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We All Feel Feelings

by

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Abstract

Consisting of three illustrated books, *We All Feel Feelings* is designed as a vehicle for the discussion of emotional and mental health with young boys. These books will help foster a mindset of openness and acceptance through different methods of displaying and understanding emotions.

Project Description

The We All Feel Feelings book series features text and images that provide affirming support to the mindsets of children. The book series is made specifically for children who are assigned male at birth (AMAB) and aims to tear down the societal stereotypes of bravado and confidence that are pushed onto boys. For example, male children are often taught that emotions should always be positive, and that feelings of sadness or melancholy are unacceptable. Typically, the rationale behind teaching a child to be fearless in the face of adversity is to instill a positive, go-getter, and resilient outlook on life. However, if not paired with training the capacity for emotional self-regulation, it can also be detrimental to the minds of men after entering adolescence (Borelli & Gruber, 2018).

This project has transformed in several ways since it was first conceived, but the main goal has remained consistent: open positive discussion on the subject of mental and emotional health. Mainstream media often places narrow beliefs on the behavior of boys. This produces harmful gender stereotypes that perpetuates a cycle of emotional apathy in men



(Commonsensemedia.org, 2017). Young boys are commonly portrayed as rowdy and rambunctious while young girls are performed as docile and reliant on male figures.

As men age, the emotions that they were told to suppress become stronger and begin to manifest. Due to this suppression, older men believe that they should be ashamed of displays of and sensitivity. This leads to traits of toxic masculinity and a lack of empathy for those going through difficult situations (Furlan, 2019).

The idea of always being confident and proud is something that is pushed onto young and adolescent boys. They are taught to bottle and bury emotions that don't exude self-confidence. Boys are told to "toughen up" or "man-up" when feelings of anxiety or sadness come about, but that is not always the best approach when it comes to making decisions in life and maintaining relationships (American Psychological Association, 2016).

Films that portray male characters using hypermasculine tropes are commonplace in summer blockbusters and across mainstream media. Testosterone-driven popcorn movies such as the highly successful Fast & Furious franchise or the DC *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016) maintain tremendous influence in shaping the idea of masculinity in young boys. This idea of masculinity rarely involves vulnerability and healthy emotional expression. Instead, the films commonly portray lead males with repressed emotion who have turned early childhood trauma, such as the loss of loved ones, into rage against an opponent rather than addressing the trauma directly or engaging in a process of healing.



Figure 1. Graphic of DC Comics' Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice

Although stereotypes on masculinity persist, a shift regarding the representation of gender stereotypes in the media has increased over the past decade. This shift to achieve gender equality has been increasing in literature, television shows, movies, and other consumable media. Mainstream media is moving to display male characters that are less hard-headed and more in touch with their emotions and the emotions of others. The goal of the *We All Feel Feelings* book project is to aid in that push and provide young boys with literature that

can help them become more open and in touch with their emotions and learn how to identify as their true selves.

I chose to pursue this project for the same reason that I chose to pursue a career in media: I wish to provide a positive influence on the future generations in order to aid in the creation of solutions for societal issues. Seeing, hearing, and experiencing are three ways in which humans learn. Illustrated children's books were chosen as the medium because the format of images and short lines of text are easily digestible by young children. To test the readability of the stories along the production path, parents of children ages 4 through 8 were contacted via phone call and social media and asked to present the stories to their children. Through trial and error, an understandable vocabulary for the stories was established.

Collaboration is a way to grow community. My original plan was to write and illustrate each storybook on my own, but I then thought to reach out and include other underrepresented individuals who are working in the field of children's literature. Each book in the *We All Feel Feelings* series was illustrated by a different male children's book illustrator of color. The purpose for this was to provide opportunity for men of color to display their work in a field that is dominated mainly by white men and women. In the 1990s, 9% of children's books published in the U.S. were about people of color. I myself am a black man and I am in the minority when it comes to authors of children's books, but with my efforts, and the efforts of other men of color who are trying to gain recognition in the literary realm, change toward new mindsets and greater diversity is achievable (Donella, 2017).



