

C3 Reflective Commentary

Creation

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CONTENT

INTRODUCTION	3
<i>THE REASON BEHIND THE CONCEPT.....</i>	<i>3</i>
THE ALBUM SOUND	4
<i>CONCEPTUALISING THE MUSICAL SOUND</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>CREATING THE SOUND</i>	<i>6</i>
MENTAL HEALTH ILLUSTRATED THROUGHOUT THE ALBUM.....	8
<i>SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS AND INFLUENCES.....</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>A CONFLICT BETWEEN LYRICS AND MUSIC</i>	<i>10</i>
APPROACHES, TECHNIQUES AND COMPLICATIONS	11
<i>LIVE RECORDINGS.....</i>	<i>13</i>
CONCLUSION	14
BIBLIOGRAPHY	15

INTRODUCTION

For my final project I created a concept album revolving around topics concerning mental health, which is to be a part of a personal artist project. When I first got into music production, I wished to expand my artistic knowledge so that I could produce my own music, as well as produce for others. Throughout the course I have created songs both for my own artistic project, as well as productions to be submitted for briefs or created directly for-, and with colleagues and fellow students. The immense focus on versatility and exploring different genres and sound styles has resulted in an expansion in my sound pallet that led to the discovery and refinement of my personal sound, which in turn laid the groundwork for the album.

THE REASON BEHIND THE CONCEPT

For a long time, I have wished to explore the intricate notions of mental health through music. However, I was struggling with how to execute it, as I felt insecure in my knowledge and capability to properly create a well-rounded album around such a complex topic. Personally, the severeness and complexity of mental health was, and still is, a fairly new addition to my personal life. It is only in very recent years that I have begun to understand the wide reach mental health has on society and the complications undereducation cause. Mental health awareness was very much unexpectedly introduced to my life, and I was struggling with how to understand and conceptualise all the intricate aspects of struggling with one's mental health. Consequently, the wish to create this album arose from a need to explore feelings I didn't fully grasp – in order to find a sense of self again. Mental health is a massively complicated theme, and even if undertaking years of education or therapy to better understand the different aspects of mental health, the complexities and difficulties still prevail. Being thrown into situations where mental health is suddenly a leading factor in everyday life, not only introduced a new subject I was ignorant towards, but also new aspects to myself I had suppressed for years, if not my whole life. Realising, my own unwillingness to accept mental challenges as a part of human existence resulted in a false sense of happiness – an ideology that nothing could ever be wrong. However, I could accept and understand other people's struggles, but I could never allow that same understanding for myself – and I wanted to fathom why.

Although mental health is a growing subject in society, the destigmatising movement is still moderately new and only becoming a widely discussed topic in very recent years (Rüsch, 2020). Naturally, the focal consideration is therefore to educate on what it entails to be living with a

mental illness, and to remove dangerous conceptions surrounding people with a mental health diagnosis (Rickwood, 2012). Which undeniably is paramount to even begin to grasp the magnitude of struggles surrounding one's mental health. Nevertheless, with a surge of awareness also arise a misconception regarding behaviour connected to mental illnesses and behaviour connected to personality, and whether said behaviour can be deemed acceptable because of a diagnosis (Williams, 2019). Research suggests that when being a confidant of someone struggling, there is a responsibility to be patient, gentle and caring (Hallett, 2017). Furthermore, in instances of a declining mental health because of being a confidant, there is an expectation to seek out professional help so the confidant can be as healthy as possible when interacting with someone struggling (Schulz, 2017). Begging the question of when does the toll on the carer constitute for them prioritising themselves? Arguably, there is something counterintuitive with expecting a 'healthy' person to take on the responsibility of someone struggling, resulting in them needing professional help to then continue with the activity which resulted in a decline in mental health. I was eager to understand the dynamics between relationships where there is a struggling and a non-struggling¹ part. Moreover, I found these dynamics to be sparsely discussed through music, where hopefully the exploration in this album can encourage such a discussion.

THE ALBUM SOUND

CONCEPTUALISING THE MUSICAL SOUND

Finding how I wished to musically present the album was one of the main difficulties hindering its creation. As an artist I was unsure of what image I wished to present in terms of sound, and as a producer this was even more apparent. My mastery of different production styles back when the idea of this album materialized were limited, therefore blocking the creative impulses needed to produce the album – and the album was put on hold. From very early on in the postgraduate, I desired to reintroduce the ideas behind the album as part of the final project. Using the tasks and challenges presented throughout the terms to explore with sounds, I wished to venture into as many styles and techniques as possible to properly pin down an approach and musical concept that would support the album. The lyrical visual had started to take form and the intention behind the album became more evident, where the song's themes and structures had begun to materialise – what was missing in the creation process was the sound pallet.

