

The Silent Struggle Transcript

Opening

[Sound of news clip mentioning Asian-American mental health that gets overlapped by multiple other news clips]

Host: When most people talk about mental health, they tend to address how it affects humanity as a whole, and not how it might affect certain demographics differently. But, compared to other backgrounds, Asian Americans are least likely to receive mental health treatment - only 20.8% of Asian adults with a mental illness received treatment in 2020". (NAMI)

Megan: "A lot of times I've seen me and my friends kinda put mental health on the back burner for a while. Especially in high school, a lot of my friends were just like we're grinding. Nothing else matters. We have to get into this good school, we have to get good grades, we have to do all these extracurriculars, and then we can finally rest when it's like summer or when we go to college or when we graduate. So the mental health aspect is just kind of pushed off to the side until it's convenient and a lot of times when it's convenient it's too late."

[Series theme song: "Deep End" by Makaih Beats]

Host: Welcome to U OK UVA?, a student-produced podcast about mental health and well-being at UVA. I'm your host, Paul Lee, and on this episode I'll be talking to Asian-American students at UVA about their struggles with mental health and social belonging. My hope is that sharing these stories will open up a space for conversation about mental health within the Asian-American student population at UVA.

["Deep End" fades out]

Point 1: Trends of Stress in Asian-American students at UVA

Host: As Asian-Americans our stories are often not told. Maybe this has to do with the myth that Asian-Americans are the "model minority"; that they are some perfect group. On the surface this *sounds* nice but it might be the reason why Asian-Americans are often overlooked as they don't, quote unquote, cause any issues. But history and statistics show not only that this isn't true, but that this view may be an underlying cause of stress in Asian-Americans. Various studies have shown how many factors affect the mental health of Asian-Americans. Most often it starts with stress. Stress is something we all experience. Whether it's from our school or our job, it's something we all deal with. While stress doesn't always look the same for everyone, we noticed some common factors among Asian American students here at UVA.

Jass: “I would say it partly comes from the upbringing of Asian American Students, like there is a stigma against getting mental health help, and the idea of balancing your mental health from like an upbringing aspect where i feel like a lot of asian kids can relate to the fact that when they’re brought up a lot of like all their grades in high school and work assignments were heavily stressed upon getting perfect grades and getting A’s and not really balancing like social life and doing activities that help relieve mental health.”

Helen: “I would still say that the way that I was raised, academic pressure is present and relevant, and what really caused me a lot of anxiety in my first year was that I was doing a show, this musical for a club, and I was really getting into it but I was scared that one of my grades wouldn’t turn out to be an A and I think that that is something that a lot of UVA students deal with but especially people of color.”

Hannah: “I think I definitely put a lot of the stress onto myself because like even though like obviously like with Asian parents they definitely you know are like a lot stricter on you in terms of your grades and stuff. Like I just wanna succeed and I wanna do good and like get a successful job and stuff like that. So I feel like there’s not really anyone around me that’s like causing me to be stressed I think it’s definitely just me wanting to be like the best and I think just like having had these expectations in high school and stuff I feel like you can’t just get rid of that. Like once you’re an overachiever you’re always going to have that overachiever personality one way or another.”

Host: We just heard from UVA students Jass, Helen, and Hannah sharing their experiences and sources of stress. A common theme was how academics and related pressure from parents, whether past or present, are common causes of stress to students within Asian American households.

[Thought-provoking music plays]

Host: Yale law professor Amy Chua touches on this idea in her book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* where she writes, “In one study of 50 Western American mothers and 48 Chinese immigrant mothers, almost 70% of the Western mothers said either that ‘stressing academic success is not good for children’ or that ‘parents need to foster the idea that learning is fun,’ By contrast, roughly 0% of the Chinese mothers felt the same way. Instead, the vast majority of the Chinese mothers said that they believe their children can be [quote unquote] the best students, that ‘academic achievement reflects successful parenting,’ and that if children did not excel at school then there was a [quote unquote] problem and parents were not doing their job.

