

Five *on*
Friday

Musings on Mental Health

[Celebrating Light at Times of Darkness](#)

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We are living during a period of history that is testing people's coping skills, resilience, and spirit. I have heard many people say that we have yet to see the "light at the end of the tunnel" when it comes to this global pandemic. That may be true, which is why the sources of light in our lives today are all the more important.



[Photo Credit](#)

The only antidote to darkness is light, which brings me to this year's Global Mental Health Summer Interns at Columbia. This year's cohort of ten university students brought to the program a myriad of interests in culture, neuroscience, brain development, gender, race, storytelling, and more. And despite the constraints of working remotely, they have made valuable contributions to a wide range of research programs under the mentorship of Columbia faculty and collaborators around the world. As we approach the homestretch of their eight weeks with us, this Five on Friday salutes and thanks our 2020 Global Mental Health Summer interns!

1. Manya Balachander. My passion for refugee mental health led me to apply for this internship, and it has quickly become one of the most rewarding academic experiences I've had. The Global Mental Health Internship has given me the opportunity to delve into the research and efficacy behind Mental Health First Aid and Child Friendly Spaces, both of which have been implemented internationally. Working on these projects has given me insight into how mental health is treated and researched abroad. I hope to carry this knowledge with me after this internship into the work I will be doing with mental health advocacy for refugees both domestically and abroad. I aspire to continue my exploration of global mental health intervention and advocacy in higher education, and hope to continue to advocate for refugee mental health and wellbeing.

2. Kristina Jacobsson. Throughout college, I have always felt passionate about the connections between science and society. Specifically, I am interested in addressing social determinants of health and analyzing how inequities and adversity can impact physical and mental health. It is my hope to go to medical school and become a physician who prioritizes mental health in my practice. Participating in the Columbia Global Mental Health Summer Internship has provided me with a novel outlook on the adversities that can impact someone's health, particularly on a global scale. I know I will take forward what I have learned this summer and apply it to my future endeavors - hopefully in medical school and beyond!

3. Alex Jansen. To me, mental health is a complex psychological and emotional state of well being that is constantly changing. In today's world, people still do not give their mental health the priority it needs, as mental health disorders are one of the most common causes of disability, and have one of the highest burdens of all diseases. Due to the complexity and fluidity of mental health in 2020, with the dynamic of the global COVID19 pandemic, everyone will have individual experiences, which may differ drastically from one person to another. It is this complexity and uncertainty of mental health disorders which makes it so fascinating to study. I have had my own personal experience dealing with mental health issues as have many other family members, friends, and peers. Global mental health research is critically important as it reveals new diagnoses, treatments, prevention, guides, and policy-decision making, which can help to alleviate societal and cultural norms of stigma and discrimination.

4. Anitra Karthic. Mental and physical illnesses are closely linked together, but the idea of comorbidity often goes unaddressed. Mental illness affects almost everyone in some capacity, but stigma often prevents the conversations we need to empower one another and communities to seek help. Through my neuroscience and sociology coursework, I've become curious to understand how different sociocultural determinants of health impact the mental healthcare structures worldwide. Specifically, how do you increase access to mental healthcare services in communities with different beliefs surrounding mental illness? The Columbia Global Mental Health Internship has introduced me to different perspectives and work that go into improving global mental health from education to advocacy to research. In the future, I hope global mental health and care is recognized as the #1 way to increase community morale, welfare, and health.

5. Sophie Khomtchenko. As a rising senior concentrating in psychology, I was drawn to global mental health for its emphasis on bridging the gap between policy, research, and communities. Last summer, I was a research assistant at Vanderbilt University's Research on Conflict and Collective Action Lab, studying potential deterrents of institutional violence. While studying abroad in the Netherlands last spring, I trained to assist in a developmental psychopathology lab at the University of Amsterdam. I am specifically interested in education

and development, having worked as a TEFL instructor for elementary, middle, and high school students abroad. This summer I am working with Drs. Sabrina Hermosilla and Kathy Pike in conjunction with researchers at the American University of Beirut to understand the relationship between health and education in Lebanese youth using the Participatory Assessment Tool for Mapping Social Connections (PATMSC). I assisted in the development of a scoping review by working on data extraction from peer-reviewed and grey literature and by working to update IRB and funding documents. I also assisted in creating interview questions for key informants in Lebanon in addition to school-aged children and their parents.

