



# Addressing the Mental Health Needs of Post-Secondary Education Students Through the Implementation of Multi-Sensory Environments

By: Amanda Austin  
June 25, 2019

# Abstract

Students that are transitioning from high school to post-secondary education can experience a great amount of stress (Sheng, 2017). According to the National Institute of Mental Health, routine stress can contribute to mental health challenges such as depression or anxiety. The majority of people entering or preparing for post-secondary education, 15-24 year olds, are more likely to experience mental illness than any other age group (CAMH, 2012). Many changes occur during this period that are unfamiliar and out of their control. In response to these statistics, specifically looking at young adults 18 years of age and older, and in the interest of evolving education practices with inclusive principles, how can post-secondary institutions provide a welcoming, holistic, and supportive environment, demonstrated by physical and sensorial elements including light, material, colour, scale, and shape; for students?

Inclusive Research Study divided into two parts based on differing ontological perspectives

### Part 1

- Positivist Perspective: determine a single truth or reality
- Methodology: Surveys and experimental research
- Quantitative
- Methods: Online Survey

### Part 2

- Interpretivist Perspective: reality is created by individuals within their groups
- Methodology: Ethnographic approach, grounded theory and action research
- Qualitative
- Methods: long answer survey questions, expert interviews, site visits

Survey Participants: 18-26 year old post-secondary students experiencing mental health challenges

# How do spaces affect our mood and transform our behaviour?



- “One of architecture’s primary goals is to trigger an emotion” - Alan Pert
- Factors may include light, geometry, texture, colour, and scale



*Traditionally, multi-sensory  
rooms have the ability to engage  
users, encourage  
communication, and even delight  
the user.*

*(Snoezelen Multi-Sensory Environments,  
2018)*

Mental illness affects millions of people daily and according to the Canadian Mental Health Association (2018), “suicide accounts for 24% of all deaths among 15-24 year olds”, second to accidents.

# Factors & Considerations

- Stigma
- Awareness
- Funding
- Current Responses
  - Counselling Services
  - Help Lines
  - Online Platforms
  - Programs and Social Groups
  - Environmental Support

# Snoezelen:

to seek out/explore  
and relax

Purpose: meant to be a non-directive approach that allows free choice of interaction with stimuli needed to be active.

- × Increase concentration and focus
- × Develop sense of cause and effect
- × Provide relief of pain
- × Provides a distraction





Figure 1



Figure 2





“Unanimously  
Satisfied”

# Stakeholders

Students

Staff/Faculty

Visitors

The Institution

Family and Friends

Groups associated with  
mental health

Designers

Society

Equipment Suppliers

# Making a Change

With a lack of control in an educational setting where students can get caught going through the motions, a multi-sensory interaction can allow them to regain control of their feelings and help to cope with the struggle to deal with the impact of life challenges.



# Issues & Factors

## **Practicality and Acceptance:**

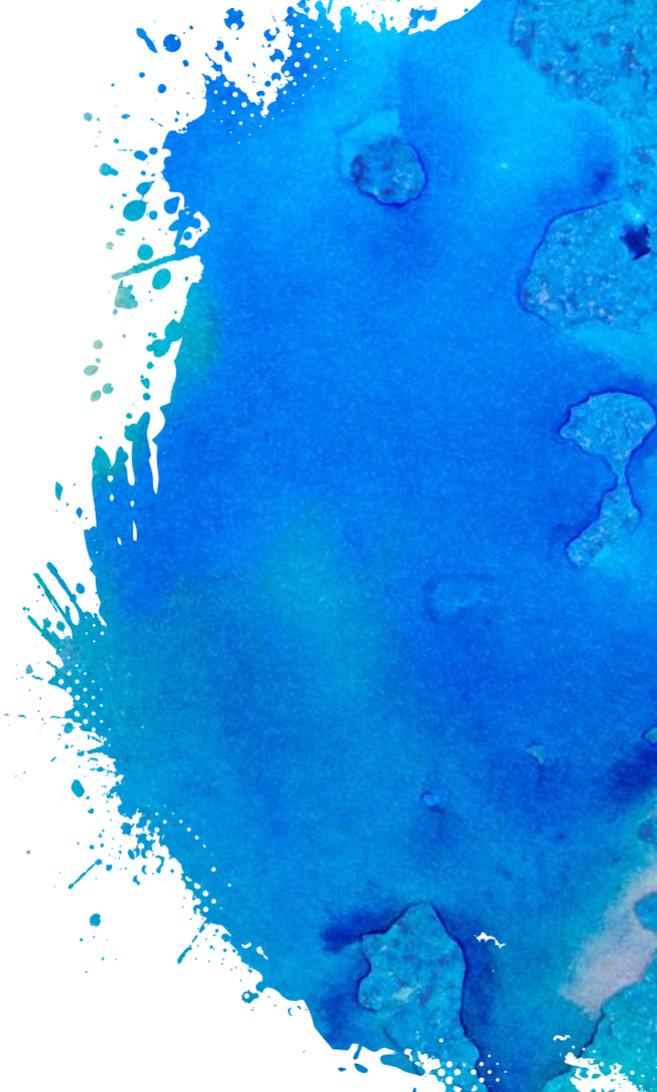
Discreet as to not be the centre of focus, but obvious enough for people to enjoy and use.

