

“You need to get out more.”
an analysis by Christina Bennett

Integrative Project
Fall 2015 - Winter 2016

ARTDES 498/499 - 001
Hannah Smotrich & Stephanie Rowden

INTRODUCTION

Positive statements have the ability to encourage and support the people they are being directed at. “Look on the bright side”, “try not to think about it”, and “it’s just in your head” are all perfect examples of this kind of language. But when these statements are directed at someone struggling with depression, a dramatic shift takes place. This series of statements become false-positive, instead of being simply positive.

Surprisingly, those struggling with depression typically do not vocalize their struggles to even their closest companions. This can be for reasons such as fear of shame, confusion, or embarrassment. In turn these reasons among many others make having a conversation about depression extremely difficult, even with those who know about it. So when these expressed emotions are met with false positive statements, they in turn do the opposite of what their speaker intended for them as they can lead the depressed to further hide their true feelings.

For my senior thesis project I chose to shine light on these difficulties and fears that come with talking about one’s depression, including topics that do not commonly get discussed. Through a series of three small books, I will uncover the difficulties and perspectives that stem from receiving these false positive statements. Each book will discuss a different kind of strain that comes with talking about one’s depression to the people around them and will subtly begin to point at how these conversations can be better handled. These books they act as educational tools that will create a communal and social impact among others, as people who do not understand depression can better assist those that are battling it, instead of negatively affecting it. In addition, I will ultimately provide a voice of understanding to those battling depression that they do not commonly receive. By highlighting this fight with an invisible illness, it shows how that the way our society treats mental health troubles only makes the battle more difficult to talk about.

CONTEXTUAL DISCUSSION

When I began, my quest for artists and designers to help guide me on my project path and the first one I came across was designer Stefan Sagmeister. One of my favorites is his book *Things I Have Learned in My Life So Far*, which is a collection of different typographic pieces and installations bound into mini booklets, comprised in a bigger box.



Covers for *Things I have Learned in my Life So Far* featuring cutouts with different booklets showing through. (Source: Stefan Sagmeister)

One of the typographic designs featured in the book. (Source: Stefan Sagmeister)

Each piece was a moral-sounding statement of something he’s learned in life. His project is narrative based, as is my project. As a collection, these booklets ended up being tremendously relatable and comforting to take in when they were broken up into a system of one or two words per spread. This reading process became a therapeutic activity by forcing the reader to slow down and take in everything that was happening on the page. Through this piece of his I took away his way of storytelling, focus on language, and use of book forms.

Focusing on different characteristics, I also looked at his exhibit ‘The Happy Show’. This space was created to tell a story where he was trying to increase his happiness through different methods. In turn, the show was all about how these different aspects worked together. At the

beginning of the exhibit, a notice stated:

“This exhibition will not make you happier. It will not take away your anxieties. If you regularly weep into your pillow at night, visiting the design exchange won’t keep you from doing so. These pieces will not keep you from having dreadful thoughts during your morning shower. They will not solve the problems you are having with your unreliable colleague at work or an unthankful child at home. I am telling you this in order to lower your expectations, because low expectations are a good strategy.” (Source: “The Happy Show.” Institute of Contemporary Art. 118 South 36th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104.)

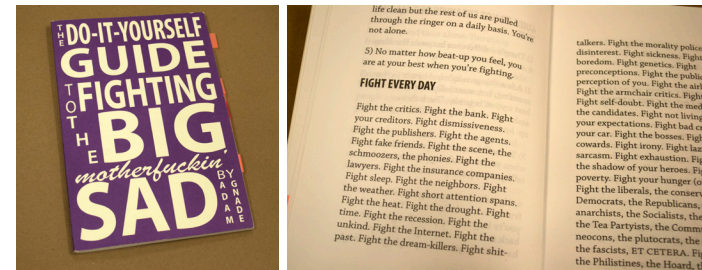


A portion of the wall designs from The Happy Show (Source: Sagmeister & Walsh)

Like his book, this was a very honest and almost negative statement to make in relation to finding happiness. This comparison is what sparked my interest in this dark side to trying to find happiness, leading me to the topic of depression and how people try to overcome that difficulty. It also relates heavily to my content since the words on the pages are very honest. Eventually, the content leads up to a book about the methods used in order to come down from a depressive panic.