¹ Non-struggling in the sense of not having a professionally diagnosed mental illness.

The musical concept became apparent while working on some briefs in correlation to another assignment. I had started to experiment with a stronger synth-based soundscape where short synth melodies would play throughout the production as a leading element. I have always been very intrigued by ‘unusual’ and ‘unexpected’ sounds as a lead component in a production. There is something captivating with a well-produced, and arguably, simple melody-line, and I wished to explore that further. As the exploration of different synth sounds developed, as did the musical presentation of the album. With mental health, a lot of struggles can be tied to childhood trauma and despondency (Read, 2018). When explaining certain healing processes, it is often made references to healing and nurturing one’s inner child, which is an essential process in improving one’s quality of life (Kneisl, 1991). Wanting to gently nudge towards childhood mental health, I explored with sounds that are often characterised as childish and evidently took inspiration from the music box and the xylophone: especially those colourful children’s play xylophones. This laid the groundwork for a musical theme, created using synths, that can be found throughout the album.

In order to create distinct differentiations between each song and not have them be a copied variation of each other, I had to be careful with how to execute the sound and melody of the synth-leads. They all share the similarity that the melody and flow is relatively staccato and short. Furthermore, certain songs play off each other’s melody lines as a way of tying two storylines together. The album follows the stories of different relationship dynamics, and some songs act as a response to another. These relationships have been solidified through the lyrics, but also by having the synth-melodies play in relation to one another. Predominately done by borrowing rhythmic motions and intervals in such a way that if the album is listened to as a complete entity, the listener will be given gentle nudges and clues as to what songs ‘belong’ together.

The inspiration for the synth melodies came from the more childish bell sounding xylophone. However, that particular sound was not necessarily always fitting for the theme and concept of every song – and therefore had to be adapted. With the songs that do primarily touch upon children’s mental health, I found it impactful to create a more childlike bell pattern: which can be found in ‘en liten introduksjon’ and ‘jeg smiler fortsatt’. Otherwise, the synth-melodies have been developed to incorporate a darker sound with more nasal undertones; where they range from sounding more like the original bell pattern idea, a modernised interpretation or completely transformed into a different instrument such as a bass.

CREATING THE SOUND

The development of these melody lines is what lead me to properly consider this album as exclusively created by using a synth-, and virtual instruments production approach. Admittedly, it can be argued that some of the songs could have been done with live instrumentation. Nevertheless, from a production standpoint, I wished to challenge and explore what I could achieve through virtual instruments and synths. I have always been fascinated by the possibilities of virtual instruments, but because of those endless possibilities I found myself continuously sticking to what I knew and not actually exploring with different sounds. This album presented an opportunity to really dive into those possibilities, and I wanted to exploit that to the fullest. Furthermore, with the rapid technological development of artificial sounds, new avenues in the way music is produced has been presented; further challenging how music can be produced in the future (Hracs, 2016). Not to say, live recorded instruments create a distinct sound that is extremely difficult to recreate, if possible, and for certain situations that recording style is desired, and needed (Anderson, 2022).

Regardless, this album is being created as a means to challenge myself both as a lyricist and as a producer; the lyrical topic requires a lot of consideration and attention to detail that I wished to be reflected and challenged in the production. From a thematic standpoint, there is something poetic by having very raw and intimate lyrics contrasted by synth and electronic elements. Almost as if the lyrics and the production ought to stand against each-other, but somehow, they come together and work in harmony. Furthermore, the creation of this album has served as a personal journey to explore and understand themes and topics I struggled to comprehend. The intention of the album, and thus the production, is not to impress or claim to have perfectly recorded instruments. There is no aim to assert the album as anything other than a reflection on composite dynamics. Because of the intimate complexion of the concept, the voice in which the album is created through needed to obtain that same intimacy. Surely, intimacy can be accomplished with the inclusion of outside perspectives and impressions, such as live recorded instruments performed by different musicians. Arguably, such inclusions would open the discussion on mental health by allocating different perspectives on the same topic. Each musician would perceive the intention of a song differently, and thus give the song their personal outlook and possibly an insight into their own struggles. Which, when considering sentiments made surrounding a universal topic, different outlooks and perspectives is integral in presenting a factual visualisation.