[Thought-provoking music fades out]

Host: In an academically rigorous environment like UVA's, a dedication to school is basically second nature for some Asian-Americans. We are pushed from a young age to pursue academic success. I remember being in Kumon, a tutoring/education company, where I was learning Algebra 1 in 6th grade. After that

experience and the rigor it required, I felt pressured to approach all my academics in the same way. Maybe that's why I didn't feel the shock of academic rigor as much when I came to UVA. I was already so in tune with it.

[Deep mysterious music plays]

Host: So we see Asian-American students tend to get stressed because of academics and their parents, but who do they go to with this stress?

Point 2: Family dynamic on mental health

Host: Being able to talk about mental health is something that has become more common over the last decade, yet people still struggle with having this conversation with their family, especially Asian Americans. Constance Wu speaks on this in an interview on the show *The View*.

[Deep mysterious music fades out]

[Sound bite from Constance Wu]

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SZRCVz_sDK8 (0:08 - 0:46)

Constance Wu: “Even talking about your feelings. There's an entire episode of *Fresh Off the Boat*, where we talk about how Asians don't like to and families don't like saying I love you to each other. Something as innocuous as saying ‘I love you’, is too vulnerable and touchy-feely and I think we need to open up those conversations and talk about mental health.”

Host: Thinking about this I am transported back to middle school when I first heard about my sister struggling with anxiety. At the time I knew what anxiety and panic attacks were, but within the family we never really talked about mental health so I silently worried from the side. Now, many years later I think about how I have finally opened up the conversation to my sister who still struggles with anxiety. I have finally suggested therapy and asked her to share her anxiety with me. If only the culture surrounding mental health was different I might have been able to do this for my sister much earlier.

Host: Many of the students I talked with emphasized how difficult it is to approach mental health issues within Asian American families. For instance, this is what Megan Van Rafelghem, who you heard speaking at the beginning of the episode, had to say.

Megan: “My mom. She felt like mental illness wasn't really a real thing and like hard work could just beat anything and when we finally convinced her like ‘Hey you might have ADHD like mental illness is a thing like these are struggles that you face.’ It was kind of like she took that and ran with it and was like ‘Ok, well

if I have mental illness and I still graduated from college and I overcame all of my struggles then why can't you?' And it was a very volatile and negative motivator that she used to try to like encourage us, so I think that relationship with mental health being so prevalent in my family was definitely not a good thing. Also I think she was raised like that talking about your feelings isn't really a necessity."

Host: So why are Asian Americans so reluctant to discuss mental health?

One of the big reasons seems to be the social stigma and shame involved. According to the National Alliance for Mental Illness, Asian Americans are more likely to report that they didn't receive mental health treatment because of negative opinions from those around them often resulting in shame.

[Soft enlightening music starts]

Host: Many Asian-American families, especially first-generation immigrants, deny mental health needs because of cultural stigma towards mental illness. Due to a desire to protect the family's reputation many people don't seek help until it's too late.

Point 3: Being a minority/feelings of othering at UVA

Host: When struggling with mental health, people often seek support from friends. This is especially true for those who feel like they can't go to their families for help. Yet, some people have a hard time finding people to relate with at UVA.

[Soft enlightening music fades out]

Host: The Asian population is only 16% of its total student population. While unintentional, some students may feel othered or like they don't belong when looking to join clubs or CIOs at UVA. A fourth year here at UVA, reflects upon her experience of being a minority within a religious group here at UVA.

Fourth Year: "I think, when I was a first year, something that was important to me when I was a first year was finding a Christian community to be a part of. And so I tried both Grace Christian Fellowship and Chi Alpha. But I think I chose Grace Christian Fellowship mainly because I felt like I could not culturally relate to my group at Chi Alpha. Again super nice super good people, but I think the ways they could connect in terms of culture or humor or background, I could not relate."

"I remember one time, I was talking to someone from my group, and we were like listening to music or something and she was talking about how she wished she was a housewife in the 50s, just cleaning the house and waiting for her husband to come back home, and it was in that moment I was like, I don't belong here, I don't relate at all. Because I am pretty sure the people around me were like, that's so relatable and but I was like that's not relatable because if it were in the 50s I wouldn't survive in America, so yeah.

It was just things like that that made it a little harder to relate, so I chose to leave."