With my new interest in overcoming depression, I found myself being referred to writer Adam Gnade. His book *The Do It Yourself Guide to Fighting the Big Mother Fucking Sad*, is a zine-turned-book that discusses how to fight one’s depression, written from a first person

perspective. After reading it in its entirety, the reader is supposed to leave feeling better about themselves and their mental health.



Cover design and sample spread from Gnade’s book. (Source: Photos by Christina Bennett)

The book itself was small in scale, which added to the intimacy of the read. By having it written in a first person perspective, it gave the writing a very distinct personality with a loud and clear voice, making it a relatable read even if the reader did not have depression themselves. The way he wrote the book made it educational as well for readers who do not know about the difficulties of depression by phrasing things like “I know you feel like X...”. His informed me on how to talk about depression and take away the emotional impact of the book, which are aspects I have been applying to my process.

After more artistic research I came across the book artist Heather Weston who creates artist books about different mental health struggles. The first book of hers I found, *Paper Cut*, is a book where the reader comes across only slits in the pages but once they start to play with the book and pull it apart, a story is found on the reverse sides of the pages about self-harm. The struggle of finding this story mimics the internal struggle within the narrator, symbolizing how deeply hidden some peoples real troubles are. Since the book did not feature any illustrations, all of the focus is on the words being addressed and the process it took to find them. In addition to *Paper Cut*, Heather has a similar book, *Shedding Light*, where the reader comes across a series of braille passages in an accordion style booklet that has the text mirrored on the back, requiring a mirror or very good eyes to read what it says. Like the other one, there is work required to find the hidden story. There is a

strong use of dual languages working together to tell a story of difficulty. Overall, the way that reading became a meaningful experience was my biggest takeaway, which led to my desire to create my own books with hidden messages. Heather's book construction techniques also inspired my own construction techniques in terms of creating another layer to mimic the difficulty being described.

METHODOLOGY

When I first started this project I wanted to create something that built off a list of topics and ideas that I am passionate about. This list eventually became five concepts: culture, stories, books, language, and people. These were keywords that kept resurfacing in my initial research so I decided to push forward with them and explore artists and designers who worked with similar topics. With these newfound, concrete sources of inspiration I created five quick, potential project sketches that were based off my initial reactions to these keywords that I had been exploring. Two of my five sketches were focused on overcoming negative emotions, but I didn't realize how passionately I felt about the topic until it was pointed out to me in a critique that I rambled on about it for over ten minutes. Through this brainstorming process emerged a desire to create something that would benefit someone individually. I pushed this desire further by getting specific and reassessing that I wanted to create something that benefited someone individually in terms of overcoming an internal struggle of having overwhelming negative emotions.

To start, I applied this idea to my 'book' keyword and began to explore how this concept would work within a book composition. In my first attempt, I tried to create a book about de-stressing through a small book that expanded to a much bigger sheet of paper and featured a few words per spread but it did not function as expected. When it was read as book it ended up doing the opposite of what I intended and thus made the reader more stressed out.

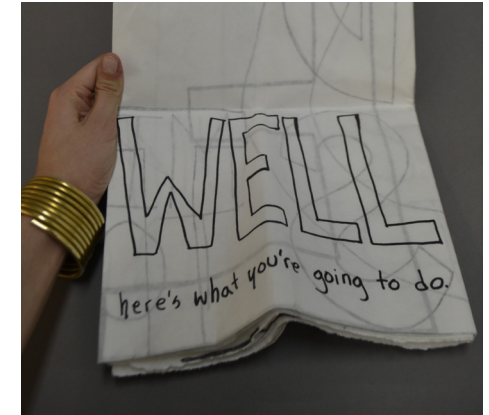
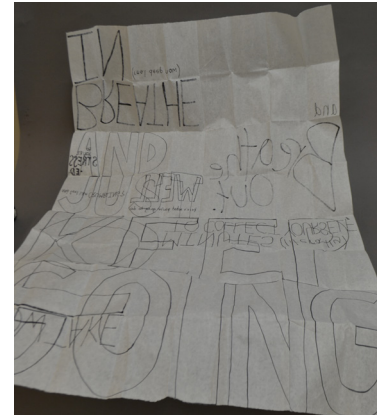


Photo examples of de-stressing book. (Source: Photos by Christina Bennett)

In critique, while it was regarded as unsuccessful in the way I intended, it was successful in over ways by accurately visualizing what stress internally feels like and how it is not as easy to calm down from as some might think. With this in mind I took the same brainstorming process I did earlier and created five books that were initial reactions to the notion of overcoming a condition of overwhelming negative emotion. By using different content and writing styles for each one, they each spoke in a very specific tone about depression.