Nevertheless, this is where mental health becomes a fragile line of deciding whether to present an overall apprehension of what having mental health issues may entail or offer a more personalised perception. In a study conducted by Alex Kresovich, the influence of pop songs referencing mental health is discussed and was found to impose a great impression in the destigmatising of mental health struggles; audiences, especially in the younger generations, who listen to music about mental health are more likely to have less mental health stigma, they are more inclined to seek out help and in turn, offer support to others (Kresovich, 2020). Importantly, Kresovich argues that the effect of these songs stems from a perceived personal connection, the intention and vocalisation of the artist offers a further initiative and parasocial relationship which impose an important encouragement of action and acceptance. An audience does to want to be told what mental health struggles imply, they wish to be offered a personalised view upon someone's struggles – and then internalise those impressions into sentiments they can relate to. Therefore, constructing the album around several different people's outlooks on the same song, was deemed counteractive. Allowing for a more simplistic approach, each song is given the opportunity to comprehensively dissect one perspective: allowing for a more detailed exploration. There is something painfully intimate with a "one-man" show verbalizing an internal struggle. I wished to capture that raw and personal impression in every sense of the concept and found the way to approach such intimacy was to have the album come directly and purely from one voice.

Not to say that there are not live elements found on the album. The component found most consequently is the use of a drum sampler I created in association with a previous assessment. The sampler was originally created with items found in the kitchen, whereas I have taken the audio files used to create the sampler and utilised them throughout the productions. Evidently, the hi-hat found in 'There is Something in The Shadows' has been constructed by carefully blending an audio file of hitting a pot with a whisk with a sample of a hi-hat. The kitchen sample provided a very subtle delay effect, creating the illusion of a more distant hi-hat positioning it very naturally into the mix. Furthermore, the crash in 'Twisted Affection' has been given a subtle top-end by mixing in a sample of hitting a utensil holder with a spoon – giving it a bit more sharpness as well as a subtle bright and long reverb. Anyhow, the approach of blending samples is most prominent in 'It Was Beautiful' where the cello soundscape has been created by utilising the Spitfire Audio BBC Orchestra sample library blended with a live recorded cello. The result became a very fine background, where the cello acts as a sonic palette rather than a prominent solo component.

MENTAL HEALTH ILLUSTRATED THROUGHOUT THE ALBUM

SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS AND INFLUENCES

It was important to illustrate the duality of living with a mental illness through the album. Although one is struggling with one's mental health, there is a certain expectation that 'life goes on' and to simply find a way to cope with one's struggles to 'properly' function in modern society (Bauman, 2007). Lyrically, this is very evident with 'en liten introduksjon'. The song is inspired from a code of conduct found in the Nordic countries called *Janteloven*², which in short is used to encourage a unified population by illustrating that no one is better than anyone else; we are fundamentally all the same. A general occurrence found in the Nordic countries is the aversion of individual excellence in exchange for a greater emphasis on societal success (Norman, 2023). Which has been argued to be a dominant factor for said success, where the Nordics have one of the most advanced welfare systems in the world (Palamara, 2016). Nevertheless, when instilling from a young age that one should "[...] not think you are anything special [...]", individuals are being taught that their personal struggles and feelings are not of societal concern and therefore unimportant (Sandemose, 2017). Someone who then might need more help, or attention due to uncontrollable circumstances may feel their struggles to be irrelevant and as a result be reluctant to seek out help. The desperate need to maintain a private personal life is unintentionally creating a society where people who are in desperate need of help are not being taken care of (Andvig, 2014).

The second verse of 'en liten introduksjon' has taken the main ideals of *Janteloven* and used them to underline the damming effect such a norm can have on someone struggling.

