Beyond the Therapy Room: Exploring Mental Health Through Unexpected Voices

Objective

Mental health is often discussed within the boundaries of therapy, psychiatry, and clinical frameworks. While these perspectives are essential, they are not the only ways people understand and navigate emotional well-being.

This project set out with a simple but important goal: to explore mental health through the eyes of people whose professions are not directly tied to therapy. The idea was to uncover how mental health shows up in everyday work, creativity, culture, and human interaction and how insight can come from places we don't usually think to look.

In doing so, the project draws on the idea of *lived experience* as a form of knowledge. This concept, central to qualitative and phenomenological research, recognizes that understanding does not only come from formal expertise, but from how people interpret and navigate their own worlds

Whom I Interviewed

To capture a wide spectrum of perspectives, I spoke with individuals across diverse fields, including an author focused on Chilean history, a singer, an actor, a planetarium educator, a Mapuche representative, a university director, a tour guide, an aerial yoga teacher, a massage therapist, an acupuncture doctor, a paranormal expert, a member of a religious group, a hairstylist, a fashion designer, an architect, a social media expert, a technology expert, an entrepreneur, a paragliding instructor, an oceanographer, a sculptor, and a language exchange program coordinator

Each conversation offered a different lens, whether creative, cultural, physical, spiritual, or technological, on what mental health means in practice.

How the Questions Were Designed

Rather than asking generic questions about mental health, I tailored each conversation to the interviewee's profession. This allowed the discussion to feel natural and grounded in their lived expertise.

This kind of approach aligns with qualitative research methods commonly used in mental health studies, where context-specific, open-ended questions are used to generate deeper, more nuanced insights rather than standardized responses.

For example:

- The author, who writes about Chile's history, was asked whether confronting a nation's past is similar to therapy: uncomfortable at first, but necessary for growth. This opened a reflection on how collective memory mirrors personal healing.
- With the university director, I focused on academic pressure and the idea of "positive stress." Her response led to follow-up questions about how students support each other, especially during transitions, and how teacher mental health is often overlooked despite being deeply interconnected with student well-being.

- The actor spoke about accessing emotions through performance, sometimes reaching feelings that are difficult to access in everyday life, suggesting that art can act as a bridge to emotional awareness.
- The singer reflected on vulnerability during live performances, framing it not as weakness but as a powerful connection point with others.
- With the massage therapist, I explored the idea of "pressing where it hurts" and how that parallels recurring emotional patterns in life: how discomfort can signal areas that need attention rather than avoidance.
- The hairstylist was asked about the common impulse to change one's hair after a breakup, revealing how physical transformation can be a way of processing emotional transitions.
- The tour guide discussed seasonal depression and how certain environments, including nature, movement, new experiences, can act as subtle forms of resistance.
- Inspired by a question from Interstellar, the planetarium educator reflected on whether emotions are ever "wrong," suggesting instead that they exist for a reason, even when they seem irrational.
- Conversations with the aerial yoga teacher, acupuncture doctor, paranormal expert, and religious group brought forward holistic perspectives, emphasizing the connection between mind, body, and, for some, spirituality.
- The architect discussed how urban spaces can be designed to better integrate nature, improving mental well-being through light, openness, and accessibility.
- The social media expert explored the comparison trap and raised the question of whether ethical marketing can exist in a system that often thrives on insecurity.
- The technology expert addressed anxieties around job replacement and how rapid innovation can shape people's sense of stability and identity.
- The entrepreneur reflected on why consumers today are increasingly conscious of environmental choices, linking it to values, identity, and collective responsibility.
- The paragliding instructor brought up accessibility in extreme sports, reframing them not just as adrenaline-driven but as experiences that can build confidence and perspective.
- The language exchange coordinator shared how language shapes emotional expression: how, for instance, communication styles in German can be perceived as abrupt but are actually structured for clarity. This opened a broader discussion about how emotions can feel different depending on the language used to express them.
- The Mapuche representative and language-focused conversations highlighted the emotional complexities of migration, identity, and belonging.