6. Roxy Mistry. I have been fortunate enough to experience many different cultures because I grew up abroad and am biracial. This initially sparked my interest in global mental health as a whole because I have always been fascinated by the treatment of mental health in other cultures. Witnessing people I love struggle with mental health further increased the longing I have to pursue a career in the mental health field and to ultimately help people live happy and healthy lives. I am here at the Global Mental Health Program because I want to learn how we can make mental health care more accessible worldwide.

7. Cierra Moore. Coming from a community of both Africans and African Americans, where mental health is notoriously stigmatized and dismissed as a legitimate health concern, I have always viewed the mental health field as being uniquely influenced by culture. Since I began my journey in pursuing studies in this field, I knew that cultural considerations would be necessary in order for me to be any sort of effective force in my own community and elsewhere. Prior to discovering the Global Mental Health Program, I was set on existing mostly in the clinical world, which, for me, meant going into psychiatry or clinical psychology with a focus on cultural competency. However, as I continued into my studies, learning more about the intricate ways that culture and society shape not only individual mental health outcomes, but population-wide outcomes as well, my interest in the public health side grew. Now, as a double major in Spanish and Psychology, with a minor in Latin American studies, my interests lie in exploring how culture and society shape the experience, expression, and concept of mental illnesses primarily in Latin American communities. I firmly believe that a better understanding of the cultural origins and presentations of disorders leads to more accurate and effective care, both at the level of individual clinician-patient interactions and population-wide interventions. I'm very thankful to this program for orienting me to mental health care at the population level, and I'm excited to learn even more about how I can make a difference at this level of mental health care and others as a clinician.

8. Nita Senesathith. I came from Laos, a country currently with only 2 psychologists for a population of 7 millions. People do not realize the importance of mental health and that health is not without mental health. You cannot function and thrive when your mental health is lacking even if your physical health is good. I want people in Laos to understand that when someone has certain mental health symptoms, they are not 'crazy' and superstitious ways of healing can do more harm than good. I want Laos to see the value of mental health and start investing in building mental health capacity. This prompts me to dig deep into psychology and public health. Eventually, I would like to go back home and help build a strong mental health system there. For me, global mental health in the future means more experts/researchers from the low-resource settings, community-participation research, and collaboration is at the forefront. Technology is also part of the picture and I hope we can leverage it to help advance global mental health. Ideally, I hope awareness on mental health is raised to the point where the word 'stigma' is not in the dictionary.

9. Sanaya Shikari. My interest in mental health stemmed from my fascination with Neuroscience and the mechanisms of the mind. However, it is difficult to study and understand mental health without considering the impact of cultural perspectives on the development and beliefs of a person, an area that I found difficult to study in the confines of a laboratory. Global mental health implies the provision of resources and care that are not constrained by borders or other barriers, and I hope to both contribute to research that unravels the nuances of different societies, as well as use previously conducted studies to implement interventions and policies that would benefit society. Specifically, I am interested in the psychosocial development of children and adolescents, and reducing the stigma of mental health by tackling education systems and policies.

10. Xian (Elaine) Ye. Growing up in a community where mental illness is highly secretive and stigmatized, I've always wondered when and how we can address mental illness given its detrimental yet often unnoticed effects on one's health. As an international student, my education in the U.S. and my living experience in China prompt me to learn more about how to understand mental health in different cultural settings and how to make mental health resources accessible to everyone. The GMHP has given me the opportunity to study mental health globally and work on projects that make administration of neurocognitive screening tools for HIV more efficient. In the future, I would like to continue integrating the conversations of mental health in the public health domain.

This year's Global Mental Health Internship was directed by Ohemaa Poku, a doctoral candidate at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health who we proudly recognize as the first program coordinator for our Columbia-WHO Collaborating Center. Ohemaa was assisted by Maddy Van Husen who we are delighted to recognize as a former intern. An amazing duo. Thank you, Ohemaa and Maddy!

And thanks to our 2020 summer interns. You have brought new ideas, energy, optimism, determination, and an infectious conviction that the world can and will be a better place if we stay focused on bringing light where there is darkness. Indeed, no need to wait for the end of the tunnel. You are lighting the path forward - here and now.