

COMFORT WORDS

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Integrative Project

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2018-2019



INTRODUCTION

I suffered from mental health problems for eight years before I got help. When I think about how long I waited to seek help, I feel disappointed, but statistically waiting for years to address mental health problems is the norm.¹ Since eighth grade, I battled with intense cognitive distortions and symptoms of depression and anxiety because of it. Cognitive distortions are ways of thinking about oneself and one's environment that are biased and lead to problematic emotional states.²

Throughout the highs and lows of my mental health struggles, art has been the most consistent source of confidence in myself as well as a way of coping. But once I switched from fine art to graphic design, it took me a few years to figure out I could use handmade elements in my everyday design practice. It simultaneously brings me immediate joy and relaxation by working with my hands as well as helps me foster a deeper, physical connection and devotion to the projects I work on. *Comfort Words* was born when I explored my passion for handmade elements within graphic design while simultaneously taking actions surrounding my own mental health problems. The project focuses on addressing mental health by fostering active conversations between people I am close with and myself. *Comfort Words* is made up of over forty soft, stuffed letterforms serving as playful comfort objects intended to foster an environment where people feel comfortable being vulnerable as well as eight photographs. The photographs showcase my subjects' answers to the question, "What words of comfort do you need right now?" They were prompted with this after having one-on-one conversations about their personal mental health experience and how they felt after spending time with the letterforms.

¹ Pratt, Kim. "Psychology Tools: What Are Cognitive Distortions?" *Healthy Psych*. November 7, 2013. Accessed April 18, 2019.

² Susman, David. "8 Reasons Why People Don't Get Treatment for Mental Illness." David Susman PhD. June 02, 2017. Accessed January 10, 2019.

CONTEXTUAL DISCUSSION

Mental Health

Mental health issues aren't new, but they are discussed more openly now. The conversation about mental health for college students has been happening for a century. Students have consistently utilized mental health services since they've been established on campuses in 1910. From that point forward, psychiatric services started to appear on college campuses across the country. A 1947 survey confirmed that 15% of students on campuses with adequate services had used one, exceeding the expected 10% participation. This statistic has remained relatively consistent even until today.³

A struggle for me personally was reaching a point where I finally accepted I needed help regarding my mental health, so I was interested to find that I wasn't alone in this. There are several common reasons why people with mental health issues don't seek help. These range from not knowing what resources are available and not being able to afford professional help to feelings of fear, shame, hopelessness, and inadequacy. Common thoughts are "my problems aren't that bad" and "it'll get better on its own." Because of this, people feel that taking a big step like seeing a therapist isn't necessary. This was important context for my project in order to develop a smaller scale resource that could especially help people that didn't feel comfortable seeking help.

At the University of Michigan, the most commonly cited mental health issues are anxiety, depression, emotional management, and stress. Self-comparison is one of the biggest issues that students struggle with. The University's Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) focuses on teaching students how to be compassionate with themselves, yet students still struggle and feel like there aren't ways to get help. Some reasons that University of Michigan students don't get help include the current stigma around mental health and perceptions of weakness, limited resources like insurance or transportation, and simply feeling that their personal issues are not bad or severe enough.⁴ This last point was my reasoning for not getting help for so long, and it has been a consistent goal to help others feeling the same way through this project.

³ Kraft, David. "One Hundred Years of College Mental Health." *Journal of American College Health*, 2011, 477-81.

⁴ Karen Henry, Psy.D., interviewed by Paige Wilson at the University of Michigan, January 4, 2019.

Resources

To make a project focused on helping people with their mental health problems, I needed to figure what current solutions there are. First, there are the easier fixes. When it comes to problems like stress and anxiety, there are physical, “quick” fixes to help combat the bad feelings. Something as simple as smiling or adjusting posture can quickly change physical symptoms of stress and anxiety.⁵ This research was vital when figuring out the material and interaction the audience would have with my piece later on.

There are other, more comprehensive options for help when mental health issues are more severe. People often turn to professional psychology service to help their mental health, but counseling and therapy are not the only opportunities to get help. A lesser known, innovative way of combating these issues, especially for the young adult demographic, is a student-run or peer-to-peer service. These services have been established for many reasons from students not affording professional help or limited campus services. These services can act as a supplement to outside resources, but they can also act as the only mental health service a student receives.⁶ The effectiveness of these peer-to-peer services proved that peer-based projects can have a significant positive impact on mental health on campuses.