Children's Books By and/or About People of Color and First/Native Nations Received by the CCBC*--US Publishers Only 2015 -

Last Updated: August 20, 2019

Year	Number of Books Received at CCBC from US Pubs	African / African Americans		American Indians / First Nations		Asian Pacifics/ Asian Pacific Americans		Latinx	
		Ву	About	Ву	About	Ву	About	Ву	About
2018	3,312	192	388	22	34	308	284	186	240
2017	3,500	126	334	18	44	260	286	109	205
2016	3,200	92	267	8	35	195	225	95	157
2015	3,200	106	244	9	28	156	107	56	79

Figure 2. Data on books by and about people of color and from First/Native Nations published for children and teens compiled by the Cooperative Children's Book Center, School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison

In the year 2019, books about and by people of color have increased in number, but the numbers are still significantly lower than the number of books by and about Caucasians. Putting together this book series is helping to combat the current statistics. Race and skin tone were incorporated into this project to provide children of color with characters that they may relate to more directly. Representation in media is a strong force that can influence how members of a society view themselves.

In order to transform perceptions, we must transform our cultural landscape into one that puts forward people of color in all of their complicated humanity, rather than relying on tired stereotypes. (Perception Institute, 2016)



The book, *Jae Woke Up This Morning and Did Not Feel Happy*, was illustrated by Jeric Tan, a Filipino-American children's book illustrator. The book, *Allen Sings the Storm*, was coillustrated between myself and an Indonesian children's book illustrator named Mujix who was met through the artist community website, DeviantArt.com. The last book and the namesake of the series, *We All Feel Feelings*, was co-illustrated between myself and an Albanian artist named Albin who was met through social media connections. I worked with each artist to develop specific illustration styles for each book. The stories are meant to stand out from other children's books, while being understandable by children of various ages. Each story was crafted to cover a certain topic under the umbrella of emotional and mental health and contains a message that pertains to dilemmas that a child may face.



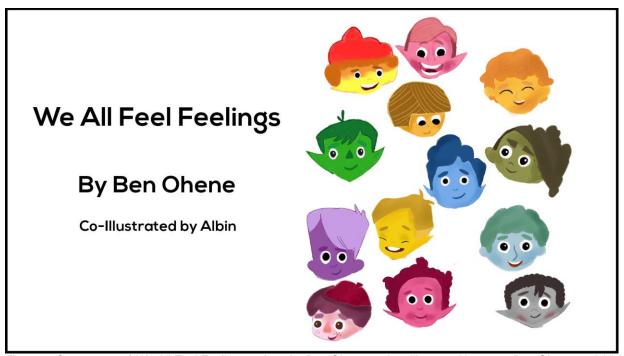


Figure 3. Cover page of We All Feel Feelings, written by Ben Ohene and co-illustrated between Ben Ohene and Albin

The storybook, We All Feel Feelings, addresses the fact that no matter who a person is, they have emotions. The emotions can be positive or negative and affect one's outlook on life. The book pairs emotive words to illustrated boys who are expressing the emotion. We All Feel Feelings was created to show young boys that there is a name to what they are feeling and that emotions are common and can make them feel certain ways. The story highlights the thought that there is no shame in having emotions. For this book, the decision was made to have the characters boast unnatural skin tones in order to be inclusive of children of all skin tones. It does not matter what a child may look like; everybody has feelings.



Figure 4. Cover page of *Allen Sings the Storm*, written by Ben Ohene and co-illustrated between Ben Ohene and Mujix

The storybook, *Allen Sings the Storm*, addresses generalized anxiety and some of its symptoms: loss of appetite, restlessness, and the desire to be isolated (Mayo Clinic, 2018). The main character, a young boy named Allen, experiences these symptoms and has difficulty enjoying everyday activities and his true passion, singing. Towards the end of the book, Allen decides to sing about his feelings. This alleviates his anxiety and helps him get back on track with his life. Allen's singing illustrates how verbalizing about feelings can be therapeutic. The exact type of anxiety that Allen is feeling is not defined in the book so that the readers can place themselves in Allen's position.

Anxiety and depression are two mental issues that have physical characteristics. These characteristics can include weight fluctuation, hyperventilation, trouble breathing, sweating, and trembling (Bhatia, 2018). When Allen, the main character of *Allen Sings the Storm*, feels anxiety, he is described as being "trapped in a storm." A visual representation of anxiety is

displayed in the story as a series of disorganized lines behind around Allen's head. After the anxiety passes, Allen's head is clear.

Jae Woke Up This Morning and Did Not Feel Happy

By Ben Ohene

Illustrated By Jeric Tan



Figure 5. Cover page of *Jae Woke Up This Morning and Did Not Feel Happy*, written by Ben Ohene and illustrated by Jeric Tan

The storybook, *Jae Woke Up This Morning and Did Not Feel Happy*, follows a child that wakes up one day and is in a gloomy mood. This story can be relatable by adults and children. We all experience days in which our minds don't want any sort of stimulation. In this story, Jae, a Filipino-American boy, wakes up and does not feel excited for his day and only desires isolation. After a day a feeling down, Jae rests his body and mind for a night and wakes up the next morning with positive emotions. Studies have shown that sleep is a pillar of recovery when it comes to distressed mental states (Kahn, Sadeh, Sheppes, 2013).

