-being, academic success, and professional development), OPL who function as peer mentors may receive unique opportunities afforded to them as mentors in an online environment (Urrutia et al., 2016). These opportunities include increased self-assurance in the use of technology, improved online instructional competencies, and increased ability to effectively communicate using technology. In a similar study on online mentoring in the workforce, the mentor's resourcefulness and confidence in the use of technology increased as a result of PMP participation (Panopoulos & Sarri, 2013). These unique skills may well benefit OPL mentors as they transition from learner to professional in an increasingly online world.

Opportunities for Mentor Growth

Learners participating in a PMP as a mentor at online and on-campus postsecondaries may be faced with multiple opportunities for growth through overcoming challenges (Christie, 2014; Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Geng et al., 2017; Gunn et al., 2017; Holt & Lopez, 2014; Lim et al., 2017; Urrutia et al., 2016). The most common challenges mentors may confront include motivating their mentees (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Gunn et al., 2017; Holt & Lopez, 2014; Lim et al., 2017), developing their own sense of self-efficacy in mentorship (Gunn et al., 2017; Lim et

al., 2017; Urrutia et al., 2016), balancing their mentor duties with other responsibilities (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Geng et al., 2017; Urrutia et al., 2016), and maintaining their own well-being (Christie, 2014; Gunn et al., 2017; Holt & Lopez, 2014; Lim et al., 2017). In addition to these challenges, online peer mentors face challenges related to technology (Bach et al., 2018; Ozkara & Cakir, 2018; Parkes et al., 2013; Smailes & Gannon-Leary, 2011; Smith-Jentsch et al., 2008; Urrutia et al., 2016; Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2018). Canadian online postsecondaries can offer their learners the opportunity to experience personal, academic, and professional growth by participating as mentors in a PMP.

A common challenge experienced by learners participating in a PMP as a mentor is motivating their mentees (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Gunn et al., 2017; Holt & Lopez, 2014; Lim et al., 2017). These mentee motivational challenges may lead to feelings of discouragement in the peer mentors when their mentees do not appear to work on suggested avenues of improvement (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Holt & Lopez, 2014) or engage in the PMP (Gunn et al., 2017; Holt & Lopez, 2014). Research has indicated that this challenge may be the largest growing edge for peer mentors, with studies reporting that some peer mentors have been significantly challenged to motivate mentees (Gunn et al., 2017; Holt & Lopez, 2014; Lim et al., 2017).

Postsecondary learners mentoring in a PMP may also face challenges in developing their own sense of self-efficacy in mentorship (Gunn et al., 2017; Lim et al., 2017; Urrutia et al., 2016). This may create feelings of insecurity about leadership skills (Gunn et al., 2017), interpersonal skills (Lim et al., 2017), and personal capacity to handle the task of being a peer mentor (Urrutia et al., 2016). Research suggests that this challenge to a mentor's self-efficacy in

mentorship may affect about one third of peer mentors (Gunn et al., 2017; Holt & Lopez, 2014; Larose, 2013).

A third challenge for postsecondary learners participating in a PMP as a mentor is in balancing mentor duties with other responsibilities (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Geng et al., 2017; Urrutia et al., 2016). Attempting to balance mentorship with other responsibilities may increase the mentor's anxiety and stress (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Geng et al., 2017). This challenge may be experienced by about one quarter (Holt & Lopez, 2014) to one half of mentors (Colvin & Ashman, 2010).

Research indicates that about one third of mentors may struggle to maintain their well-being (Gunn et al., 2017; Holt & Lopez, 2014), which is a fourth challenge postsecondary learners participating in a PMP as a mentor may face (Christie, 2014; Gunn et al., 2017; Holt & Lopez, 2014; Lim et al., 2017). Mentors may face impediments to their well-being in several ways, including mentees overstepping their emotional boundaries (Christie, 2014), depleting one's own personal emotional energy by giving psychological support to mentees (Gunn et al., 2017), changes to social relationships within peer groups (Holt & Lopez, 2014), and feelings of anxiousness about being able to succeed as a mentor (Lim et al., 2017).

Challenges specific to OPL relate to technology. The peer mentor participating in a PMP at an online postsecondary may face technological challenges that impede efficacy, such as glitches inherent within the technology being used (Ozkara & Cakir, 2018), difficulty in learning new technology (Parkes et al., 2013), and inequitable access to technology and to the internet (Bach et al., 2018). A related concern is the negative influence of transactional distance (Moore, 1993) on the quality of online mentoring relationships (Smailes & Gannon-Leary, 2011; Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2018); the communication gap caused by transactional distance makes it

more difficult for online mentors than their on-campus counterparts to connect with their

mentees. Online peer mentors may face additional personal challenges that are specific to

mentoring in a digital environment, such as maintaining control over their online presence

(Urrutia et al., 2016) and keeping electronic records of their conversations with their mentees

(Smith-Jentsch et al., 2008).

Challenges can be framed as barriers or opportunities for growth. For learners

participating as mentors in a PMP, challenges can function as growing edges of personal,

academic, and professional development; online learner mentors have additional areas of

technological development and the reduction of transactional distance. These growing edges that

mentors experience can provide opportunities for skill development that may transfer into the

mentor's professional career (Geng et al., 2017; Goodrich et al., 2018; Gunn et al., 2017; Lim et

al., 2017; Urrutia et al., 2016). Motivating colleagues, exhibiting self-confidence, achieving

work–life balance, maintaining well-being, and keeping technological skills current are part of

the soft skills that graduates need when entering the workforce after academia (Albandea &

Giret, 2018; Cukier et al., 2015; Sharma, 2018). Developing soft skills as mentors in an online

PMP may give the postsecondary learner the skills necessary to successfully navigate from being

a learner to becoming a working professional in a progressively online world.

Mentoring Programs and OPL from Minoritized Backgrounds

Although all postsecondary learners are at risk of feeling disengaged and isolated (Gillett-

Swan, 2017; Ozkara & Cakir, 2018), learners from minoritized backgrounds at online

postsecondaries are at greater risk of isolation than their counterparts at on-campus institutions

(Athens, 2018; Stoessel et al., 2015; Yeboah & Smith, 2016). Positive peer mentorship that

addresses the perspective of minoritized OPL may reduce their mental health risk factors

associated with disengagement and isolation (Ainsa & Olivarez, 2017a, 2017b; Daughtry et al., 2009; Markle et al., 2017; Ross-Sheriff et al., 2017; Russell & Horne, 2009; Williams-Nickelson, 2009).

In on-campus postsecondaries, instructors support their learners' mental health, including the mental health of learners from minoritized backgrounds, by recognizing signs of mental health strain (such as changes in physical appearance and academic work) and then referring learners with these indicators to on-campus mental health supports (Barr, 2014). In online postsecondaries, however, instructors are not physically present with their learners and thus may miss signs of mental health decline (Barr, 2014). Although online instructors can be taught to recognize signs of mental health strain in their learners (such as changes in the tone and pattern discussion forum posts (Barr, 2014; Russo-Gleicher, 2013)), transactional distance can impair the instructors' ability to notice nuances of tone (Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2018).

Online instructors can leverage technology to close the transactional gap (Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2018); however, they may not be able to refer their learners to a mental health service as many online postsecondaries' learner mental services are at a nascent stage (Barr, 2014) and online faculty may not be aware of the existence of learner mental health services at their institution (Russo-Gleicher, 2013). Peer mentors can assist by providing a link between the formal and informal mental health resources offered at online postsecondaries (Baranik et al., 2017; Chester et al., 2013; Kees et al., 2017; Mayer et al., 2014; Smailes & Gannon-Leary, 2011; Yomtov et al., 2017).

Finally, OPL from minoritized backgrounds face barriers to joining the community and obtaining instructor support, ranging from the overt, such as discrimination, to the covert, such as negative stereotypes enshrined in the curriculum (Daughtry et al., 2009; Markle et al., 2017;

Ross-Sheriff et al., 2017; Russell & Horne, 2009; Williams-Nickelson, 2009; Yeboah & Smith, 2016). Peer mentors who have overcome such barriers may debunk discriminatory practices and negative stereotypes (Daughtry et al., 2009; Markle et al., 2017; Ross-Sheriff et al., 2017; Russell & Horne, 2009; Williams-Nickelson, 2009). Daughtry et al. (2009) articulated how this occurs for a subset of minoritized learners (those with a disability), but their comments may also apply to any minoritized learner group:

> While we firmly believe that effective mentoring can be offered by individuals without disabilities, working with a mentor with a disability can afford some unique advantages to people with disabilities in achieving . . . identity integration. Opportunities to build relationships with professionals with disabilities may help the mentee challenge internalized negative stereotypes of disability. This has the potential to create a positive sense of self and can lead to embarking upon a successful career. A person with a disability can be positively impacted by observing individuals with disabilities achieving educational and vocational goals. A mentor relationship provides a venue for sharing coping techniques, information, and resources that may enhance the mentee's success. (p. 203)

Mentoring Programs and OPL with a Disability

As an applied example, OPL with a disability often require accommodations at their institutions (Daughtry et al., 2009; Markle et al., 2017). Although the provision of these accommodations is mandated by Canadian law (Government of Canada, 2018), they can be difficult to access or articulate (Daughtry et al., 2009; Markle et al., 2017). Furthermore, "accommodation is not limited to modifications in program materials or logistical considerations. Accommodation is an attitude of inclusion" (Daughtry et al., 2009, p. 203). This "attitude of

inclusion" is lacking in mainstream Canadian culture. Disabled peer mentors can help to bridge the gap between mandated accommodations and true inclusiveness at their online postsecondaries for their peers with a disability by providing informal support, facilitating access to a variety of resources, and normalizing the need for accommodations (Daughtry et al., 2009; Markle et al., 2017).

Return on Investment for the Postsecondary

Online postsecondaries may directly benefit from PMPs; these benefits include enhanced mental health strategy outreach from mentors to mentees (Baranik et al., 2017; Chester et al., 2013; Kees et al., 2017; Mayer et al., 2014; Smailes & Gannon-Leary, 2011; Yomtov et al., 2017) and increased learner retention through practical knowledge transfer between mentor and mentee (Ainsa & Olivarez, 2017b; Boyle et al., 2010; Horgan et al., 2013). Canadian online postsecondaries that invest in a PMP may benefit, in return, from enhanced mental health strategies and reduced learner attrition.

In online postsecondaries, isolation and disengagement may create or amplify learner mental health issues such as anxiety and depression (Barr, 2014; Gillett-Swan, 2017; Raley, 2016). In postsecondaries, learners' mental health struggles may be linked to academic failure and attrition (Bailey & Phillips, 2016; Boston et al., 2011; Lipson & Eisenberg, 2018; Stoessel et al., 2015; Yomtov et al., 2017; York et al., 2015). Unfortunately, learners and faculty alike at online postsecondaries may not be aware that learner mental health support services are available (Raphael, 2006; Russo-Gleicher, 2013). Peer mentors can help bridge this knowledge gap by sharing their knowledge about mental health resources with their mentees (Baranik et al., 2017; Chester et al., 2013; Kees et al., 2017; Mayer et al., 2014; Smailes & Gannon-Leary, 2011;

Yomtov et al., 2017). Thus, Canadian online postsecondaries may be able to enhance the outreach component of their mental health strategy by investing in a PMP.

Learner disengagement is one of the leading causes of attrition at online postsecondaries (Boston et al., 2011; Boyle et al., 2010; Laux et al., 2016; Ozkara & Cakir, 2018). Disengagement within the online learning community has been an issue for learners—and institutions—since the advent of online distance education (Bolliger & Inan, 2012; Moore, 1993; Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2018). Learner disengagement has many causes, among which are learners lacking technological skills (Parkes et al., 2013; Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2018), the pedagogy of the digital course (Ozkara & Cakir, 2018; Robinson et al., 2017), and other responsibilities that require time and effort on the part of the learner (Ozkara & Cakir, 2018; Stoessel et al., 2015). Peer mentors can fill these gaps by sharing technological skills (Ainsa & Olivarez, 2017b; Boyle et al., 2010), offering advice on meeting academic requirements (Horgan et al., 2013), and providing practical tips on balancing school and life commitments (Boyle et al., 2010). Thus, Canadian online postsecondaries may increase learner retention by engaging their learners through online PMPs.

To operate an online PMP, postsecondaries may need to commit financial, technological, and staffing resources over a significant period (Khan & Gogos, 2013; Panopoulos & Sarri, 2013; Rashid & Sarkar, 2018). As an example, the University of Maryland University College (UMUC) created an online platform for its mentoring program, in which graduate learners were mentored by industry experts (Khan & Gogos, 2013). The university spent a year creating the online program and the procedural documents related to it. In terms of staffing, it cost UMUC the equivalent of one half-time position for the first year (Khan & Gogos, 2013). Ongoing financial commitments include the costs of mentor assistants and computer server fees related to

the online mentoring platform. The university has continued to successfully offer online

mentoring in a variety of academic streams (UMUC, 2018). Other research has shown that online

postsecondaries that spend resources to invest in a PMP may see "apparent retention gains of up

to 20% with a return on [financial] investment in the order of magnitude of several hundred

percent" (Boyle et al., 2010, p. 115).

Summary

There is scant research regarding learner mental supports at postsecondaries, even though

"strategies for increasing student retention by improving mental health and wellness are among

the most pressing needs facing universities" (Linden et al., 2018, p. 33). Online postsecondaries

are particularly pressed with finding ways to provide mental health supports to their learners due

to the inherent nature of online education. A PMP that utilizes current online communication

technology may provide a way for Canadian online postsecondaries to enhance their mental

health strategies. Research from a Canadian perspective that demonstrates the feasibility of

online PMP to enhance mental health of GOL is warranted.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

I used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to conduct this research and interpreted the research through the lens of disability theory (DT). In this chapter I explain my decision to use IPA and DT. This is done by situating IPA in relation to other qualitative research methodologies, examining its underlying philosophical assumptions, presenting the IPA approach to research, critically reflecting on issues in using IPA, assessing the role of reflexivity in IPA, and considering how rigour is built into IPA. I also describe the basic tenets of DT. I close this chapter with an examination of IPA's fit with DT.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

IPA is a qualitative research methodology. Researchers using IPA focus on the lived experience of their participants through examining participants' meaning making, interpretation and individuality (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is a suitable method for novice researchers and small sample groups (Smith et al., 2009), making it a good match with master's level research projects.

A Method Among Other Qualitative Methodologies

I chose IPA from among five major qualitative research methodologies: narrative, phenomenological, grounded theory, ethnographic, and case study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To describe the differences between them, I use the metaphor of studying counselling psychology. A narrative researcher would focus on creating a description of the individual experience. A phenomenological researcher would focus on relating the experience of what it is like to study counselling psychology. A grounded theory researcher would focus on deriving a theory about the process of studying counselling psychology. An ethnographic researcher would study a group of learners and aggregate their experience into an anthropological model. Finally, a case study

researcher would conduct an in-depth study of the journey of one (or more) students of counselling psychology.

My research focused on the experiences of graduation online learners (GOL) in a Master of Counselling (MC) program, including their perception of mental health as it related to their MC experience, and their perspectives on peer mentoring. Focusing on the experience of a group of persons is a good fit with phenomenological, grounded theory, and ethnographic research. The first research method I considered for my investigation was grounded theory, which would lend itself to the creation of a theoretically based peer mentoring program (PMP). However, I did not want to create a theory about how to provide peer mentoring. Rather, I wanted to create a model of mentoring based on why peer mentoring matters to GOL. Therefore, I discarded grounded theory as an option for my research.

I next considered ethnographic research, which would harmonize with my goal of studying a defined group (i.e., GOL). However, as I reflected on ethnography from my perspective as a disabled GOL, I realized that the focus of creating a pattern of behaviour for a group felt wrong to me. Upon further reflection, I realized that the feeling of wrongness came from my experiences as a disabled learner of being lumped into a group and expected to fit into a predetermined pattern. Therefore, I rejected ethnography as a fit with my research focus.

Finally, I considered using (and ultimately selected) phenomenological research, which fit with my focus on studying the experience of GOL. Traditionally, phenomenological research has two branches: (a) descriptive phenomenology, the uncovering and describing of the makeup of psychological experiences; and (b) hermeneutic phenomenology, the interpreting of the experience of psychological experiences (Aagaard, 2017). A newer third branch, termed postphenomenology, studies how technology influences our experiences as humans of the world

around us (Aagaard, 2017). To me, the focus of hermeneutic phenomenology on the

interpretation of experience honoured the individual experiences of my participants, which

factored heavily in my decision to use IPA to conduct my research.

Philosophical Assumptions

IPA is based on three philosophical assumptions: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and

idiography (Smith et al., 2009). Phenomenology is the study of "the relationship between acts of

consciousness and the objects of such acts" (APA, 2009, p. 372); the influence of

phenomenology on IPA is demonstrated in the method's focus on examining and seeking to

understand lived experience (Smith et al., 2009). Hermeneutics is the study of "the ways in

which humans derive meaning from language or other symbolic expression" (APA, 2009, p. 224)

and has been described as a "theory of interpretation" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 11). The influence

of hermeneutics on IPA is demonstrated in the method's focus on interpreting both the

participant's lived experience and the researcher's experience of interpreting the participant's

lived experience through an analytic process (Smith et al., 2009). Finally, idiography is "the

thorough, intensive study of a single person or case in order to obtain an in-depth understanding"

(APA, 2009, p. 238). Its influence on IPA is seen in the focus on the particular, which consists of

both a concentrated focus on the details within the analytic process and intentionally small-scale

sample sizes (Smith et al., 2009). In IPA, these three philosophical assumptions,

phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography, combine for "the detailed examination of human

lived experience . . . in a way which as far as possible enables that experience to be expressed in

its own terms" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 21).

General Principles

The participants' lived experiences are central to IPA (Smith et al., 2009). In IPA, participants are homogenous in that they are selected because they have similar lived experiences pertaining to the research question. Sample sizes are small, ranging from a single case study to a suggested three to six participants for novice researchers (Smith et al., 2009).

Although in-depth, semi-structured interviews are the most common data source in IPA research (Smith, 2017), data can also be generated through focus groups (Palmer et al., 2010), relational mapping interviews (Boden et al., 2018), field notes (Leo & Goodwin, 2016), photographs (Borisov & Reid, 2010), and prompted writing (Phillips & Rolfe, 2016).

Regarding data analysis, Smith et al. (2009) indicated that there is no incorrect way to analyze the data; in fact, they "encourage IPA researchers to be innovative in the ways that they approach [the analysis]" (p. 1). The predominant method of data analysis is to intensively analyze each data source individually for themes and then aggregate the themes across data sources (Smith, 2011). Smith et al. (2009) suggested a six-step process for the novice researcher to follow: reading and rereading, initial noting, developing emergent themes, searching for connections across emergent themes, moving to the next case, and looking for patterns across cases (pp. 3–21).

Research questions in IPA are intentionally constructed to reflect the focus on lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Smith (2011) narrowed the focus on lived experiences to "experience which is of existential import[ance] to the participant" (p. 9). As such, research questions often reflect concepts of meaning making of, and personal familiarity with, life events (Smith, 2011).

Finally, when writing the report, IPA researchers adopt a narrative approach, with a particular emphasis on entering each participant's perspective and getting the reader's attention (Smith, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). The conventional outline of an IPA research report, as is typical of many scientific research papers, is abstract, introduction, method, results, and discussion (Smith et al., 2009). The report sections may be drafted and iteratively rewritten as best suits the researcher; for example, the methodology and methods sections may be drafted in advance of the data gathering and then rewritten at a later point should the researcher find that the data warrant a method of analysis that was not mentioned in the draft (Smith et al., 2009).

Research Issues

As a qualitative research methodology, IPA shares some common issues with other qualitative approaches, such as how to (a) maintain rigour (Yardley, 2000), (b) address practical issues related to conducting interviews (Reynolds & Lee, 2018), (c) meet criteria for generalizability (Pringle et al., 2011), and (d) mitigate the heavy reliance on language as a data source (Smith, 2011).

One notable characteristic of IPA is the intentional lack of a prescriptive formula for data analysis (Smith, 2004), which lends itself to criticisms of weak analytic rigour. Although data analysis process guidelines exist for novice IPA researchers, Smith et al. (2009) have made it clear that the guidelines are not meant to be taken literally or prescriptively. Furthermore, IPA researchers "recognize that different levels of interpretation are possible" (Smith, 2004, p. 44). This interpretative approach to data analysis can lead to a lack of rigour if the data analysis process is not transparent or descriptive enough (Rodham et al., 2015; Yardley, 2000). Rodham et al. (2015) suggested that one of the ways for IPA researchers to combat this shortcoming is to become both the "researcher and [the] researched" (p. 68) by working within a team setting

wherein data are coded individually by researchers who then compare and compile their codes into a cohesive whole. In my study, I increased transparency by comparing sections of my coding with coding done on the same data section by one of my co-supervisors.

A second issue is that IPA data collection relies heavily on semi-structured interviews (Smith, 2017). With interviews come technological glitches such as auditory recording gaps and video chat malfunctions that may require the participants to retell their stories, which may affect the story itself (Reynolds & Lee, 2018). Practical considerations such as using a second recording device and acknowledging that technical malfunctions may occur or have occurred in the data collection process may alleviate this issue (Reynolds & Lee, 2018). In my study, I incorporated these practical considerations to avoid issues caused by technology. Examples include prearranging to continue interviews via telephone in case of video platform (Zoom) failure and recording the interviews both within Zoom and with a digital voice recorder.

Limitations to the generalizability of the research findings centre on IPA's favouring of studying the individual over the group (Pringle et al., 2011). In practical terms, this third issue relates to IPA's use of small, heterogenous groups of participants who have had a similar experience (Larkin et al., 2019). Smith et al. (2009) provided two counterpoints to this criticism: they argued (a) that information from individual cases can provide building blocks to understanding general behaviour and (b) that studying individuals is a worthy research pursuit.

A fourth common issue with qualitative research approaches is that they rely heavily on language-based data, both written and spoken (Polkinghorne, 2005), and IPA is no exception (Smith, 2011). This limitation makes it difficult to include persons with speech-related impairments in an IPA participant sample. However, some efforts have recently been made to expand IPA data to include drawing (Boden et al., 2018) and prompted photography (Borisov &

Reid, 2010) to mitigate this shortcoming. My purposeful inclusion of both semi-structured interviews and writing prompts that consisted of a variety of media types helped to address this limitation.

Role of Reflexivity

Reflexivity in qualitative research involves the hermeneutic discussion of the "assumptions, intentions and actions . . . [of the researcher and] how such factors may have affected the product of the research investigation" (Yardley, 2000, p. 222). Doing research from an IPA perspective involves a "double hermeneutic, whereby the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant[s] trying to make sense of what is happening to them" (Smith, 2011, p. 10). This highlights the importance of reflexivity on the part of the researcher, for without reflexivity, there is no double hermeneutic. It is important to note that,

> from an IPA perspective, we should not view this as a license to claim that our analyses are more 'true' than the claims about research participants, but it does allow us to see how our analysis might offer meaningful insights" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 23).

When reflexivity is done via journalling, both the double hermeneutic (Smith, 2011) and the goal of transparency of data analysis (Yardley, 2000) are accomplished due to the inherent audit trail that a reflexive journal creates (Vicary et al., 2017). Reflexive notetaking about the environment in which data are gathered can also add layers of context to data gathering (Smith et al., 2009). In my study, I used a reflexive journal to add this transparency to my research.

Disability Theory

Underpinning DT is the foundational tenet that "the presence of disabled people in any discussion changes not only the culture of the discussion but also the nature of the arguments

used in the discussion" (Siebers, 2008, Chapter 1). I am a disabled person, and thus as part of the discussion, I cannot talk about my intended methodology of IPA without also talking about DT.

DT Lens

Rather than a specific methodology, DT is a lens through which research is conducted (Gustavsson, 2004). This lens of DT is embedded in disability studies, which "encourage[s] us to ask contrasting questions about disability leading to different research paradigms" (Goodley, 2017, p. 32).

Conceptual Foundation

Two main concepts comprise DT: (a) the scrutiny of the stigmatized cultural representations of persons with a disability that impose systemic subjugation on them, and (b) the promotion of the positive impact that disabled persons have on the world around them (Siebers, 2008). The theory acknowledges the tensions inherent in disability and equality; namely, the need to receive accommodations while still remaining equal (Rioux & Valentine, 2006). In Canada, DT "offers a politicized view of the meaning and experience of disablement" (Rioux & Valentine, 2006, p. 48).

Research Critique Questions

DT is a subsection of Disability Studies (Siebers, 2008). Goodley (2017) listed seven questions that are asked in research from a disability studies perspective:

1. Inclusion—to what extent do research projects include disabled people either as active participants but also as fellow researchers?

2. Accountability—to whom or what are disability research projects accountable, e.g., funders, government, service providers, academics, disabled people's organizations?

3. Praxis—this is a Marxist term relating to theory having a cathartic, catalytic quality,

changing the social world for the better; can disability research match these

ambitions?

4. Ontology—whose knowledge and experiences count in research: experts, disabled

people, official or local sense knowledge?