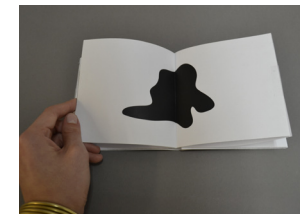
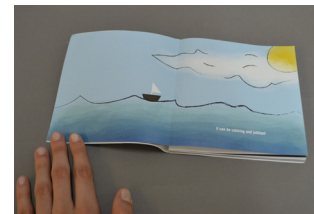


Photo examples of the five initial reaction books. (Source: Photos by Christina Bennett)



Bennett 5.

With these books I explored illustrations, photography, and typographic design to convey my message. I explored different writing styles by utilizing a poem, first/second person, and monologue formats. With this combination of styles and formats the books became very descriptive of depression, but fell short by lacking a personable quality and a “but why should I care” moment.

By discovering this new speed bump to overcome, I repurposed a couple of books I made in a bookbinding workshop I took earlier in the semester in an attempt to explore other forms of books.

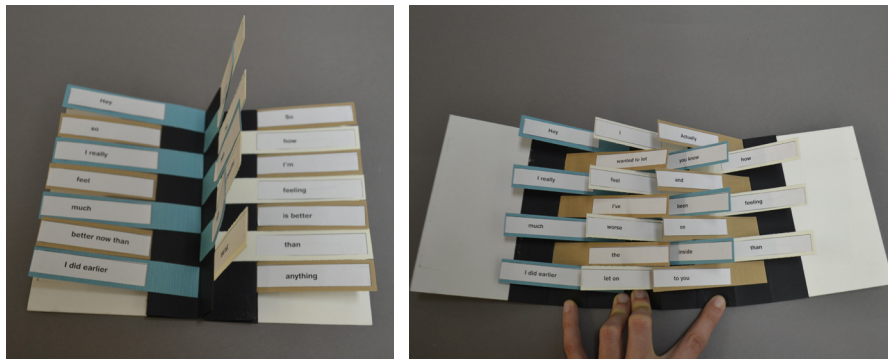


Photo examples of initial flag book. (Source: Photos by Christina Bennett)

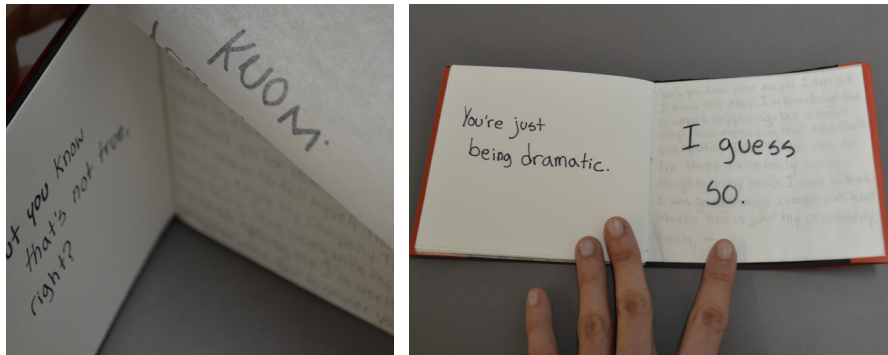


Photo examples of initial hidden panel book. (Source: Photos by Christina Bennett)

With a book made up of flag like tabs, I told a story like Paper Cut (Heather Weston) where the reader had to play with the book, turning, pulling it apart, to discover the real message within. One book had a hidden panel for internalized thoughts. These thoughts were unsaid responses to questions on the exterior of this hidden panel.



Photo examples of initial accordion book. (Source: Photos by Christina Bennett)

With an accordion book that featured pockets, I made a book for a series of letters communicated between two people, both experiencing depression. Through this book making series, I discovered that these books achieved what I wanted to convey, in the sense that they pulled the reader into these descriptions of emotions and set a scene for what was being discussed. But in turn I grew concerned that using books for my message body might not be the right format.

