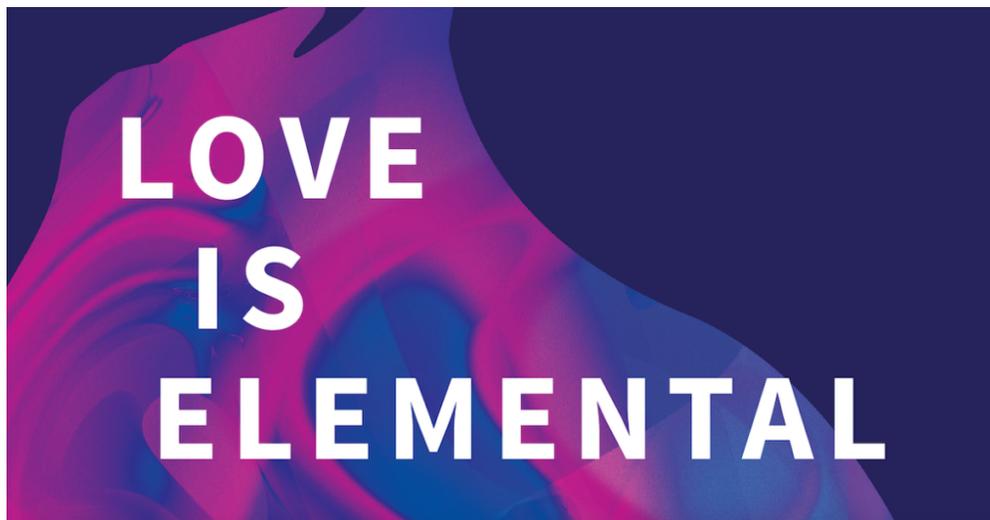


Love is EleMental 2019

written by Kathleen M. Pike, PhD

February 15, 2019

Most people don't have a hard time seeing the link between Valentine's Day and love, but when we go from love to mental health, a few will scratch their heads and wonder: really? Yes. Really. This week of Valentine's Day, recognizing all the different ways that human connection and community matter to our health and wellbeing, we hosted our third Love is EleMental benefit to support our Columbia University Global Mental Health WHO Collaborating Centre.



Love is EleMENTAL is about celebrating the unique power of the arts to connect and engage communities around mental health. With Peter Hermann as Master of Ceremonies, the evening was nothing short of magical. Some highlights from the themes of the evening:

1. Inspiration: Our greatest achievements in life often start with an inspiration. We all know the story of Dorothy's journey down the Yellow Brick Road to find the Wizard of Oz. Her fears have her trembling with self-doubt. In [The Wiz](#), the musical take on the story, there is a magical moment when the Good Witch sings to Dorothy and friends, reassuring them that they really have everything they need inside them - if only they can learn to believe in themselves. When we struggle with mental illness, it can be challenging to believe in anything or anyone - let alone believe that recovery is achievable. One of the most important outcomes of increasing the conversation about mental health and mental illness is that we can be inspired by those who both struggled with mental illness and found their way to recovery. Drawing on this inspiration, Broadway star [Syndee Winters](#) began the night singing [Believe in Yourself](#) from [The Wiz](#).

2. Connection: The most joyful and meaningful moments in life are never experienced alone. We are each born into other people's stories. These connections with one another - not always easy, sometimes downright difficult - are ultimately at the heart of our life journeys. When people struggle with mental health and substance use disorders, staying connected can be challenging - and it can also be lifesaving. Celebrating life affirming connection, Emmy and Grammy Award-winning songwriter and composer [Chris Jackson](#) joined Syndee Winters to sing [Can You Feel the Love Tonight](#).

3. Creation: Great works of art don't just happen, we create them. The act of creation - moving from an idea to putting in the labor to create something - and then daring to put oneself out there takes courage. This was evident in spades when Grammy-winning and Emmy-nominated songwriter and producer [Desmond Child](#) took to the stage. Opening with all-time hit [Livin' On A Prayer](#), everyone joined him in singing the refrain. We all

know times in our lives when we are really just getting by. Adding mental illness to the mix can make life feel near impossible. Desmond also performed hit song, [Weird](#), a piece that speaks to not fitting in, feeling out of place, overwhelmed and a little bit weird – again a near universal experience at moments for all of us; an all-too-familiar and long-lasting state of being for people with mental illness due to ignorance and discrimination.

4. Rejuvenation: Concert pianist [Elaine Kwon](#) performed a [Prelude](#) by composer Rachmaninoff – an artist who struggled with depression his entire life but learned to manage it and use it to fuel his creative works. After a disastrous premier of his First Symphony, he sank into a 3-year period of deep depression and writer’s block. With the help of hypnosis, psychotherapy, family and friends, he recovered and went on to enjoy success and become ... Rachmaninoff. Like Rachmaninoff, many of us have periods of mental ill health. Of course, the love of family and friends is good for our health and can provide a much needed safety net, but it is essential to remember that mental illness is like other states of ill health and getting effective treatment is essential. I don’t know what psychotherapy Rachmaninoff received, but I know that today we have many treatments that are effective for treating conditions like depression, anxiety, and eating disorders. One of the big challenges is making sure that individuals who are in need can actually access them, a priority that is central to our work across the Global Mental Health Programs at Columbia.

5. Celebration: We started the evening with a celebratory toast, and we concluded the evening with a celebratory dance! Life is about giving it your all. Getting engaged. Getting involved. Living with drive, purpose and rhythm. The evening concluded with world class tap dancer, [Chris Erk](#), dancing with partners to Duke Ellington’s [It Don’t Mean A Thing \(if it ain’t got that swing\)](#). As our final performance of the night, it was a buoyant moment celebrating the arts, the artists, and all the support from everyone in attendance.

Our artists donated their time and talents to a full house at Joe’s Pub. They shared their own stories and elevated the evening with their many talents – advancing mental health advocacy with inspiration, connection, creation, rejuvenation and celebration. It was a night of standing ovations: for our extraordinary Master of Ceremonies, Peter Hermann, all the performing artists, Artistic Director Elaine Kwon, and Program Chair Janet Montag. We are enormously grateful for such a stunning and memorable evening. As this week of Valentine’s Day comes to a close, yes, love is eleMENTAL for our health and wellbeing – but when love is not enough, remember that mental illness is treatable, and we have many effective interventions that can put health and recovery in reach.