5. Disableism/impairment—to what extent does disability research tackle the conditions

of disableism and/or capture the psychological, embodied or personal accounts of

impairment?

6. Partisanship—does the research project have any alliances?

7. Analytical levels—what levels or layers of analysis are engaged with in disability

research, ranging from individual, relational, social and cultural? (p. 28)

Some of Goodley's (2017) questions were inherently part of my IPA research study,

specifically: praxis, ontology, and disableism/impairment (Questions 3, 4, and 5). Praxis was

relevant as the desired result was the production of published articles that increase public

knowledge of the specific supports needed by disabled learners; the potential of this is based on

the study's inclusivity. Ontology was germane as I sought the knowledge gained from my

participants, half of whom are disabled. Disableism is the purposeful omission of persons with a

disability from society (Goodley, 2007). Questions of disableism/impairment from a DT

perspective ask how the research addresses this omission. I designed my thesis research to

address disableism/impairment from the start of the recruitment stage right through to the data

analyzation stage and beyond to the writing stages. In the recruitment phase, I made a particular

effort to use disability inclusive language in the poster (e.g., stating that "all materials in the

study will be provided in accessible formats") and actively promoted inclusivity in conversations

with potential participants. In the data collection stage, I provided a discussion prompt that

depicted disabled learners. In so doing, my intent was to decrease disableism by acknowledging the presence of disability. Data analyzation from a DT perspective is of specific relevance to my study, as analysis is linked to rigour in qualitative research (Yardley, 2000). When analyzing my data, I engaged a DT perspective by highlighting the experience of learners with a disability.

Two of Goodley's (2017) questions, accountability and partisanship (Questions 2 and 6), related to research practicalities rather than to the research methodology itself. Because my research was conducted as part of an academic thesis, I was accountable to my postsecondary institution; determining the opportunities to ally with organizations was outside the scope of this paper but was noted for further consideration.

The remaining two questions on Goodley's (2017) list are issues of inclusion and analytical levels (Questions 1 and 7). In my opinion, these questions need a focus on filtering the emphasis on the lived experience in IPA through the lens of DT. The question of inclusion in my research was about involving participants as full companions in the research journey. There is evidence of the successful use of IPA with participatory research with autistic persons (Heselton et al., 2021; MacLeod, 2019), which led me to believe that IPA research could be done through a DT lens in terms of inclusion. The question of analytical levels is particularly relevant in qualitative research, as rigour is tied to comprehensive analysis (Yardley, 2000).

IPA's Fit With DT

The use of double hermeneutics in IPA is a good fit with the importance of analyzing data at various levels when conducting research through a DT lens. Furthermore, IPA researchers are encouraged to break new ground in their data analysis methodology (Smith et al., 2009). As such, as an IPA researcher, I was free to analyze my data from a DT perspective.

Summary

      The focus of learning about the lived experience of the individual in IPA is a good fit with the foundational principle in DT of honouring the contributions of all people. The use of this combination was also a good match for me as a novice researcher with a disability. IPA provides a manageable opportunity to learn how to do phenomenological research with a small sample. DT affords the researcher natural opportunities to share the ways in which they interact with society and the data. Doing my research with an IPA approach through the lens of DT enabled me to explore my participants lived experience in a way that honoured their identity.

Chapter 4: Research Methods

My research methods were designed to suit online data gathering from a small sample. They also included accessible design components for myself and the participants. Data were gathered via semi-structured interviews and writing prompts. A review of mainstream analytic tools showed a lack of accessibility, which necessitated the creation of tools that fit my needs. Data were analyzed for participant themes and then cross-compared. The chapter concludes with a review of my transcription methodological choice.

The design of my research to be entirely online with a small sample group was providential, as the COVID-19 pandemic health restrictions in early spring and summer of 2020 coincided with the data gathering stage of my study. The pandemic restricted my ability to conduct research and limited the available pool of participants. I recruited four participants from the Master of Counselling (MC) program at Athabasca University (AU) who had completed at least one year of the degree. I generated data through semi-structured interviews and writing prompts. I used a unique system of clipped audio transcripts (CAT) to organize the data; the CAT process was based on my accessibility needs and desire to honour the participants' voices. I followed the standard Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) procedure of initial coding followed by emergent themes for each participant; I then cross-compared by case. I followed AU ethical guidelines. I maintained accessibility and provided accommodations for the participants as needed.

Setting

The setting for this study was the participants' home environments. The interviews took place via a video conference platform (Zoom), or via telephone as a backup when Zoom was unavailable due to platform failure. The participants appeared to be in their homes during the

interviews, as evidenced by the presence of pets, the furniture in the camera view, and the sounds

of home renovations. I worked on the study in my home for the duration. Like the participants,

my pet was nearby for much of this work.

Sampling

The study had a small sample size, which is in line with IPA guidelines. I used the IPA

principle of purposive heterogeneous sampling criteria to recruit participants from the MC

program at AU. I promoted sample inclusivity by using of disability-friendly language in the

recruitment poster.

Sample Size

My recruitment goal was to find three to five learners to share their lived experience of

the MC program. I determined the sample size in conjunction with my co-supervisors; we

followed Smith et al.'s (2009) recommendation "that between three and six participants can be a

reasonable sample size for a student project using IPA" (p. 51). I recruited four participants ($N =$

4) in May and June of 2020.

Recruitment

I utilized an online poster (see Appendix A) in the Graduate Centre for Applied

Psychology (GCAP) Student Resources Forum to recruit participants. This forum is where MC

program announcements are made, and to which all GCAP learners have access; as such, there

was an unstated inclusion criterion that participants were current learners in the MC program.

Permission from the GCAP program director was sought and received prior to posting.

Sampling Criteria

The only stated inclusion criterion was completion of two courses (GCAP 671 and 635).

Participants self-attested to meeting the inclusion criterion. The inclusion criterion was linked to

where the potential participants were in the MC program. GCAP 671 and 635 are typically taken

concurrently at the end of the first year of the program (see Appendix B). At this point in the

program, learners have developed basic skills in counselling such as the purposeful use of

microskills, appropriate self-disclosure, paraphrasing, and cultural inquiry. These basic

counselling skills are akin to those needed as mentors (Clutterbuck, 2004). Furthermore, after a

year spent in the program, learners are typically fully familiar with the online learning platform

and demands of school–life–work balance. No other inclusion criteria were used.

Recruitment Inclusivity

The recruitment poster contained disability inclusive language, primarily evident in the

poster statement that "All materials in the study will be provided in accessible formats."

Intentionally stating that the study was accessible demonstrated that learners with a disability

were welcome to participate without directly recruiting them. Welcoming disabled participants

was vital to incorporating a Disability Theory (DT) lens to my research project.

Recruitment Process

The recruitment poster invited interested applicants to contact me via email for further

information. Once contacted, I emailed the applicant a copy of the participant information letter,

using a standard email template, and the consent form (see Appendix C). When applicants

replied to my email with questions, I responded promptly. Initial interviews were booked for

applicants who indicated that they were interested and who met the inclusion criterion. If an

interested applicant did not reply to my email containing the participant consent letter, I sent

them a follow-up email about two weeks later. I did not contact these applicants past this point.

Of note, two of the participants stated that they appreciated the follow-up email, as they had

intended to participate but had not yet been able to respond for a variety of reasons, including

forgetfulness.

Data Collection

The data collection occurred in spring and summer of 2020. I generated data through

interviews and writing prompts. I promoted the availability of accommodations to participants

throughout this stage. I arranged to have the audio recordings of the interviews transcribed for

participant accessibility purposes (e.g., to function as closed captioning; see section on interview

transcription for related information).

Communication With Participants

During all stages of the study, I communicated with the participants through email. I used

my university email address for transparency. When sending emails, I used the senders' return

email address. I used emails for the purposes of facilitating paperwork, arranging for interviews,

sending the writing prompts, and for post-data collection follow-up (when I sent copies of their

interviews, I invited the participants to notify me if they would like to receive a copy of my

thesis). No other method of communication with the participants was used outside of email and

the interview audiovisual technology.

Data Generation Approaches

Participants were each invited to participate in two semi-structured interviews. In

between the interviews, the participants were asked to respond to four writing prompts. All

participants participated in both interviews and in the writing prompts activity. I recorded the

interviews within the Zoom videoconferencing platform, in my account and stored to my secure

external hard drive, and also via a digital voice recorder. Using the recorder created a backup for

video conference technological failure.

Interviews. The interviews were semi-structured and designed to bookend the writing prompt responses. I conducted the interviews via Zoom. Prior to the interviews, I arranged with the participants to continue the interviews via telephone, should the videoconference platform fail. This was providential as several of the interviews were interrupted by Zoom platform failures. The interviews were conducted in spoken English; the interviewees and I appeared to be the only persons present. Of note, participants' pets were often present, which caused some interruptions to the interview process as the participants attended to the pets' immediate needs.

First Interview. In consultation with my co-supervisors, I focused the initial interview questions on participants' experience of peer mentoring and connection (see Appendix D). I scheduled the interviews at the participants' convenience; they then took place from mid-June to mid-July 2020.

Second Interview. Like the first interview, the second interview questions were created in tandem with my co-supervisors. I focused the second interview questions on the experience of authoring the writing prompt responses and of being in the study (see Appendix E). Again, I booked the second interviews at each participant's convenience; I did so within a week of receiving their writing prompt responses. The second interviews took place from late June to late July 2020.

Interview Transcription. I approached the interview transcription from a disability inclusive perspective. This was based on my DT stance of accessibility for the participants as well as on my own accommodation needs. This perspective necessitated a thorough review of a rationale for interview transcription, as opposed to the standard qualitative research transcription of audio data into written documents. I determined that the interviews needed to be transcribed for participant accessibility purposes (i.e., they served as a closed captioning function). However,

I was not able to transcribe the interviews myself for a variety of reasons (described in more detail in the section on my CAT process). I knew that I would work almost exclusively from the audio interview recordings (see analysis section for more details) given my accommodation needs, and thus did not need written transcripts for coding. I also knew that I would need transcribed portions for quotes within my written thesis. My interview transcription decision was to have a basic transcription done that consisted of a closed captioning transcription format (e.g., a focus on the spoken words) for the purposes of accessibility and using quotes in a written thesis. I hired a transcript assistant as a disability accommodation for me.

Writing Prompts. At the end of the first Interview, I introduced the writing prompt activity. I told the participants that they were designed to aid potential MC peer mentors to share their journey with new learners. The prompts consisted of a comic strip (also referred to as a cartoon), an audio podcast, a written blog, and a photograph montage (see Appendix F for copies that were given to participants). At the time of writing, the podcast was available for public listening on the host website; permission was sought and granted for use in my study (see Appendix G). I provided the prompts to participants in various formats (e.g., the podcast was provided it its original audio and transcript forms) for accessibility purposes. A description of each prompt is in Table 1. Rationale for use of the prompts follows Table 1. I sent the participants the four writing prompts and further instructions via email.

Table 1

Writing Prompt Activities

Prompt	Description	Other information
Comic strip	The comic strip humorously depicts themes of achieving adequate sleep, balancing school, and other life responsibilities, and maintaining good self-care while being a graduate learner.	The comic strip's authorship is credited to www.phdcomic.com. The comic is available for public viewing on their website; permission was sought from the author via email; however, no response was received after multiple emails over a span of several months.
Audio podcast	The audio podcast is an interview between a graduate student and a counselling centre staff person. The conversation has themes of experiencing stress and anxiety as a graduate learner and coping strategies.	The audio podcast was produced by the University of Alabama at Birmingham Graduate School in 2019. It was designed to interest graduate learners.
Written blog	The blog contained themes of overcoming barriers to online learning, with themes of time management, finding motivation, contending with administrative and technological issues, and handling finances.	The blog was published by AU in 2019. At the time of writing, the blog post was available for public viewing on their website. The written blog's audience was online learners at AU.
Photograph montage	A four-photograph montage using stock photos. Each photo depicted a person working on a laptop. Each person in the photo is different; inclusion was promoted through selection of photos of individuals without obvious and visible demographic markers (e.g., age, ethnicity, or gender). The exception to this was the purposeful inclusion of a person seated in a wheelchair; this was done to promote DT tenets.	I created this photo montage using paid copyright free stock images.

Note. Written description of the table: A three-column table describing the writing prompts provided to participants. Column 1 contains the title of the prompt. Column 2 contains a description of each prompt. Column 3 contains other information relevant to that prompt.

Rationale for Use. The writing prompts contained themes drawn from research on graduate learner mental health (see Chapter 2). I determined the finalized prompts with advice from my co-supervisors on the thematic choices, with information gleaned in the literature review, and with the intention to minimize risks to learner mental health; the latter was done through selecting prompts with general learner themes but without highly emotive topics.

Instructions. After the first interview, I emailed the participants a copy of the writing prompts and accompanying instructions. I utilized a standard email template for this communication (see Appendix H):

Responses. The participants all provided typewritten responses. I stored these in their original formats on my external secure hard drive. Each of the responses were longer than a paragraph and did not exceed one page single spaced. I honoured the participants communication style by not transcribing their written communication into an audio file. The responses were coded in their original typewritten format. Of note, I was able to do this in conjunction with my accommodation needs only due the short length of the responses (maximum of one page). Had the responses been longer, I would have had my disability accommodation assistant transcribe the written responses into audio files.

Ethical Considerations

The AU Research Ethics Board (REB) guidelines were followed in the study. This included obtaining appropriate levels of approval, an assessment of participant confidentiality and consent, an examination of the study for potential participant harm, and attention to issues of rigour.

Approval

Prior to beginning the study, I sought approval to conduct this research in the AU Faculty of Health Disciplines (FHD) from the then-dean, Dr. Margaret Edwards. Following that approval, I sought ethical approval from the AU REB. Both approvals were granted (see Appendices I and J).

Confidentiality

The risk to learner confidentiality in this study was low. Nonetheless, two risks were present. First, one of my co-supervisors and a committee member were members of the MC program instructional staff. It was possible that these staff could recognize a participant due to unique elements of their MC journey. Every effort was made to mitigate this through not giving these committee members access to the original data and by obscurement of participant identity details in the findings chapter.

Second, participants risked having their data recognized or shared by the transcriptionist as she was a fellow MC learner. However, given the transcriptionist's start date and progress in her MC, it is unlikely that she and the participants were in the same courses during the study. Furthermore, the transcriptionist signed a confidentiality pledge (see Appendix K) before her work commenced and she did not have access to the participants' full names.

Consent

I used AU's participant information letter and consent template and customized it to suit my study (see Appendix C). Participants were provided a copy via email and were asked to review and sign it electronically. These documents specified how participants could withdraw from the study; they could do so up to one week after receiving copies of their interviews by emailing me without reprisal or needing to say why.

Risk of Participant Harm

The focus of the study, on exploring the influence of peer mentoring on graduate online learner (GOL) mental health, was beneficent and carried a low risk of participant harm. However, the risk of participant harm was that they might feel physiologically or emotionally stressed, embarrassed, anxious, distressed through reminders of, and sharing, their MC journey. This risk was low, as the MC coursework included the practice of appropriate counsellor self-disclosure throughout their program. Even so, this risk was mitigated by reminding participants of the no monetary cost mental health supports available to them through AU's Learner Support Services in the participant information letter.

Rigour

Yardley (2000), a seminal influence in the field of qualitative research, defined rigour as "the resulting completeness of the data collection and analysis" (p. 221). She explained that data collection completeness is not about sample size; rather, completeness is about the sample's capability to provide enough data for depth and breadth of analysis. Yardley defined depth and breadth of analysis as "the completeness of the interpretation, which should ideally address all of the variation . . . at several levels" (2000, p. 222). Yardley suggested that utilization of several levels of analysis in conjunction with theorizing can increase rigour in phenomenological research.

Additionally, Yardley (2000) proposed that depth and breadth of analysis could occur by data obtainment through various methods and sources "to achieve a rounded, multilayered understanding of the research topic" (p. 222). I conducted my study in line with Larkin et al.'s (2019) argument that multiperspectival dimensions in IPA can garner more generalizable results. Smith (2011) suggested that analytic rigour can be evidenced by using quotes judiciously to

"give some indication of convergence and divergence, representativeness and variability" (p. 24); Smith (2011) further advised that the quotes should come from a representative proportion of the participants so as to provide a wide evidence base. At the end of my research process, when I wrote the report, I took care that the participant quotes I selected came from all my participants (Smith, 2011). Confirmation that each participant's voice was heard in my report aligns with DT's principle of inclusion.

In my research, I built rigour at the beginning, middle, and end of my research (Smith, 2011; Yardley, 2000). At the beginning of my data gathering process, I intentionally selected participants who had had a significant amount of experience as GOL to draw on during the study. One of the ways in which I did this was by a recruitment of participants who had already completed at least one year of courses in the MC program.

At the midpoint of my research, the data analysis phase, I analyzed my data at different levels. One of the ways in which I did this was to maintain a reflexive journal, with the knowledge that I could include data from my journal in the analysis. By keeping a reflexive research journal, I increased the transparency of my analysis, which further increased rigour (Kacprzak, 2017; Yardley, 2000).

Disability Accommodations

I made every effort to provide a safe and welcoming space for the participants to receive accommodations throughout the study. At the recruitment stage, the poster mentioned accessibility (see Appendix A) and the initial email sent to potential participants (Appendix C) in response to their interest welcomed the participants to contact me via email, video, or telephone for accessibility purposes. The data gathering stage of the study included both interviews and writing prompts. The invitation to participate via written or aural conversation was extended for

the interview. The writing prompts included illustrative and audio material; these were given to the participants with written descriptions and/or a transcript (see Appendix F). The participants were invited to respond to the prompts in either a written or audiovisual format. After data were generated, the participants received transcribed copies of their audio interviews; regrettably, email space prohibited me from sending the participants audio copies of their interviews. However, I specified this in my email to the participants, and invited them to contact me to make alternate arrangements should they need an audio file; none requested this.

Data Analysis

Neither IPA nor DT prescribe the manner of data analysis, although there are some general guidelines to follow. Smith et al. (2009) recommended that a beginner IPA researcher follow a six-step process of reading and rereading, initial noting, developing emergent themes, searching for connections across emergent themes, moving to the next case, and looking for patterns across cases (pp. 3–21). From a DT perspective, data analysis is done at the individual, relational, social, and cultural levels (Goodley, 2017, p. 28). I endeavoured to honour the DT perspective through fore fronting issues relevant to participants with a disability.

Analytic Coding Tools

As a physically disabled researcher, determining which tool to use for coding my data necessitated a considerable amount of learning and research about the intersection of my accommodation needs and standardized qualitative research analysis methods and tools. Eventually I settled on the creation of my own process of working from audio transcripts and utilizing Microsoft (MS) PowerPoint to complete the initial coding.

Learning. In preparation for my thesis, I took a required course on advanced qualitative methods. The qualitative coding approach in the course focused on the reading and coding of

written transcripts of interview audio recordings. During the course, the class held a debate about the pros and cons of researchers transcribing their own data, which resulted in a recommendation that student researchers transcribe their interviews. I was challenged by the ableist assumption in our class discussion that every researcher has the physical capability to transcribe interviews. We used the NVivo software program to practice coding; I encountered barriers to accessible use of NVivo that prevented me from completing course assignments in the manner in which they were designed. I was glad to have an open-minded professor who welcomed feedback from myself and a classmate with a physical disability. Our assignments were modified, and I was told that the course would be refined for future learners. My experience of the course as a disabled learner necessitated me to find a substitute for researcher transcription and use of written transcripts for coding.

Literature Survey. A survey of the literature for an alternative to the traditional method of coding written records of spoken conversation turned up a paucity of information. A wider search for literature by disabled researchers who articulated the practicalities of physically interacting with data turned up even less information. I was, however, delighted to discover two articles that informed the creation of my process of analysis. The first was about using a voice recognition software program (VRSP) to create written transcripts and the second was about directly coding audio recordings of interviews.

The Voice Transcription Technique. This technique entails the use of voice recognition software to transcribe digital interview data in qualitative research. The impetus for Matheson's (2007) development of the Voice Transcription Technique (VTT) was their desire to "use the existing technology to simplify the process of transcribing . . . [their dissertation interview data to combat] . . . a significant case of carpal tunnel syndrome from years of typing on poorly

designed computer keyboards" (p. 547). Matheson described their attempts to use a VRSP to transcribe the spoken interviews to written transcripts, their decision to discard this option due to limitations of the software's ability to transcribe multiple voices, and their subsequent creation of the VTT. Matheson's VTT involved listening to an audio file via headphones, then dictating what was heard for transcription by a VRSP. I was intrigued by the VTT, as I rely on a VRSP for much of my computer usage. As such, the learning curve mentioned by Matheson would be minimal for me. However, upon reflection, I realized that I was uncomfortable with the interpretation aspect of this technique.

A former professor of mine was fond of saying that "all translation is interpretation." By translating, more commonly referred to as transcribing, the participants' spoken language into a written language, I was interpreting what they were saying (Lapadat & Linsday, 1999). For example, would I include all the ums and ahs and broken sentences? Would I specify how long they paused before speaking? From a DT perspective, how would this translation and interpretation affect the way that I or the reader viewed the participants? Would interpreting their informal spoken language into formal written language dishonour their speech patterns? Which would thus disvalue a disability identity? I discovered that I was not alone in my wonderings when I located Shelton and Flint's (2019) "preliminary literature review of 200+ articles . . . [that found] there is little examination of the creative processes inherent in transcription and the ethical implications of those processes" (p. 203) in most research. Furthermore, as I explored these ideas in more detail through VTT trials, I noticed that I began to feel uncomfortable as I sat in my chair. This sense of discomfort was different than the usual physical pain I experience as part of my disability. Reflexive journalling led to the self-discovery that I was uncomfortable

with replacing the participants' recorded voices with my own through the process of repeating their words out loud so that my VRSP could type out the words on the computer screen for me.

Clipping and Coding Audio Files. Clipping and coding of audio files is a research method to enable participants' voice. Crichton and Childs (2005) suggested that coding from audio clips "can honour the participants voices, retaining the original three-dimensional recording well past the data collection stage" (p. 1). They outlined a method by which interviews are recorded using a digital video camera, the audio files uploaded into an audiovisual editing software program and clipped into "appropriate frames" (Crichton & Childs, 2005, p. 4). These frames are then inserted into MS Excel for coding and sorting. The authors' assertion that this process enables the researcher to "keep the richness of not only what was said but also how it was said" (Crichton & Childs, 2005, p. 4) resonated with the DT principle of disablement/impairment through enabling the participants' voices to be heard instead of the researcher's voice. From a practical angle, I was also intrigued by the authors' use of a MS program to complete their coding, as the VRSP that I use typically interacts well with MS programming. I decided to trial Crichton and Child's method with audio files.

Coding Software Accessibility Issues. In trialing the VTT and the clipping of audio files, I decided to try using NVivo once more. Some time had passed since my advanced qualitative methods course, and I was curious if NVivo could handle audiovisual interview clips and if its accessibility had been updated. In conjunction with this decision, I watched training videos, read the accessibility information on NVivo's website, and looked up information on integrating my VRSP with NVivo. I discovered that NVivo could code audiovisual clips and that I could use my VRSP to conduct basic commands, albeit in a complicated manner. Unfortunately, the complexity of the NVivo database exponentially increased the amount of time

that I would need to spend coding, as well as having some functions of the database unavailable to me. I thus discarded NVivo as an option for me. I was unable to locate any other qualitative software programs that had robust accessibility. The decision not to use a pre-existing qualitative software program necessitated the creation of a system of organized coding that was functional for me.

Decision-Making. Trials of the above-mentioned methods produced two key decisions. The first was to hire a transcriptionist to complete a closed captioning style transcript for my participants. This decision was based on provision of accommodations for both myself and my participants. Of note, this decision was made before I recruited participants and was part of my stance of providing fully inclusive participation. In other words, I was demonstrating an awareness and expectation of the presence of disabled persons, which is a DT principle. The second decision was two-pronged; one was to work from audio clips to honour my accommodation needs and two, to use MS PowerPoint to code. The latter was inspired by Crichton and Childs' (2005) article, which was published 15 years ago. After reading the article, I found myself wondering how present-day MS programs could handle audio clips. This led me to recall that MS PowerPoint had the capability to incorporate and edit audiovisual clips.

My Process: Clipped Audio Transcripts (CAT). Clipping the audio recordings of the interviews turned out to be quite straightforward and manageable within my accommodation needs. Of note, I did not use my VRSP to clip the files. I made this decision after reviewing the number of mouse clicks needed to complete the clipping and the speed of using the VRSP. The VRSP is capable of commands in MS programs, and it remained an option for me, but I had the privilege of choosing not to use the VRSP because of its complex verbal commands in favour of the simplicity of using a mouse.

I used the edit audiovisual clips capability within MS PowerPoint to create my CAT. It took me an average of twice as long as the interview length to clip the files (e.g., 1.5 hr to clip a 45-min interview). In determining how to break the audio into manageable time chunks, I considered the participants' flow of thought and listened for natural conversational breaks. For the most part, I was able to chunk the audio into sections that started with my question and ended with the participant's response. As a point of interest, video recordings could be done in the same manner; in step two, one would select video instead of audio and then one would proceed in a similar manner. The steps I used to create a complete case were:

1. I created a new, blank MS PowerPoint presentation and used a file naming convention that indicated the case number. I ensured that the trim audio command was added to my quick access toolbar (alternatively, the command could be added to the tool ribbon).