These books will let the children know that it is okay to have and express feelings that aren't of joy or confidence and that there are methods to communicating the negative



emotions and moving past them. The stories in *We All Feel Feelings* are aimed at opening discussion on mental and emotional health in young boys in order to allow them to grow to be mentally and emotionally stable men.

Research Analysis

The importance of this project shone through during the early stages of its production. The purpose of the research is to assess how children's books can aid children with identifying, expressing, and regulating emotions that don't conform with a prescribed role. My initial research for *We All Feel Feelings* started with conversations amongst groups of adults met at art galleries and workshops on active listening and expressing and receiving emotions. Individuals were asked about childhood memories that played a significant role in their current perceptions of the world. From the discussions, television shows and literature were identified as big influencers in the lives of the adults. Further research for this project included interviews with a cognitive behavior psychologist, a children's book author, and extensive reading of children's literature.

II. What's at Stake?

Perpetuating gender stereotypes

Research shows that gender biases continue to exist in the mainstream media that kids consume and that, in some cases, these biases haven't improved since the 1940s. Studies also show that stereotyped messages about boys and girls in traditional media—television, movies, magazines, music lyrics and videos, advertising, video games—can, over time, influence kids to adopt similar, narrow perceptions of social roles.

Kids who don't think critically about gender stereotypes can be misinformed about how the world perceives them and what they can grow up to be.

Figure 6. Graphic on studied gender stereotypes in the media from "Boys, Girls, and Media Messages in a Digital World" by Common Sense Media



Through research on the effects of media on the average child's mind, it can be seen that mainstream media plays a major part in the sculpting of society. A conversation with cognitive neuroscientist Dr. Ida Momennejad led me to look deeper into how our understanding of our social roles shapes the human mind.

An interesting phenomenon that is extremely apparent in American media, and stories regarding the social lives of teens and younger children in general, is the over-representation of predetermined and stereotyped roles. Children are expected to fit into those roles. When it comes to young boys, these roles largely devalue experiencing and expressing genuine emotions. They train children and teens to only display emotions that fit within the expectations of their social role. These oppressive social role structures are especially detrimental to the development of children with historically marginalized identities. In the case of black boys eight and up in the United States, the oppressive structures exercise their power on the bodies of these children un public.

(Dr. Ida Momennejad, 2020)

In Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code, Ruha Benjamin mentions the effect of observing the patting down and public humiliation and the sounds of helicopters not only on those young boys, but herself as a young girl and other bystanders observing this public and violent show of force. More often than not, these external forces turn into negative self-talk and reduce the social mobility of these children. Training young boys of



color with skills and nourishing environments to identify, express, and regulate their emotions is a crucial step in the process of collective healing (Benjamin, 2020).

For a portion of the psychological research, I invested in the Cognitive Behavioral

Therapy (CBT) and the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) card decks that are often

used in modern psychotherapy sessions. The CBT deck (Figure 7) is authored by Dr. Seth J.

Gillihan, a psychiatrist who specializes in cognitive behavioral treatments. The ACT deck (Figure

8) is authored by Dr. Jessica Borushok and Timothy Gordon, MSW – two renowned

psychologists whose work focuses on trauma and its relation to cognitive behavior and medical

conditions.

The ACT deck provides 55 practices based on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for use in therapy, classrooms, or at home. These cards ask questions that challenge the mind to think deep, encourage meaningful actions, and provide new perspectives to help individuals let go of negative thoughts and live in the present moment. The ACT deck is divided into three categories: aware, engaged, and open. Exercises in the "aware" category aid in incorporating mindfulness and presence in everyday life. Exercises in the "engaged" category challenge the user to do better in their life by staying on top of their goals. Exercises in the "open" category aid in bringing up suppressed memories and sensations.

The BCT deck provides 101 practices that are meant to alleviate stress using actionoriented techniques that build positive emotions. The deck is split into three categories: think,
act, and be. Each category provides strategies that connect thoughts and actions to mindfulness
and well-being.