With this new concern I hit the ground running and immediately attempted some large-scale installation work, using my most recent book content.

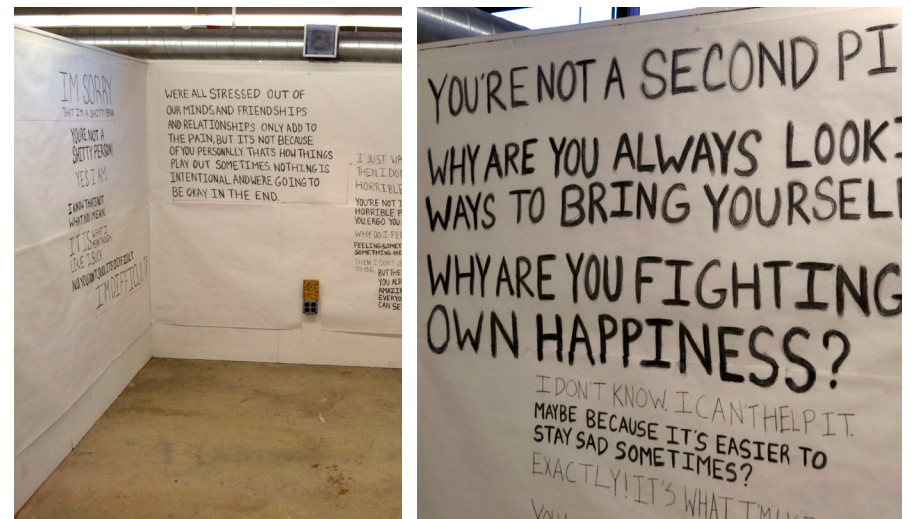


Photo examples of installation 1. (Source: Photos by Christina Bennett)

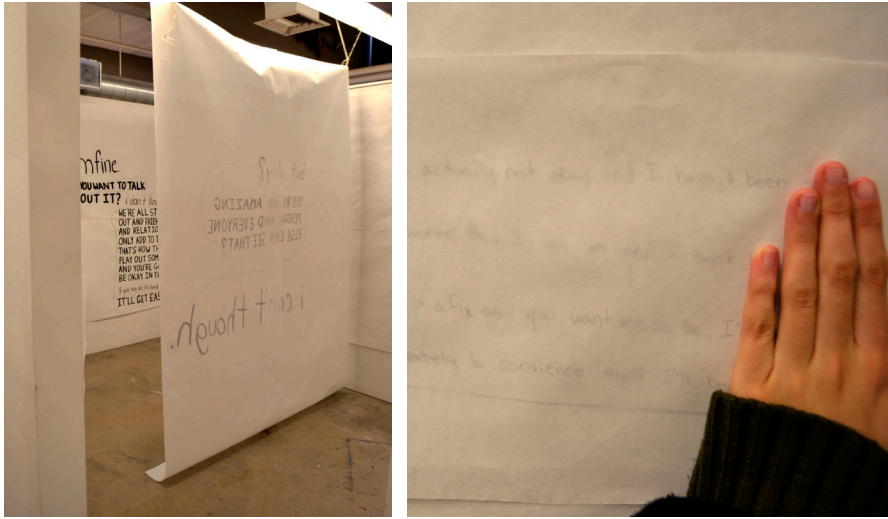


Photo examples of installation 2. (Source: Photos by Christina Bennett)

After working at a small scale for so long, it was very powerful to see these words in the setting of a room, but not in the ways I wanted. In my two attempts at an installation, the words I chose to highlight became inauthentic and loud by having them so large and with so many people reading them as once. I created this environment that replicated depression for the viewer instead of addressing ways to overcome it. Subsequently, I realized I was far from where I started in terms of my initial goals for the project and I preferred the intimate book setting I had been working with before.

While this helped to reassure what my intentions were, another takeaway I received from my class was to incorporate more genuine textual content. Taking this feedback, I applied it to my final exploratory book form.