2. On Slide 1, I typed in the case number, Interview 1, and the approximate length of the interview. I then went under the insert menu and located the audio option. I selected the interview from my files, and PowerPoint added it to the slide. In the 2015 version of PowerPoint that I used, a speaker icon was added to the slide to indicate that there was an audio file.

3. I duplicated the initial slide to create Slide 2. I deleted the information about the approximate length of the interview and the interview number. I added a footer that contained the participant, interview, and slide number; this created a reference system that aided in tracking the coding in future steps.

4. I trimmed the audio on Slide 2. This was done through clicking the speaker icon to bring up a play menu bar, and then selecting the trim audio command to trim the clip to the desired length. In my version of MS PowerPoint, the trimming involved noting the

previous slide's trimmed end stamp time, clicking trim, changing the trimmed start time to the previous slides trimmed end stamp time, moving time slider to the end of the interview, listening to the clip until the end of the section, noting the time stamp, and changing the end time of the trim to section end time stamp. I found the process to be smoother and simpler than it sounds when it is written out. Of note, the trim function keeps the entire audio file intact on the slide, but only the trimmed length is played when the speaker is clicked. This turned out to be handy in future coding steps, as the clipped section could be listened to on its own or in context with a larger time chunk without having to navigate back to the initial slide.

5. Still on Slide 2, I added a text box titled "Interview." I then entered the relevant interview question, including the time stamp, into the box. This step was added after I clipped my first interview. I realized that I would need a way to label each clip and found it easier to recall through using the interview questions. Alternatively, I could have simply numbered each clip.

6. I then duplicated Slide 2 to create Slide 3. Because the trim function keeps the entire audio file intact on each slide, there was no need to go back to Slide 1 for duplication. I added my question into the interviewer box, trimmed the audio and then duplicated the slide, and so on, until the interview was complete.

7. I followed a similar procedure for each participant's writing prompt response. The participants all wrote in paragraph form. I broke their responses into a size that was manageable to read on a single slide.

8. I then repeated the process I used for the first interview for the second. This resulted in a large MS PowerPoint deck (henceforward referred to as the case deck) that was easy for

me to navigate, either by mouse or my VRSP.

Case Determination

Determining what constituted a case was a challenging first step in coding my raw data. My study contained 24 sets of data; for each of the four participants, I had Interview 1, four writing prompt responses, and Interview 2. This was complicated by my use of CAT and written responses. Smith et al. (2009) suggested that each instance of data collection could be a case. Admittedly, the thought of managing 24 cases was daunting. I am grateful for the input of my committee members, who advised that I consider each participant's data set as a whole, which resulted in four cases (one per participant). Their rationale was that the study was about each participant's experience, and that I was examining their experience from three different angles. In other words, the three points of data gathering (i.e., Interview 1, the writing prompt responses, and Interview 2) were all part of the same whole. I agreed with their rationale and determined that each participant's data set would constitute a case.

Case Coding Sequence

I commenced coding after all of the data were gathered. In the coding and early writing stages of my study, I used a number convention to identify the participants (i.e., P1, P2, P3, and P4) for ease of reference; I coded each participant's data in its entirety in the same order that they were numbered, that is, the order in which I had conducted Interview 1 (e.g., all of P1 followed by all of P2). I completed each step of the coding sequence for one participant before moving on to coding the next participant's data set.

Initial Noting. The preparation step in my coding sequence was to create the "transcript" for the case, as described above. The first step of initial noting was to listen to Interview 1 in its entirety in one sitting, which matched Smith et al.'s (2009) "reading and re-reading" (pp. 82–83)

step. I opted to not listen to the interview multiple times, as I had already listened to the

interview multiple times through the clipping process. I then added a coding table to the case

deck (see Figure 1)*.* After completing this step for P1, I added the table to Slide 1 for the other

participants; this sped up the process of adding the table, as I was able to fully utilize MS

PowerPoint's slide duplication function. The initial coding table correlated to the initial noting

step in Smith et al. (2009, pp. 83–90). I then re-listened to the clip on each slide (usually multiple

times) and added any descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual noting to the table.

Figure 1

Sample Coding Table

0:00 Interviewer:			
Transcript clip	Descriptive	Linguistic	Conceptual
🔊			
Reflexive Comments:			

Note. Written description of the figure: A four-row table. Row 1 contains a single cell that has a

timestamp and the word interviewer typed in. Row 2 contains four cells; from left to right the

cells read transcript clip, descriptive, linguistic, conceptual. Row 3 contains four cells that align

with the cells in row three to create columns; the leftmost cell contains a speaker icon, and the

remainder are blank. Row 4 contains a single cell with the words "reflexive comments" typed in.

I followed a similar procedure for the writing prompt response. I then went back to the start of the case deck to enter the reflexive noting; to do so, I reviewed the existing notation and then wrote in a stream of consciousness fashion. Occasionally I listened to the transcript clip or re-read a section of a writing prompt response before reflexive notation occurred.

Emergent Themes. The first step of developing emergent themes (Smith et al., 2009) was to create a new MS PowerPoint deck, henceforth referred to the emergent deck (see Figure 2). The second step was to transfer the initial coding and reflexive comments from the case deck to the emergent deck. I used the copy paste function in MS to complete the transfer. It was a challenge for me to complete this transfer, as using my VRSP to do this was time-consuming and use of my mouse painful (my recommendation for other disabled researchers is to hire an assistant to complete this transfer as an accommodation). The third step was to work from the emergent deck to shift my analytic focus from the participant data to my noting, as "themes reflect not only the participant's original words and thoughts but also the analyst's interpretation" (Smith et al., 2009). I recorded my interpretation in the emerging themes section in the emergent deck table; the interpretation included reflexive noting.

Figure 2

Sample Emergent Deck

Initial Coding Slide Number:			
Transcript Comments	Descriptive	Linguistic	Conceptual
Emerging Themes			

Note. Written description of the figure: A four-row table. Row 1 contains a single cell that has Initial Coding Slide Number typed in. Row 2 contains four cells; from left to right the cells read transcript comments, descriptive, linguistic, conceptual. Row 3 contains four empty cells that align with the cells in row three to create columns. Row 4 contains a single cell with the words "emerging themes" typed in.

Participant Theme Tables. The final step of emergent themes development (Smith et al., 2009) was to create a theme table for each participant (see Figure 3). I created a table in MS Word. I completed the table through sifting through and reflecting on the emerging theme slides until I determined the themes were coalesced. Corresponding emerging slide numbers and key quotes were copied from the emerging slides for convenient referencing in cross-case comparison. Navigation of the participant theme tables was relatively easy in conjunction with my VRSP.

Figure 3

Sample Theme Table

Participant 1: Themes

Draft Number:

	Theme	Sub-ordinate Themes	Emerging Slide No.	Key Quotes
1.				
2.				

Note. Written description of the figure: A four-row table. Row 1 contains five cells; the leftmost cell is empty, from left to right the remaining cells read theme, subordinate themes, emerging slide no., key quotes. Row 2 contains five cells that create columns with row one; the leftmost cell is numbered one, and the remaining cells are empty; cells two and three are split into sub cells. Row 3 provides an empty space between it and row four. Row 4 is a repeat of Row 2, except it is numbered 2.

Cross-Case Comparison

Smith et al. (2009) listed six ways in which "patterns and connections between emergent themes" (p. 96) can be found by the novice in IPA research: abstraction, subsumption, polarization, contextualization, numeration, and function. Of these six, I selected two that were most relevant to my study, namely abstraction ("putting like with like and developing a new name for the cluster" (p. 96) and contextualization ("identify the contextual or narrative elements" (p. 98). Abstraction was completed through regrouping the participant themes under new superordinate themes for the sample as a whole. Contextualization was done through examining how the participants' demographics affected their MC journey. Smith et al. (2009)

also recommend that a cross-case comparison be presented in a pictorial format; I followed this suggestion and created a graphic to illustrate the cross-case themes.

Summary of Data Analysis

My research methods were constructed to fit with IPA and DT. I experienced barriers to accessibility to traditional data analysis approaches; however, I overcame these through creating tools that worked for me. Following Smith et al.'s (2009) recommendations for the novice researcher facilitated the effective use of my time and highlighted the lived experience of my participants as individuals and as a group.

Rationale for Coding Directly From Audio Files

Audio recordings of interviews in counselling for clinical and research purposes have been used since at least the 1940s (Covner, 1942). Until the advent of digital recording technology, it was difficult and cumbersome for researchers to replay these audio recordings (e.g., locating an exact spot on a phonographic record, or rewinding large amounts of cassette tape) for use in data analysis. As a result, researchers transcribed these audio recordings for ease of use in coding. Transcription typically refers to converting spoken words to typewritten documents.

Although it has been possible to code digital recordings via data management software (e.g., NVivo) since at least 2008 (Wainwright & Russell, 2010), most qualitative researchers continue to analyze transcriptions rather than audio/visual recordings (Shelton & Flint, 2019). The purpose of this section is not to discount the value of the process, or use of, traditional transcription with data that originated in audiovisual formats (in my case, semi-structured interviews). Rather, the purpose is to query the inherent ableism in a staunch adherence to this traditional approach to data management and coding. I reflect on this ableism from my

experience as a disabled novice researcher and from a DT perspective of honouring the participants' lived experience. I also discuss my choice to edit some transcribed participant quotes throughout this section. This makes my transcription method transparent.

My Experience

I began to question the standard practice of transcription in an advanced qualitative methods course I took prior to the start of my thesis. The course materials included video presentations by a notable qualitative researcher who was insistent that the lead researcher do transcription themselves; the implication in their statements was that if researchers do not transcribe their interviews themselves, they are not actually conducting qualitative research. This course content may have been meant to provoke class discussion and debate about transcription methods. However, as a physically disabled novice researcher for whom traditional transcription would be nearly impossible to complete, the video content caused me to question my ability to do research. After all, if this noted researcher is telling me that if I cannot type out the words that my participants are saying, then am I deficient, less than, not welcome in the qualitive research world? It took a great deal of work in my reflective journal and in discussions with other disabled persons to recognize the inherent ableism in the view that researchers must transcribe interviews. I realized that it is ableist to insist that the crux of the ability of the qualitative researcher lies in their ability to hear spoken words and to type them out on a screen, as opposed to in their ability to connect with the participants, draw out their stories and analyze for themes. It is also ableist to assume that all participants communicate verbally or that all researchers hear or see.

To combat internalizing this ableism, I sought out literature that demonstrated that non-traditional transcription and coding methods could be effectively used in qualitative research.

More specifically, I searched for research that demonstrated that I could directly code audio recordings, as working from recordings was a match with my accommodation needs. I focused my literature search on articles by any researcher who choose to work from audio files, rather than those who referred to adapting transcription as a disability accommodation. I wanted to substantiate my argument that any researcher could effectively use audio coding, that the use of it was an accepted qualitative practice and not just an accommodation. Due to the pervasive use of traditional transcripts in qualitative research, it was challenging to find examples. However, I was able to find a few articles. These included D'Amico et al.'s (2015) large-scale study of how speech affects change in group meetings for adolescents with drug and/or alcohol problems, Stonehouse's (2019) work in character development in outdoor education, and Wainwright and Russell's (2010) research with persons with specialized medical needs. These articles provided methodological evidence that rebutted the requirement to work from typewritten transcriptions of aural interviews, evidence that researchers who interact with research data in diverse ways are welcome in the qualitative research world.

Honouring the Participants' Lived Experience

Through my search for audio file coding, I found two key articles that influenced the creation of my analytic tools (my CAT process). Matheson (2007) described using dictation software to transcribe aural interviews in their dissertation, which was qualitative research on substance abuse recovery. Crichton and Childs (2005), who conducted case study ethnographic qualitative research, argued that working from audio clips honours the participant voice. As described in the methodology chapter, my review of these two articles influenced my interpretation of DT principles as they applied to the transcription of participants' spoken words into a typewritten format for participant disability accommodations (e.g., closed captioning of

their interviews). As my final thesis product would include a static typewritten work (as opposed

to an aural presentation), I was unable to insert excerpts from audio recordings into my thesis.

This meant that I needed to have portions of the interviews transcribed by someone else for use

as quotes. Thus, I located the relevant sections in the closed captioning transcriptions that were

provided to the participants and used them in my writeup. However, using transcribed quotes in

my writeup turned out have unexpected challenges from a DT perspective.

Accuracy and Privilege. In Creswell and Poth's (2018) textbook for novice qualitative

researchers (the textbook used in the advanced qualitative course I took), transcription accuracy

is addressed in the section on reliability. This is done in a small section, where the novice

researcher is advised that "reliability can be enhanced . . . by transcribing the digital files. Also,

the recording needs to be transcribed to indicate the trivial, but often crucial, pauses and

overlaps" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 265). Creswell and Poth did not list the common

deliberate, *accidental*, and *unavoidable* mistakes that are made by transcribers (Poland, 1995,

pp. 296–299), nor did they address the wide array of transcription methods/approaches available

for use (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). The methodological "choices that researchers make about

transcription enact the theories that they hold and constrain the interpretations they can draw

from their data" (Lapadat & Linsday, 1999, p. 64). A clear articulation of the transcription

choices I made will enhance the reliability and rigour of my analysis.

I initially chose to use a modified verbatim method of transcribed quotes. Verbatim

transcription is a literal method wherein the transcriber records all the words that are spoken

(Poland, 1995). I modified this to add some descriptive elements, such as emotional outbursts

(Hammersley, 2010). As punctation can significantly affect how the reader interprets meaning

(e.g., "I'm sorry, I love you" versus "I'm sorry I love you"), I translated small pauses as periods

at the end of a sentence to convey speech patterns. I referred to this combination of transcription as "closed captioning."

As I edited the quotes for verbatim accuracy, I wondered if I was privileging spoken language over non-verbal communication, especially considering Goodley's (2017) ontology questions about examining research with a disability lens. I also wondered if all the participant data were accurately represented in a close captioned style quote. Participants in my study who were disabled and/or had a chronic health condition had divulged that they feared or had experienced ableism; this was accompanied by downward gazes and soft voices that I had observed during the interviews. What parts of my participants' lived experience were then being lost by only transcribing words? Was my perception of their implied feeling of shame that their body language indicated being lost in translation to typed words on a screen? Cannon (2018) approached similar questions of transcription in a novel way through producing artistic transcriptions (poems and drawings). In Cannon's avantgarde approach to disseminating their experience of struggle to fully represent their participants' lived experience in their transcription, they wrote this poem that resonates with my wonderings:

How much is in the space between words,

in the glance,

in the sigh,

the silent swallowing of thoughts

too dangerous to say?

And, what can we show? And, how do we make it matter? (2018, p. 576)

Potential of the Participants Being Judged. When transcribing participants' quotes, I wanted to accurately represent their words through closed captioned excerpts. However, I was

also concerned that they might be judged by a reader as less intelligent due to their speech

patterns if I did not edit the quotes. This linguistic bias has been found to be present in society

(Garrett, 2010) and in academic publishing (Politzer-Ahles et al., 2020).

Two of the participants had a disability. Disability can affect communication styles and

persons with a disability can be judged as having inferior intelligence as a result. As a disabled

person, I have lost writing marks in my MC course assignments due to dictation errors made by

my VRSP; in other words, my assisted written communication was deemed inferior. I have lost

marks in oral presentations for not being a dynamic speaker; among other things, my disability

affects the clarity of my speech and my physical energy levels, both of which affect the

dynamics of my presentations. In other words, I have been deemed to be an inferior verbal

communicator due to my disability. Thus, I was torn between closed captioned quotes of the

participants' actual words, and potentially exposing disabled participants to the same judgement

I had experienced if I did not edit the quotes.

I briefly reference this challenge in the findings chapter, wherein I use a participant quote

that was included many grammatical errors, ums, and pauses. In the findings chapter, I indicated

that it can be challenging for the reader to follow the conversation topic in the quote and yet I

deemed that the speech pattern conveyed the participant's lived experience. To increase the

readability of the quote, I edited it for clarity. I struggled with this decision to edit for clarity. I

found myself continually asking who was being privileged in the act of editing the participant's

quote. I kept asking myself if I was privileging the reader, who may struggle to understand the

participant if I used a verbatim quote. I kept answering yes to this question. This left me with a

moral dilemma, as privileging the reader is antithetical to DT principles of amplifying diverse

voices (Goodley, 2017; Siebers, 2011).

This moral dilemma applies to working with all minoritized participants, not only disabled individuals. Shelton and Flint (2019) described times when their students had edited participants' speech for both clarification and because the transcriber wanted to "avoid the labor-intensive process of trying to make [participant] speech . . . recognizable to readers" (p. 205). Shelton and Flint illustrated this with a story of a student who had edited the Southern drawl of a participant to "make it resemble more standard language" (2019, p. 205). As I read this story, I found myself asking, "Whose *standard*?" How much classism, ableism, and outright racism is found in a decision to edit a participant's quote to meet the researcher's standard language? These are questions that touch on transcription choices as acts of social justice.

Final Decision. In the late stages of writing my thesis, I made the decision to balance readability with giving the reader a sense of how the participants spoke during their interviews. I worked back and forth between editing the words on my screen and listening to the participants' voices in the audio clips. I focused on translating the participants' spoken language into written language while maintaining the contextual elements that I deemed relevant to their lived experiences. For transparency, I give an example here of a participant quote from Sue that I used in my findings chapter. Although my example is imperfect, as I cannot insert an audio clip into a typewritten document, there is value for the reader in reviewing the difference that transcription decisions can make. For context, the question I asked Sue was about how she balanced school with her other life responsibilities.

Verbatim Excerpt. The first quote is a verbatim excerpt from the interview:

Sue: Mmmm [pause]. Well, I would say that I've had, [pause], I sort of had the privilege of, um, being able to really pare down what I'm doing in order to um, in order to, [pause]. Sorry, my cat wants out, let's see if she actually wants, will go out this time. Ok, are you

going to run away from me again? Ok, but you gotta leave. Ok, bye. No, you gotta leave. There we go, now she's finally out. [laughter] Um, so I would say that I've had the privilege of really like reducing my roles and responsibilities. Um, and I think, so like, I had gone from working full-time, to four days a week, then down to two days with the option of doing a third day, right? So, I really reduced my work so that I could concentrate on school, right? I had the financial privilege to do that right? Um, and like I don't have kids so that, um [pause], I don't have kids so, I think that really helps. Um, you know, I don't, [pause], um, so, I would say that I was lucky that I was able to reduce stuff so that I could spend time on schoolwork. So, I guess then in essence it did, you know, I've cut out a lot of social time. I've cut out, um, you know I've cut a lot of things out to focus mostly on school.

Alicia: Ok, thinking back to when you made that decision to cut back on your work hours [pause]. Where did you get that idea from?

Sue: Um, well, my work, it was just like, I was like ok, I could either, like, do poorly in school, I didn't want [pause]. I probably wouldn't have been able to do poorly, but I think also like my mental health was just at capacity. Right? Like, it was like any, like, any drop in the bucket would, you know, send it over the bucket. Right? Um, over the edge of the bucket. It was up to the lip, right? Um, and my workplace, I [pause]. There was a lot of, um, there were a lot of traumatic incidents, right? Like, I worked with people who were impacted by the [redacted], right? So, it was like, I can't [pause]. Something's got to give. Right? Like, I have to get rid of something or else I'm going to fall apart, right? Like, I'm not able to do it all. So, it was for my mental health, I would say.

Edited Quote. The second quote is the edited version (see Chapter 5):

Sue: I've had the privilege of really, like, reducing my roles and responsibilities. . . . I had

gone from working full-time, to four days a week, then down to two days with the option

of doing a third day, right? So, I really reduced my work so that I could concentrate on

school, right? I had the financial privilege to do that . . .

Alicia: Ok, thinking back to when you made that decision to cut back on your work hours

[pause]. Where did you get that idea from?

Sue: Um, well, my work, it was just like [so stressful], I was like ok, I could either, like,

do poorly in school [or poorly in work]. . . . [Pause.] I probably wouldn't have been able

to do poorly. But I think also think, like, my mental health was just at capacity. . . . It was

like any drop in the bucket would you know, send it over the bucket. Right? Um, over the

edge of the bucket. It was up to the lip. . . . There were a lot of traumatic incidents [at

work]. . . . So, it was like, I can't. [Pause.] Something's got to give. Right? Like, I have to

get rid of something or else I'm going to fall apart, right? Like, I'm not able to do it all.

So, [ending employment] was for my mental health, I would say.

In this example, I kept the context of her language. The primary way I did this was in the

inclusion of some of the times Sue said "right," "you know," "um," and "like." This indicated to

the reader that Sue was asking me to track what she was saying, while decreasing the distraction

of what some readers may consider to be extraneous language. It also adds credence to my

interpretation of Sue's words and speech patterns as her feeling hesitant about admitting to me

that she could not work full-time and be a full-time learner.

Standardized Quote. To highlight the differences between verbatim, edited, and

standardized transcripts, I ask the reader to re-read the edited quote above and then this same

quote (below) with the words "right," "you know," and "um" removed. In other words, I standardized the quote by removing slang.

> Sue: I've had the privilege of really reducing my roles and responsibilities. . . . I had gone from working full-time . . . to two days with the option of doing a third day. So, I really reduced my work so that I could concentrate on school. I had the financial privilege to do that . . .
>
> Alicia: Thinking back to when you made that decision to cut back on your work hours [pause]. Where did you get that idea from?
>
> Sue: Well, my work, it was just so stressful, I felt I could either do poorly in school or poorly in work. . . . [Pause.] I probably wouldn't have been able to do poorly. But I think also think my mental health was just at capacity. . . . It was as if any drop in the bucket would send it over the bucket. . . . There were a lot of traumatic incidents at work. . . . So, I felt that something's got to give. I had to get rid of something or else I'm going to fall apart because I'm not able to do it all. Ending employment was for my mental health, I would say.

Both the edited and what I have labelled sanitized versions of the quote let the reader know that Sue achieved mental health balance through reducing her employment hours. I hope that by reading the edited quote followed by the sanitized quote, the reader will be able to identify how removing the contextual words may change the way in which the reader perceives Sue. In the edited quote, the "right," "you know," and "um" convey hesitancy, perhaps a lack of self-confidence in Sue's decision-making, and that Sue was asking if I understood what she was saying. In the sanitized quote, Sue appears to be confidently conveying her decision. By

sanitizing the quote, I potentially changed the reader's perception, and my analysis of written transcriptions, of Sue's lived experience.

Summary of Rationale

Although I did not work from interview transcripts and opted to instead code the audio files, I still needed to have some transcription done to quote participants in my thesis and to provide participant disability accommodations. This transcription was a creative and interpretive act (Berg, 2005; Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; Poland, 1995; Shelton & Flint, 2019) that I leveraged to amplify the participants' lived experience while self-accommodating my disability.

Chapter 5: Findings

An introduction to the participants and an exploration the experience of their Master of Counselling (MC) journey situates their perspectives of mental health and peer mentoring into their personal contexts. I will then describe the major themes in each participant's account of their journey, followed by comparison of these themes across cases. Analyses of the participants' perceptions of mental health showed that there were both positive and negative influences of online education on learner mental health, and that learners believed that the institution bears a responsibility for learner welfare. Examination of participants' perspectives of peer mentoring revealed that they defined it as the act of sharing experiential knowledge in a supportive manner. Additionally, they considered peer mentoring as having special relevance for graduate student counsellors.

In my early writing drafts, I referred to the participants by number in the order in which they were interviewed for ease of reference. From this point onward, I refer to them by their pseudonyms: Ona (P1), Sue (P2), Beatrice (P3), and Cora (P4).

Participant Description

Formal demographic data were not collected from the participants. Rather, I invited participants to self-identify salient personal characteristics. At the outset of Interview 1, I invited participants to tell me about themselves. Throughout their study participation, the participants shared further details that contributed to my description of them.

All of the participants were women, spoke English fluently and lived in Canada. Ona and Beatrice were mature learners. They all worked full-time while enrolled in the MC program and were hoping to start a new career with their MC degree. Each participant lived with a significant other; two of the participants (Ona and Cora) had children living with them. Ona, Sue, and

Beatrice all mentioned pets during their interviews. Ona, Sue, and Beatrice referred to having a disability or a chronic health condition; of the three, Beatrice was the only participant to mention being registered with the university's support office for disabled learners. Sue and Cora stated that at the time of the study, they were enrolled in the last course needed to complete their degree. Ona and Beatrice had both deferred their practicum (i.e., an 8-month unpaid counselling internship necessary for graduation typically taken in final year of the program) and were preparing to start it in the next semester.

Participants' Experience of Their MC Journey

I analyzed data for themes of participant experience of their MC journey. These analyses resulted in three or four overarching themes for each participant (see Table 2).

