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Breaking Free

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BREAKING FREE

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A capstone project submitted for Graduation with University Honors

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APPROVED

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ABSTRACT

This creative project is a script that focuses on a teenage girl named Chloe who overcomes social anxiety with the help of her family. This work references basic principles of psychology in emotion regulation as Chloe and her family navigate situations that young people face to emphasize that 1) they are not alone in their experience, 2) they can learn to overcome them, and 3) others can help them through it. Chloe begins as a girl who struggles with social anxiety but is forced out of her comfort zone to help her younger sister. In her effort to support her sister, Chloe learns to confront her own fears and manage her social anxiety.

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CREATIVE PROCESS

Introduction

Emotions—what are they? This has been a long-asked question which many have sought the answer to. As a psychology student, I have had the opportunity to learn about studies on emotions. Research has defined them as responses to the external environment which involve perception, physiology, and action (Keltner & Gross, 1999; Steimer, 2022). As humans, we experience many emotions, but the one I've found the most interesting is the complex emotion of social anxiety (SA).

During my studies on emotion, I found that they are commonly categorized as having a positive valence (joy, love, gratitude, etc.) or negative valence (anger, disgust, fear, etc.). Emotions are short-lived and carry with them action tendencies, which are the behaviors motivated by the emotion (Fredrickson, 1998). Action tendencies for negative emotions are often considered to prepare the mind and body to escape or defend against a threat (Shiota et. al, 2014). Many people can agree that basic emotions such as joy and sadness give us the urge to act a certain way, but other more complex emotions can be stereotyped as mental health conditions. SA is such an emotion. Experiencing anxiety may not mean that a person is struggling with a mental disorder such as social anxiety disorder (SAD). As an emotion, SA can be felt by anyone, but learning about the prejudice surrounding this emotion led me to start a project that can raise awareness about what SA is and that it can be dealt with in a healthy manner. My goal was for the basis my message regarding SA to be grounded in research findings and expressed through art, namely, film.

Film has been commonly used as a medium to express concepts in psychology (Rieber, 2014). For instance, dream states, thought processes, mental illness, and the stereotypical Freudian psychoanalysis (Rieber, 2014). Movies often entertain and hold the attention of the audience by creating their own fictional reality. This may cause issues when blending it with studies in psychology, which are heavily based on research experiments and theory (Nannicelli & Taberham, 2014). Examples from the past have shown that important psychological concepts, such as mental health and clinical treatments, have been ridiculed or depicted inaccurately (Rieber, 2014). It seemed to me that film had an amazing potential to express relevant topics but often distorts the truth about emotional health. For this reason, I made it a goal to show SA as a real and relatable challenge without giving reason for excluding the target population.

I've observed how films often depict mental health as well as how the audience responds to it, so I decided to have my project include SA in a practical way. To me, this meant the film would not be overly dramatic but instead show how SA affects a person's life. This required me to have a better understanding of SA and how it affects young people. The next step would be how to show this in a film. These two components of my project brought me to research social anxiety and film separately before bringing them together.

Researching Social Anxiety

Initially, investigating social anxiety seemed easy enough since I had enough resources to get me started and continue from there. I didn't expect, however, to find less research about SA as an emotion. This hurdle led me to change my tactics and begin from the foundation of emotions before delving into the research dealing with SA. Through this investigation, I learned what social anxiety is and how it manifests in young people.

To understand SA, I first researched what anxiety is. Anxiety is an emotion with a negative valence which causes a person to feel uneasy about the potential negative outcome of something (Barrett et. al, 2016). A person experiencing anxiety will often look to the future and may be caused by continuously ruminating about the possible negative outcome (Barrett et. al, 2016). This anxiety serves as an alert and motivates many people to avoid something but may not be specific (Steimer, 2022). In the case of SA, this emotion arises in social situations that bring forth rumination about negative outcomes (Almeida et. al, 2021; Danneel et. al, 2019). As a form of anxiety, SA carries with it the action tendency to avoid but is more specific in that this behavior is targeted toward social interaction.