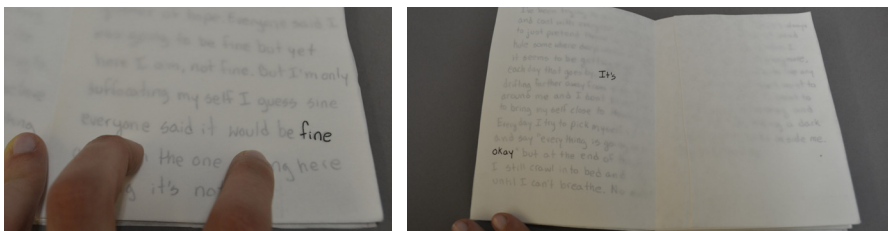


Photo examples of final exploratory book form. (Source: Photos by Christina Bennett)

This book was constructed by having newer, more genuine text underneath a thinner layer of paper so the reader had to get close to the book and press into the pages to read what these passages were saying. With this method the book illustrates the lack of communication coming from people with depression, and was interesting when juxtaposed with the repurposed books I had created before my installation work.

Through all of this exploration, I discovered that I wanted my series of books to explain the difficulties that come with talking about one's depression with people that may not always understand. All of my books had been built off this series of false-positive statements that are said to people with depression, fully intending to make them feel better but in actuality making them feel worse.

CREATIVE WORK

The final form of this journey exists as a series of three books entitled "You need to get out more." The books are identical on the outside in terms of scale, color, and materials. They are each 7.5" by 7.5" book forms that are covered with a sunny yellow book cloth. In the center of each cover is a title that is letterpressed into the book cloth using yellow ink, slightly darker than the yellow of the book cloth to give it some dimension. Each book is titled with a false positive statement.



Photo examples of final installation work. (Source: Photos by Christina Bennett)

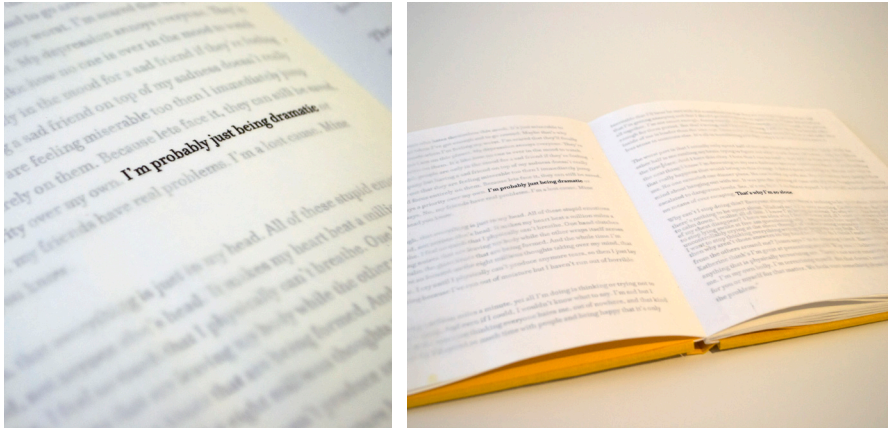


Photo examples of "It's just in your head.". (Source: Photos by Christina Bennett)

"It's just in your head." is the first book in the series. The content is structured as an internal monologue of a depressed persons true thoughts and responses as to why they are not verbalizing these thoughts they are having. Using a traditional drumleaf style binding, this book contains five folio spreads with body paragraphs of text where the leading becomes gradually tighter throughout the course of the book. Over top of each individual folio is a sheet of translucent paper with a single sentence from the text underneath, printed to align right over top of its pair underneath. This sheet obscures the rest of the text making it harder for the viewer to read. This mimics the mental barrier of people with depression. All of the spreads are white in color with a very deep red color for the text.



Photo examples of "Everyone has those days.". (Source: Photos by Christina Bennett)

"Everyone has those days." is the second book in the series where the content is structured with a series of false statements used by those with depression, and single, more truthful statement about how they are feeling. The truthful statement gets revealed using a flag book style binding where the pages are made of individual strips. When the book is pulled apart, these strips all fit together to create a hidden sentence that is crafted using the words from each individual page. This method mimics the idea of reading between the lines of what people with depression are actually expressing in order to figure out how they are actually feeling.