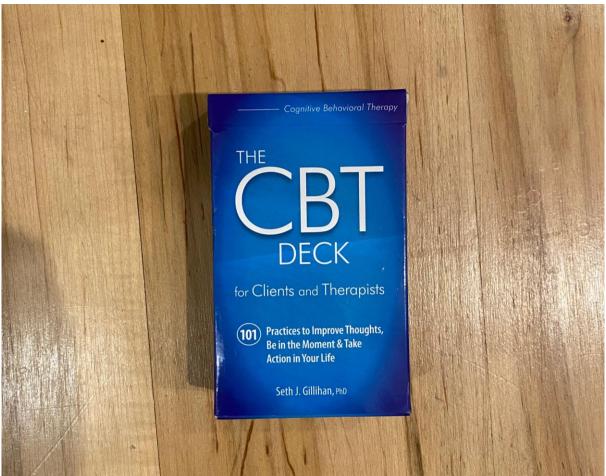


Figure 7. CBT card deck by Dr. Seth J. Gillihan

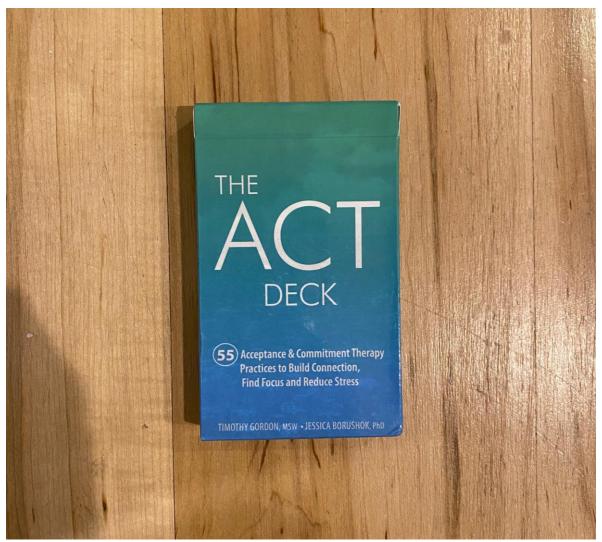


Figure 8. ACT card deck by Dr. Jessica Borushok and Timothy Gordon, MSW



Figure 9. Sample of cards from ACT card deck

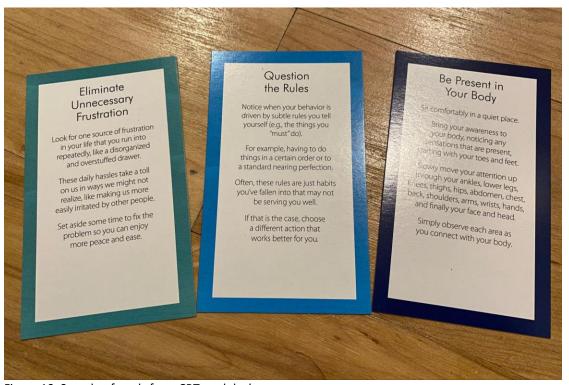


Figure 10. Sample of cards from CBT card deck



Both card decks were used in two 3-person mixed gender group studies that I conducted in Brooklyn, NY. The cards were used to determine how both the expression and stifling of emotions can affect memories and day to day actions. After the studies concluded, it was clear that the suppression of memory has an effect on perception of the world and self-esteem. All four of the men who participated in the experiment recalled traumatic experiences from their childhoods that challenged their masculinity and became catalysts in their development. The catalytic experiences involved belittling comments from fathers, uncles, and older male figures in the families of the male participants. The information gathered points to the importance of male figures in families and how their actions can have impact on a child self-esteem. If the male figure in the household is unable to communicate emotions of negativity effectively, a household may become a toxic environment and deter the proper formation of communicative abilities (Humphrey, 2020). If the cycle of repressing discussion on negative emotions in men is ended, then there will be a possibility to end toxic masculinity.

Thesis Production Process

One reason for pursuing this project is the lack of diversity in children's books. There are not enough books that cover the subject of mental health in children, few that feature boys, and even fewer that feature boys of color as main characters. Representation of boys of color is rarely seen in children's books that revolve around topics of anxiety, patience, depression, and other mental aspects. Research on the authors of the books that were read gave insight on the reason for the lack of diversity in the stories: Caucasian females make up to 78% of the people working in publishing (Jarema, 2019). The children's book genre is lacking the perspective of men of color.



In 2015, the World Health Organization conducted a worldwide mental health survey and reported 322 million cases of depressive disorders in adults (Figure 11). Notably, according to the Child Mind Institute most mental health disorders have an onset prior to age 24. This signals that early life education and anti-stigma programs could bear a significant improvement to the lives of millions (Koplewicz, 2017, Figure 12).