Social anxiety can be observed as the avoidance of social situations for fear of being socially rejected in some way (Tse et. al, 2023). This behavior may bring temporary relief and therefore encourage a person to continue withdrawing (Cannon et. al, 2020). People of all ages and backgrounds experience SA, but adolescents are at higher risk of developing certain disorders such as anxiety and depressive disorders (Rapee et. al, 2019; Tse et. al, 2023). It can be a challenge for teenagers to overcome SA because it feeds into itself. For instance, a person who experiences SA will likely have little practice and learning with regards to socializing with peers since they avoid interacting with them. This results in poorly developed social skills which may pave the way for peer rejection. This coupled with safety behaviors that provide some solace for the person but seem strange or awkward to others may lead a socially anxious person to withdraw further and perhaps be more susceptible to rejection (Almeida et. al 2021; Cannon et. al, 2020; Danneel et. al, 2019; Rapee et. al, 2019). Much tension and stress can result from such an environment at school, often leading to affected school performance. Observing the detrimental effects of a passive attitude towards the emotional hardships during adolescence has

brought researchers to also focus on ways to improve the situation through coping and support (Cavanaugh, 2016; Chervonsky & Hunt, 2018; Elsharnouby & Dost-Gözkan, 2020). With this in mind, I focused on how familial support can help a teenager to deal with SA.

Relationships within the family can offer adolescents support in coping with emotional struggles. Social support within the family refers to having feelings of connection and trust where the teenager feels comfortable communicating openly and honestly (Cavanaugh & Buehler, 2015). This support has been found to play an important role in adolescent well-being (Elsharnouby & Dost-Gözkan, 2020). Providing consistent care and attention to teenagers is a way of being supportive and helping them cope with stressors (Cavanaugh & Buehler, 2015). However, this support must be coupled with healthy behaviors from the adolescents as well. Their own well-being is also affected by their disclosure to their parents (Cavanaugh & Buehler, 2015). Adolescent disclosure opens the door for open communication so that parents can provide guidance and support during this sensitive period in life (Elsharnouby & Dost-Gözkan, 2020). These findings about the complexity of SA and how young ones can learn to overcome it motivated me to focus on the family's role in helping them. Specifically, I sought to express such familial interactions through film.

Researching Film

The world of film holds countless intricacies behind the scenes which most viewers are not aware of. I was part of the larger audience which was mostly unaware of the processes and planning that goes behind the finished film. As someone new to the field, I was required to learn the basic process of film and found that the first steps include creating a synopsis and a script.

Much research went into how the screenplay should be formatted and how the story can have a structure.

The modification led me to research the features of a screenplay. For instance, the dialogue, characters, and scene headings are uniquely distinguished from one another through the level of indentation and letter format. It was also important to highlight the first appearance of a character by placing the name in block capitals. In addition to the format, a plot can clearly be developed within a script.

The various plot structures for different types of movies were reviewed in a screenwriting class I took as part of my research. It was unclear to me which format I should use at this point of the creative process. Even so, learning about how a story is developed within a screenplay revealed that my idea was not well-developed and lacked structure. Analyzing the commonly used plots enabled me to fill in the holes in my project's story. Once I had a clearer idea of what my project entailed and how I could develop it, I began my synopsis.

Synopsis

The synopsis involves laying out the main points of the plot. This includes the main decisions the character makes and the events that affect the character's development. The synopsis allowed me to see the direction the story was heading in and, more importantly, revealed problematic elements of the story. One of the main issues that arose after review was the lack of specificity at certain points of the story. Specifically, some key behaviors of the characters were unexplained or required more details for the audience to make sense of the cause-effect relationships. In other words, the character development needed improvement. This matter moved me to "get to know" my characters better.

Through this process I learned that creating a character involves more than a name and age. Forming Chloe, the central character, as a teenager involved thinking about how a person her age would react, what she likes, how she feels, and her motivations. This took much thought and effort to try to transform Chloe into a person rather than a character who only acts based on what's written in the script. She was a girl who was very close to her family and truly cared for each of them but also someone who had her struggles and had to learn to overcome them. And this paved the way to form the other characters. What type of family did she have? What qualities brought Chloe close to them? Suzie, Chloe's younger sister, and Claire, their mother, both needed to come to life as well to bring the story together. How did they treat Chloe and each other? How did they react to Chloe's behavior? Asking and answering these questions about the characters gave a clearer direction to the story. Once the characters were set, I moved on to the next step of writing the script.

Formatting

A completed synopsis meant the story was ready to be transferred to a script. With no background in this field before this project, formatting the script seemed daunting. Some investigation led me to formatting basics using Word, but I realized this method would take an extremely long time. How could I possibly finish the project in time using this method? Fortunately, I was later introduced to multiple applications that assist with the screenplay format.