Follow-Up Questions: Letting the Conversation Evolve

A key part of the process was allowing answers to guide new questions.

For instance, when the university director introduced the idea of "positive stress," it led naturally into a deeper exploration of support systems, such as how students help each other adapt, and how educators themselves cope within high-pressure environments.

These follow-ups made the interviews feel less like questionnaires and more like evolving conversations, where meaning was built collaboratively rather than extracted, which is a dynamic often emphasized in qualitative research practices.

From Conversation to Method: Practical Takeaways for Researchers

While this project was exploratory, several patterns emerged that may be useful for others working with interviews, especially in areas shaped by lived experience and context.

Start with the participant's world, not your framework.
Anchoring questions in the interviewee's reality often led to more meaningful insights. Asking a historian whether engaging with national memory is "a bit like therapy," or a massage therapist about "pressing where it hurts," created entry points that connected abstract ideas to lived experience.

Use metaphor as a tool, not a simplification.
Replacing technical language with metaphor didn't reduce depth in my experience. In practice, simpler framing made it easier for participants to respond reflectively rather than formally.

Treat follow-ups as the core of the method.
Many of the most valuable insights came from what followed the initial question. The idea of "positive stress," for example, only became meaningful through follow-up questions about support systems and adaptation. In this sense, the conversation itself becomes the method.

Slow down interpretation: especially when something feels obvious.
Conducting interviews in a second language made it harder to assume immediate understanding. This often led to clarifying questions that deepened the discussion, for instance, distinguishing whether "pain" in relation to history was personal or societal.

Let unexpected answers reshape the direction.
Moments that initially seemed contradictory, such as a designer rejecting the idea of resisting fast fashion (discussed below), often revealed more nuanced perspectives when explored further.

Recognize language as part of the method.
The shift toward simpler phrasing in a second language frequently produced more direct and emotionally grounded responses. This connects to broader ideas around Linguistic relativity, suggesting that language shapes not only how we communicate, but how we interpret experience.

Prioritize depth over coverage.
Rather than trying to standardize responses, allowing conversations to evolve produced more layered and context-rich insights, supporting the idea that smaller, in-depth approaches can reveal perspectives that broader methods might miss.

Taken together, these practices suggest a shift from extracting answers to facilitating insight, an approach that may be particularly valuable in fields like mental health, where meaning is deeply contextual.

Unexpected Insights

Some of the most valuable moments came from answers that challenged my expectations.

In one conversation, I asked a fashion designer whether he saw himself as resisting fast fashion. When he said no, it initially felt surprising, almost disappointing. But he reframed it: his work serves a market that fast fashion doesn't reach (such as designing uniforms for basketball teams and dance troupes).

That shift revealed something important: not all alternatives exist in opposition. Sometimes, standing out isn't about resistance, but about filling a gap that hasn't been addressed.

Language, Simplicity, and Depth

The Chilean context also added depth, particularly in discussions around language and culture. The idea that emotions can shift depending on the language used to express them came up multiple times, reinforcing how closely emotional experience is tied to communication and context.

Conducting the interviews in a second language also shaped the way questions were asked. Instead of relying on abstract or highly academic phrasing, the questions often became simpler and more direct.

For example, instead of asking something like:
"Do you think people's relationship with history is mediated by cultural narratives and collective memory?"

The question might become:
"Do you think learning about a country's past is a bit like therapy—uncomfortable at first, but important to understand who we are today?"

While the first version is technically precise, it invites a more distant response. The second is clearer and easier to connect to, often leading to more personal and reflective answers.

Interviewing in a second language also reduced the tendency to assume meaning too quickly. Instead of moving on, responses were more likely to be clarified and explored further.

In this way, the linguistic gap did not limit the conversations—it often made them more intentional, precise, and open to nuance.