Table 2

Themes by Participant

Name	Overarching themes
Ona	• Locating her motivational why: Honouring the memory of a deceased family member • Transitioning employment identity: Moving into retirement at the same time as starting a second career • Being challenged by time management: Cramming it all in • Managing her health: Online education removes barriers
Sue	• Prioritizing schoolwork over employment: "Something's got to give" • Experiencing double isolation: Feeling isolated and alone • Reframing expectations: Perceptions of academic workloads • Handling health challenges: "Minimize harm caused" by online education
Beatrice	• Seeing the value in her "baggage": Disability and life experience • "Trying to interpret tone": Online groupwork challenges • Remaining employed: Being a full-time learner without "living a full-time student life"
Cora	• Learning how to connect: Talking with peers "in an online world" • "Finding those pockets of time": Time management pressures caused by learning at home

Name	Overarching themes
	• Ending the "never-ending cycle of regularly being 'wrong'": Combatting graduate school guilt through peer connection

Verbs were used in the themes to highlight the participants' sense of agency and action during their MC journey.

Ona

Locating Her Motivational Why: Honouring the Memory of a Deceased Family Member. For all the participants, the first interview question invited them to tell me about themselves. In response, Ona listed her family roles, mature student status and her imminent retirement. When I paraphrased these identities back to her and inquired if there was anything else about herself she would like to share, she hesitated and then shared a story about a death in her family. As a novice researcher in my first interview with the participant about a topic that was unrelated to family trauma, I was unprepared for this disclosure. Her story touched an emotional chord in me; when I rewatched the video recording of the interview, I saw myself visibly trying to collect my emotions and maintain a sense of professional decorum. At the time I struggled with connecting her disclosure to her MC experience. After a review of Ona's data together as a whole, I came to realize that Ona's disclosure of this trauma honoured the family member's memory related to her MC journey. This was highlighted at a later point in the initial interview and in one of her writing prompt responses.

In her initial interview, Ona shared that prior to the death, the family member had stated that they were "so proud of me for wanting to become a counsellor." Later in the same interview, Ona shared that she "was really impressed with the quality" of her classmates. She said this with pride in her voice and I heard echoes of the pride that her deceased family member had in her; in other words, Ona's identification that she was on par with "quality" people demonstrated that she

still had the academic qualities that the deceased family member was proud of her for. In this way, Ona's MC journey honoured the memory of this beloved family member.

In her response to the comic strip writing prompt, Ona wrote about her struggles with sleeping past her morning alarm. She wrote that she "would think of how proud [the deceased family member] was of me, and that would get me out of bed to start my day." Here again I saw the importance of honouring the memory of her loved one; even in death, her family member was her motivational why for achieving her academic goals.

Transitioning Employment Identity: Moving Into Retirement at the Same Time as Starting a Second Career. Ona listed her imminent retirement as one of the important things that I should know about her. Ona was a mature student and had nearly completed her first career. At the time of the second interview, she was about three months away from her official retirement date. This date coincided with the commencement of her MC practicum. Ona revealed a sense of uncertainty about transitioning from a salaried full-time employee to an unpaid counselling intern, as well as a sense of certainty that she would be able to rely on the "lessons learned" in her first career for her second career.

Ona appeared to be uncertain about the change in financial stability that her upcoming retirement and practicum would cause. Ona shared that she was "very blessed with the area of money because of . . . a fairly good salary rate", however, she also shared that she was "coming up to an area, a time period where I'm not going to have enough [income], and well, that's going to be a challenge." The time that she was referring to was her simultaneous forthcoming retirement and her 8-month MC practicum. In this time, she was anticipating a reduction in income through switching from a salaried income to a pension. Furthermore, her upcoming practicum placement was unpaid (as is standard in MC programs), and there would be a gap of

several months between her practicum placement ending and being licensed as a paid counsellor. It was unsurprising that the financial difference between this time and her long years of stable, well-paid employment created feelings of uncertainty for Ona.

At each point of providing data for this study, Ona conveyed a significant feeling of carrying forward "lessons learned" from her first career to her second. She wrote about this in the following excerpt from her response to the audio podcast writing prompt:

I find it intriguing that the very first article in the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association's 2007 Code of Ethics has to do with self-care. This is definitely something I need to do more of as I enter this second career. I think that pulling from my previous experiences in my first career can help me here. I remember working [as assistant for someone] who actually had me book some time every day for her to spend without attending meetings. . . . I saw how that energized her. Applied to my upcoming career as a therapist, if I could schedule a break after each client, for example, so that I can do paperwork and then meditate / breathe before my next one, that would help me pace my work, so I am not overextending myself.

Being Challenged by Time Management: Cramming It All In. Ona worked full-time and was enrolled as a full-time MC learner. During this time, she also attended to family and household responsibilities, grieved the death of a family member, and volunteered at a local charity. At one point during her MC program, she reduced her employment from five days a week to two. This meant she "had to try to cram all of [it] . . . into those two days."

When I asked Ona to identify three aspects of learning in an online environment that affected her mental health in Interview 1, Ona unequivocally stated that time management challenges were at the top of the list. She said,

I was working full-time and taking online classes, so basically I had . . . work and I had

school. And somewhere in there I would eat. And somewhere in there I would sleep. But

I really didn't have anything else. . . . My friends were like, where are you? [Laughter.]

And, ah, the only break I really gave myself was Facebook. Ah, I didn't go out much, at

all. Unless it was with my husband to a restaurant or something like that.

Later in the interview she linked the time she spent on Facebook to "keeping up with

[her] peers," which meant that at least part of the break she gave herself was dedicated to finding

time for peer connection. Even when she was going out for a social activity, she reported that she

combined physical needs (e.g., eating) with social needs (e.g., time with her husband) into the

same chunk of time. In a writing prompt response, Ona stated that over the course of her MC

program she relied on her paper time management planner to be able to find "time to do

homework, to watch TV and to cook (which I love to do)"; this enabled her to "stay on track

over the last five years" of her program.

In Interview 2, Ona identified that the blog writing prompt "made [her] think the most"

because it reflected her time management challenges. When I asked her what it made her think

about, she said,

Well, it's not easy for me to admit that I was finding it difficult to manage my time

because there was times that I could have managed it better, but I didn't feel like it so I

didn't. And [authoring a response to the audio podcast prompt], [pause] kind of [pause]

was one of those aha moments for me. . . . I think, finally, when I really was honest with

myself, I really had to admit to myself that time management was not my forte.

There was evidence of personal growth that occurred for Ona in between the two

interviews, through the process of responding to the prompts. In the first interview, she

externalized the responsibility for her time management struggles through a discussion about the practicalities of her time management pressures. In the second interview, she internalized the responsibility through articulating a personal weakness to herself (and me). The pauses that she took when admitting this appeared to show a depth of emotion and strength of character that it took for her to say these words out loud. Ona connected this realization that time management was an issue for her because of a personal weakness, and not because of the number of demands on her time, to the experience of reflecting on and responding to the writing prompt.

Managing Her Health: Online Education Removes Barriers. Ona shared that she had underlying physical and mental health conditions that she needed to manage while completing her MC. In Interview 1, she talked about experiencing insomnia caused by her workload stress, shared that program challenges triggered some mental health struggles, and stated that she had experienced altitude sickness during her first summer institute in Calgary, AB. In her writing prompt responses, she indicated that she "had to have surgery [that necessitated] one week off" of her coursework, "was exhausted most of the time" and experienced "self-induced anxiety" that was related to achieving high grades. In Interview 2, she spoke broadly about being "pretty overwhelm[ed]" and about the negative impact on her energy levels that were caused by poor nutrition.

Ona disclosed that she had a physical disability in her response to the photo montage writing prompt:

I would be remiss were I not to mention the advantage of being away from toxic chemicals by being able to attend school from my own home. That was huge for me! I also found the fragrance-free policy at Mount Royal (where I went to three summer residence courses) simply phenomenal. Rarely did I ever have an issue there. I have [a

disability] and my symptoms are neurological in nature (headaches, problems

concentrating, stuttering, disorientation) so having that pressure taken off me was a

significant help. My disabilities are invisible and not many understand the extent of them,

so it was a relief not to have to constantly explain my needs to people.

Of note, the photograph montage writing prompt depicted a learner with a visible

physical disability. Ona recognized herself in the visible disability, despite identifying that her

disability was invisible. Interestingly, the quote above was the fourth of five paragraphs that she

wrote, and the topic of disability was not mentioned in the other paragraphs or indeed anywhere

else in her data. She also did not disclose a disabled student registration with the AU's Learner

Support Services.

Throughout her data were references to aspects of online education that enabled her to

complete her MC. For example, she recounted being able to manage her energy due to the

"flexibility of the [class discussion post] expectations." In the quote above about her disability,

Ona clearly stated that one of the advantages of completing an online MC degree was the ability

to manage her physical health through not being exposed to environmental triggers of her

disability symptoms. Based on the references that she made, it is likely that the structured

attendance requirements and physical environment of an on-campus MC program would have

made it quite challenging for Ona to achieve her graduate education. Online education removed

these barriers and made it possible for Ona to obtain the academic credentials necessary for her

second career as a counsellor.

Sue

Prioritizing Schoolwork Over Employment: "Something's Got to Give." Sue worked

full-time while enrolled in full-time graduate education until her last year and a half of the

program. Sue's job was emotional demanding, and she was concerned about her mental health capacity given her job while completing her program. She articulated that over the course of the program, she had the "privilege" of reducing her employment hours. She talked about this in Interview 1:

> I've had the privilege of really, like, reducing my roles and responsibilities. . . . I had gone from working full-time, to four days a week, then down to two days with the option of doing a third day, right? So, I really reduced my work so that I could concentrate on school, right? I had the financial privilege to do that . . . my work, it was just like [so stressful], I was like ok, I could either, like, do poorly in school [or poorly in work]. . . . [Pause.] I probably wouldn't have been able to do poorly. But I think also think, like, my mental health was just at capacity. . . . It was like any drop in the bucket would you know, send it over the bucket. Right? Um, over the edge of the bucket. It was up to the lip. . . . There were a lot of traumatic incidents [at work]. . . . So, it was like, I can't. [pause] Something's got to give. Right? Like, I have to get rid of something or else I'm going to fall apart, right? Like, I'm not able to do it all. So, [ending employment] was for my mental health, I would say.

She further disclosed that her household relocated to another part of the province about the same time that she was preparing for practicum. She described this move as "lucky," as she was able to eliminate her employment hours due to the move; this made room for her to focus solely on her practicum.

Sue's description of her decision and ability to reduce her employment responsibilities over time is admittedly challenging to follow due to her hesitant language and repeated use of "you know" and "right?" However, read in light of her comments in the same interview that she

had "experience[d] stigma around online learning" and "judgement [from other people] regarding not working," the reason for her hesitant language usage became clear. Sue experienced discrimination based on her education and employment choices, and the hesitation in sharing about these topics with me were evidence of both her willingness to share and self protection. When she talked about the stigma of her online education, I noted that her tone and body language were open; this is likely due to the safety of talking about a shared experience with me as she knew I was also an online learner. When she talked about the judgement she had experienced about choosing to be unemployed, I noted that her tone and body language were closed; this is likely due to her not knowing my own views on employment status and remaining self-protective as a result.

Experiencing Double Isolation: Feeling Isolated and Alone. Sue disclosed that she experienced a double isolation as a GOL. This isolation left her feeling both physically apart from school peers (isolated) and emotionally distance from her non-school friends (alone). This was evident in an excerpt from Interview 1, wherein she identified isolation as the number one influence on her mental health in online education in response to my query about the top three things that affect her mental health as an online learner:

Hmm [pause]. I think [pause]. Well, that's interesting because I think I would say isolation. . . . It's like you don't have like school friends to, like, I dunno, go to, like, the campus pub with, or something along those lines. [pause] Yeah, I would say isolation because I think, like, being on campus, it's sort of like you're surrounded in this university community. Whereas being online, your day to day isn't like [on campus university]. The people around you don't really, like, understand the stress of [online] university.

In this excerpt, Sue painted a picture of being by herself no matter where she was. She described a longing for physical social connections with her online peers (e.g., going to the campus pub). She contrasted this with the being able to physically connect with her in-person friends but feeling emotionally distanced from them because they did not "understand [her] stress." Of note, she appeared to be confident in her opinion as evidenced by a significant reduction in her hesitant language.

Later in the study, Sue shared that she had "recently" found a way to combat her isolation. From the conversational context, "recently" meant the last course of her program. The timing of this last course coincided with the summer of 2020, during which online connections became normalized for everyone due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In her response to the photograph montage writing prompt, Sue described feeling "more connected to my peers" during this time. She listed social media, text-based cell phone apps and video conferencing platforms as ways that she created an online community. In this community, she met "with classmates to just talk about the [school] week and life." It is possible that the awareness of ways to connect with friends online came to the forefront for Sue due to the pandemic health restrictions that prohibited in-person gatherings. However, it is also possible that Sue felt confident in actively creating an online community due to her familiarity with her classmates after being in the same program with them for three years.

Reframing Expectations: Perceptions of Academic Workloads. Sue recalled she experienced workload issues at the start of her MC. These were caused by a perceived unrealistic suggested timeframe for coursework by the university. Sue shared that this led her to question her academic abilities; she wondered if she was "not a good enough student because this is taking me longer than [the recommended hours]?" In the interview, I observed that she had a soft

tone in her voice and a downward gaze as she shared that she "was struggling [and wondering] why I can't do this". Her body language indicated that this questioning may have caused a negative self view, low self-esteem, and a sense of shame for not living up to the recommended university time guidelines.

In her response to the podcast writing prompt, Sue wrote that she had an "issue of perfectionism." Looking at her data as a whole, an instance of the "issue of perfectionism" was present at the start of her MC. Sue took the university guidelines for the number of hours spent on coursework at face value and internalized them as an arbitrary standard of student excellence that she was required to meet to be "good enough." This appeared to result in a feeling of unworthiness. In the second interview, she said that over time she realized that "the things that I'm struggling with in grad school are common." This realization reframed her internalized shame to a belief that she was experiencing typical graduate learner workload stress through "self-compassion strategies". Sue shared that these "self-compassion strategies . . . less[ened] the hold that perfectionism" had on her.

Handling Health Challenges: "Minimize Harm Caused" by Online Education. In her response to the photograph montage writing prompt and elsewhere, Sue divulged that she had put "increased strain on [her] back and neck from all the time spent at the computer [for online coursework]" and "strained [her] eyes badly." In this prompt response, Sue advised future students to "take ergonomics into consideration" to "minimize harm to the body" when completing coursework online.

Throughout her data, Sue talked about a chronic health condition and mental health ailments that negatively impacted her available energy and time for coursework. Her chronic health condition reduced her available physical energy to do coursework. While she did not

identify the condition as a disability, the symptoms of her condition would likely have qualified her to register as an accommodated learner in her program. Sue disclosed that she "struggle[d] with depression and anxiety" that necessitated days away from coursework. A formal diagnosis of these conditions would also likely have qualified her for accommodations. While Sue spoke openly about these physical and mental health conditions, she did not link them to her feelings of shame caused by an inability to meet the university's time guidelines for coursework completion. Internalized ableism may be one reason why she did not link the two.

Beatrice

Seeing the Value in "Baggage": Disability and Life Experience. In response to my invitation to tell me about herself in Interview 1, Beatrice readily disclosed that she had a mental health disability and that she was a mature learner. I was honoured that Beatrice was so open about their mental health diagnosis with me. As a disabled person, I admired her self-confidence and unashamed approach to public identification as a disabled person. In interview one, she mentioned her disability experience as a strength that she contributed to her academic peer community:

Um, I live with mental illness. . . . Ah, so, it's been interesting to be um, to be in this [MC] program not only as a student [counsellor] but also someone who has been the [client]. I always like to say because I've struggled with my mental health for so long, I always like to say that I'm a professional client. So, um ah, I actually, I've really helped a lot of people in my, ah, in my course work because often times they don't know what it's like from the client perspective. So, I've been able to provide some of that for them.

Beatrice shared her emotional struggle to register as a learner with a disability in her response to the audio podcast writing prompt:

Because I have a mental illness I registered for an accommodated student designation. I

didn't in my first year because I was too proud and wanted to do this on my own. When

my multicultural course triggered [my mental health disability] I should have caught it

then but it took me another 6 months. I did not feel any stigma from the University, it was

self-stigma, and steadfast determination that nothing was going to stand in my way of my

degree. This was a crucial decision that I made and had I not I don't think I would still be

in school. As I was reading the podcast I said to myself yes this makes sense, yes this is

basic stuff but I did struggle to apply these principles in my own life. Having a peer

mentor may have helped me see through the haze and access what I already knew.

In this excerpt, Beatrice identified that her struggle might have been easier if she had had

a peer mentor. The implication in her statement is that a peer mentor would have normalized her

need for accommodation. In other words, there was value for Beatrice in learning about other

people's baggage.

In Interview 1, Beatrice recalled that at the start of her MC program, she was challenged

by the significant age difference between herself and her peers. However, she found that

the more that [she] would talk about [her] uncertainty . . . [the more she] really noticed

that everyone was so supportive of each other. And then everyone start[ed] opening up

about their own experiences regardless of what they are . . . the fact that we're

experiencing stress for whatever reason is, is kind of common amongst us.

In Interview 2, Beatrice shared that "within the first month [she] felt pretty comfortable"

and was no longer challenged by her mature learner status. She released her mature student

baggage and fully embraced learner life in her academic community.

"Trying to Interpret Tone": Online Groupwork Challenges. When invited to share about the influence of online learning on her mental health in Interview 1, Beatrice divulged that online groupwork had the potential to trigger one of her mental health illnesses. When I asked what three aspects of online learning influence her mental health, she said:

Oh, my goodness. [astounded tone of voice, sat back in her chair and visibly tensed up] . . . d'you know what? It's just, it's pretty amazing that you're asking that question because you, because of the week I had last week. . . . [Pause.] Trying to interpret tone. Um, trying to interpret meaning behind um, interaction that you're having with, with another student. Ah, so I'm going to try and make this as quick and dirty as I can, cause I know I have an hour but it's [a long story. Laughter.] . . . So, we had [a group class project where part of our grade was participation marks from our groupmates] . . . one person in our group was extremely passive aggressive. Um, ah condescending, rude. . . . It was extremely challenging dealing with this person in a digital format. Because I really wanted to say, listen [you need to change your communication], but I also, I wanted to say it in a, a professional and collaborative tone but it was just so hard too. The more I tried, the worse it got. You know what I mean? So, um, it got so bad that the last day that we were working on the wiki I was having a panic attack. She triggered me . . .

Conversely, Beatrice also identified that text-based asynchronous communication in the same class, with the same platform, as having the capability to reduce her stress. In her response to the written blog writing prompt, she wrote

In this course I do have more of a sense of community because we chat as a class on Microsoft teams. We consistently bounce things off each other and have a place to vent.

When others are talking about what they are working on it lights a fire under me, so it is

definitely motivating.

Her statement in Interview 1 and her written response were authored 10 days apart. The

difference between the two chat groups (online environments) seemed to be their purpose. The

groupwork chat's purpose was to fulfil an assignment for grades, whereas the class chat purpose

was to create a "sense of community." The pressure of being marked on each other's wiki

participation amplified the need to understand each other. Added to this pressure was a "very

high [self] expectation [for A grades]" that Beatrice wrote about in her response to the audio

podcast writing prompt. Although these same grade pressures would have existed for Beatrice

for in-person learning, the extra challenge of text-based communication was clearly a stressor

linked to learning online.

Remaining Employed: Being a Full-Time Learner Without "Living a Full-Time

Student Life." Beatrice repeatedly stated that she valued the flexible nature of online education.

She contrasted to this with statements about feeling "stuck in [her] job." At the close of

Interview 1, I invited Beatrice to share anything else that she would like to say about anything

we had talked about. In response, she shared her high valuation of online learning opportunities:

I think one of the great things about the students at Athabasca, for the most part, is they

have other things going on in their lives. Um, I think that's kind of one of the draws of

online learning is that . . . even though you're a full-time student, you're not living a full-

time student life . . . like you would in a brick and mortar institution.

In her response to the photograph montage writing prompt, Beatrice wrote about the

contrast between the "freedom" of online education and feeling "stuck" in her job:

These photos remind me that my experience as a grad student at Athabasca has been flexible. . . . The format of the program allows me to work full-time in a high demand occupation. I have had the support of my organization in the first couple of years of my master's with money towards tuition and time off for the summer institute. Even though my organization is less supportive today, as I am closing in on the end of my program, I am still able to find opportunities during my workday to attend to school. It was important for me to be in charge of the pace of my program which is why I did not choose a brick and mortar institution. I did not want to be tied to a class. As a student in GCAP, I can access my courses from anywhere which gives me a sense of freedom. I feel stuck in my job, so this sense of liberty is important to me.

Beatrice carried the importance of the "liberty" of online education into her second interview when she spoke about her search process for a master's level psychology degree program. She said, "when I was looking for a university, I knew that I wanted a university online" so that she could continue working while taking her degree.

Beatrice's first career was in a highly regulated environment. She had a defined role with a specific set of rules to follow. Beatrice appreciated her employment, however she felt "stuck" in her current job. Obtaining her master's degree a handful of years before her retirement from this career meant that she would be able to transition from the role into a new one that came with more autonomy and then into a second career after retirement. Her employment would have been significantly impacted or terminated if she had to take an extended leave of absence in order to attend in-person education. Online education gave her the ability to be both a full-time worker and a full-time learner.

Cora

Learning How to Connect: Talking With Peers "in an Online World." Cora shared

how she learned to connect with peers at the start of her program, and her perspective on how the

institution could promote connection within the program. Near the beginning of the first

interview, I asked Cora to think back to that first year, to what her connections with other

students were like. She said, "I guess that very first semester though was kind of, [pause], I don't

know, lonely. You know, you are online, and you did the [discussion forum posts], but you

didn't, besides those tiny pictures, you didn't really know anybody." She then shared about the

connections she was able to make with peers in later classes. I asked her how she transitioned

from communicating in the discussion forums to what sounded like forming friendships. Cora

recalled that "it kind of transpired within the discussion forms, you know as we were kind of

pushed to be more vulnerable in them and, like, open and honest rather than just being so surface

level." Cora also recounted group work activities that promoted peer connection. In the group

work,

> it was just easier to kind of text or connect through [apps]. . . . So, then it was away from
>
> the whole school and academic side and was more, right? Like we're connecting
>
> personally, right? Willing to share you know, private information with somebody, right?
>
> Your phone number is kind of something you keep close now.

These opportunities to share personal information is what created peer connection for

Cora at the start of her online program. Cora had a pointed reaction to the suggestion in the

written blog writing prompt that appeared to state that creating online peer connections was easy:

> This blog post oversimplifies the realities of online learning and how to overcome them.
>
> The reality is, its not that easy. "Fostering a community" and "turning to classmates" is

hard when you have never seen their faces, heard their voices, or know anything about them, aside from their profile bio and their class introductions but most often, those are surface level and they do not provide you with a thorough understanding of who your peers are. This is especially hard in the first year of the program as everyone is just trying to gain their footing, understand the expectations, and help him or herself. As the saying goes, put your own oxygen mask on first.

Cora talked more about this in Interview 2:

More like how and when you're in an online world like how, how do you make that [peer connection] possible. Like, it just seems easier when we're in person and you can see these people, right? And then you sit beside each other in class or you know you, you chat at the beginning of class whereas [online you don't have that opportunity] . . . [once you] made those connections through the online world, then those things occur right? Like, you will text a peer over the weekend or like those kinds of things . . . [the AU Blog told us to] reach out to a peer. Well, you know, that doesn't always feel comfortable when you, you know, first have met them and it's in an online space right? So, you don't actually know them.

Cora identified her program's discussion forums as the initial place to get to know her peers. She shared that group work provided informal opportunities to further these connections. Cora identified feeling uncomfortable with reaching out to peers when she only knew them on a surface level. Her description of group work implied that she leveraged it as a reason to connect with her peers outside of the online classroom.

From this perspective, there was an expressed responsibility for the institution to promote peer connection as a built-in course and program function. Cora spoke about the benefits that this would provide for learners:

> that loneliness in the first year and you know you're, you're trying to make connections but then it's like seems almost like not authentic because you don't get to see these people and but you're supposed to be open and you know share so much with them. Um, and then those feelings like as we actually did get to know each other and how like that felt so reassuring and it was so comforting to have these people you could turn to.

Cora brought cultural location nuance into the conversation with her perspective about peer connection in her response to the audio podcast writing prompt:

> At first, connections within your academic field are limited and developing those can be challenging, especially for online learners. There can be many kilometers between students or even countries. This makes "connecting" difficult and in that you depend on the forums to formulate an understanding of one another and to make a connection that way. This is HARD. *(emphasis is the participant's)*

This excerpt highlighted the concept of learner shared institutional culture. When learners are at an on-campus university, there is somewhat of a shared culture due to the shared experience of the physical parameters of the university (e.g., studying outside in the sunshine, bonding over the poor quality cafeteria food). In an online academic environment, the learners remain in the physical parameters of their own home or culture. Transactional distance makes it "hard" to create a connection based on the learner experience of the online space. Hard does not mean impossible, however, as Cora identified that existing course forums could create a space for peer connection to be formed.