I used the WriterDuet online application to format my project. This program automatically indented the scene headings, the character dialogue, and action lines. The program helped me focus mainly on the content of my script rather than the spacing and alignment of the writing. Because WriterDuet formatted the writing for me, I did not have to spend unnecessary

time doing this manually. This meant more time could be spent on the story itself. Once I finished the script using the program, the work was a total of 42 pages. This means that a film made from the document would be roughly 42 minutes long. The script was ready to be reviewed once again.

Refinements

The screenplay was inspected and required more alterations. For example, the characters needed further improvement since their development was incomplete, which meant altering and even removing some scenes. Other changes were made to the dialogue to create a more conversational environment rather than a scripted one as well as to emphasize the support the central character was receiving. These modifications revealed growth in the characters and clarified the meaning of the scenes as they relate to the plot. More importantly, making these improvements helped me achieve the making of a more real character and situation which could effectively convey a message about SA.

Message

My goal with this screenplay was to share with the audience that SA is an emotion everyone experiences and that it can be a part of life outside of the stereotypical SAD condition. More importantly, I wanted the audience to feel they are not alone in experiencing this anxiety, they can learn to overcome it, and they can get the support they need by having relatable characters and situations.

Considering that adolescents are susceptible to experiencing SA, I included a central character who struggles with this emotion during their teenage years. Featuring a character who

is commonly known to experience SA would make the story relatable to the target audience—adolescents who struggle with SA. It was my hope that including such a character could remind adolescents that they are not the only ones facing this hardship. Reaching the audience in this way could also demonstrate that SA is not just present in SAD. Rather, it is an emotion that anyone can experience, and they shouldn't be ashamed to feel it. This was an important goal for me because achieving this may bring people who struggle emotionally to realize that they can take the initiative to improve their emotionality. This leads to the next objective for the project: they can learn to overcome SA.

Those who struggle with SA can take action to improve their anxiety. However, SA can be difficult to overcome because it can feed negatively into itself and in the long run may lead teenagers to develop SAD and other socioemotional disorders. Because of this, showing the audience that they can learn to overcome SA was an important goal for the screenplay. Accepting SA as something that people experience is crucial for young ones to realize learning to live with SA is not a matter of having a disorder. Instead, it is an emotion that can be regulated when they take the initiative to do so. To achieve this, the story did not focus on a solution; instead, the script emphasized the need to act and not give up. Overcoming SA can be a challenge, but they are not alone in fighting against it because others can provide them with the support they need.

I exhibited this last goal of showing the audience that they can have support through interactions within the family. The family was there to give the central character the courage and tools to act. This was a key factor to consider because the family dynamic and interactions have a strong influence on the emotional well-being of teenagers (Cavanaugh, 2016; Elsharnouby & Dost-Gözkan, 2020). Showing how others can support a socially anxious person in informal

settings was more important as the writer because much prejudice still exists about receiving help formally. Additionally, not everyone needs support in professional settings. In either case, it is extremely important to have a personal support network to learn to overcome SA.

The inspiration and development of the screenplay was deeply influenced by research in psychology, but the project itself is meant to deliver these messages by means of film. I developed characters the audience can relate to with the purpose of reminding young ones who experience SA that they are not alone in their struggle, they can take action to fight against it, and they can gain the support they need to overcome it.

Conclusion

Breaking Free was initially inspired by studies on emotions and developed into a project that sought to convey a message about psychology to the audience. Social anxiety is a complex emotion commonly experienced by adolescents. Research has shown that this population is more likely to struggle with SA and engage in safety behaviors as a way to deal with the emotion. Researchers have also found that familial relationships play a crucial role in helping teenagers cope with SA. These are common features of SA which I wanted to express in a project to raise awareness about what it is and how one can learn to overcome it rather than viewing it as a stereotypical aspect of SAD. To achieve this, I chose to use film to portray a character who gets the support she needs in order to learn how she can fight against SA. I faced many challenges while pursuing this goal, such as researching what a film project entailed and forming a realistic character the audience could relate to. Building this foundation propelled me toward creating the story. Once the story was set, I formatted it into a screenplay, reviewing it as needed during the process. The review and editing process was lengthy and resulted in a final

product of a 50-page script which would result in a film roughly 50 minutes long. It was challenging to create the script because it is my first project in film, but it has been a satisfying learning process. I was introduced to a new field of study, its methods, and potential. Through this I had the opportunity to share with the audience what SA is and that it is relevant for both the people who experience it and those around them. Studies on emotion and other concepts in psychology can be practical and my hope is that future research will continue to be presented via art forms to a larger audience in an understandable and applicable way.

BREAKING FREE

The final project can be accessed [here](#).

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