Host: As a half-Asian and half-white student, Megan shares a unique statement as she reflected upon her time at UVA.

Megan: “I think it still is really difficult for me to like feel comfortable outside of people who don’t have like shared cultural experiences as me.”

“Something that like I felt uncomfortable by is just like if I hang out... Oh ok, if I go to a frat I just kind of don’t understand the culture and I feel really out of place in circumstances like that and times where I’ve tried to go I feel like every conversation is super monotonous and boring, and it’s always like someone will come up to me and ask what sorority I’m in and I’ll be like ‘I’m not in one’ and then usually the conversation screeches to a halt. So it’s just like yeah I can definitely get away with going to like tailgates and frats and stuff and like it looks like I’m in place, but I generally don’t feel the most comfortable.”

“I think that it’s difficult for a university as a whole to make people feel included like it’s the people who make people feel included like it doesn’t really matter what the message of the university is saying so much as like if professors and the people and your peers are making you feel like you’re one of them.”

[Steady mellow music starts]

Point 4: Social groups and social belonging as a minority at UVA

Host: We’ve just heard how Asian Americans can feel isolated or lonely at Predominately White Institutions like UVA. Asian students have had to carve out their own spaces where they feel comfortable and have a sense of belonging. Culturally-focused clubs/CIOs are not exclusive to students of that particular background; additionally, they can give more exposure and highlight the experiences of that particular cultural group in a way that can't really be learned in the classroom. Here is Megan again commenting on how her experiences at the Vietnamese Student Association shaped her time here at UVA..

[Steady mellow music fades out]

Megan: “I feel like it’s different having friends versus having a community that you feel like you can rely on. And I feel like I definitely found my community within VSA - Vietnamese Student Association - and it was around my second year second semester when I found like that group that I felt like I could actually be myself and i could like wholeheartedly enjoy hanging out with them doing basically anything. I think the year and a half leading up to trying to find that group that I like really resonated with, it was pretty difficult maneuvering college, but still manageable. I think once I found my people it was so much easier and I felt like a weight had been lifted.”

“There were times where I really, really needed it [in regards to their VSA community] and like there were times where I just needed support and I would go to a VSA event and I would see so many people there and

know so many of them and feel like ‘Wow I have such a wide network of people I could reach out to if I ever needed help.’”

Host: Jass also speaks positively about their experience at the Sikh Student Association.

Jass: “When I joined here, the president of the Sikh Student Association which is a religious club at UVA, was one of my sister’s friend through high school, so she had reached out to me asking me to come out to their interest meetings, and I was pretty active in the beginning of my first semester. I met a few friends I still talk to today. I didn’t join the Indian Student Association, I would say partly because my high school and neighborhood in Northern Virginia was majority from different parts of India, so like I wanted to reach out and find more, like joining SSA [Sikh Student Association] was more impactful for me because there were less Punjabi and Sikh students in my area, so I dedicated more of my time to getting to know that group of students at UVA.”

Host: As we can hear, these culturally-focused groups offer places where Asian-American students can find a place of understanding and acceptance. I too share in this experience as it is often easier for me to feel accepted in a place where I can make jokes in Korean or share some kimchi jjigae without having to worry about the smell. It is often these small things that amount to how comfortable and accepted people feel.

[Ambient optimistic music plays]

Closing

Megan: “No matter how healthy you are physically and mentally, you can always do more to improve.”

Host: Megan’s comment is a powerful one to leave you with. Not only can you continue to improve yourself, but you can also help improve the health of those around you. Share your experiences and struggles with others. The Asian-American stories that often go overlooked and ignored need to be shared.

[Ambient optimistic music fades out]

Host: By being open about these stories we can bring together our communities and offer up spaces for understanding across differences in culture and customs. By sharing more, we can work towards equally addressing the mental health needs of *all* students at UVA.

Acknowledgements

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Host: This podcast was produced by Paul Lee, Raymond Wen, Bryson Taylor, and Aayush Patel as a part of a collaborative project for Professor Steph Ceraso's "Writing with Sound" class at UVA. A full list of audio and textual sources used in the production of this podcast can be found in the transcript associated with this episode. Thanks for listening.

["Deep End" fades out]

[End of episode]

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