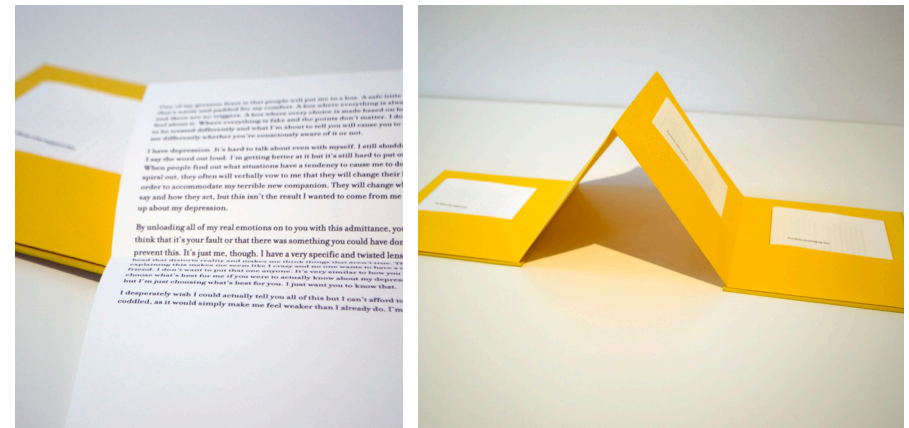


Photo examples of "Don't be so hard on yourself". (Source: Photos by Christina Bennett)

"Don't be so hard on yourself." is the third book in the series. The content is structured as a string of letters that are written from someone experiencing depression, addressed to people who have affected their depression in a good or bad way, expressing thoughts they wish they could tell them. This book is bound using an accordion pocket fold style where four pockets are created in the book and each letter is folded in half and then placed inside. The exterior of the letter then features the intended audience of each one. This method mimics the therapy method of writing letters that you don't intend to send.

CONCLUSION

My initial goal with this project was to say something about depression more generally as a topic overall. I feared that if this project became more about me specifically, it would not be relevant to enough people. It is because of this that throughout the course of the project, I always had striven to keep my identity out of the content by keeping my writing as ambiguous as possible. Even though I worked effortlessly to achieve this amorphous narrator, I neglected to realize that the average person would naturally read a first person narrative as a reflection of the writer. At Work Gallery's opening reception I had coworkers, friends, and acquaintances mention to me that I am, "so strong and so brave" or that they, "had no idea because [you] always seem so positive." It was after these occurrences that I realized I did not need my artist statement or my content to explicitly say, "Christina has depression, these books are about Christina's depression," for the books to reveal the truth about my depression. My viewers put the pieces together themselves using the context clues I left throughout the books; actually mimicking the communication that happens in my second book, "Everyone has those days." At first I cared deeply about this, as I worried that everyone was too focused on realizing that I have depression and it was now a personal piece. Shortly after this though, I realized that it did not matter. It did not matter that it was about me and my depression. It did not matter that people fixated on realizing that I was battling depression. What mattered was that the project became relevant for these people through realizing that I had depression. This action communicated that depression can be found in any size, shape, or form (even if they appear upbeat and happy); which is above all else what I wanted to express through my piece.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

"Everything I Do Always Comes Back to Me" Argus Webzine. Accessed April 19, 2016. <http://www.student.nvcc.edu/home/aglee/sagmeister.html>.

"Various Cover Portraits for Things I Have Learned in My Life so Far" Argus Webzine. Accessed April 19, 2016. <http://www.student.nvcc.edu/home/aglee/sagmeister.html>.

Gnade, Adam. *The Do-It-Yourself Guide to Fighting the Big Mother-fuckin' Sad*. Lansing, Kansas: Pioneers Press, 2014.

Paper Cut: Relief. Bookery, London, England. Accessed April 19, 2016. <http://www.bookery.co.uk/collections/book-art/products/paper-cut-relief>.

Sagmeister, Stefan. *Things I Have Learned in My Life so Far*. New York, New York: Abrams, 2008.

Shedding Light. Bookery, London, England. Accessed April 19, 2016. <http://www.bookery.co.uk/products/shedding-light>.

"The Happy Show." Institute of Contemporary Art. 118 South 36th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104.

The Happy Show. Sagmeister & Walsh, New York, New York. Accessed April 19, 2016. <http://www.sagmeisterwalsh.com/work/project/the-happy-show/>.

Weston, Heather. *Paper Cut: relief*. London, England: Heather Weston, 2007.

Weston, Heather. *Shedding Light*. London, England: Heather Weston, 2005.