"Finding Those Pockets of Time": Time Management Pressures Caused by Learning at Home. In Interview 1, I asked Cora to think about learning in an online environment and what three aspects that affected her mental health. Cora shared two aspects. The first was stress caused by asynchronous communication with peers and the second was time management pressures caused by online learning in a home environment. She described these pressures as

> [having] to kind of schedule [schoolwork] yourself. It's not like ok you have class from this time to this time. It's, you have to figure out a way to make it work for yourself. Which is a pro and a con. Right? Um [long pause] . . . for myself, that's like, it's always there on the back of my mind. Right, ok, I have like this, this, and this to do but I also have to get some schoolwork done. And like, you know so, you know, finding those pockets of time and it's like ok, you know I should do this reading, but [pause], like you know, the floors could really be mopped as well. You know so then it's. Yeah. And, whereas sometimes it just would, like, ok, if I knew that I had class from like one till three then you know that just was what it was, and I'd have to be there. Whereas instead I was trying to make those [pause], yeah, [pause] boundaries, I guess. Those schedules.

Cora communicated that she pushed back against the time management pressures caused by self-directed learning by creating schedules for herself. She shared that this was not an easy process in her response to the photograph montage prompt, when she wrote that:

> At times it is a struggle to stand up and walk away from your computer. The concept of boundaries, self-care, and staying connected with the people in your life were challenging and challenged at times. Although I would step away from computer there were many times that school would drift back into my thoughts and I would struggle to remain in the

moment and fight the urge to run back to my computer to complete some form of

schoolwork.

In these excerpts, Cora identified that the pressures of her household responsibilities were

difficult to escape from while she was inside her home; she contrasted this with an on-campus

experience, where the household pressures did not exist. In her home, Cora was a "wife and

mother" with omnipresent household responsibilities; on campus, Cora would have been a

learner with no immediate household duties to eat into her academic time. Creating at-home

schedules for herself formed the boundaries of "pockets of time" that she could fill with her

coursework.

Ending the "Never-Ending Cycle of Regularly Being 'Wrong'": Combatting

Graduate School Guilt. When I invited Cora to tell me about herself at the start of Interview 1,

Cora shared her small-town identity, family roles and employment details with me. She also

shared that over the course of her MC, she worked full-time and became a mother. When I asked

her about how these responsibilities affected her online learning, she said:

> Like anything else, I think, it, it comes and goes. Um, [pause]. There was definitely times
>
> where the outside stuff felt like it was, you know, more looming than the expectations of
>
> graduate school. Um [long pause] . . . Just like, especially like right after having my son,
>
> it was like, I have this newborn and I have school to do, and it's just like how, to balance
>
> those two things, like that, you know? Um, but that's also a benefit to the online
>
> schooling as well, that, right?. . . . So yeah, being a mom for sure. Um, and a wife. Um,
>
> there was times where you, I'd have to like decline to do something with friends or
>
> something. Just being, like, you know, I have, you know some schoolwork to work on
>
> and stuff like that. And at times that was hard, just them not completely understanding

um [pause]. Partially because I think I wasn't going to a building, right? And going to school it was like, I'm going to go to my basement and sit on my computer [laughter].

When I asked Cora what kind pressures in the rest of her life affected her as a graduate learner, and how she balanced these pressures and school, she said, "I worked full time through my entire masters" which was "challenging", which "became more challenging" after becoming a mother. She identified the determination of priorities as both a stressor and a benefit to her mental health. In her response to the comic strip prompt, Cora wrote about the experience of making decisions about these priorities:

> I struggled to be an academic, a mother, and a wife, while working full-time. I often found myself struggling to remain present. When I was with my son my subconscious was telling me about all the schoolwork I had to do but, when I was doing schoolwork my subconscious was criticizing me for not being with my son. While at work I was thinking about my son and school. . . . It was a never-ending cycle of regularly being "wrong." It helped when I "met" more of my peers and knew that they were also struggling with the same things. To know that I was not the only mom, or the only one feeling overwhelmed at times, or to hear that they too felt inadequate at times made it safe. I wasn't failing at being a mom, or a wife, or a student, I was normal and normal means that life can be challenging and uncertain and ugly.

Cora described feelings of graduate school guilt as a result of her prioritizations. These feelings abated as she created meaningful peer connections that normalized her graduate learner life experience. This normalization occurred for her about the middle of her MC journey. She may have placed less pressure on herself during the first half of her degree, had she been able to

create strong connections (or had a peer mentor) at the beginning of her journey to normalize her experiences.

Cross-Case Comparison

I utilized abstraction, contextualization, and a pictorial form to cross-compare the cases. Abstraction resulted in four themes. Contextualization examined three key demographic differences in the sample. A pictorial representation of the cross-case comparison illustrated influences on the participants' mental health during their MC journey.

Abstraction

I identified four themes: deprioritization of one's first career, preservation of physical and mental health, redistribution of time commitments, and socialization "in an online world" (see Table 3).

Deprioritization of One's First Career. The participants spoke about the deprioritization of their current career as a result of their MC journey. Each participant stated that the reason for embarking on their MC was to enter a new career. Full-time employment while engaged in full-time learning necessitated a shift in prioritization of tasks related to their current employment to tasks needed to complete their MC. Participants placed an emphasis on finding the "something [that's] got to give" (Sue) at work rather than at school. Participants found the *something to give* through reducing the amount of time spent in paid employment, taking unpaid leaves of absences, using paid vacation or sick time, or completing coursework during work hours.

Table 3

Summary of Themes

Theme	Participant examples
Deprioritization of one's first career	• Prioritizing schoolwork over employment: "Something's got to give" (Sue) • Remaining employed: Being a full-time learner without "living a full-time student life" (Beatrice) • Transitioning employment identity: Moving into retirement at the same time as starting a second career (Ona)
Preservation of physical and mental health	• Experiencing double isolation: Feeling isolated and alone (Sue) • Handling health challenges: "Minimize harm caused" by online education (Sue) • Managing her health: Online education removes barriers (Ona) • Seeing the value in her "baggage": Disability and life experience (Beatrice)
Redistribution of time commitments	• Being challenged by time management: Cramming it all in (Ona) • Ending the "never-ending cycle of regularly being 'wrong'": Combatting graduate school guilt (Cora) • "Finding those pockets of time": Time management pressures caused by learning at home (Cora) • Locating her motivational why: Honouring the memory of a deceased family member (Ona) • Reframing expectations: Perceptions of academic workloads (Sue)
Socialization "in an online world"	• Learning how to connect: Talking with peers "in an online world" (Cora) • "Trying to interpret tone": Online groupwork challenges (Beatrice)

Preservation of Physical and Mental Health. The participants communicated that finding ways to preserve their physical and mental health was key to their successful MC journey. The flexibility of online education bolstered their options for this success through being able to self-manage their schedule and not being required to attend class in an on-campus classroom. At the same time, participants were challenged by feelings of isolation and physical

health issues related to extended computer usage; they linked these feelings and issues to being an online learner. The participants disclosed the importance of managing their underlying physical and mental health conditions/disabilities.

Redistribution of Time Commitments. The participants voiced their struggle to redistribute their time commitments. They shared that the struggle was the hardest in the first half of their MC journey. The struggle was compounded by feeling that they were caught in a "never-ending cycle of regularly being 'wrong'" (Cora) about the way that they were spending their time. Participants were able to interrupt this cycle through the creation of time boundaries, utilization of all available time, a recollection of their enrolment purpose, and an increased self-awareness.

Socialization "in an Online World." The participants spoke about their experience of learning how to socialize with their online peers. Socialization initially took place inside the online classroom platform through responding to written discussion forum posts; the topics for these posts were largely initiated by their instructors and the participants were graded on their participation in the forums. The participants described feeling performance pressure that affected their ability to connect meaningfully with peers during this initial socialization. Over time, the participants socialized with peers outside of the online classroom. The participants identified group work as the primary way that this occurred; the participants recalled that it was easier to complete group work outside of the university-provided communication platforms (e.g., via cell phone text messaging instead of Moodle). Of note, the participants also identified MS Team functions as a preferred method of communication in the later years of their program; access to MS Teams was provided to them by their university as an adjunct classroom (the timing of

access to MS Teams coincided with an institutional contract with MS, rather than it being limited to senior learners).

Contextualization

The participants fell into three distinct demographic groups, based on their age, ability, and caregiving responsibilities. Their status in these groups provided context for their differentiated MC journeys.

Age. Ona and Beatrice were mature learners. The generational difference between them and the other participants was highlighted in their experience of socialization. Ona and Beatrice described feeling apprehensive about connecting with the "young people" (Ona) in their program. Both Ona and Beatrice recalled feeling relieved when they were able to "easily build relationships" (Beatrice) in their academic communities. They also spoke about a desire to share their life experience with their classmates; both recounted positive examples of when this sharing of life experience was welcomed by their classmates.

Ability. Ona and Beatrice identified as disabled learners; while Sue did not identify a disability, she disclosed physical and mental health conditions that significantly affected her journey in a similar way to learners with a disability. Ona and Beatrice shared that overall, they were accommodated by the university. All three disclosed that they spent time and energy managing their disability or chronic condition, time and energy that took away from their availability to do coursework. The other participants did not have these extra demands. An excerpt from Beatrice's response to the photograph montage writing response illustrates a subtext of the disabled student counsellor's experience:

> I am a student [who is registered with the university's support office for disabled
>
> learners]. I have been supported by the staff and faculty of [my MC program]. I carry a

great deal of baggage on my shoulders, so the support has kept me going – truth be told. I

haven't experienced negativity or frustration on the part of staff or faculty. Sometimes I

am afraid of being forthright because someone may say I am not fit to be a counsellor.

Ethically, I know where the drawing line is however, I am afraid of being judged—even

though that has not been my experience.

In the excerpt, Beatrice reflected an internalization of the ableist societal assumption that

disabled persons cannot be effective counsellors. She described a fear of "being judged" and

having to be self-aware of her limitations, both of which would have cost her emotional and

intellectual energy. When I asked her if she had seen positive representations of disability in her

university or coursework, Beatrice said she had not (outside of a discussion about disability

being a cultural identity in her culturally responsive counselling course). This meant that she did

not have an institutional role model to follow for the integration of her disabled and counsellor

identities.

Caregiving Responsibilities. Cora disclosed that she became a mother in the first half of

her MC journey. Caring for an infant added responsibilities to Cora's life that the other

participants did not have (Ona and Beatrice had adult children). She shared that after she became

a mother, she was never able to meet her caregiving, academic, and employment responsibilities,

in a timely fashion which resulted in her feeling constantly "inadequate." Beatrice's perspective

on her feelings shifted after meeting other parents in her program. These parents normalized her

experience of the added stress of caregiving responsibilities, which reduced her feelings of

inadequacy. A pictorial representation of the cross-case comparison is shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Pictorial Representation of Cross-Case Comparison

Note. Written description: a student is juggling five balls. From left to right, the balls read school, work, family, health, and online factors.

Participant Perspectives on Peer Mentoring

A look at the participants' MC journey provided context for their perspectives on peer mentoring. Analysis revealed the participants' definition of peer mentoring and their view on the potential benefits of a PMP for a mentee, mentor and the postsecondary. Participant perspectives on GOL mental health were also analyzed. The participants' shared a belief that their postsecondary was responsible for their welfare.

Definition of Peer Mentoring

Participants were not provided with a definition of peer mentoring prior to the data collection portion of the study. Early in the initial interview, participants were invited to describe/define peer mentoring. The participants characterized peer mentoring as a senior learners' sharing of experiential knowledge with junior learners in a non-hierarchical manner.

This knowledge included practical components. Although there was an aspect of support in the participants' definitions, analysis highlighted that the participants had a nuanced differentiation between support and mentoring.

Sharing of Experiential Knowledge. The participants each identified the communication of firsthand experience as part of what peer mentoring meant to them. More specifically, they described shared beliefs that the experiences a learner/student has can be valuable for the student that has not yet had that experience; for the participants, it seemed to be less about being in a different year or stage and more about having a different experience. Sue's perspective on assisting peers with locating a practicum was an applied example. Sue had shared that she had had some mentoring conversations with people in her cohort and the same, or around about the same point into the program. She gave an example,

> I have one friend who, well maybe two friends, who had um, not taken practicum, like, hadn't from 2019 to 2020, and they're starting their practicum in September so we're at different stages in the program, so I've helped them with the practicum process . . . [with] things to like to look out for. Like for example, one person was like, "Yeah, well, you know this, ah, placement wants me but she says that like I have to find my own clients" and I'm like, "Ok, well you live in [town], I know like the [town] environment, I really think that would be like a struggle. Like, I don't think that sounds like a practicum placement that's going to work out." Or you know, just like, these are some experiences that I had, like maybe um, those are things like to watch out for [pause] um [pause] . . . or oh yeah, you're like going over somebody's résumé, and oh well like, these are things that you shared with me, like, I think would probably be good for practicum. I had helped another student get connected to my practicum placement.

Sue described helping "friends" with their practicum placements; these "friends" were her program peers. Sue was able to mentor her prepracticum peers because she had firsthand knowledge of the practicum experience. When Sue described the mentoring that she provided, she used language that indicated she did not see a power differential in the situation ("support," "friends," "helped," "maybe um, those are things like to watch out for") as opposed to instructional language (e.g., I told them what to do). There was a sense here that Sue saw herself as a peer ("friend") even though she was ahead of her peers, program wise; she had experience to share with those at a "different stage" in their program and they could benefit from that. The other participants used language with similar connotations. When Ona defined peer mentoring, she said she was "making suggestions based on experience." When Beatrice described the actions of a peer mentor she said, "I think the first important element is the shared experience." Cora summed up her understanding of a peer mentor as "somebody who's, you know, already experienced the something you're going to them to ask about."

Practical Components. The participants identified various practical components to the experiential knowledge that is shared by mentors with mentees. The components included academic (Ona, Cora) and vocational (Sue, Cora). Beatrice added a nuance to the practical components through her perspective about supporting mentee educational goals.

Academic. Ona described peer mentoring as being "academic" in nature between classmates, classmates intimating those taking the same course at the same time. During the first interview, Ona shared that when peers "had seen the way I wrote on the forums and they wanted me to, you know, peer review their paper . . . and after a while, you know, ah, word got around and [laughter] other people started asking if I would do theirs." In these statements, there was an underlying feeling of pride in her scholarly writing. Tying that to her description of editing her

classmates' papers as being "academic" mentoring, it was apparent/evident that she felt she had

editorial knowledge to share with her peers. Ona included imparting course information to her

peers as mentoring through her statements such as "making suggestions based on experience"

and "when I took the course." Ona implied that academic mentoring forms the foundation for the

mentoring relationship. When asked what types of information would be passed form mentor to

mentee, Cora identified information about the MC degree.

  Vocational. Sue described sharing her vocational knowledge as part of her mentoring.

This included résumé editing and how to obtain practicum clients, as well as helping a peer

obtain a practicum placement at the site at which Sue completed her practicum (thus helping the

peer to make vocational connections). Cora identified information related to the "profession" that

the mentor and mentees were in, or aspiring to be in, as part of mentoring.

  Goal Support. Beatrice shared her perspective that peer mentoring has a "quasi-

coaching" component. Beatrice talked about this quasi-coaching as being a form of

encouragement to reach degree completion Beatrice implied that this is different than academic

mentoring through her reference to grades:

> maybe the mistakes that I've made can help someone else be successful. Or help
>
> someone [pause], and successful, I'm not talking about like you know, high grades and
>
> all that stuff, what I'm talking about is completion. You know, in the end we all want to
>
> be counsellors and/or psychologists. So, um, it's about completion, it's about finishing
>
> your journey.

  There was sense that as a mentor, one can see both the finish line (as mentioned by

Beatrice, it is the goal of vocational licensure) and the "journey" towards that goal that consists

of academic achievement.

Supportive Element. The *APA Concise Dictionary of Psychology* (APA, 2009) defines a support group as a place where "members come together to provide help, comfort and guidance" (p. 506). Ona reflected this when she talked about giving and receiving feedback within the peer editing process ("then you can take feedback from them better and they can take feedback from you better"); in her view, participating in academic support contributes to the personal development for both parties. Sue described/referred to online peer groups (e.g., Facebook learner groups, WhatsApp practicum cohort group chat) as places where she was able to give and receive emotional support for her educational journey ("we, like, help each other, like, just [with] anything going on"). Cora defined peer connection as having a significant mutual support component ("I felt that . . . if I was struggling with something then I could turn to my peers"). Ona, Sue, and Cora's connection of mutual support to peer mentoring is in contrast to Beatrice. Beatrice differentiated peer support from peer mentoring as peer mentoring being a place or the context in which to one way support is given through intentionally sharing an experience for the other to learn from.

Differentiation of Support and Mentoring. The *APA Concise Dictionary of Psychology* (APA, 2009) defines mentoring as

> the provision of instruction, encouragement and other support to an individual (e.g., a student, youth or colleague) to aid his or her overall growth and development or the pursuit of greater learning skills, a career or other educational or work-related goals (p. 294).

One of the key differences between peer mentoring and peer support seems to be the goal; the goal of mentoring is knowledge sharing whereas support is providing aid. The participants reflected this difference in several ways.

During the initial interview, Ona shifted the perceived value of peer mentoring from those at similar stage in program to peer mentoring from those further along in their course work with the latter one having more value for Ona. Ona began her definition of peer mentoring by sharing that she felt that it was strictly peer editing her classmate's writing, however she also voiced an opinion that "it would be better if, more upperclassmen were involved in mentoring the younger ones." Her original perspective on peer mentoring related to offering writing support to those who were in a similar stage in the MC program. In this additional comment, Ona identified that although supporting her classmates, those at a similar stage in their MC program through editing their work is "okay," it would be "better" if that support were provided by learners with more experience than the ones being supported.

Sue and Cora demarcated a difference between peer support and peer mentoring; in peer support, the assistance is mutual but in peer mentoring, the assistance is one sided, from the mentor to the mentee. Sue described helping "friends" with their practicum placements. When she described how she helped them with the practicum placements, there was no mutual support benefit described by Sue. Rather, Sue invested her energy into providing a peer with the benefit of her experience. This in contrast to Sue's description of her peer groups on social media, where the members "help each other." Cora described peer mentoring from the perspective of the mentee, who would "ask questions. . . . Lean on someone who has like more knowledge or has already been through something." Cora described the mentee's ability to receive support and gain knowledge from someone, however she did not identify that the "someone" received support in return.

Beatrice delineated the difference between peer support and peer mentoring as the latter being about "imparting knowledge." Beatrice has engaged in extensive peer support and peer

mentoring in a leadership capacity with her place of employment; this specific articulation of the difference was likely based on this experience and training. Her use of the word "quasi-coaching" regarding the nature of peer mentoring showed that she sees that there is a motivational component of peer mentoring that is different than the empathic nature of peer support.

Potential Benefits of a PMP

"Peer mentorship . . . can set you up for success" (Beatrice).

Learner perspectives on the potential of a PMP as a mental health support were gathered through asking the participants what it was like for them to be in the study and inviting them to imagine their MC journey with the addition of a PMP. This data was gathered from the interviews and responses to the writing prompts. When talking about what it was like to be in the study, the participants shared that they were "excited" about prospect of the study creating a basis for a PMP. Participants also shared their experience of reflecting on their lessons learned throughout their MC journey in the writing prompt responses; sharing experience is part of their definition of peer mentoring. When imagining their MC journey with a PMP, the participants reflected on what it would have been like to be a mentee and a mentor. As a mentee, the participants shared that it would have been "valuable" (Beatrice) to "have an understanding of what is to come." (Cora) As a mentor, the participants shared that it would "empower" them to gain both personal and professional benefits. The participants also shared their views on the mentor skills they would need and the challenges that they would encounter as a mentor. The participants identified that the timing of the program would need to be carefully chosen. Two participants discussed the benefits of the program for the institution.

Sense of Excitement. The participants were asked for three words to describe what it was like to be in a study about the potential for a PMP. Table 4 shows a list of the words they used.

Table 4

Participants' Words to Describe Participation in the Study

Name	Words
Ona	• Interesting
	• Exciting
	• Pleasant
Sue	• Thought-provoking
	• Hopeful
	• Interesting
Beatrice	• Heard
	• Excited
	• Reflective
Cora	• Exciting
	• Challenging
	• Thought-provoking

Three of the four participants (Ona, Beatrice, Cora) used the word *exciting*. It carries a sense of looking forward to something ("Exciting," n.d.). Sue used the word *hopeful*, which carries an optimistic desire to see something happen ("Hopeful," n.d.). Cora expanded on this sense of excitement when she said:

Exciting, just because you're paving a new path. So, that's, it's exciting to be a part of that. And um, and that there is going to be this new research out there um, yeah, for others to jump off of and expand upon.

Potential Value of Being a Mentee. The participants identified that participating in a PMP as a mentee would be of value to them. When asked about the value, participants identified mental health and academic benefits. Beatrice identified an additional benefit of normalization of disability accommodation.

Mental Health Benefits. Sue and Cora identified that if they had participated as a mentee in a PMP during the early years of their MC program, their stress levels would have been reduced and their confidence would have been increased. Sue shared her viewpoint that her stress levels near the beginning of her MC program would have been reduced, had she had a mentor to point out the "bumps in the road" that learners encounter as they progress through their program. When I asked her to tell me what it was like to respond to the prompts, Sue said:

Um, hum, what it was like. I mean it was sort of interesting getting to like, reflect, trying to like think about what would you share with like another student. I, um, I haven't really thought of that too much before. And its sort also like you know what, it would also be nice, it's also it would be nice if like we had had that right? (Reflective tone in voice when talking) Like, like, if there was somebody to like share these sort of like, bumps in the road, that you find out along the way. That, I feel like, would have saved some like stress. [Laughter.] . . . if we had the experience of having a peer mentor, right? Somebody who's a year ahead of us, or two years ahead of us or something like that. Um, to sort of share their wisdom, I think that would have been helpful . . .

Sue had a reflective, almost wistful, tone to her voice as she shared this perspective. Of note, the conversational prompt I used deliberately did not mention a mentor (I used the phrase, "connecting with someone"). Sue linked "somebody to, like, share these sort of like, bumps in the road" with a peer mentor; rather than Sue's stress levels being reduced by having peer support, she identified that her stress reduction would occur through having a peer mentor. When I asked Beatrice to think back to the first year of her MC program and imagine what it would have been like to read another learner's prompted writing, she used the word "settling":

> Enlightening . . . valuable . . . settling. In the first year because when, like I said when I first started, I was so scared and I was so overwhelmed . . . I felt out of my element because it had been so long since I was in school [pause]. If I'd had that [experience of hearing mentor stories] I would've known it would be ok.

She used "settling" in conjunction with the feeling of being "out of her element" in the first year of her MC program. Her statements implied that as a mentee, she may have gained self-confidence through accessing an experienced peer's perspective that everything "would be okay." There was an underlying sense of learning to belong in the online classroom in Beatrice's statements. "Settling" and "out of my element" are both rooted in a sense of space and location. This is in contrast to the digital/ephemeral nature of the online experience of education, as online students are studying in the cloud, so to speak. On the other hand, to be settled is to feel confident and comfortable in one's space ("Settling," n.d.). Beatrice made it clear that having a peer mentor may have increased her confidence and sense of belonging in the online classroom during her first year of the MC program.

The participants shared that peer connection positively influenced their mental health, however they experienced difficulty in finding opportunities to connect with other students

during their first year. In a writing prompt response, Cora shared that "Just telling graduate

students to talk to other people about what they are experiencing seems counter intuitive as this

is unlikely to occur." Her belief that it is difficult for GOL to open up to each other undergirded

this comment. Similarly, Ona wrote in a writing prompt response that she "felt isolated from

lively discussion" as an online learner. Sue talked about the difficulties of connecting with peers

as a new GOL when she said that she had "very minimal" connections in her first year. Beatrice

shared that at the outset of her MC, she "felt it was kind of difficult to build relationships with

people." Cora's use of the phrase "great opportunity" in reference to the prospect of gaining peer

connections as a mentee suggested that being a mentee might "open up the potential for

conversation" (Cora) with online peers.

 Academic Benefits. Ona and Cora described a desire to gain academic and program

information and knowledge from a learner perspective. For example, Ona described an instance

that she was able to gain this knowledge from her peers:

> I learned things from them [the learners who were farther ahead in the MC program],
>
> what they were taking, and what kinds of assignments they had. And where their
>
> attention was most involved with. Like, they were taking two courses at the same time.
>
> They were both taking Assessments and they were both taking Group Counselling.
>
> Which, I thought was very brave, because Assessments is really, really, hard, from what I
>
> had heard. And, um, and then they were doing this group counselling course, which, I
>
> ended up taking, um, a couple years later.