## **Universal or Personalized Experience**

Variety or rotation of stimulation may be necessary to maintain people's interest.

## **Costs, Reno's, & Implementation**

New construction may be more realistic. Maintenance is also a concern.





## Findings:

There was a strong interest in the subject area, with little to no prior engagement around the role of spaces and places in supporting challenges of mental health at the post-secondary level.

# Findings

- Top 3 ways students cope with mental health challenges at school: having a good support system of family and friends, exercise, counselling services
- 53% of respondents said they began experiencing mental health challenges after beginning and during their post-secondary education, 31% before and 16% intensified by PSE
- Common survey response was that students were unaware of the support available to them
- Strong need for additional counsellors, access to fresh air and natural light, and alternative means of support for students that makes them feel comfortable

This alternative means of support could manifest in a physical space for students that resembles:

1) A space dedicated to students for relaxing and unwinding

2) A space that acts as a supporting service to counselling services

3) A space that is supportive of mental health by using specific features

4) A space that is easily accessed by students, but not the main focus

5) A space that is created by students

6) A space that is holistic and welcoming







↔ DIRECT ADJACENCY  
 → CONVENIENT ADJACENCY



# Summary

- Better awareness and more proactiveness
- More effective marketing and advertising of the support available to students
- Better recognition and response from the government considering the state of the crisis
- For students, by students mentality moving forward
- Students recognize the way their environment affects them and are asking for an improvement
- Continue to raise awareness as numerous students still feel prejudice and discrimination based on their mental health needs and therefore, do not seek support.
- A co-design approach to test the recommendations would be beneficial and help to build on the existing results. Creation of a prototype would also be critical to test the theories proposed.

# Questions:

In what way can I make my research more inclusive?

Do you have any suggestions for creating a more welcoming, supportive, and holistic environment for students?



Thank you for  
listening!

Any questions?

You can find me @

[www.linkedin.com/in/amanda-austin-33b4b6b1](http://www.linkedin.com/in/amanda-austin-33b4b6b1)

You can find my paper @

<http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/2625/>

# References

For a full list of my references, please access my paper from the link on the previous slide.

Figures 1 & 2 – Snoezelen. (2018). Success stories. Retrieved February 17 2018, from <https://www.snoezelen.info/category/europe/>

CAMH. (2012). Mental illness and addictions: Facts and statistics. Retrieved February 12 2018, from [http://www.camh.ca/en/hospital/about\\_camh/newsroom/for\\_reporters/Pages/addictionmentalhealthstatistics.aspx](http://www.camh.ca/en/hospital/about_camh/newsroom/for_reporters/Pages/addictionmentalhealthstatistics.aspx)

Canadian Mental Health Association. (2018). Fast facts about mental illness. Retrieved February 14 2018, from <https://cmha.ca/about-cmha/fast-facts-about-mental-illness>

Pert, A. (March 6 2014). Build me up: How architecture can affect emotions. Retrieved April 10 2018, from <http://theconversation.com/build-me-up-how-architecture-can-affect-emotions-22950>

Sheng, J. (2017). Stress of getting into university now starts in Grade 10. Retrieved February 14 2018, from <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/education/stress-of-getting-into-university-now-starts-in-grade-10/article18347125/>

Snoezelen Multi-Sensory Environments. (2018). Snoezelen for Mental Health. Retrieved February 13 2018, from <https://www.snoezelen.info/who-can-benefit/snoezelen-for-mental-health/>