⁵ Davids, Chandré. “4 Ways to Stop Feeling so Stressed in 30 Seconds or Less.” Health24. July 01, 2018. Accessed January 20, 2019.

⁶ Kirsch, Daniel J., Stephanie L. Pinder-Amaker, Charles Morse, Marsha L. Ellison, Leonard A. Doerfler, and Michelle B. Riba. “Population-Based Initiatives in College Mental Health: Students Helping Students to Overcome Obstacles.” *Current Psychiatry Reports* 16 (2014).

⁷ Nordstrom, David Sturt and Todd. “Are Scare-Tactics The Most Effective Way To Get Results? Maybe.” *Forbes*. November 01, 2016. Accessed January 13, 2019.

Language

Although we don’t have a complete understanding of humanity and how our minds work, using the knowledge we do have is important when talking about mental health. With *Comfort Words* being a very language-heavy project, understanding the impact of language on individuals was important. Our minds don’t process positive and negative feedback the same way. When we hear something negative, we automatically think it is much more common than it really is. But it takes a positive message three to four times as long to influence human thinking.⁷ For example, when someone receives tons of compliments on their appearance, a single negative comment will be what they remember. Because of this, people need to hear more positive affirmations for them to stick than they need to hear negative ones. This concept played a vital role during the ideation stages of my work.

Interacting with Art

Making art is something I use to cope with stress, but even simply observing art for a small period of time has been proven to make people feel better and decrease stress levels.⁸ And although observing art is seen as virtually the only way to experience art, touch has been proven to enhance an audience's experience and understanding. In an experiment to test how touching art influences engagement, a group of visitors experienced the art only by looking, and a second group touched the art as well. After observations and final interviews, the researchers noticed that the individuals allowed to touch the art were better at communicating their thoughts on the work, had an enhanced understanding, were able to connect the work to other knowledge they had, and, finally, developed more eloquent interpretations of the piece. People also engaged with the pieces for longer periods of time, and automatically took turns when engaging, creating a sense of respect and community.⁹ This research solidified my decision to create a project where the audience could physically interact with the piece to gain a better result from the project outside of what they could simply observe.

Left: Fig. 1, individual touching an art piece.

Right: Fig. 2, two individuals discussing an art piece.



⁸ Siegel, Isabella. "Art in Transit Systems May Improve Commuters' Mental Health." *Mobility Lab*. June 13, 2018. Accessed December 1, 2018.

⁹ Christidou, Dimitra, and Palmyre Pierroux. "Art, Touch and Meaning Making: An Analysis of Multisensory Interpretation in the Museum." *Museum Management and Curatorship* 34, no. 1 (2018): 96-115.

Soft Sculpture

Because I haven't worked in soft sculpture before, I needed to understand what sort of work was currently being created. Two artists that stood out to me the most were Sarah Lucas and Annette Messenger. Lucas uses nylon and stuffing to create manipulated, human-like forms that explore gender and sexuality through symbolism of the human body as well as the material itself.¹⁰ Messenger uses materials from daily life in her pieces, creating many different types of soft sculptures exploring human existence.¹¹ Both women utilize extremely tactile material which had a strong influence when deciding what fabric and stuffing to use in *Comfort Objects*.

While Lucas and Messenger helped me contextualize current soft sculpture projects, Mia Cinelli's work most directly related to my own. Cinelli is an artist of many mediums, but her piece *The Weight* is an exploration of coping through a comfort object. Sewn to look like a square with two arms, *The Weight* is a cream colored weighted pillow that sits on one's lap or shoulders, immediately combating physical feelings of loneliness or anxiety. The sewn hands are to human scale, allowing the user to actually hold and feel comforted by the hands.¹²

Fig. 3, *The Weight*
by Mia Cinelli.



¹⁰ Smith, Roberta. "Sarah Lucas, Unmasked: From Perverse to Profound." *The New York Times*. September 05, 2018. Accessed January 9, 2019.

¹¹ "Annette Messenger." *Guggenheim*. Accessed January 9, 2019.

¹² Cinelli, Mia. *The Weight*. 2014. In *Mia Cinelli*. Accessed January 9, 2019.

Fig. 4, *The Weight*
by Mia Cinelli.



Comfort Objects

Comfort objects, transition objects, and security blankets are all terms used to describe a physical item that helps a young child cope with their feelings and develop self-soothing strategies. This development is extremely important to children in their developing stages, and although a comfort object is not required to learn these skills, they can help. Comfort objects feel, look, and often smell familiar, and this familiarity is translated to security.