 There was a sense that Ona was not only looking for academic information, but she was

also looking for the learner perspective of what the courses involved. Her use of the word

"brave" in reference to the senior learners reflected this; she became aware that she would need

courage in the years ahead, through reflecting on their experience. There was also a sense of discovering what academic program paths would be available to take in the years ahead, through Ona's discovery that learners in her program felt it was manageable to take two specific courses at once. It was apparent that Ona was looking for and valued information from learners who had already been through the experience that she was inquiring about. This was similar to the longing expressed by Cora to know more about the "experiences" of the learners in the years ahead of her. When I asked Cora if she had any connections with experienced learners in her first year, she said,

> No. . . . It would have been nice though . . . just knowing their experiences and you know, um, just now as we talk about oh you know, like this instructor, I had, you know I took this class and I had this instruct, instructor and they were phenomenal. Or this instructor looks for this, like, knowing those kinds of things might have been helpful.

Normalize Disability Accommodations. Beatrice recognized her disability identity in the photograph montage writing prompt and freely wrote about her accommodation experiences in her response. The prompt included a positive representation of a learner with a disability. This representation indicated that it was a safe space for participants to articulate their accommodations as well as normalized the presence of disabled learners for all participants. An important note is that the photograph montage depicted a person with a visible disability and Beatrice's disability was invisible. She associated the pictorial representation of a physical disability with her mental health disability. In other words, it was not necessary for Beatrice to see a representation of her specific disability type to see her identity represented in the montage.

Potential Value of Being a Mentor

The participants shared that they imagined that they would feel "empowered" (Beatrice) by their experience of being a peer mentor. This feeling of empowerment would be created by an opportunity for personal growth, vocational benefits and being able to apply the experience to their counselling career.

Opportunity for Personal Growth. The participants shared their view that participating in the study enabled them to reflect on their MC journey. Through their participation in the study, they realized that mentors would be empowered to gain self-knowledge. This reflection was valuable because participating in the study in a similar role to a peer mentor (e.g., responding to the writing prompts) aided their personal growth and had a positive impact on their mental health. Beatrice described this at the end of Interview 2, when I invited her to share any final thoughts about peer mentoring that were on her mind:

> It was a really exciting opportunity. I was really happy to do it. Um, I found ah, working with you very easy, you were very accommodating. Um, um, I think it's always, I think it's always. You know what this is something that we should be doing more often as we are going through our ah university career, is taking that opportunity to reflect back on what we've done. And how we've grown, and how we've learned from it. And what worked for us and what didn't work for us. Because I, I think um, that just, that just um, empowers us to have that knowledge. So, um, this was a great exercise for that.

Additionally, the visual prompts "sparked" (Sue) a reflective thought process about topics that were important to the participant but were not top of mind. This was demonstrated in Interview 2, when I asked Sue to tell me how she went about responding to the writing prompts:

I feel like the ergonomics piece is like, it seems like such a small thing when I'm thinking

about grad school, it's not something that I would even think of. But it was like, just that

picture of the laptop [made me think about ergonomic] because it's like laptops are

horrible for ergonomics. It sparked that [thought].

Sue articulated that the act of being asked to reflect on her MC journey in the context of

peer mentoring gave her an opportunity for growth and self-realization. It is likely that being a

peer mentor would reveal further opportunities for Sue and the other participants to experience

growth.

Identified Vocational Benefits for Student Counsellors in a Mentor Role. The

participants identified that participating in a PMP as a mentor would have been of value to their

counselling education. When sharing their perspective of how being a mentor, or responding to

the prompts in a mentor role, would tie into their counselling education, participants identified

career applications and an opportunity to further develop the core competencies established by

the Canadian Psychological Association of being a psychologist. These core competencies

include self-awareness and practicing ethical obligations. An added benefit of reinvigorated

desire for learning was recognized.

Career Applications. Sue specifically identified peer mentoring as having direct

applications to her upcoming career as a psychologist. She talked about peer mentoring as being

part of her "career trajectory" and that it would be a "resumé booster." Participating in a PMP as

the mentor would strengthen one's résumé both as volunteer work and counselling-related work,

and thus enhance career opportunities upon graduation.

Developing Core Competencies. The participants communicated that they felt that

learning about oneself through authentic and personal discussions with peers increased core

professional counselling competencies. They identified the potential to develop these

competencies further through participating in a future PMP. These competencies are of particular

importance to student counsellors as they are part of a national standard for Canadian

psychologists Canadian Psychological Association, 2004).

   Self-Awareness. Each participant expressed/recognized the necessity of self-awareness

for peer mentors. Gaining self-awareness is of particular importance to student counsellors, as it

is embedded in the interpersonal relationship competency requirement for Canadian

psychologists. Beatrice shared that she felt that there was not enough opportunity to engage in

activities designed to create self-awareness in her MC program, and that responding to the

prompts in an imagined/projected mentor role gave her that opportunity. This opportunity would

be amplified through participation in a formal PMP.

   Practicing Ethical Obligations. Student psychologists are taught that case consultation is

an ethical obligation (Canadian Psychological Association, 2017). Case consultation involves

conferring with colleagues in order to gain a variety of perspectives on a subject and to receive

emotional support as needed for difficult cases. Ona referred to this ethical obligation in a

response to a writing prompt:

> That my fellow-students were enduring the same stresses as I was helped me to cope. I
>
> knew I could reach out to one or more of them, even if only to commiserate. . . . I look
>
> [forward] to having them as not only friends, but valued colleagues and mentors as I
>
> finish my degree and enter the counselling world.

   Ona's quote is a nascent version of this ethical obligation. In this quote, Ona talked about

reaching out to colleagues for support. She related the value that her peers added to her academic

success. She also talked about transferring these peer connections to future career supports.

There is the idea here that she is practicing how to reach out to colleagues to fulfil her ethical obligations as a psychologist.

     Reinvigorated Desire for Learning. Cora shared her perspective that engaging in a PMP as the mentor would enable the senior learner to be reinvigorated about learning. There is an implication that MC learners are exhausted from learning at the end of their degree (at the very time that they are taking on the ethical responsibility to engage in continual learning), and that mentoring first year learners would reinvigorate the mentor's interest in learning prior to launching a career as a psychologist.

Identified Challenges of Being a PM

     The participants pinpointed challenges to the being a peer mentor. These included needing a specific skill set, as well as time and emotional costs.

     Need for Mentor Skills. The participants shared that a peer mentor would require skills and capacity to be effective. Skills included the ability to "set some boundaries" (Ona) with mentees, academic and editing skills, and self-awareness of their own limits. Beatrice defined capacity for peer mentoring as "equalling time plus energy."

     Time Costs. The participants acknowledged that being a peer mentor would add to their existing academic workload pressures. This pressure would cost them time. All of the participants shared that finding the time needed to be a mentor would be daunting but would be worth the cost. Cora summed up this view when she said, "Being a [peer mentor] would be just adding more to the demands that are already in place . . . it would just become something that would be important for me to take time for."

     Emotional Costs. The participants shared that they might experience emotional difficulties. They said that it would be important to share the challenges that they overcame with

their mentees, but that "its hard to admit that [they are] not great at everything" (Beatrice). They

also said that it would cost them emotional energy to be a mentor, as the discussion topics could

cause temporary emotional distress due to the personal nature of the topics. Sue added that there

might be a variety of mentee needs that would not be a fit with her experiences; not being able to

fill mentee needs would cause her emotional distress.

Benefits to the Institution

Sue and Beatrice both mentioned learner enrolment benefits for the institution. Sue stated

that "peer mentoring could really help with reducing the rate of dropout." Beatrice shared her

view that peer mentoring would make the MC program more attractive to prospective learners

and thus lead to increased enrolment at the institution.

Participant Perspectives on GOL Mental Health

"People are like, 'Well, I don't know why you're so stressed. You're doing school online.

Online is easier, and you're only taking one course. Like why, why is this difficult?'" (Sue).

Participant perspectives on GOL mental health are illustrated in Figure 5.

Figure 5

Representation of Online Graduate Learner Mental Health
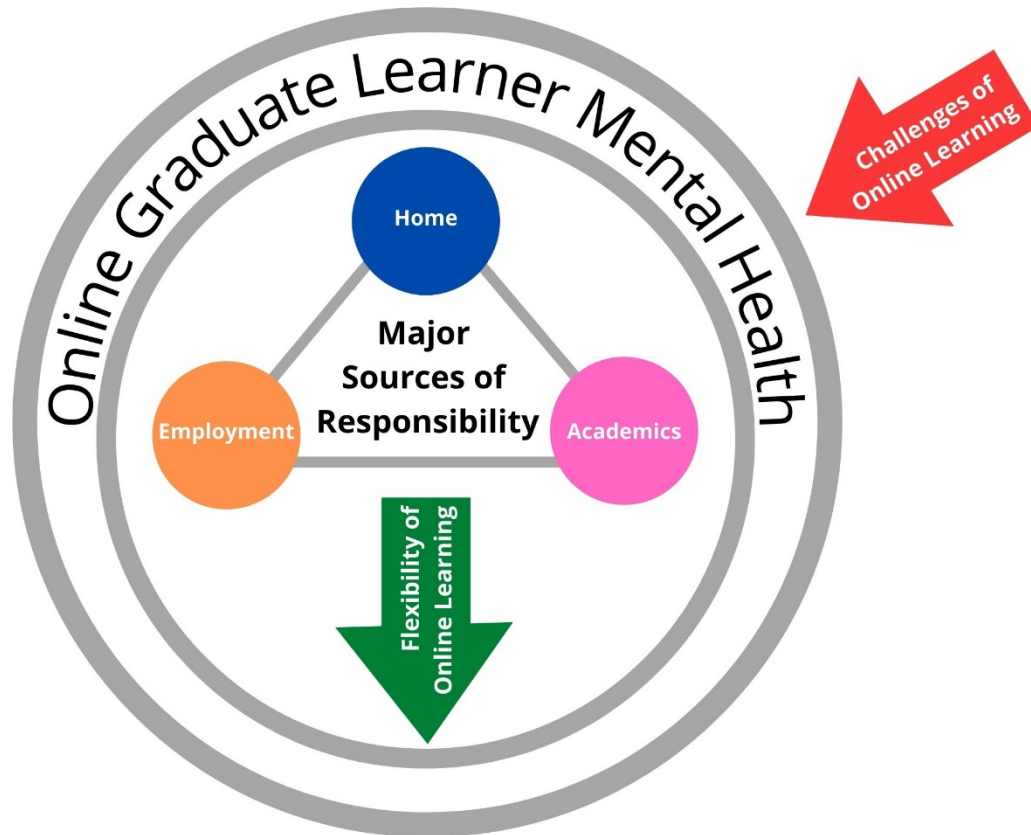
Note. Written description of the diagram. A circle with the words "Online Graduate Learner Mental Health." Inside the circle is a triangle. In the middle of the triangle it says, "Major Sources of Responsibility"; each corner has one of the following words "Home," "Employment" and "Academics." There is also an arrow inside the circle, pointing outwards against the circle's edge; the arrow reads "Flexibility of Online Learning." Outside the circle, pointing inwards against the circle's edge is an arrow that reads "Challenges of Online Learning."

Throughout the study, participants were invited to reflect on their mental health; they described experiences that both negatively and positively influenced them. The all-consuming nature of their graduate studies had them struggling to keep up with their schoolwork along with

"many other obligations." Grad school guilt was common among participants as was aloneness that was amplified by their online learning environment. At the same time, participants elucidated experiences of balance related to boundaries, built peer connections, and utilized their personal resources. Ona described this balance as "walking that tightrope between doing my best and letting some things slide so I look after me."

Detrimental Influences

The participants shared that they felt there were some ways in which being a GOL was detrimental to their mental health. They identified that life obligations, self-imposed guilt about how they spent their time, feeling alone and online environmental factors were the major things that negatively influenced their mental health.

"Many Other Obligations." The participants communicated that as adult learners, their mental health was affected by "The reality of choosing to be a graduate student is that you are an adult, and you likely have many other obligations aside from your studies" (Cora). For all the participants, these "many other obligations" included family responsibilities (e.g., parenting, maintaining a relationship with a significant other, household duties) and full-time employment. Disability and chronic health conditions added health considerations to Ona, Sue, and Beatrice's obligations. As mature students, Ona and Beatrice faced the additional pressure of age differences in connecting with peers and returning to academics after a significant amount of time since their undergraduate degree.

Family Responsibilities. The participants all lived with a significant other; Ona and Cora had children living at home. All shared that they felt that being a graduate student stressed their family relationships. Ona talked about her husband having to take on more household duties, which was a change in their home. Sue spoke about having to navigate who got priority for the

household internet bandwidth, which affected her partner's employment. Beatrice shared that being away from her husband for three weeks of in-person classes (summer institute) was "very hard." Cora shared feeling obligated to integrate life tasks into schoolwork time due to the co-location of class and home.

Full-Time Employment. The participants all were full-time employees in addition to being full-time students. This was not surprising, given that AU markets the MC for full-time workers and that full-time employment is an indicator of the adult life stage of graduate learners. All participants identified that the MC was leading them to a second career. Ona, Sue, and Beatrice talked about needing to reduce employment responsibilities or time to manage the school workload. Ona disclosed that she would "have to call in sick" to work to get all her schoolwork done. Sue identified that she had the "privilege of being able to reduce my roles and responsibilities" through opting not to work during her practicum year to remove employment pressures. Beatrice shared that she has taken time away from work (both in large chunks for in-person summer institutes and throughout her workday) to "attend to school." Cora talked about the pressures of full-time employment differently than the others; she shared that she would "use any moment" outside of work to complete schoolwork; she described working on schoolwork during her lunch hour and reducing her workday length to meet her academic responsibilities.

Health Considerations. Three of the four participants referenced disability or a chronic health condition that added to their obligations. Of note, the participants were not asked to disclose their disability or health status; these health considerations were self-identified by the participants. Ona self-identified that she had an invisible physical disability but did not identify as being registered with AU as a disabled learner; her disability affected her energy and focus levels. Sue did not identify a disability; however, she disclosed a medical condition would likely

have qualified to register with learner services as disabled learner; the condition affected her

energy levels, which negatively influenced her available time to do schoolwork. Sue also stated

that she had "mental health struggles." Beatrice self-identified that she had a mental health

disability and was registered with AU as a disabled learner; Beatrice shared that her disability

affected both her schoolwork and her employment.

   Mature Learner Status. AU (n.d.-b) has defined mature learners as those who are 50

years and older. Based on the ages that they disclosed in the data, Ona and Beatrice were mature

students. Both participants identified their age differences when talking about connecting with

peers. Ona shared that it was "interesting to have a role model half your age"; the interesting part

for her seemed to be that she felt delighted to discover that although her classmates were mostly

"old enough to be, or young enough to be, my children [or] my grandkids," she was able to learn

from, and connect with, them. Beatrice talked about a similar feeling in this excerpt from

Interview 1, when she shared that she felt her age affected her peer connections and I asked her

to elaborate on her experience:

> Ah, I [pause] it was something that I was imposing on myself. It wasn't um, I never, you
>
> now when people met me. I'm young at heart. I'm, you know, I'm funny, I, I try to be, ah
>
> I'm funny um, I'm really self-deprecating. Um, I act like a fool. So, I don't, I don't feel
>
> older but I was just like oh that's a whole different generation and I don't even
>
> understand them. And so, I'm not going to fit in. So, I had, as soon as I started school I
>
> had that mindset. And it took a few months for it to kind of fall, or kind of, um, start to
>
> change I guess would be the best way to say it. Because um, the more I said it, the more
>
> everyone else was saying are you kidding me? You know, you're great . . .

Beatrice also shared that having several decades elapse between her undergraduate and graduate degrees made starting her MC degree a "daunting" undertaking.

"Grad School Guilt." Typing "grad school guilt" into an internet search engine generated upwards of 2.2 million hits at the time of writing. Definitions vary, but like Sue wrote about in a writing prompt response, many of them focus on an omnipresent feeling that whatever activity one is engaged as a GOL is the wrong one:

> This cartoon also reminds me of grad school guilt. While there may be a formal definition of it, I define it as this ever-present guilt whenever I do something not related to my education. For example, spending a night out with my friends, I feel guilty for not working on schoolwork. I somehow think I am a bad student or that I won't be able to get everything done if I don't spend every waking hour doing schoolwork. I think this might relate to the societal discourse around productivity that somehow always being productive makes you superior over others. My advice to a new student is to start unpacking those discourses and see how they relate to them and if they are helpful or not. Changing the way I think about productivity has helped ease the guilt slightly, but it still seems to be present, just not as loud.

The feeling is burdensome (Cora) and present in both leisure (Ona) and work (Beatrice) time. The participants all located the guilt as being internal; Sue added a layer to the location through referencing societal norms.

Aloneness. Aloneness is defined as "the state of being alone or kept apart from others" ("Aloneness," n.d., para. 1). In the study, the participants all described feelings of isolation and loneliness. Cora described these feelings as "a chasm between academia and everyday life." Ona and Cora added a layer of feeling isolated from their family; they talk about being in the same

house as their families, and yet were isolated through working in "the downstairs office" (Ona) or in the "basement" (Cora). Both participants shared that this sense of isolation was amplified through physically being in the family home and yet cognitively being away at school. Sue shared that she felt isolated because she was not able to physically be with her fellow learners due to the nature of online education. Sue, Beatrice, and Cora all share a sense of loneliness in their everyday life; they conveyed a longing to receive sympathy from their in-person support network. This feeling of aloneness was amplified by the identified lack of time for social connection with non-school friends due to their academic obligations for Ona, Beatrice, and Cora. Compounding their feelings of loneliness were the participant's challenges in creating peer connections in an asynchronous, written communication learning environment. Cora vividly illustrated this when she wrote this about her challenges in creating peer connections: "That my keyboard was my only true connection and the words that I typed made no difference because there was no real connection anyway."

"Schoolwork Everywhere!!!": The Online Environment. The participants identified a variety of influences on their mental health that were linked to the online environment, as evidenced in these quotes:

- "Schoolwork everywhere!!!" (Alicia, transcript comment for Ona).
- "Take into consideration ways to minimize harm caused to the body by being on the computer so long, as laptops are culprits of poor posture" (Sue).
- "Trying to interpret tone. Um, trying to interpret meaning behind um, interaction that you're having with, with another student. . . . It was extremely challenging dealing with this person in a [text-based] format" (Beatrice).
- "Technical issues are . . . enough to push you over the deep end" (Cora).

The participants shared that they felt that their schoolwork was ubiquitous; because their home was their classroom, they were always in class. This resulted in challenges to self-care and permeable boundaries between school and home. The participants talked about the negative influence on their physical health of attending school online, such as significant back strain due to extended laptop usage. This decline in physical health affected their mood. As well, they experienced challenges to create a space in their home that was conducive to schoolwork; the challenges influenced their family dynamics. The asynchronous, text-based communication with classmates and instructors created emotional and academic pressures for the participants.

Emotionally, the participants struggled to both infuse and interpret the tone of written communication. This showed up in two ways for the participants. The first was that the participants had increased stress due to the challenges in communicating with classmates about group projects. The second was the perceived lack of instructor skill in text-based communication. Interacting with the technology required for online coursework was a source of constant mental strain for the participants. The cause of this strain was attributed by the participants to both the user's skill in using the technology and inherent components of the online platform(s).

Positive Influences

Although there were many factors of online education that the participants felt were detrimental to their mental health, the participants also felt there were ways in which their mental health was positively influenced. They shared that setting boundaries, making peer connections and utilizing their available personal resources all contributed to the maintenance of good mental health while studying online.

"Boundaries With Yourself." The participants shared that setting boundaries for themselves through well-rounded time management and self-awareness of mental health needs provided a counterbalance to the detrimental influences of online graduate education on their mental health. Cora described the importance of this in a response to a writing prompt:

Ugh, what are [work–life balance and boundaries] and how exactly does one achieve them!? I believe this a concept that all students, especially graduate students struggle with. The reality of choosing to be a graduate student is that you are an adult and you likely have many other obligations aside from your studies. I personally don't believe there is a balance. There is always one obligation that outweighs the others but, at some point, the scale tips. Perhaps this is where boundaries come in. Boundaries with yourself and knowing your own limits, what your loved ones are willing to tolerate and support, and what fills you personally.

Well-Rounded Time Management. The participants characterized time management as the creation of space in their calendar to complete schoolwork as well as other responsibilities. They described the creation of a balanced blend of opportunities for schoolwork, life engagement and self-care in their calendars. The participants shared that taking this approach required intentionality and effort. However, they also shared their perspective that this cost was worthwhile as time management enabled them to achieve their educational goals.

Awareness of Mental Health Needs. The mental health stressors experienced by the participants were offset through their awareness of their mental health needs, and how to fill them. Beatrice shared her perspective that knowing one's typical mental health state enables the learner to have a gauge against which to measure the influence of online graduate education on their mental health. Once a detrimental influence is noted, the participants all suggestion that a

willingness to prioritize self-care over high academic achievement is needed. The participants noted that this willingness requires self-compassion, which Beatrice described as learning "that I need to be kind to myself."

Peer Connections. The central benefit of peer connections for the participants was the experience of normalization of their struggles. In other words, knowing people who were going through the same experience helped the participants neutralize some of their online graduate school stressors. Cora described this in an excerpt from a writing prompt response: "It helped when I "met" more of my peers and knew that they were also struggling with the same things. . . . I [discovered I] was normal and normal means that life can be challenging and uncertain and ugly."

Peer connections reduced loneliness through creating avenues for the participants to give and receive sympathy inside a community that had experiential knowledge of the participants' struggles. Lending their strengths to peers increased the participants' self-confidence, stabilized their stress levels and countered their motivational challenges. Listening to their peers' struggles reduced the participants' self-criticism through gaining skills in compassion. Sue shared her experience of this in Interview 1:

> I think like I definitely have classmates where we, where we support each other . . . like, helping with one thing or another. . . . Cause we have, me and my [school] friends have like different strengths. . . . Um, and you know, for example like I was better at APA and then another friend was better at sentence structure or paragraph structure, right? So, we were able to support one another in that way and then both us were able to like get our writing better, right? Um, and I guess I was also thinking about like another friend that I have right, who um, I think often times shares like similar struggles and [pause]. . . . I

think like we both, um, have some like mental health struggles …. So, like sort of um,

supporting each other through those sorts of ah, I guess like struggles maybe when we

judge ourselves right? Or like other people, um, pass judgement on you for the way, you

know, you live your life or whatever.

The participants shared that they were able to create authentic peer connections in an

online environment. Academic activities such as peer editing and groupwork gave the

participants opportunities to create working relationships on which to build friendships. Shared

digital experiences, such as posting pet photos or memes, promoted a sense of belonging to a

like-minded community. Text messaging, email, social media, and MS Teams were all identified

as ways that connections were maintained through sharing personal information and daily

experiences. Cora identified class discussion forum posts as a way that she was able to connect

with peers.

The participants linked peer connection to increased mental health. The participants

shared that they felt less alone, had more motivation, and enjoyed being able to give and receive

support. Beatrice shared that she also gained academic benefits through connecting with her

peers.

Utilization of Personal Resources. As adult learners, the participants had personal

resources available to draw on as supports during their MC. These include being able to reduce

the amount of time spent in employment, having an established support network, developed self-

awareness about their academic why and developed character traits that enhanced their abilities.

Reducing Employment. Ona, Sue, and Beatrice shared that they had the "privilege"

(Beatrice) of being able to reduce their employment to increase or maintain their mental health.

Ona accessed employment supports (paid sick and vacation days, pre-retirement transition leave)

to find time for schoolwork. Sue leveraged a household move into an opportunity to receive income through employment insurance while completing her unpaid practicum. Beatrice took an extended leave of absence from her employment as a self-directed mental health support during her practicum year.

Leaning on a Support Network. All the participants described asking for and receiving support from their personal support networks. Ona shared that she relied on practical family supports (e.g., cooking dinner for her) in order to find more time for schoolwork. Sue talked about the emotional relief she found in engaging with non-school friends. Beatrice spoke fondly of the "primary" support she received from her husband. Cora described the high value she placed on the gift of time that she received from family members who provided childcare so she could focus on schoolwork.

Knowing Your Why. All the participants shared that they were completing their MC to obtain a new career path. They referenced keeping this goal of becoming a counsellor or psychologist front of mind as a motivational aid that positively impacted their ability to succeed in their goal. In a prompt response, Sue wrote that "Reminding myself of the end goal helps me to keep on pushing and even though it has been hard, I've never given up!" Ona added a layer to her motivational why through sharing her desire make her family proud of her.

Character Traits. The participants self-identified a variety of personal characteristics that helped them maintain their mental health. Ona shared that "the sense of isolation was not an issue for me because I am more of an introvert by nature." Sue stated that her ability to reframe self-expectations aided her mental health. Beatrice linked her "steadfast determination" to her academic capacity and success. Cora identified her ability to find things that "fill" her as a way that she achieved balance.

Postsecondary Responsibility for Learner Welfare

The participants shared their view that the institution is responsible for providing effective learner supports, and that the learner is responsible for engaging in the supports. Sue typified this view in Interview 1:

Yes, students do need to take responsibility for their learning and stuff, but I think that the university also has a role in like supporting their students. I think AU has been trying to make strides in that, but I also think that it's not quite there, yet. And hence why you're probably doing research on what you're doing.