<i>kom igjen</i>	<i>Come on</i>
<i>vi har alle ting vi sliter med</i>	<i>We all have things we struggle with</i>
<i>du ikke spess</i>	<i>You're not special</i>
<i>ikke tro du er no bedre enn dem</i>	<i>Don't think you are any better than them</i>
<i>faktisk, ikke tro du er verdt noe overhodet</i>	<i>Actually, don't think you are worth anything at all</i>
<i>er det ikke det de sier</i>	<i>Isn't that what they say</i>
<i>når du prøver å bli mer sett</i>	<i>When you try to be more seen</i>
<i>hjelp, hva er det?</i>	<i>Help, what's that?</i>
<i>slutt å bry oss nå med problemene dine</i>	<i>Stop bothering us with all of your problems</i>

² Translated to 'the Law of Jante' in English

Playing with the notion that you should not think you are better or more important than others, the song reflects an internal conflict of convincing yourself that your problems are insignificant, people do not want to be bothered by your struggles and to suck it up; “bare skjerp deg [...] ingen som vil høre hver gang du føler deg lei deg” // “pull yourself together [...] no one wants to know every time you’re sad”. The societal impact is illustrated by having the lyrics narrated in third person, signifying how outside influences can transform into a subconscious voice in our minds if instilled continuously over time.

The production supports the agitated expression of the vocal performance with a staccato and syncopated instrumentation driving the pulse of the song. A unifying notion found amongst several of the songs is such an off-beat force. Due to the nature of the album, a need to illustrate a sense of rush and restlessness became important, where a syncopated off-beat gives the impression that the music is ‘pressing forward’ (Matt, 2022). A commonality amongst several mental illnesses is the feeling that you are ‘existing’ outside of your body, where one loses a sense of control over bodily reactions – a duality of feeling ‘stuck’ in an emotion or situation while being a bystander to rapid and inflated reactions (McKinzie, 2018). Essentially, the syncopated instrumentation creates the feeling that the music is slipping away, and the protagonist is desperately trying to keep up.

As the song is created on the premise of challenging a social conduct I grew up with, it laid the groundwork for a lot of reflection in the other songs, making it fitting as the first song of the album; hence the name “en liten introduksjon” which translates to “A Little Introduction”. Together with “jeg smiler fortsatt”, the two Norwegian songs communicate the underlying premise for the creation of the album. They explore reflections from earlier youth, and comment on the effects of growing up in a society where mental health is not widely discussed. I mentioned in the proposal an intention for the Norwegian song to exist as their own entity within the story of the album. By having the songs in a different language from the rest of the album, they already stand out. Furthermore, the lyrical theme, and sound suggests a different influence and intention; the songs provide a more intimate and rawer glimpse into the underlying premise of the album. Whereas the English songs contain a combination of personal experiences, observations and scenarios created from research, the Norwegian songs stems purely from my own reflections and -, or experiences, which in turn arose from a societal expectation of what was deemed acceptable in regard to vocalising mental struggles.

A CONFLICT BETWEEN LYRICS AND MUSIC

Each song conveys very intentional circumstances, with their own unique sentiments. To allow the songs to independently express themselves, the production could not always be a direct depiction of the lyrics – there needed to be conflict for it to be possible to express different dynamics. Playing with juxtaposing impressions, the production acts as a voice to challenge, underline and agree or completely disregard what is being sung. With the songs ‘There is Something in the Shadows’ and ‘Let Me Hold You’, the production act as a supporting element to the lyrical impression. Intentionally, both songs have a great use of repetition. Not to say that repetition has not been utilised in the other songs, these songs have used either repetition in the production or through the lyrics continuously as a deliberate tool to convey a specific sentiment throughout the song. With ‘There is Something in the Shadows’, the production stays very interchangeable throughout. Certain elements are moving in and out of the sonic picture, but very few new elements are being introduced between each segment of the song. The song expresses the defeating feeling of being lost in one’s head, where the production plays with the uncomfortable notion that you can never really escape by being ever present and stagnant. Furthermore, the sound pallet of the production compliments the darker tones of the vocal melodies with deep, pulsing synths and a heavily distorted piano.

In contrast, ‘Let Me Hold You’ uses repetition in the vocals as a tool to convey a sense of hopelessness and despair. Throughout the song, the vocals gradually build from being very quiet and timid into an eruption of harmonies and exchanging melody lines. Exploring the powerless notion of being a witness to someone you care about slowly succumb to their mental illness, the use of lyrical repetition intensifies the desperation of wanting to help but being unable to. This gradual build-up is being underlined in the production where the instrumentation reflects the impending panic found in the narration. This is found particularly with the drums, that have a very urgent and aggressive impression with the use of repeating crashes and harsh snares.