Overall Insights

A reflexive thematic analysis was conducted following existing frameworks. This approach was selected for its flexibility in identifying patterned meanings across qualitative data while allowing interpretive depth rather than purely descriptive coding.

The analysis proceeded through iterative phases:

1. Familiarisation with transcripts (repeated reading of full conversational data)
2. Initial coding (semantic and latent codes such as "patience," "frustration," "nature as relief," "body discomfort")
3. Theme generation (grouping codes into conceptual clusters)
4. Theme refinement (checking coherence across cases and professions)

5. Interpretive synthesis (linking themes to psychological and sociological literature)

Rather than treating professions as separate categories, the analysis prioritised shared experiential structures across contexts.

Emergent Themes

1. Nature as a Restorative Psychological Space

Across narratives, natural environments were consistently framed as having a calming, regulating effect on mental states, particularly after exposure to urban stressors. The experience of moving from "city → rural → remote/natural" environments was described not just geographically but psychologically, as a gradual decompression process.

This aligns strongly with:

- Attention Restoration Theory, which proposes that natural environments replenish cognitive resources depleted by sustained directed attention.
- Stress Reduction Theory, which links exposure to natural scenes with reduced physiological stress responses.

Participants emphasized that even harsh conditions (cold, remoteness, physical effort) were offset by perceived beauty and sensory relief, suggesting that restoration is not comfort-dependent but meaning-dependent.

2. Adaptation, Discipline, and the Psychology of Gradual Change

A dominant narrative pattern was the emphasis on stepwise adaptation. Professionals framed meaningful outcomes as requiring structured progression rather than immediacy.

This theme reflects resistance to what is perceived as a broader cultural acceleration: instant gratification, digital speed, and reduced tolerance for delay. The interviews suggest a psychological tension between:

- lived ecological time (gradual, embodied)
- technological time (instantaneous, compressed)

This resonates with contemporary work in behavioral science on delayed gratification and self-regulation, as well as broader critiques of "speed culture" in modern life.

3. Embodied Work, Vulnerability, and Body Image

In fashion-related narratives, the body emerges as a site of emotional vulnerability and social meaning. Clients frequently experienced discomfort during measurement and garment fitting, sometimes expressing shame or apology about their bodies.

This reflects well-documented findings in:

- body image research, where exposure to fitting contexts can intensify body awareness and self-evaluation
- social psychology literature on objectified body consciousness

Importantly, the practitioner's role is not only technical but emotional: they actively normalize bodily diversity and reduce shame through reassurance and adaptation.

4. Creativity, Iteration, and Frustration Tolerance

A strong theme across both professions is the cyclical process of creative ideation → mismatch → revision → partial acceptance. Frustration is not incidental but structurally embedded in creative labor.

Participants described:

- restarting processes from zero
- abandoning unworkable ideas after repeated attempts
- emotional strain when imagined outcomes do not materialize

This reflects principles consistent with:

- growth mindset theory, particularly learning through iterative failure
- creativity research emphasizing constraint-driven innovation and improvisation

However, unlike idealized accounts of resilience, the narratives also acknowledge limits; there are points where discontinuation is necessary for emotional regulation.

5. Technology, Acceleration, and the Loss of Environmental Silence

A paradox emerges around technology: it is both enabling and psychologically intrusive. Digital systems are associated with speed, expectation of immediacy, and cognitive overload, while natural settings are framed as "signal-free" zones that allow mental decompression.

This contrast produces a perceived division between:

- technologically mediated urgency
- environmentally mediated presence

The data suggests that disconnection from technology is not experienced as deprivation, but as cognitive relief in specific contexts.

6. Meaning-Making, Narrative Mediation, and the Role of the Guide/Practitioner

In experiential professions (e.g., guiding), work is not only logistical but interpretive. Professionals actively shape how others experience environments by pacing information, reducing sensory shock, and constructing narrative continuity during transitions.

