



community

Noun [C, + sing/pl verb)
safety; myth; integral

Artwork and story by Embrace Youth Community Group member Rachael Burns

The concept of 'community' has always been something I've struggled to understand.

At times, I've believed it a total myth, while at others, it was a lifeline. The one constant was its lack of constancy, but I think I've finally landed at a definition of community that works for me.



Community: a safe and loving environment; a sense of inclusion

As a child, I thought of it in terms of my local area – the libraries and playgrounds, civic centres and sports ovals. It wasn't so much about people as it was about growing up in a safe and loving environment. It was the experiences and the greenspaces around me which I took for granted but enjoyed nonetheless.

As I started going to school and existing around peers, I came to understand 'community' as a sense of inclusion – the feeling of being in company. It wasn't necessarily a connection, but it was inclusion through being a part of clubs and groups that came together to play sports or learn. For the most part, it was something I viewed as a positive.

Community was not something that I thought deeply about – either regarding its absence or presence.

Community: a myth; a degree of social acceptance (synonyms: blending, masking)

As I moved into late primary school and early high school, socialising became progressively difficult. It became evident that I didn't relate to my peers in the ways I was expected to.

Instead of forming commonalities, forming bonds, I became hyper-aware of the ways in which my brain and thinking patterns deviated from those around me and in turn the ways that I didn't fit in. I began to believe that community as belonging was a myth.

Community was merely a degree of social acceptance, synonymous with blending in and masking. I mastered the art of observing others, altering my behaviour such that I wouldn't appear as the outsider I felt.

In doing so, I lost parts of who I was.

I started to become mentally unwell, turning to coping mechanisms that caused me significant harm. I collected diagnoses and hospital admissions like passport stamps, becoming unrecognisable to the passionate and outgoing person I had been.

I wasn't yet an adult, but I had seen and witnessed unspeakable things and in the process, I'd been completely alone. I was surrounded by nurses and doctors and security guards, but I had nobody around me to whom I could relate. Socialising didn't extend beyond conversations about treatment plans. I had nobody that saw me as a human being rather than a patient and the term 'relationship' was always prefaced by 'therapeutic'.

I spent my days alone in the four walls of either a hospital room or my bedroom, finding company in textbooks and practice exams while pushing away family and friends. I only existed in two contradictory parallels. In clinical settings, I was a patient who was frequently reminded that she was primarily a burden, and almost as an afterthought, a human being. In academic settings, I was a 'gifted student' with 'incredible potential' who was far more interested in study than in something as menial as a social life.





Community: my people; comfort and belonging

My current understanding of community only started to form last year as I began to step into advocacy and embrace my neurodivergence. Connecting with the parts of myself I had vowed to eradicate, I started to celebrate these inherent characteristics of the person I am. I accepted my identity, recognising that the way my brain operates is likely different to that of many of my peers.

As a passionate mental health and disability advocate with lived experience, community is now fundamental to the work that I do and in creating a sense of safety. It is particularly relevant to my own passion project, Integrity Initiative, which I launched last year. Integrity Initiative is

a mission to humanise mental health treatment and deliver dignity to those stripped of it through a lived experience-focused, community-centred approach. We will develop and deliver essential packages and resources for people experiencing mental ill-health across Western Australia, and host community engagement events to raise awareness, decrease stigma and encourage early intervention for mental health challenges. The program and all of its work will be by people with lived experience of mental ill-health, for people with lived experience of mental ill-health, alongside established community organisations, taking a lived experience, evidence and human rights-based approach.

Integrity Initiative draws upon my new-found comfort in the term 'community'; that which brings together connection to country, to peers, to locality, and belonging all in one. Community based on passion, shared values, mateship and identity. ■



Community forms a silver lining in wordcloud survey

TALKING to friends, family and other trusted people were the most commonly identified ways to look after your mental health by both high school and university students in a recent Embrace survey.

The responses serve as a reminder of the importance of community to support our wellbeing.

Other answers that came up with both age groups included exercise and sport, self-care, and creative pursuits like writing, reading and listening to music.

High schoolers were more likely to turn off their phone and practice skin and hair care routines to look after their mental wellbeing, while university students veered towards rest, journalling and staying away from toxicity.

Students at both events responded to mental health-related questions on sticky notes which went on display on a mental health poster.