I mentioned a want to express the duality of living with a mental illness, whereas this duality is heavily illustrated through the symbiosis between the vocals and the instrumentation. Playing with the different aspects to mental health, there was something interesting with having the music contradict the lyrics with a more upbeat instrumentation. Following the trail of using syncopations, in the song ‘Leave Me Be’ their purpose is to increase the sensation of a groove (Sioros, 2014). Created as a response to ‘Let Me Hold You’, the lyrics are in direct dialogue, but the production breaks up their conversation by undermining the desperation found in ‘Let

me Hold You’. The protagonist acknowledges the agony expressed in ‘Let Me Hold You’, but the internal expectation to not bother others encourages the message of “leave me be”; with the excuse that they have already fallen victim to their mental health, and don’t want to be the cause of pain for others. The music suggests an almost nonchalant attitude, where the protagonist have become numb to their own suffering and is existing on auto pilot; the syncopated rhythm drives the song forwards, keeping the story alive. Furthermore, the lyrics illustrate a sense of shame and defeat, where the productions challenges that in a fashion of urging the protagonist to keep moving. Subsequently, there is a musical change in the bridge where the intention of the music and lyrics aligns, and they work to support each other. The bridge acts as a break from the notion of ‘accepting’ reality and offers a glimpse into the desperation behind the colder exterior. The music follows the build-up in the vocal production and becomes more and more frenzied until realisation hits and they break apart again: becoming two separate expressions.

Similarly, conflict between music and lyrics is found with ‘It Was Beautiful’. Where in ‘Leave Me Be’, the music undermines the lyrics by suggesting a sense of *life goes on*, in ‘It Was Beautiful’ the music indicates a heartfelt confession of love, which is contradicted in the lyrics. Taking inspiration from the more traditional love songs, ‘It was Beautiful’ is constructed around a main element of a bell arpeggio pattern, giving the song a very romantic texture. The first verse of the song supports this dreamy impression by expressing intimate sentiments of a past relationship, but the lyrics evolve in such a manner that as the song progress’ the lyrics reveal a relationship that is falling apart. The song acts as a realisation that no matter how much you care for someone, if you are not able to care for yourself you may hurt your partner more than you bring them joy. Which is what ultimately led this to be the final song of the album. It serves as a reminder that to be in fulfilling and healthy relationships, we need to first take care of ourselves; and we need to allow ourselves to feel pain and then heal that pain.

APPROACHES, TECHNIQUES AND COMPLICATIONS

The initiation of the project from a concept into a portfolio of ideas and song concepts was lengthy. The task of creating an album around a very convoluted theme, resulted in difficulties with deciding which topics to approach. There was a desire to keep a sense of continuity throughout the album, where each topic discussed could not be hugely different from each other – there had to be some resemblance between all the songs. However, as the process progressed, and I allowed myself to create and experiment more freely, the direction of the album became apparent. Initially, I expressed a desire to predominantly explore the album as if told from the

perspective of an observer or carer of someone struggling. Which is what initiated the creation of the songs 'Let Me Hold You', 'Shut Up' and 'Twisted Affection', which were some of the first songs created for the album. Nevertheless, as I started to explore with these perspectives, I became intrigued by how it must feel to be on the struggling end. Surely, there must be a sense of awareness on the effect their mental struggles may have on bystanders. A lead cause for isolation in people with mental health diagnoses is exactly that shame connected with not feeling like a good or deserving person because their struggles makes them act in ways they are not comfortable with (Linz, 2013). These revelations are what led me to create 'Leave Me Be', as a response to 'Let Me Hold You', and then further expand on the notion of being trapped in a struggling state with 'The Mess That Wanted Love' and 'There Is Something in The Shadows'.

As the topics explored through the album are very serious, and not yet widely discussed through music in great depth, I wished to reflect the use of these unconventional topics with unconventional production approaches and song structures. Most pop songs follow the same structure of a 4 or 8 bar verse with a repeating chorus lasting anywhere between 2-5 minutes in total and keeping a consistent key and 4/4 time, which often includes a pre chorus and a bridge to add dynamic shifts (Bennett, 2014). I wanted to move away from that, and not limit the expression of the songs to the expectation of commercial music. Evidently, with 'The Mess That Wanted Love' the structural 'high point' is not intended to be the chorus, but rather the pre chorus. The chorus becomes a release of the build-up in the pre, utilising the characteristics of a post chorus, which then further intensifies the heartfelt confessions in the lyrics. The chorus then expands into what could be attributed to a bridge, before slowly dissolving without really revisiting the original chorus.