This can be understood as:

- cognitive scaffolding for experience
- emotional regulation through anticipation
- meaning-making through storytelling

The guide becomes a mediator between environment and perception, reducing abruptness and enhancing psychological readiness.

7. Coping Strategies: Distraction, Multitasking, and Emotional Modulation

Participants described informal coping strategies for managing unpleasant tasks or emotional discomfort, including:

- multitasking (e.g., pairing disliked tasks with media or conversation)
- reframing frustration as learning
- repeated attempts followed by disengagement

These strategies reflect pragmatic emotion regulation rather than formal psychological techniques, aligning with everyday coping literature in occupational psychology.

Ongoing Work and What's Next

This project is best understood not as a completed body of work, but as the beginning of an evolving qualitative inquiry into how mental health is understood beyond traditional therapeutic and clinical frameworks. While the first season was exploratory in nature, its findings increasingly suggest the value of treating these interviews not simply as isolated conversations, but as part of a broader interdisciplinary research model. The diversity of participants revealed that professions not explicitly associated with mental health often contain deeply developed understandings of emotional regulation, resilience, vulnerability, identity, adaptation, and meaning-making. These insights emerged not despite participants' distance from formal psychological practice, but often because of it, suggesting that lived professional experience can generate forms of psychological knowledge that are differently articulated, yet no less meaningful.

A key direction for future work is therefore not only expanding the number of voices included, but deepening the comparative rigor of the project itself. As more interviews are conducted, the aim is to move beyond singular insight toward stronger thematic comparison across sectors such as creative work, embodied professions, cultural identity, education, technology, and institutional leadership. This next phase will allow for richer cross-case analysis of how different environments shape experiences of stress, healing, belonging, self-perception, and interpersonal connection. In doing so, the project can more systematically examine where certain themes recur across professions and where specific contexts produce distinct psychological frameworks.

Methodologically, future iterations will also benefit from increased reflexivity and structural consistency. The role of language, translation, and interviewer positioning has already proven significant, particularly in the context of conducting interviews across linguistic and cultural boundaries. What initially appeared to be a limitation of second-language interviewing often became a methodological strength, encouraging greater clarity, slower interpretation, and more intentional questioning. Building on this, future work may more explicitly examine how language itself shapes emotional articulation, potentially expanding across additional linguistic and cultural settings to better understand how mental health concepts are mediated by communication styles, cultural norms, and systems of meaning.

There is also substantial value in extending the project longitudinally. Revisiting participants over time could provide insight into how perspectives on mental health shift alongside personal development, professional transitions, or broader social changes. Such an approach would strengthen the project's ability to explore mental health not as a static concept, but as something dynamic and continually renegotiated through lived experience. This would further

align the project with qualitative traditions that prioritize process, reflexivity, and contextual depth over fixed categorization.

Importantly, this work also has implications beyond research alone. By presenting interviews publicly and accessibly, the project functions as a form of public scholarship, creating space for wider audiences to engage with nuanced conversations about emotional well-being outside academic or clinical gatekeeping. In this sense, the interviews serve not only as data, but as cultural interventions that broaden who is seen as capable of contributing meaningfully to conversations about mental health. Future developments may therefore include not just additional interviews, but the creation of educational, methodological, or interdisciplinary resources that translate these insights into broader applications for researchers, communicators, educators, and mental health professionals.

Ultimately, the first season has reinforced a central premise: mental health is not solely the domain of therapy rooms, psychiatric models, or diagnostic systems. It is equally embedded in art, movement, architecture, technology, spirituality, history, language, and everyday forms of labor. The ongoing work of this project will continue to build on that premise by expanding its archive of unexpected voices while refining its methodological depth, with the broader goal of contributing to a more socially distributed understanding of mental health, one that recognizes psychological insight as something emerging not only from formal expertise, but from the many ways people interpret, navigate, and give meaning to their worlds.

Watch the Interviews: https://www.hemathakur.com/interview-series/ (more interview shall be uploaded soon; these are in Spanish with English subtitles).