Throughout the study, the participants embedded information about what supports learners need and how the institution can support them. They also shared that these supports should be made apparent to learners. Sue articulated knowledge about learner supports but felt that the supports are "not well integrated into the [university] community" and that the university should "make these services known because we don't have a campus where you walk past [the service office]." Beatrice shared this perspective in a writing prompt response when she wrote that "More can be done to promote [the use of mental health services] among graduate students."

What Supports Learners Need

The need for concrete and practical supports undergirded all the participants comments about the types of support they need from their postsecondary. The participants identified a learning gap in connecting with peers in an online school environment; Cora put it bluntly when she said, "Just telling graduate students to talk to other people about what they are experiencing seems counter intuitive as this is unlikely to occur." They shared a related needed support from the postsecondary to initiate discussions about their experiences and coping strategies with peers. Cora shared her perspective on this need in Interview 2:

[I want to be taught] more like how and when like when you're in an online world like how, how do you, like, make that possible. Like, it just seems easier when we're in person and you can see these people right? And then you sit beside each other in class, or you know you, you chat at the beginning of class whereas unless like one after you've made those connections through the online world, then those things occur right? Like you will text a peer over the weekend or like those kinds of things but. Um, yeah like, so [the AU Blog] just kind of seemed simplified. Like "reach out to a peer." Well, you know, that doesn't always feel comfortable when you, you know, first have met them and it's in an online space right?

The participants also articulated a need for opportunities to connect with peers outside of their immediate classroom context through incidental and organic opportunities.

How Postsecondaries Can Support Learners

Learner privacy, support integration and provision of mental health supports were identified as ways that the postsecondary can support learners. The participants shared that they prefer to have online spaces to talk in that faculty do not have access too. The participants also shared that they believe that the postsecondary should provide opportunities for students to connect in online meeting spaces. Integrating discussions about learner life throughout the coursework would support learner ability to share authentically in the classroom. The participants said that it was incumbent on the postsecondary to convey available mental health supports to learners in an accessible, learner-friendly fashion (Sue said, "part of me thinks that [the student support services] won't be of value because . . . navigating the website is difficult"). The participants also shared their belief that a formal PMP would be an effective way for the institution to support learners.

Summary

An exploration of the participants' views of their MC journey, their opinion of peer mentoring, and their perception of online learner mental health created a full description and interpretation of the potential use of a PMP as a mental health support. This IPA demonstrated that the participants would like to have a PMP at their postsecondary; this will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Chapter 6: Discussion

This study has demonstrated that a peer mentoring program (PMP) is a viable mental health support for online learners, from data gleaned in the literature and in the perspectives of the participants. A PMP has probable success as a learner-led mental health support that learners would be "excited" about. It has the potential to enrich counsellor education. Furthermore, a PMP could be one way that postsecondaries support their learners' mental health post-COVID-19. Limitations of the study include sample size and findings based on projected experience. Further research that addresses these limitations is warranted.

Projected Probable Success of an Online PMP

Recent research from a variety of online academic programs at postsecondaries around the world has shown the effectiveness of online peer mentoring. In the United States, online PMP provided practical academic supports minoritized learners, increased learner course pass rates and aided learners to reach higher grades (Ainsa & Olivarez, 2017a, 2017b; Baranik et al., 2017; Rashid & Sarkar, 2018). In Australia, online PMP were shown to be effective in engaging learners with their class material (Beckton et al., 2016). In Italy, participating in an online PMP improved learner participation in the online classroom (Sansone et al., 2018). In Great Britain, online PMP were shown to be a viable way to increase the pedagogical skills of mentors and boost the self-efficacy of both the mentor and mentee (Fayram et al., 2018; Urrutia et al., 2016). Although there is some recent evidence of successful PMPs at in-person Canadian postsecondaries (Benson & Enstrom, 2017; Fried et al., 2019; Vaughan et al., 2016), there is a lack of research on the Canadian graduation online learner (GOL_ perspective of online PMPs. My study addressed this gap.

The findings in my thesis research showed that Canadian GOLs are "excited" about the possibility of a PMP. Participants shared they expected that as a mentee, they would experience mental health and academic benefits, as well as have their disability accommodations normalized. As mentors in a PMP, participants identified that they anticipated that they would have opportunity for personal and professional growth. The participants' perspectives on the benefits for them as mentees and mentors are in line with what was found in the literature review. A unique finding of my research was that participants shared their perspective that the timing of a PMP would need to be carefully considered for the program to be a success.

Proposed timing of a PMP within the Master of Counselling (MC) program at Athabasca University (AU) provides an example of careful consideration of how to maximize learner participation. Based on my experience in the MC program at AU, there is a window of time in May and June of each year when both first and last year learners typically have both lighter academic responsibilities and are looking to gain practical knowledge. First year learners are engaged in preparatory coursework for their summer intensive course that is a multi-week synchronous course load that takes place in person; during COVID-19, the 2020 and 2021 summer course was held via video conference. Historically, learners were given lighter work or reading weeks as preparatory coursework. These learners are also often looking to gain knowledge about the summer intensive experience, as well as knowledge about the last years of the program, especially the counselling practicum. Last year learners are often in between courses due to staggered practicum completion timing, or they may be working on post-MC coursework required for licensure in their province of residence. These experienced learners are looking for ways to bolster their resumé or keep their counselling skills sharp while they transition from the final stages of their MC program to employment as a counsellor or

psychologist. Peer mentorship would be an attractive opportunity for these learners in these months. Hosting a PMP at AU in the MC program during May and June would fit the available time of the prospective mentees and mentors and increase the potential enrolment success of a PMP.

A PMP is feasible in an online environment. The participants articulated a sense of excitement about the potential of a PMP, which is an indicator of the probable success of a PMP at an online postsecondary.

Potential of a PMP to Enrich Counsellor Education

Vocational implications of a PMP were of particular importance for the participants, as their MC program is intended to prepare them for licensure as professional counsellors and/or psychologists. Participants projected that participating as mentors in a PMP would enhance their résumés, aid them in expanding core counselling competencies and reignite their desire to learn.

Resumé Enhancements

Participants shared that they thought being a mentor in a PMP would enhance their resumé. This is similar to findings in the literature that demonstrated mentors' perception of career benefits (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Gunn et al., 2017; Mayer et al., 2014). Grey literature suggests that novice counsellors and/or psychologists often have more academic credentials that skills listed on their résumés (Zimmerman, 2016). The skills necessary for successful mentorship are akin to those needed in the counselling field (Clutterbuck, 2004). Thus, peer mentorship would be a valuable addition to MC graduates' experience and résumés.

Expanding Core Competencies

The Mutual Recognition Agreement is an "agreement between the regulatory bodies for professional psychologists in Canada" (Canadian Psychological Association, 2004, p. 1). The

agreement lists the core competencies of practicing psychologists. Two of the six competencies are 1) interpersonal relationships, including knowledge about theory, self, and others, and 2) ethics and standards, including the ability to "establish professional relationships within the applicable constraints and standards" (p. 10). The participants in this thesis research study identified the potential to develop these core competencies through participating in a PMP. This unique finding could be leveraged by postsecondaries as a way to enhance the gatekeeping function of their counsellor education programs.

Gatekeeping Benefit for the Postsecondary

Although not specifically stated by the participants, a PMP could increase the gatekeeping credentials of a MC program. Counsellor education is part of the profession's gatekeeping process (Fitzpatrick et al., 2015). Gatekeeping in the Canadian context requires postsecondaries offering counsellor education to:

1. Limit access to training in professional psychology to candidates who have the requisite background education and experience, intellectual ability, and interpersonal skills such that success in the program is likely

2. Ensure that students have the requisite skills and competencies to work with clients before they are permitted to engage in practice, and internships

3. Ensure that students demonstrate adequate competency in course work, practice, and internships before graduating from the program. (Fitzpatrick et al., 2015, p. 245)

The second and third points are salient to counsellor education and PMPs (the first applies to learner admittance to the postsecondary). By offering a PMP program, postsecondaries could enhance their ability to ensure that learners are meeting core competencies through having faculty oversee the program.

Reignited Desire for Learning

Research has demonstrated that the risk of learner burnout increased with the number of years in a psychology graduate program (Rico & Bunge, 2020). This increased risk of burnout is a special problem for student psychologists as continual education is an ethical responsibility for psychologists (Canadian Psychological Association, 2017); learners who are burnt out may not have the capacity to engage in ongoing education after they obtain their MC. Participants in this thesis study communicated that they expected to have their desire for learning reignited as a result of being a mentor in a PMP. This is a unique finding and research into the use of PMPs as a preventative measure for burnout in counsellor education is warranted.

Summary

Participating as a mentor in a PMP would provide an opportunity for student counsellors to gain vocational benefits. As a result, postsecondaries could leverage PMPs to enhance their counsellor education program.

Post-COVID-19 Learner Mental Health Support

COVID-19's arrival in Canada in the spring of 2020 triggered widespread shutdowns of in-person postsecondary education (Dorelyers et al., 2020). On-campus postsecondaries had to abruptly pivot into online education, and postsecondary faculty and learners alike had to adapt to the new learning environments. Research on the mental health implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for these postsecondary learners is still in a nascent stage. Emergent research demonstrated that this pivot affected learners' academic and social lives, leading to challenges in maintaining good mental health. (Atherton, 2020; Doreleyers et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2021, Metcalfe, 2021). The two-fold isolation that the participants in this study experienced during their online MC might provide some insights into the emotional challenges of in-person learners

who transitioned to online education during the Covid-19 pandemic. These insights could be applied by postsecondaries as they prepare mental health supports for learners in the post-COVID-19 years.

Two-Fold Online Learner Isolation

As shared in my findings, "two-fold isolation" is the term I coined for the GOL's experience of isolation and loneliness. Isolation is the act of physically being away from other people ("Isolation," n.d.). Loneliness is an emotion that results from a lack of connection to people who understand your experience ("Loneliness," n.d.). Isolation for online learners has been well-documented as a mental health stressor (Barr, 2014; Gillett-Swan, 2017; Raley, 2016). Online learners remain at a distance (i.e., isolated) from their academic peers; their connections with their peers are mitigated through a screen. In other words, transactional distance affects their relationships. Online learners remain in their wider community while they are learning and yet, "the people around [them] don't really understand the stress of [online] university" (Cora). This results in learning while being emotionally disconnected from the people that they are physically present with (i.e., loneliness).

Worldwide, graduate learners who had to abruptly make the switch from in-person to online class during the COVID-19 pandemic were confronted with this two-fold isolation. Suddenly, they were physically separated from their peers and learning how to attend class online in a home or dorm environment. Media reports written by learners in the early months of the pandemic show that in-person learners who were forced by the pandemic health restrictions to become online learners struggled with the same two-fold isolation that the participants in this study experienced (Iwai, 2020; Tyler, 2020). Emergent research demonstrated that this two-fold isolation negatively impacted learner mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lee et al.,

2021; Salimi et al., 2021; Tasso et al., 2021). Thus, all learners would benefit from the peer connection and support aspects of a PMP as a post-pandemic mental health support from their postsecondaries.

Emergent Research on Postsecondary Learner Mental Health Needs Post-COVID-19

The emergent research demonstrates that "colleges and universities will not only need to continue to support students with pre-existing mental health needs but also prioritize early prevention and intervention programming to mitigate the impact of Covid 19 on students" (Hamza et al., 2021). This support will need to be put into place while simultaneously determining when and how campuses will reopen for in-person learning. At the time of writing, many Canadian in-person postsecondaries were planning for at least a partial return to in-person learning for the fall of 2021, according to University Affairs (UA/AU, 2021). These learners will be the first generation in modern history to return to in-person learning after a worldwide pandemic. The learners also may choose to opt for the "greater opportunity" (Sahu, 2020, p. 4) of online education. Learners in all postsecondaries will require mental health supports post-pandemic (Araújo et al., 2020). There is no research base for postsecondaries to draw on to determine what mental health supports these learners will need, due to the novel nature of a modern worldwide pandemic. However, the findings in this study can be leveraged to provide insight into ways that postsecondaries can support these post-pandemic learners.

How Postsecondaries can Support Learners Post-Pandemic

The participants in this study communicated that they believed that learner welfare is a shared responsibility between themselves and their postsecondary. They identified a need for specific and actionable supports from their postsecondaries, such as supported peer discussions about their experiences. Based on this, postsecondaries could support opportunities for learners

to share their COVID-19 experience with peers. Examples of these types of support can be drawn from past trauma responses at postsecondaries. In the aftermath of the 2007 Virginia Tech mass shootings, community and campus counsellors attended established peer interest group meetings to facilitate peer conversations (Flynn & Heitzmann, 2008). In 2014, social work students hosted a University of North Carolina at Charlotte on-campus trauma awareness event wherein learners were given a slip of paper that read, "I am a survivor because . . . P.S.: I survived" (Pantas et al., 2017, p. 190); learners were then invited to finish the sentence, deposit their response into a physical mailbox, and randomly select a response from the mailbox to read out loud. In response to the SARS outbreak in Taiwan in 2003, staff at the Chung Yuan Christian University hosted a five-week long support group for learners who had been in quarantine that resulted in "a powerful moment for members to say good-by to the shadow of SARS" (Pan et al., 2005, p. 365). Any of these three examples could be hosted online or in-person. A PMP that followed the principles set out my study would also be a viable option for learner mental health support post-pandemic.

Summary of Potential Enrichments

Emergent research on the detrimental impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on postsecondary learners indicates that this population will need increased mental health supports in the post-pandemic years. Existing research about trauma supports provided by postsecondaries show that a PMP has the potential to be used as a post-COVID-19 mental health support for all postsecondary learners.

Study Limitations

There are two major limitations to my study, the narrow sample characteristics, and the lack of participants' lived experience with a PMP at their postsecondary.

The findings in my study may not be applicable to all GOL, due to its narrow sampling. The experience of the four learners who comprised the sample may not be representative of the entire student body in the AU MC program. At the time of writing, I was unfortunately unable to obtain demographic information from AU to compare the major demographic groupings (e.g., age, ability, gender, and family status) against my sample's demographics. Half of the participants were mature learners, and three quarters were disabled and/or had a chronic health condition. While I did not create the study sampling criteria to reflect AU MC demographics, the narrow demographics of this study's participants may have significantly influenced the findings. Further studies that intentionally represent the diversity of the AU MC learner could provide a fuller picture of the lived experience of this population group.

At the time of writing, there is not a PMP within the FHD at AU. The participants thus did not have formal graduate level peer mentoring experience to share with me, and I was only able to gather data as to their projected peer mentoring experience. Running a PMP at an online postsecondary (as originally planned in my research project) would garner data that could be utilized to elucidate a tangible GOL perspective on peer mentoring.

Future Research Directions

My study has implications for postsecondary support of learner mental health. Research on the application of PMPs in counsellor education is warranted. Future directions for research include a trial run of a PMP at an online postsecondary graduate program to gain learner perspectives based on actual experience (including GOL with a disability), effectiveness trials of PMPs as enhancements to counsellor education programs and utilization of PMPs designed to fill learners' need for post-COVID-19 mental health supports. PMPs could also be implemented and evaluated in other AU Faculty of Health Disciplines (FHD) programs including another clinical

program, the Master of Nursing: Nurse Practitioner program, and in two nonclinical programs (i.e., Master of Nursing: Generalist and Master of Health Studies). Given the proposed FHD doctoral programs; an FHD PMP wherein doctoral students are mentors and master's learners are mentees might provide additional cross-discipline leadership growth opportunities for the doctoral students. A multi-site PMP study collaboration between postsecondaries who host online MC programs (e.g., AU, City University, and Yorkville University) might provide insight into how learners at a variety of online postsecondaries experience peer mentoring. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) studies that invite disabled learners from all graduate programs in FHD to share their experiences could provide the foundation for a PMP designed to be a learner support for this population group; if a PMP for learners with a disability was found to be successful, learner support services could host the program. An investigation into a PMP for disabled learners at the undergraduate level is also warranted.

Conclusion

My study provided evidence that learners are interested in a PMP. Learners expect to experience enhanced mental health as a result of participation in such a program, as evidenced in the addition of a PMP arrow to the representation of GOL mental health (see Figure 6). Student counsellors anticipate an extra benefit of vocational skill practice. A PMP has the potential to support the mental health of all learners, both in general and specifically after the COVID-19 pandemic. As Cora so aptly put it, "It's crazy to think that [a PMP] doesn't exist" at all postsecondaries.

Figure 6

Representation of Online Graduate Learner Mental Health With Peer Mentoring
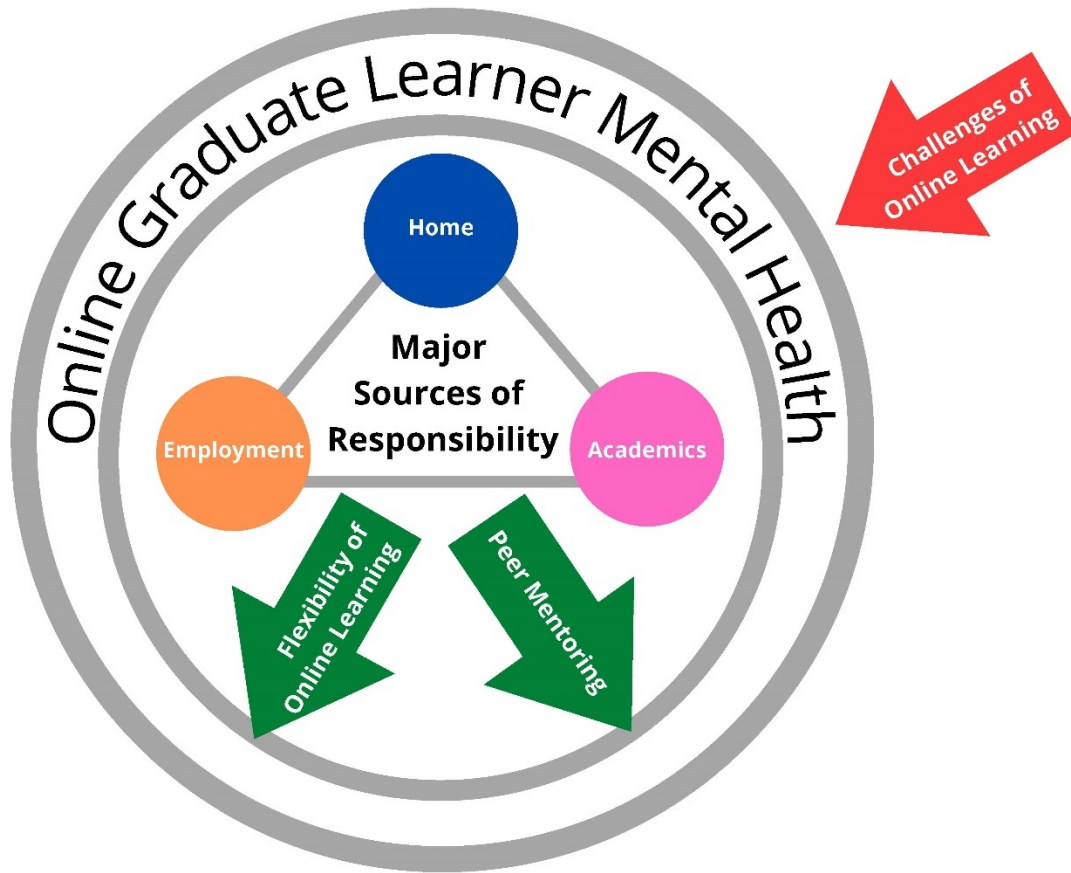
Written description of the diagram. A circle with the words "Online Graduate Learner Mental Health"." Inside the circle is a triangle. In the middle of the triangle it says, "Major Sources of Responsibility"; each corner has one of the following words "Home", "Employment" and "Academics"." There are also two arrows inside the circle, pointing outwards against the circle's edge; one reads "Flexibility of Online Learning" and the other "Peer Mentoring"." Outside the circle, pointing inwards against the circle's edge is an arrow that reads "Challenges of Online Learning".

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Appendix A: Recruitment Poster

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR

RESEARCH IN PEER MENTORING

We are looking for volunteers to take part in a study of peer mentoring in FHD at AU.

As a participant, you would be asked to share some of your experience as a graduate learner. All materials in the study will be provided in accessible formats, and we encourage all learners from all walks of life to consider volunteering.

Your participation is **entirely voluntary** and would take up approximately 6 hours of your time in June 2020. By participating in this study, you will help us to address the possibility of using a digitally based peer mentoring program as a mental health support for graduate learners.

To learn more about this study, or to participate in this study, please contact the **principal investigator** directly:
***Alicia Norman**, Master of Counselling student, Athabasca University*
[email address]

This study is co-supervised by: Dr. Gwen Rempel [email address]
and Dr. Gina Ko [email address]

Athabasca
University

This study has been approved by the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board and has received institutional approval.

Appendix B: Information on Master of Health Studies and Master of Nursing Degrees

Master of Health Studies Program Overview

The AU (n.d.-a) program overview reads as follows:

Prepare for a leadership position in the health system with Athabasca University's Master

of Health Studies (MHS). This online program will give you the skills to discern

emerging trends, anticipate future directions in health services and provide leadership in:

- planning

- implementation

- evaluation

- change management

- policy development

You will also learn how to develop successful research and project proposals. If you're

interested in teaching, a teaching focus route is available. (Program Overview section,

paras. 1–3)

As to why a learner would take the MHS program, "The rapid pace of change in health

services requires health professionals to be leaders, equipped to address new challenges. The

MHS will prepare you take on these challenges" (AU, n.d.-a, Program Overview section, para.

4). MHS is an online graduate program requiring 33 credits, of which at least 18 must be

completed through AU. There are three intakes per year, in September, January, and May, and

"all courses are online grouped study, with defined start and end dates" (AU, n.d.-a, Program

Overview section, para. 7).

Master of Nursing Program Overview

The AU (2019c) program overview for NURS reads as follows:

Welcome to the Master of Nursing program, a 33-credit degree open to nurses with an

undergraduate nursing degree. Our courses will prepare you to assume a leadership

position in the health system. As well, you will learn to discern emerging trends,

anticipate future health care directions, and provide leadership in planning, implementing

and evaluating nursing practice, drawing on philosophical considerations, nursing theory,

research methods and various tools of analysis. (para. 1)

NURS has two possible streams, Generalist and Nurse Practitioner. "The Generalist

stream prepares nurses to meet the competencies listed above. Students in the generalist stream

may elect to complete a teaching focus" (AU, 2019c, para. 3). The Nurse Practitioner (NP)

stream

prepares nurses to assume a broader role in the provision of health services to clients of

all ages, as community-based nurse practitioners. The NP stream provides theoretical and

clinical preparation for nurses whose role will focus on nursing practice. Students in the

NP stream are required to write a comprehensive examination upon completion of their

NP courses. (AU, 2019c, para. 4)

Options for Nonstudents

MHS and NURS courses are also available to nonprogram students. Under this status,

students may take up to two courses in their program of choice (AU, 2019c, Non-program

Students section, para. 1).

Appendix C: Participant Information Letter and Consent

Participant Letter

Hello [First Name],

Thank you for your interest in my study. 🙂

I've attached a copy of the participant consent letter (in identical Word & PDF versions), which contains further details about my study. If you would like to participate, please review, sign and send it back to me (if you don't have a printer/scanner, please respond to this email with this sentence [or something similar] "I have read the consent letter and have electronically signed it via this email"). If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to ask them, I'm happy answer them or provide further clarification about the study.

Two important notes: 1) As a reminder, asking questions doesn't mean you have agreed to participate, and 2) if you'd like to communicate via video or telephone for accessibility purposes, please let me know and I'd be happy to switch to a communication method that is a fit with you.

Thanks again for your interest. I look forward to hearing from you!

Alicia Norman

Consent Form

Peer mentoring at Canadian digital postsecondary institutions

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Principal Researcher: Supervisors: Dr. Gwen Rempel
Alicia Norman   [email address]
[telephone number] (cell)   Dr. Gina Ko
[email address]   [email address]

You are invited to participate in a research study about your perspective on using a digitally based peer mentoring program as a mental health support for graduate learners at a Canadian digital postsecondary institution. I am conducting this study as a requirement to complete my Master of Counselling degree.

As a participant, you will be asked to share your experiences as a graduate learner. Your participation will occur in June/July of 2020. In return for your time, you will receive a letter of thanks.

You are asked to participate in the following ways:

1) Viewing four provided discussion prompts using various media on the topic of learner mental health and authoring a short story (maximum 1 page) or video (maximum 2 minutes) for each prompt about your resilience or persistence as it relates to the provided prompt. Topics of the prompts will relate to graduate learner mental health, such as self-care or school–work–life balance. The prompts will be provided in accessible formats. Your story or video will be reviewed by myself and my thesis committee. Viewing the prompt and authoring a response will take about one hour per topic, for a total of four hours.

2) Participating in two recorded interviews (or text-based interviews, if needed for accessibility purposes) with me about your graduate learner experience, one before responding to the prompts and one afterwards. The interviews will each be about one hour and will be scheduled for a time that is convenient for you. The interviews will be transcribed, and an email will be sent to you when the transcription is complete; the email will ask you if you would like a copy of the transcript and/or audio recording (whichever is most accessible for you) as well as related information about how to provide clarification of the transcript and/or recording (if requested).