Although it is uncommon to think about in this way, adults have versions of comfort objects, too. Family mementos with attached strong emotions and memories can help adults cope with things in their life, like loss or pain. Even pets can be loosely categorized as comfort objects. But the idea that humans of all ages use objects to feel better is true, whether an object has a specific use to help (like a weighted blanket for anxiety), or it is simply special to the person (like a teddy bear).¹³

¹³ Schwartz, Allan N., PhD. "The Transitional Objects and Self Comfort." *Mental Help The Transitional Objects and Self Comfort Comments*. Accessed January 20, 2019.

METHODOLOGY

My methodology can be categorized by three larger portions of time—handmade design, experiments in soft sculpture, and the final presentation—with two shifts in between changing the direction of my project. Within each time period I participated in both library research as well as research through iterative making.

Handmade Design

At the beginning, I didn't have a set direction I wanted my project to go in. I was open to exploring a lot of different ideas, and as I started to mind map and do initial sketches, I noticed several recurring themes I was interested in that manifest in some of my past work. They ranged from exploring the relationship between fine art and graphic design to current worldly issues like mental health and the environment to exploring my own identity as a feminist or artist and designer.

I was immediately drawn to the relationship between fine art and graphic design because of my own journey through my undergraduate degree. With a passion for both, I wanted to explore how working with my hands could be incorporated more actively into my graphic design. I began to research creatives like Mike Perry and Keetra Dean Dixon—people that straddle the line of art versus design, making with their hands both for personal and commercial purposes.

Alongside discovering the current climate in handmade design, I began making what I referred to as physical sketches. These were smaller iterations exploring how I could make physical words out of various materials. Alleviating myself of the pressure to construct these perfectly and focusing more on what the process of making and the specific materials are revealing. After coming up with an extensive list of materials I was interested in playing with, I decided to frame the content of these experiments. Because I still didn't know what larger topic to make my project about, I chose simple word play for these sketches. After deciding on a material, I would come up with a list of contradicting words, or antonyms. I then picked the best-fitting word based on word length, common connotations, and any underlying conceptual theme that might be relevant.

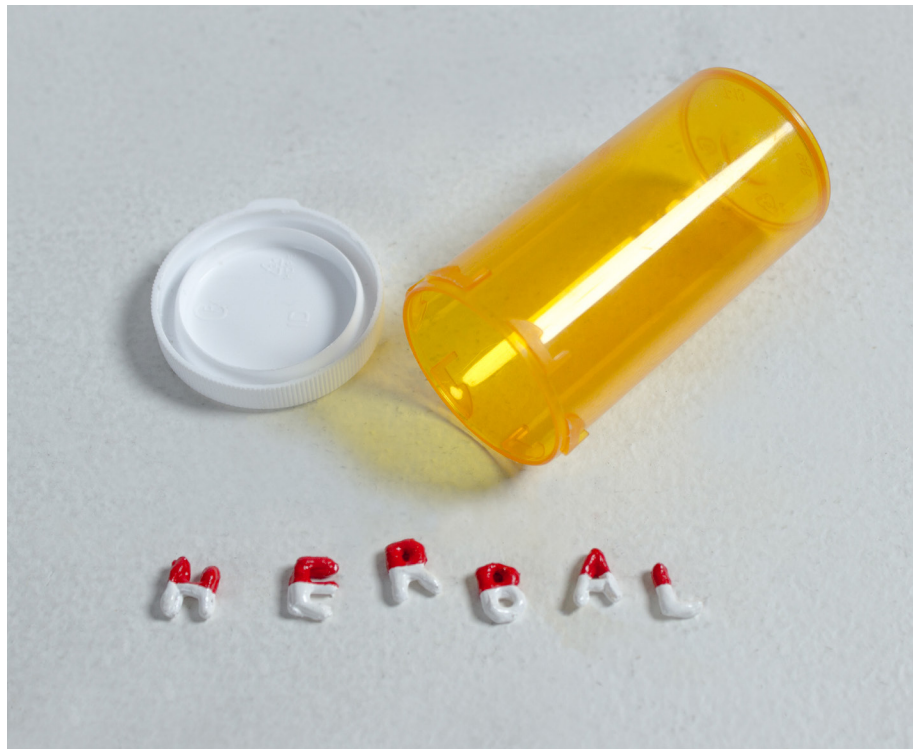
My first project proposal involved exploring the significance of handmade graphic design through creating words by hand, using a range of both two-dimensional and three-dimensional materials and mediums.