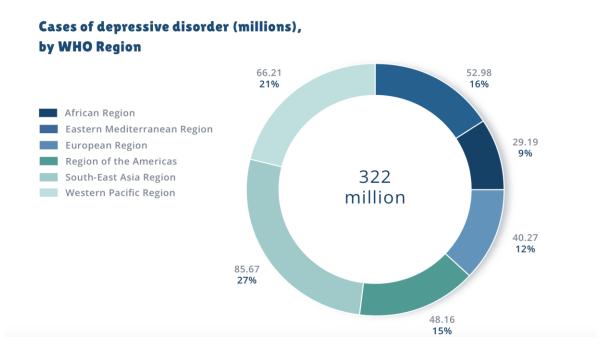


Figure 11. Graphic on adults who reported a mental disorder the World Health Organization

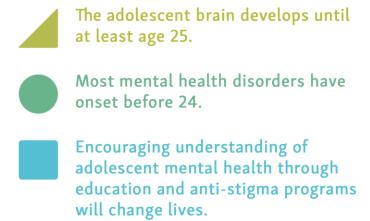


Figure 12. Graphic on brain development and mental health understanding by the Child Mind Institute



In 2015, teenagers and young adults ages 16 to 24 were noted as heavy users of social media after a study showed that 90% of the individuals in the age range use the internet for social networking (Child Mind Institute, 2017). This includes platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp. These apps use text and images as forms of communication.

The Child Mind Institute reports evidence that increased consumption of social media has a negative impact on self-esteem, and can have dramatic effects on teen behavior, including fewer risky social activities and more mental health symptoms (Koplewicz, 2017). Over-exposure to social media is also correlated with mental health problems including anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts.

Addressing mental health issues in childhood could provide educational and preventative measures to manage depression and other disorders at a global scale. Training children with the skills to identify, communicate, and cope with mental health disorders throughout development could benefit their well-being later on in life. Weaving this training into media that children and youth would willingly consume and remember could be a transformative strategy, making early life mental health education more easily accessible.

This thesis is an attempt to make a contribution to early life mental health education by way of creating accessible child-oriented media. Specifically, the illustrated stories and narrations of *We All Feel Feelings* focuses on simple narratives of identifying, expressing, and regulating difficult to understand emotions in boys of color.

Creating the *We All Feel Feelings* book series involved identifying the target audience of the books, male children between the ages of 5 and 10, and using vocabulary that could be



easily understood. To research how to write a children's book, several visits to the New York City Public Library system took place. The vision was to tie evidence-based research on children's books and use the information to form child-oriented media that addresses mental health in a manner that can be understood by children. Over 60 books were read before the New York City Public Library system was shut down after the COVID-19 pandemic was in full effect. Though the pandemic shut down many businesses and caused setbacks in the project, progress continued to be made.

Audience and Exhibition

With its brightly colored illustrations, easy-to-read text, and affirming messages, the *We All Feel Feelings* series hits a point between whimsical and educational. The purpose of this series is to allow for young boys to be able to identify and comfortably express their emotions in a constructive manner. The stories from *We All Feel Feelings* aim to reach male youth between the ages of 5 and 10, but it will be guardians, educators, and psychologists who are more than likely to acquire the books. The storybooks can be used as teaching tools in classrooms, readings that a medical practitioner would provide to a client, or as leisure reads at home. The series can be enjoyed by readers of all ages.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the process and plans for this project shifted. Originally, the books were to be printed, but the printing press that was lined up was forced to close their doors due to a lack of funding. For this reason, the stories in this book collection are online instead of physically available. Though physical books for *We All Feel Feelings* are in the plans, the online version can be accessed wherever internet connectivity exists.



In regard to legality over this project, I crafted the original text and purchased the rights to the illustrations from each individual illustrator. A plan to collaborate with a single illustrator to recreate all of the illustrations using one style has been considered. Developing a uniform illustration style would allow for the books in the series to be better recognized as a single project. The idea of getting the book printed will be revisited after the revamping of the illustrations.

Research on the subject of emotional and mental health in boys and men will continue to be conducted after the submission of this project. The topic of mental wellness is one that will continue to be studied and interpreted by researchers for the betterment of the quality of human life and I wish to be a part of the push for the understanding of the human psyche.

The storybooks of *We All Feel Feelings* are available to be viewed and listened to through the following website: nebstero.xhbtr.com/we-all-feel-feelings-the-book-series



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