The sonic picture of 'The Mess That Wanted Love' came about after a session with Sean Hargreaves. Previously, the song was resembling more of a ballad, with a slower tempo and less instrumentation. But, the intention of the song was missing, and it did not provide the same impact as the rest of the productions. Therefore, the tempo changed to be in half time, with a more hard-hitting beat. Furthermore, the lyrics required more from the production in terms of uncompromising and cold elements. The idea of including industrial elements was a great tactic in creating a piercing sound that would support the vocals. There is a combination of edgy synths layered with pulsing pads to create a rusty soundscape, countered with broken up samples of a marimba resembling pieces of metal being hit. Furthermore, the snare has been

doubled with a sample from the Kitchen sampler, giving the otherwise bright snare, darker and more rumbly undertones.

LIVE RECORDINGS

A reoccurring difficulty across all the productions, was the process of recording the vocals. Originally, all the vocals were recorded at my home studio, but the microphone used and the room it was recorded in did not create the desired sound. There was a constant complication of too much low-end on the vocals, especially considering the vocal melody is in my lower registry which naturally made a more rumbly sound. After having recorded the vocals for nearly all the songs, I made the decision to re-record at Tileyard, which provided a much cleaner vocal and a sound that fit the productions better. Nevertheless, prior to re-recording, the excess low-end on the vocal forced a new approach to the vocal editing process. Resulting in the creation of new sounds I would not have considered, or even know how to achieve, which I ended up really liking. As the lead vocals are the main element of the productions, I wished to obtain very clear recordings that would need minimal surgical editing – and did therefore not use any of the original recordings. However, for the backing vocals a more imperfect sound was proved to be desired. Although a lot of the recordings had an unpleasant rumble in the lower registries, by removing the lower frequencies all together an interesting grainy effect arose – which was attributed to the backing vocals of ‘The Mess That Wanted Love’ and ‘Twisted Affection’, serving as a supporting effect to the grittier vocal presentation.

Additionally, I was adamant on having live recorded cello on ‘It Was Beautiful’. Firstly, the cello sequence was created by using the Spitfire Audio BBC Orchestra sample library, but the phrasing and ending of the bow strokes were very harsh and difficult to automate. Therefore, the production needed a more dynamic element to soften the dissonant edges of the sample. Originally, I wished to entirely replace the sample with a live recording. However, as the cello is recorded by one cellist, I was not able to create that big, orchestral feel: even when blending several recordings together. Rather, I found it beneficial to then blend the live recordings with the sample to achieve a sound closer to that of an orchestra, while still having the dynamics of a live recording. Furthermore, for the instrumental break I intended to have the melody found in the vocal humming played as a cello solo. With the cello, you wish to capture the warm and deep tones, and I struggled to record and play the cello in such a manner that those features were not lost or overshadowed. Moreover, I found that I was not able to properly edit and process the cello recordings to the standard that I wished the solo to be at. Therefore, I

developed the instrumental to have the vocal humming as the focal point, and to push the cello further back in the mix. The cello serves more as a backdrop than a main element, where it gives of the illusion that it is being played very far away, almost like hearing distant music in a dream: which I ultimately found served the dreamlike impression of the production better.

CONCLUSION

The album constitutes a collection of songs that through unconventional approaches to sound and production illustrates the intricate and individualistic aspects of mental health. There is no ‘right’ way to have a mental illness and therefore, the songs could not follow the expected structure of commercial music. By having the album constructed around one musical theme, a sense of continuity is found throughout the album, where the songs are a reflection or play on each other. The album offers a glimpse into different dynamics and realities found universally, but that are, sadly, rarely discussed. With the creation of this concept album, I am hoping to open the discussion on the complex consequences mental health struggles presents for not only the struggling, but for all those who surround them. The album proved to be a journey of understanding complex relationship dynamics in greater depth, where there needed to be put great emphasis on not undermining the struggles of those who suffer from a mental illness. I had to carefully approach how to explore the different perspectives, without laying blame on neither part nor shaming those struggling; as well as allowing for the perspective of prioritising one’s own mental health. As said by Hemingway “The most painful thing is losing yourself in the process of loving someone too much, and forgetting that you are special too” (Hemingway, 1927). We all deserve to have meaningful and healthy relationships, but the only way to accomplish such is by accepting our struggles and prioritising our own growth: sometimes we must let beautiful things go to fully become the best version of ourselves.

“Every morning when I wake up, I experience an exquisite joy —the joy of being Salvador Dalí— and I ask myself in rapture: What wonderful things is this Salvador Dalí going to accomplish today?”
— Salvador Dalí

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