I wanted my audience to be able to touch, move, and interact with these words physically. The words I made, and the material that makes up each word, would connect and overlap each other in meaning.

After creating several physical sketches of both two and three-dimensional mediums, I reflected on this process. Some of the words I made looked bad *because* they were made by hand, like the word NATURE I made out of recycled hard foam cubes. Using an automated machine would have left better results, and the process of making this specific physical sketch by hand didn't add anything to my own experience. Similarly, when I made HERBAL out of painted hot glue meant to look like pills, I realized at the end that the tedious process of making these letters didn't benefit the project, and it would have been more effective to have simply painted dry alphabet noodles.



Left: Fig. 5, physical sketch cut out of hard foam.



Right: Fig. 6, physical sketch made with hot glue and acrylic paint.

The final physical sketch I made did receive a lot of positive feedback. I made the word HARD by sewing and stuffing a pink recycled shirt. My peers from both in and outside of class were drawn to this iteration the most, lingering longer with this word than others. Most people were inclined to squeeze and interlock the individual letterforms, resorting back to a sort of play like we did as kids with stuffed animals.

Fig. 7, hand sewn physical sketch.



Shift One

At this point, I felt very distant from the work I was creating. Focusing on making by hand wasn't enough, and I needed to figure out what I wanted to make with my hands about. After reflecting on my past work and the themes I explored at the very beginning of the project, I decided to make my project about mental health. I still didn't know what my project was going to be, so I started connecting the iterations I had been working on and my initial sketches and brainstorming back to mental health, trying to find where the pieces fit. This is when I decided to recreate my favorite physical sketch—the sewn letters—but make them involving mental health. The material itself wanted to be played and engaged with. It made my peers happy even in a five-minute critique setting. If I could amplify this small iteration, it could help more people in a more prominent way.

Experiments in Soft Sculpture

After finally deciding on a conceptual direction, I started to research the history of mental health and what changes have been relevant in the mental health climate. I also finalized a new proposal, focusing on word pillows specifically. I wanted these pillows to be read like text on a poster when installed, advocating for mental health awareness, as well as serve as physical objects of comfort. I intended to design each phrase for a specific on-campus location where it would be installed for students to physically engage with.

At this point, I wanted to run an experiment of this plan to see how people engaged with the work. I chose the phrase "IT IS OKAY TO TAKE BREAKS" for my initial experiment. I focused on making this iteration as quickly as possible to determine what public engagement would be like, not to achieve the best visual form. I created the stencils for the letters by hand on letter-sized paper and used various sources of yellow fabric to test different textures. I stuffed each letter differently to also experiment with weight, using different combinations of dry rice and fiber fill.



Fig. 8, "IT IS OKAY TO TAKE BREAKS" experiment.

After observing about fifteen different on-campus locations, I installed the phrase in the Duderstadt Library on the University of Michigan North Campus. This location had a lot of students from many different majors where they sat to work instead of just walk through in passing. I propped the phrase along three cushioned seats on the second floor of the library.

Every person that walked by glanced at the words or stopped to read through them, and people began to sit with them about fifteen minutes in. But after the first person sat down, the complete message was lost to any passerbys because the letters were blocked, and there were no looks or gestures towards the words after the first person was stationed there.

Fig. 9, "IT IS OKAY TO TAKE BREAKS" installed in the Duderstadt Library.



After the experiment, I started to have conversations with a handful of professors to get insights on next steps. Ben VanDyke is an Associate Professor at Michigan State University College of Arts & Letters. Ben thought seeing a few hundred photographs of my letters in different locations might convey a deeper connection to an audience than seeing the actual letters in a single physical space.

I also spoke with Anne Mondro, an Associate Professor at the University of Michigan Penny Stamps School of Art and Design. Anne pointed me towards the *Before I Die* project by Candy Chang: a popular wall replicated globally with the words "Before I die I will..." printed and many spaces for the audience to write in their dreams. Anne thought I could create something where people could leave their opinion and actively contribute to the addition of the piece.



Fig. 10, *Before I Die I Will...*
by Candy Chang.

Both Ben and Anne agreed I needed to decide how I wanted my audience to interact of leaving it open-ended. I realized that my previous choice to let the audience do as they pleased, whether it be interlocking the forms like a puzzle or maybe holding them in their laps like a weighted blanket, wasn't allowing for ample engagement like I intended but rather was limiting the experience by having too many possibilities.