The focus of the study, on increasing mental health, is beneficent and carries a low risk of participant harm. However, there is a risk that you may experience negative emotions as a result of discussing topics related to learner mental health. However, these risks are similar to any that you have in an AU course. It is important for you to note that participating in this study is voluntary, and you may freely choose to withdraw without reprisal at any point in the study up to one week after the second interview by emailing me and stating that you are withdrawing (no reason needed). If you withdraw, you will be given the opportunity to choose to keep or delete

your data.

Results of this study may be disseminated through the AU thesis publication process, in published articles, in conference presentations, and/or in other academic venues. Participant anonymity will be maintained in all disseminations. Once finalized, an email will be sent to all participants (to the email address provided below the signature block on this form) to notify them that a copy of the results is available via email by request.

If you have any questions about this study or require further information, please contact me or my supervisors, using the contact information above (contacting me or my supervisors does not constitute an agreement to participate).

This study has been reviewed by the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board. Should you have any comments or concerns regarding your treatment as a participant in this study, please contact the Office of Research Ethics at 1-800-788-9041, ext. 6718 or by email to rebsec@athabascau.ca.

Thank you for your contribution to this project.

CONSENT:

I have read the informed consent form regarding this research study, and all of my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I will keep a copy of this letter for my records.

My signature below confirms that:

- I understand the expectations and requirements of my participation in the research;
- I understand the provisions around confidentiality and anonymity;
- I understand that my participation is voluntary, and that I am free to withdraw at any time up to one week after the second interview with no negative consequences; and
- I am aware that I may contact the researcher, research supervisor(s), or the Office of Research Ethics if I have any questions, concerns, or complaints about the research procedures.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

Email address: (Note: This email address will be used for contacting participants for study
                purposes only and will not be disseminated further.)

_____

By initialing the statement(s) below,

_____   I acknowledge that the researcher may use specific quotations of mine, without identifying me.
[ ] researcher can choose a pseudonym
[ ] use this name as a pseudonym _____

_____   I acknowledge that the researcher may use sound and/or image data collection and/or audio visual technology to record my participation.

Appendix D: Interview 1 Guide

1. What influenced your decision to sign up for the study?

2. Thinking back to the first year of your MC program, what were your connections with other students like? (Probe/Follow-up: How did you make those connections? If the connections were in other years of the program, what did you learn about the program or life as a graduate student from them?)

3. What are the top three aspects of learning in a digital environment that influence your mental health? (Probe/Follow-up: Can you give me an example of that?)

4. How do you describe peer mentoring?

5. Considering your current role as a graduate learner in a digital environment, how do responsibilities outside of school affect you? (Follow-up: How do you manage? What most helps you deal with what is happening for you as a graduate learner? What least helps you deal with thing? Can you give me some examples?)

6. Do you have classmates who have mentored you? (Follow-up: Tell me about how you met them. What sorts of things do they mentor you about? How have you benefited from being mentored by them? Any negative experiences?)

7. Do you have any connections with classmates in the first year of the MC program? (Follow-up: Tell me about how you met them. What types of information have you shared with them? Probe about things beyond information? Other forms of support?)

8. Tell me about what you think it would be like to be a peer mentor while you were also completing coursework. (Follow-up: How would you manage? Tell me more about how you feel about that.)

Closing interview script: Later on today, I will email you the four prompts that form the next stage of the study. The prompts consist of a cartoon, an audio podcast, a written blog and a photograph. All of them will be sent in both a text and audio format for accessibility, please feel free to use whichever format works for you. For each prompt, please either write a one page response or record a three minute audio/visual clip, whichever is easiest for you. Please feel free to use a casual tone, one that you would use when talking to a friend and don't worry about the exact length of your response as the length is just a guideline. If you run into any technical issues with accessing the prompts or recording an audio/visual file, please don't hesitate to email me for help. Please email the responses back to me within ten days of receiving them. I know life can change on a moment's notice during the pandemic, so if you find you need more time to complete the responses, please don't hesitate to let me know. Once I've received your responses, I'll contact you via email to set up our next interview. Thanks so much for your time today.

Appendix E: Interview 2 Guide

1. Tell me about what it was like to author the stories (or videos) you created after viewing the discussion prompts.

2. Of the four prompts provided, which one spoke to you or resonated with you the most? (Follow-up: What was it about the prompt that spoke to you or resonated with you?)

3. Thinking back again to the experience of authoring your responses, was there one prompt that was harder to respond to than the others? (Follow-up: What was it about the prompt that was harder?)

4. Using three words, how would you describe the experience of being in the study? (Follow-up: is there anything you'd like to add to those words?)

5. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience with this study?

Closing interview script: Thanks so much for your time today, and for your contribution to the study. I'll email you an audio file and a transcript of both of your interviews within the next week or so. Please don't hesitate to reach out to me via email if there is something in the interview you'd like to clarify or that you have a question about. Thanks again for sharing your story with me.

Appendix F: Writing Prompts

1. Comic Strip
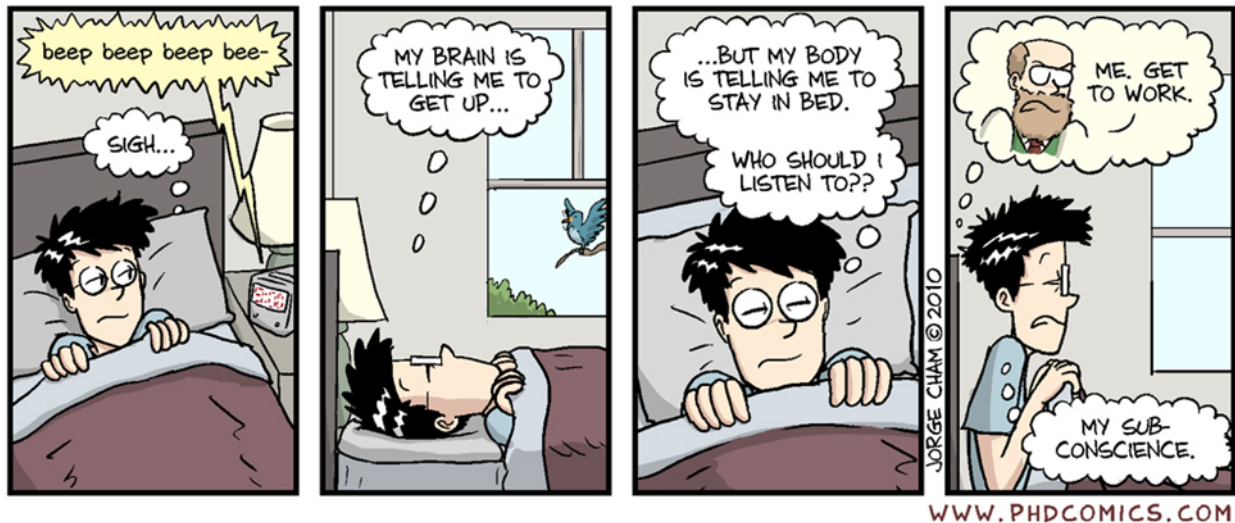
Written description of the comic strip pictured above. The comic strip's authorship is credited to www.phdcomic.com. There are four frames in the comic strip. In the first frame, a person is lying in bed looking at an alarm clock that is on their bedside table; the alarm clock has a speech bubble that says "beep beep beep beep," and person has a speech bubble that says "sigh. . . ." In the second frame, the person is lying in bed with the speech bubble that says "My brain is telling me to get up. . . ." In the third frame, the person is still lying in bed with a speech bubble that says " . . . but my body is telling me to stay in bed. Who should I listen to??" In the fourth frame, the person is sitting up in bed and has two speech bubbles; one depicts a picture of Freud who is saying "Me, get to work" and the other says "My sub-conscience."

2. Audio Podcast

Click the link to listen to the podcast: https://www.podbean.com/ew/pb-mh4ny-c35f84
        (Note: participants were instructed to listen to about the first 10 minutes)

Transcript of the podcast:

Episode 9: Dealing with stress and anxiety
October 15, 2019

Herbert Wilkerson, clinical counselor with UAB's Student Counseling Services, shares insight on how to deal with stress and anxiety.

Hi, I'm Kim Eaton, and this is UAB Grad Life, a weekly podcast where we help students at the University of Alabama at Birmingham navigate the ups and downs of graduate life. We'll answer commonly asked questions, explore what it means to be a grad student at UAB, and share stories that happen along the way.

Today Herbert Wilkerson, clinical counselor with UAB's Student Counseling Services, joins me to share some insight on dealing with stress and anxiety. Thanks for being here Herbert.
Herbert: Well thank you for having me down, it's a pleasure to be here.

Host: So, what is the difference between stress and anxiety?

Herbert: Well, when you look at the differences between stress and anxiety, stress is more built on external factors, events that take place in life, something that you're dealing with currently outside of yourself. Whereas anxiety is a more of an internal based experience. So, even though outside events can impact it when the outside event ends it doesn't mean that the anxiety ends. And so its something that's more internal. It could be genetic ah it could be caused by life experiences, ah its something that would classify more as a diagnosable mental illness versus like stress is situational.

Host: Ok, so what are some of the things that can cause stress and anxiety for graduate students?

Herbert: Well, ah, working in counselling services I do work with several graduate students and ah, some of the things that you know, they talk about a lot, perfectionism is one, for graduate students. Imposter syndrome is another. Ah, so those two things can definitely increase stress and anxiety. The competitive nature of the programs can definitely add to that. And so those are two of the main factors and then you also have mixed in relationship issues or balance ah healthy boundaries between your work in the lab and having a personal life. Family dynamics. There are a lot of people who are here at graduate school who aren't from the Birmingham areas so being disconnected from friends and loved ones in a new city. You know things that impact the normal college student. Its just ah it can have an extra layer added to it being a graduate student.

Host: Ok, so um, what are some strategies that students can use to cope with stress and anxiety?

Herbert: I think ah, being able to identify which is what is a big thing. So, if its stress, identifying what the stressor is, ah, is a big thing. So, you kinda know what to do in response to it. Um, so, if the stressor is too much time in the lab, then, look at how much time you are spending in the lab. Is the amount of time you're spending impactful? You know, cause I have students who will work 70, 80 hours a week in the lab but won't have much more success as far as what they're doing if they work 45 to 50 hours, so. Maybe that's it. Or finding more work/life balance. Ah, making time for yourself. We call it self-care, which is real popular right now. Or another term is self-compassion. Ah, making time for yourself, finding balance that way. Also finding an identity outside of school. A lot of times, students, so much of their career is academia, and, so they wrap a lot of their identity and self-worth, into that. And so regardless of, so based on how that goes,

depends on how they feel about themselves. And so, which impacts their stress and anxiety. So having, ah, a life outside of school, things you enjoy, besides the research. And you may be really passionate about your research, however, if that's all you do.

Host: Yeah.

Herbert: Then, that can, that passion can become a burden. And so ah . . .

Host: And so if the research and lab's not going so great then hopefully you have something else outside of it you can still feel good about what you're doing in your life. And you're not just completely down and out? Ok.

Herbert: Cause sometimes, ah, and this is based on what students have told me, their friends will be also individuals in are in the lab, with them. And so when they leave, and do things outside of the lab, they talk about what goes on in research and the lab and what not. And so even in the attempts to kinda break away, you're still doing, you're having discussions about the issues at work, or the issues in school, or the issues being a TA, or whatever it may be. And so, ah, even if you do have friends who are like inside the same research or study you're in, having conversation not connected to school, doing things not connected to school. Or doing things that you're interested in that you can connect to in the community, that are not connected to school. So yeah, go ahead.

Host: Well, so you had mentioned, self-care, so what are some concrete examples of what self-care can be. So is that like exercise or just even getting more sleep? Or what are some of those like really concrete examples?

Herbert: Alright, so exercise and sleep are definitely, you know, two important things. Ah, we try to call it body movement, you know, some sort, some form of activity, ah throughout the day, or, you know, whether it's walking more to class, or um, taking your you know, animal or pet for a walk. Ah, if you do like to go to the rec centre, or another gym. Yoga classes. But also, making sure you're eating. Ah sometimes, when you're working, 13, 14 hours a day, you'll skip meals. Ah . . .

Host: And when you say eating, do you mean just eating anything, or trying to eat something that is somewhat nutritious? (laughter)

Herbert: (laughter) You definitely want to get the nutrients in. So ah,

Host: So just a bag of chips every now and then is not gonna really cut it? (laughter)

Herbert: That's not gonna give you everything you need. So ah, you know, drink water, eat real food, you know, I'm not saying you got to go out and be like a hard core vegan or anything like that but, ah. Um, making sure that you're ah, you know food is important because you can get in these work modes and it not become a priority. Or you'll tell yourself, "When I finish this, I'll eat" kinda situation. Ah, getting good sleep is important. Uh, maintaining a good sleep environment, and sleep hygiene is important. Ah, making whether its time for yourself to do

some meditation in the morning time, or different points in the day, ah having guided meditation tracks on your phone that you can listen to from time to time. Talking to people. You know, we get so caught up in our responsibilities that we don't take time to connect with loved ones. So making time to talk to people. Um, journaling can be good. Ah, so there are, you know, different things that people do. Think of some other concrete ways that people can ah practice self-care. Ah, so, yeah. I'll think of some more.

Host: So, know, how do you know if your stress or anxiety has reached a point where you need to seek outside help?

Herbert: Alright, well ah, in one of our presentations we talk about ah, recognizing the levels of stress. And ah, do you need a fire extinguisher, or do you need the fire department? (laughter) And so ah, of course fire extinguishing is something like I can manage on my own, and the fire department is when I need outside help. Ah, one of the things is ah, you know, by talking to other people, getting an idea of like what's normal versus what's not normal. Because we can grow up in situations where high levels of stress become our, our natural environment. So, we'll think something's ok when realistically its like you shouldn't be dealing with all this by yourself. Or this seems to be, can be too much. So ah, by talking to somebody and getting an idea of like ok, is what I'm dealing with normal? Should I, you know, get an outside perspective on "Is this too much?" That may not necessarily come from a counsellor but can come from a friend. Also, ah, how its impacting you. Ah, is it impacting you physically? Is it, you know, causing fatigue? Is it causing irritability? Um, is the stress causing you not to eat? You know, sickness. You know, and its things like that, it might be time to get outside help. If its something where you can look at it you know, on your own, create a plan, ah of action, to take the steps to alleviate whatever stress you have going on at the moment. Then, yeah that's something you can deal with on your own. Ah, but that's something a lot of students struggle with because high levels of stress become so normalized. And they think well this is just life. But then when your life is I'm working on this particular thing 95% of the time and I don't have time for anybody else including myself, then you might need somebody else to talk to.

Host: So, now, if you get to that point how do you go about finding that help as a graduate student at UAB?

Herbert: Alright, well, as a graduate student, like any student at UAB . . .

3. AU Blog

Link to the online original document: https://news.athabascau.ca/learners/barriers-to-

online-learning-and-how-to-overcome-them

Text version of the blog:

Barriers to online learning (and how to overcome them!)

Learners: Words to the Wise: August 20, 2019

Online learning can have many barriers—at Athabasca University, we're ready to help you overcome them! These are some of the most common obstacles that online learners face, and how you can conquer them with ease:

Barrier #1: Poor time management

While the flexibility of online programs is excellent for those who have a lot on their plate, the absence of a rigid structure has some people scrambling. Ward off procrastination by building a study/assignment schedule, so that you maximize your time and hit your deadlines with ease.

Barrier #2: Lack of motivation

Online courses are a lot of work, and sometimes it's hard to know exactly how you're doing. Don't hesitate to ask your professors and tutors about your progress throughout the course, and prevent isolation and disengagement by fostering a community with your peers. Motivation is hard to maintain when you don't have to face your instructors in person, so get a friend or family member to check in on you and hold you accountable for your work. Breaking down course information into chunks can also help make the work seem less overwhelming and thus keep you motivated to complete it!

Barrier #3: Administrative issues

Frustration in online learning often stems from students not knowing how or when to contact their professors/tutors, along with poor communication about coursework expectations. The solution? If you're confused about an assignment/test and you aren't getting a timely response from your professors, tutors, or other academic resources, turn to your classmates for help! Through chat rooms and discussion threads, you're sure to find a peer that is going through the same thing and can provide much-needed clarity.

Barrier #4: Technical issues

Though the internet is a wonderful and necessary resource for online learners, it can also cause problems. Without a strong internet connection or high bandwidth, online learning becomes nearly impossible, and keeping up with technical requirements of a chosen course can be stressful. The best way to combat this is to prep way in advance; by assuring that you have basic computer literacy (including fundamental knowledge of computer hardware), familiarize yourself with the programs you'll be using most often, and know what support to look for when technical issues arise, you will be better equipped to complete your studies successfully! Don't be afraid to seek help from the IT Department, as there are many resources available to you should you need to access them.

Barrier #5: Cost

Though online university is usually much more affordable than traditional school fees (LearnDash estimates savings of up to $20,000 after one year!) paying for your education is still a challenge. Thankfully, many online universities like AU have "pay-as-you-go" programs; you pay for each course only when you register for it, and course fees include all textbooks, class materials, and access to a tutor or success centre. There's no formal timeline to complete most AU credentials, so if time isn't a concern, you can take your classes as you can afford them, and you may be able to complete your education with little student debt. However, if meeting your personal goals means a faster pace and a heavier financial commitment, there are financial aid options available to support your online studies.

At Athabasca University, our slogan is "Open. Flexible. Everywhere.", and we deliver just that. As a world-class leader in online and distance education, AU is dedicated to providing you with opportunities to pursue your personal interests and professional needs without having to

sacrifice your family, career, or community commitments. Set your study hours and work at the time and place that best suits your lifestyle. You are in control of your education!

Think you're ready for online education through Athabasca University? Check out some of AU's many interesting undergraduate and graduate courses.

4. Photograph Montage

Written description of the photograph shown above: The photograph is a montage of four photos. Each of the photos depicts one person working on a laptop. Each person in the photo is different. In all the photos the person's face is not visible, skin tones show a variety of racial heritages, and visual cues of genders are not immediately obvious. In three of the four photos the people's disability status is not obvious, in the fourth photo the person is seated in a wheelchair. In the photos: 1) a person is working on a laptop near an open window with a latte in a mug beside them, 2) a person is working on a laptop at a table with a book on their lap and two books on the desk, 3) a person is working on a laptop at an outdoor table with an open textbook and a

to-go cup beside them, and 4) a person is working on a laptop while writing in a notebook with a

pencil, with an open book on the table beside them.

Appendix G: Permission for Use of Podcast

Re: Grad School podcast

From: Eaton, Kimberly Kay [email address]

Date: Wed 2/26/2020 10:58 AM

To: Alicia Norman [email address]

Alicia,

I'm so sorry for the delayed response. I've been out with a sick baby since last Wednesday. Yes,

you can use the podcast.

Please let me know if you have any questions.

Thanks, Kim

Kimberly Eaton | Director of Communications & Events

UAB Graduate School

UAB | The University of Alabama at Birmingham

LHL Suite G03 | 1700 University Blvd. | Birmingham, AL 35294 P: 205.975.6539 |

[email address]

uab.edu

Appendix H: Writing Prompts Email Script

Hello [Participant Name],

Thank you again for your time today. I enjoyed hearing about your experiences.

As I mentioned in our call, the next step in the study is for you to respond to four discussion prompts. The prompts consist of a cartoon, an audio podcast, a written blog and a photograph. The prompts are provided in written, audio or descriptive formats for accessibility purposes—please feel free to use whichever format works for you. You may respond to them in whichever order you like.

For each prompt, please either write a one page response or record a three minute audio/visual clip, whichever is easiest for you. Please feel free to use a casual tone, one that you would use when talking to a friend and don't worry about the exact length of your response as the length is just a guideline. If you choose to record an audio/video file and can't email it to me due to size, please upload it as an unlisted YouTube video and send the link to me. I will be able to save the file on my end, and then you can delete the YouTube video. If you run into any technical issues with accessing the prompts or recording an audio/visual file, or have any other questions, please don't hesitate to email me. Please email the responses back to me within ten days of receiving them. I know life can change on a moment's notice during the pandemic, so if you find you need more time to complete the responses, please don't hesitate to let me know. Once I've received your responses, I'll contact you via email to set up our next interview.

Thanks again for your time today,

Alicia

Appendix I: Ethics Approval From FHD Dean

Re: Institutional Permission, REB File #23859 'Digital Peer Mentoring at Postsecondary

Institutions'

From: [email address]

Wed 3/18/2020 3:56 PM

To: Alicia Norman [email address]

Cc: Rempel Gwendolyn(Supervisor) [email address]; Hawranik Pamela [email address];

Edwards

Margie [email address]; [email address]

March 18, 2020

TO: Ms. Alicia Norman

Faculty of Health Disciplines\Graduate Centre for Applied Psychology

Athabasca University

Dear Alicia Norman,

      I have reviewed your request for Institutional Permission to access resources for research

purposes.

      I am pleased to advise that your request to access Athabasca University staff or students

(or their data under the care and control of the University) or resources to conduct your research

project entitled 'Digital Peer Mentoring at Postsecondary Institutions' File No. 23859 has been

approved.

As outlined in your approved ethics application (excerpts from Tabs 2, 3, and 4 below), you are seeking assistance to access, for research purposes, graduate learners in the Master of Counselling Program:

Tab 2. Participant Information . . .

Tab 3 Recruitment . . .

Tab 4 Data Collection . . .

I wish you every success with your research project.

Dr. Pamela Hawranik

Associate Vice President Research (Interim)

Athabasca University

[email link]

3 of 3 2020-03-24, 9:42 a.m.

Appendix J: Research Ethics Board Approval

Athabasca University
RESEARCH CENTRE

CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL APPROVAL

The Athabasca University Research Ethics Board (REB) has reviewed and approved the research project noted below. The REB is constituted and operates in accordance with the current version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2) and Athabasca University Policy and Procedures.

Ethics File No.: **23859**

Principal Investigator:
Ms. Alicia Norman, Graduate Student
Faculty of Health Disciplines\Graduate Centre for Applied Psychology

Supervisor:
Dr. Gwendolyn Rempel (Supervisor)

Project Title:
Digital Peer Mentoring at Postsecondary Institutions

Effective Date: March 10, 2020   **Expiry Date**: March 09, 2021

Restrictions:

Any modification or amendment to the approved research must be submitted to the AUREB for approval.

Ethical approval is valid *for a period of one year*. An annual request for renewal must be submitted and approved by the above expiry date if a project is ongoing beyond one year.

A Project Completion (Final) Report must be submitted when the research is complete *(i.e. all participant contact and data collection is concluded, no follow-up with participants is anticipated and findings have been made available/provided to participants (if applicable))* or the research is terminated.

Approved by: **Date: March 10, 2020**

Simon Nuttgens, Chair
Faculty of Health Disciplines, Departmental Ethics Review Committee

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Athabasca University
RESEARCH CENTRE

CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL APPROVAL - RENEWAL

The Athabasca University Research Ethics Board (REB) has reviewed and approved the research project noted below. The REB is constituted and operates in accordance with the current version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2) and Athabasca University Policy and Procedures.

Ethics File No.: **23859**

Principal Investigator:
Ms. Alicia Norman, Graduate Student
Faculty of Health Disciplines\Graduate Centre for Applied Psychology

Supervisor:
Dr. Gwendolyn Rempel (Supervisor)
Ms. Gina Ko (Co-Supervisor)

Project Title:
Digital Peer Mentoring at Postsecondary Institutions

Effective Date: March 10, 2021   **Expiry Date**:   March 09, 2022

Restrictions:

Any modification or amendment to the approved research must be submitted to the AUREB for approval.

Ethical approval is valid *for a period of one year*. An annual request for renewal must be submitted and approved by the above expiry date if a project is ongoing beyond one year.

A Project Completion (Final) Report must be submitted when the research is complete *(i.e. all participant contact and data collection is concluded, no follow-up with participants is anticipated and findings have been made available/provided to participants (if applicable))* or the research is terminated.

Approved by: **Date: March 10, 2021**

Carolyn Greene, Chair
Athabasca University Research Ethics Board

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Appendix K: Transcriptionist Confidentiality Pledge

Athabasca University

Study Title: Digital Peer Mentoring at Postsecondary Institutions

Investigator: Alicia Norman, Master of Counselling Student, Faculty of Health Disciplines

Cell: [phone number]

Email: [email]

CONFIDENTIALITY PLEDGE

In generating, transcribing, and/or analyzing video and/or audio recorded data for the above-named research study , I understand that I will be working with data gathered from individual participants whose identities I may or may not know or come to know.

I understand that all possible precautions are to be undertaken to protect the identities of the participants as well as the information they share during their involvement with the research study.

I hereby pledge to keep all the information that I see or hear during my work as an accessibility assistant to the research investigator strictly confidential. I agree not to discuss the information or the identities of any of the participants with anyone other than Alicia Norman and/or other members of the research team.

My signature (below) indicates that I understand the importance of, and agree to maintain, confidentiality.

[signature of transcriptionist]

[printed name]

[date]