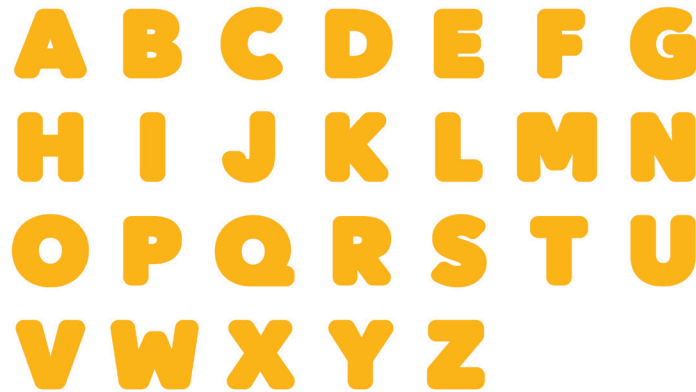
I created my next project proposal in response to this feedback and my experiment. I wanted to create seventy-eight individual stuffed letters that would be displayed in a pile in multiple on-campus buildings. A poster would prompt students to leave messages of encouragement for each other. The constantly shifting positive messages would contribute to a better mental health climate on campus in general, and the act of taking a break to participate would help each individual student by receiving stress-relieving benefits from stepping away from their work and physically engaging with art.

Final Iteration

In the final iteration of the project, the actual structure of the letterforms became a much more important factor. They needed to evoke comfortable feelings but not look limp or fall over easily. I designed templates digitally so the cut letters would be as consistent as possible. The design is based on the typeface Avenir Black for its thick, consistent stroke weight, wide letterform structure, and simplicity. I altered all of the letters to have rounded edges and made other adjustments, making them feel more approachable and function well as three-dimensional objects. I ended up laser cutting the fabric instead of cutting it by hand with a stencil—a handmade process that wouldn't have contributed to the overall concept of the piece.

Top: Fig. 11, final digital letterform template.

Bottom: Fig. 12, picture of my desk during the making process.



The sewing process involved pinning two pieces of fabric together, sewing most of the outside edge, flipping it inside out, hand sewing any counters, layering dry rice and fiber fill until stuffed, and hand sewing it shut. A significant aspect to this laborious work was using my grandma's old sewing machine. My grandma taught me how to sew when I was younger, so when she passed away in April of 2018, she gifted me some of her old machines. I use opportunities to make by hand as a way to relax and destress, but because I was using her machine, I also was thinking a lot about my grandma—something I had previously tried to avoid processing. Creating work not necessarily about her but with her in mind felt special and like I was directly improving my own mental health through it.

Fig. 13, photo of me cutting fabric at my grandma's house.



While working towards making three alphabets worth of letters, I decided on two locations to install my work on campus. To target as broad of a range of students as I could, I chose locations on both Central and North Campus.¹⁴ I chose the Duderstadt Library on North Campus—the same location as my “IT IS OKAY TO TAKE BREAKS” experiment. I chose the Ross School of Business on Central Campus because of the open floor plan with abundant space to work, and heavy traffic through the area daily. After coordinating with the Director of Operations at both locations, I was supported by both locations to install the project and document it for a duration of a week, leaving my piece in public for a total span of two weeks prior to the gallery show.

¹⁴ The University of Michigan (Ann Arbor) has two campuses, North and Central, that host campus buildings of different, specific majors.

Shift Two

I installed the piece in the Ross School of Business first. The letters sat piled on a long, black clothed table across from the Winter Garden.¹⁵ I hung a poster explaining the meaning of the piece and prompting people to spell out words on the table. About four hours after installation, I learned people were taking the letters off the table and leaving with them. Nineteen letters were taken of the fifty completed at the time.

I knew that having such a major setback would need to result in a shift in direction. For a few days, I thought about why people may have wanted the letters for themselves (outside of simply wanting their initial as a pillow). I came to the conclusion that the current form of leaving messages to one another with the letters wasn't what the audience wanted given their material and structure. What people wanted must be a personal, more individual experience. With the weight and soft fabric, the letters served more as intimate comfort objects, and people are used to experiencing similar objects in a place where they feel comfortable—not in public.

Final Presentation

Moving forward, I decided to engage with my personal network instead of the greater university community in a hope to feel more connected to the piece after feeling hurt and lost. Additionally, because I was now thinking about my audience as a few individuals, I wanted those individuals to be ones I cared about and had relationships with. This new concept included eight individuals including myself, and instead of presenting an abundance of photographs documenting the many words the public spelled out to one another, I would present eight larger photographs. I spent a half an hour with each individual. After taking off their shoes, people were allowed to be with the letters alone for ten minutes. Some people ended up falling asleep on the letters, some tossed them like toys, and some alphabetized them. When I returned, we had a conversation about how they were feeling, how they had been feeling lately, and their own experience with mental health as a whole. Having an opportunity to have very open conversations about mental health was new for me and an incredible experience. Each conversation left me feeling closer to the person, and in every one I gained a new perspective on the individual I was talking to.

¹⁵ The Winter Garden is an open area with ample seating for students to work and collaborate in at the Ross School of Business.

My final question in each conversation was “What words of comfort do you need right now?” Everyone gave a longer answer, explaining what they were currently struggling with most and what thing they needed to hear to feel better. Together we came up with a single word we felt encompassed their longer answer, and I photographed them sitting however they felt comfortable holding their word.



Top Left: Fig. 14, Jose.

Top Right: Fig. 15, Liv.

Bottom Left: Fig. 16, Malcolm.

Bottom Right: Fig. 17, Me.

CREATIVE WORK

Comfort Words is an interactive soft sculpture made up of over forty soft, stuffed letterforms. The letterform design is adapted from the typeface Avenir Black and displays a thick, even stroke weight and simple structure of forms. The soft, plush fabric used lends itself to the audience's desire to engage with soft texture. Once picked up, the audience experiences the unexpected weight of the letters achieved through a technique of layering small amounts of fiber fill and dry rice repeatedly. The letters are warm gray to appear approachable and soft.¹⁶

Fig. 18, pile of letterforms in the gallery.



The gallery installation of *Comfort Words* included eight framed photographs showcasing individuals with the letters and their answer to the prompt, "What words of comfort do you need right now?" This prompt is on the wall in yellow vinyl above the photographs. Beneath the photographs, a white pedestal topped with white sherpa tables the sewn letters. The words "hug me squeeze me spell me" repeat around the three exposed sides of the pedestal in yellow vinyl, inviting gallery viewers to physically engage with the piece. In addition to picking up and holding the letters, the audience also engaged with the piece by sitting in front of the pedestal holding their own words of comfort and taking their own photographs.

¹⁶ The color choice was also originally intended to work with multiple environments when the piece was meant to be installed on campus.



Top Left: Fig. 19, prompt to photographs in vinyl.

Top Right: Fig. 20, prompt for audience interaction in vinyl.

Bottom: Fig. 21, full installation.

CONCLUSION

Comfort Words didn't have an impact on a large percentage of the thirty-thousand undergraduates at the University of Michigan like I originally intended and hoped for, but it did do so much more.¹⁷ This project allowed me to address mental health problems in my own social circle and fostered open, vulnerable conversations. After finishing the physical work, I was able to step back and realize similarities in *Comfort Words* to past self-directed projects I have done. I focused a lot of my work two years ago on installations in public around Ann Arbor. I hoped for large public interactions, and after continuous trials and engagement with big groups of people, I felt exhausted. There is a certain pressure associated with making a project that is about and for a large population of people. I avoided this type of work for a few years, but I ended up in a similar position again during this project.

The desire to make work that makes a difference in many people's lives is still an active goal. But I realized I keep finding myself in projects trying to tackle huge problems for a large group because I felt like these projects have to be something greater than myself; a project simply about myself or my perspective wouldn't be significant enough for a year-long thesis. By being forced into adapting my project when my letters were taken, the best solution happened to be one that involved a personal perspective. Because of the time constraint, there were no other feasible solutions that did justice to the research and work I had put in, so I was forced to present a final outcome that was focused on just me and my friends, not a public's reaction or interpretation. I realized that this need to make work that a lot of people resonated with or were positively affected by didn't come from simply my desire to do help people, but a lot of the motivation came from my cognitive distortions and believing that I don't have worth. *Comfort Words* was successful in improving several of my relationships with close ones, and creating a successful project with a personal lens proved to myself that making a larger project still focused on my own experience is valid and has worth. Coming to this realization feels like the best conclusion to a yearlong project focused both on my own mental health and graphic design practice.

¹⁷ "Facts & Figures."
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