

Navigating Discrimination Through Empathy: The Situational Torment of Asian-Canadian Youth

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Abstract: Team Ice, a group of university students primarily of South Asian heritage, came together with a shared desire to explore and express the complexities of cultural identity through the Reader's Theatre (RT) process, a research project as part of a broader study seeking to better comprehend discrimination within different ethno-cultural contexts. The topic of our RT script, *Together Through the Struggle*, centers on the mental health challenges faced by Asian-Canadian youth during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our group was drawn to this theme after reflecting on the significant emotional, psychological, and cultural stressors encountered by marginalized communities throughout the pandemic. We observed how many Asian-Canadian youth (particularly those from immigrant or culturally diverse families) grappled with heightened social isolation, anxiety, and cultural dissonance due to the pandemic lockdowns, remote learning, and disrupted social environments.

Key words: Readers Theatre, youth, identity, arts-based research, mental health, COVID-19 pandemic.

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Introduction

Team Ice, a group of university students primarily of South Asian heritage, came together with a shared desire to explore and express the complexities of cultural identity through the Reader's Theatre (RT) process, a research project as part of a broader study seeking to better comprehend discrimination within different ethno-cultural contexts.

The topic of our RT script, *Together Through the Struggle*, centers on the mental health challenges faced by Asian-Canadian youth during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our group was drawn to this theme after reflecting on the significant emotional, psychological, and cultural stressors encountered by marginalized communities throughout the pandemic. We observed how many Asian-Canadian youth (particularly those from immigrant or culturally diverse families) grappled with heightened social isolation, anxiety, and cultural dissonance due to the pandemic lockdowns, remote learning, and disrupted social environments.

As South Asian youth, we recognized a deep-rooted stigma surrounding mental health within our communities. Conversations about emotional well-being and help-seeking are often met with silence and / or discomfort, shaped by cultural expectations and societal pressures. By engaging with this theme, we aimed to break the silence, challenge taboos, and open space for dialogue rooted in empathy and collective support.

During early brainstorming, we considered several directions, including cultural resilience, online learning challenges, and friendship in virtual spaces. Ultimately, the topic of *mental health* resonated very deeply and reflected both our lived experiences and our shared hope to raise awareness about an issue far too often silenced and stigmatized in our South Asian communities.

The Context

Settings and Scenes

Scene 1 – Narrators' Introduction

Neutral space. Sets the tone: mental health, cultural stigma, and community support.

Scene 2 – Liran's Academic Struggles

Dorm living room. Liran is overwhelmed with school; Bala suggests seeking help.

Scene 3 – Cultural Clash

Dorm kitchen. Tension over food odors leads to cultural understanding and compromise.

Scene 4 – Gee's Isolation

Gee's dorm room. Alone and homesick, Gee finds hope through the residence advisor's outreach and a student club.

Scene 5 – Support & Resolution

Dorm living room. Liran apologizes, seeks help, Bala offers support. Conflict resolves.

Scene 6 – Narrators' Conclusion

Same neutral space. Reinforces themes of empathy, support, and healing.

Characters and Roles

Narrator: Not a character, but someone in charge of setting the scenes.

- **Narrator #1:** Opens and closes the story, emphasizes cultural resilience.
- **Narrator #2:** Guides the narrative, highlights hope and support.
- **Liran:** Stressed Caucasian student, hesitant to seek help, learns to open up.
- **Bala:** Supportive Indian roommate, bridges cultural gaps, encourages help-seeking.
- **Gee:** Isolated international student finds community through outreach.
- **Residence Advisor:** Friendly woman advisor that helps Gee reconnect through the student community.

The Script: Together Through the Struggle

Scene 1: Narrators' Introduction [Narrator #2]

Narrator #1: Our group chose the topic of mental health struggles among Asian-Canadian youth during the pandemic because it resonates deeply with our own experiences and observations within our community. The pandemic has magnified existing challenges related to mental well-being, and we believe it's crucial to address these issues openly. By focusing on mental health, we aim to contribute to breaking down the stigma surrounding these discussions within our community. Additionally, we recognize the importance of cultural resilience in navigating adversity. Our decision to infuse cultural elements into the narrative stems from a desire to celebrate the strength and resilience found within our diverse backgrounds. Through this script, we hope to shed light on the power of supportive communities, cultural values, and breaking down the barriers that prevent individuals from seeking the help they need. This topic reflects our commitment to fostering understanding, empathy, and a sense of unity among Asian-Canadian youth during these challenging times.

Narrator #2: Today, we share a story of three youths, their struggles, their conflicts, and their journey towards understanding and support. Our theme of mental health will be portrayed through the lives of Liran, Bala, and Gee, relatable students who manage to find solutions to their challenges. Liran and Bala are roommates living in a dorm together, both with their own struggles. Being an international student, Gee struggles with his isolation but finds help through his Residence Advisor. Each of these situations described were common occurrences during the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore highlight the obstacles faced by Asian-Canadian youth. Through three different lenses of student experiences, we portray common struggles of South Asian-Canadian youth while also showing hope and perseverance through ways of overcoming these difficulties. This is their story, yet it mirrors the lives of many youths and is still relevant today, years after the pandemic initially began.

SCENE 2: Liran's Academic Struggles [Narrator #1: *Liran is studying in the living room of the dorm he shares with Bala*]

Liran: [Looks stressed, surrounded by books and papers] "I just can't seem to catch up on my work. Every assignment feels like a mountain."

Bala: [Offering a comforting smile] "Have you talked to someone about this? Maybe there's more support available than you think."

Liran: [Sighs] "I don't know. I don't want to seem like I can't handle it."



Image 1: Cultural Dissonance: preparing dinner in the dorm/s kitchen (OpenAI, 2025a)

SCENE 3: Cultural Clash [Narrator #2: *Later on, Bala is preparing dinner in their dorm as Liran continues to study*]

Liran: [Frustrated with Bala as he cooks in the kitchen] "Bala, how can you cook such strong-smelling food all the time? It's overwhelming! I can't even focus!"

Bala: [Taken aback initially but then understands]: "I didn't realize it was bothering you so much. Let's work out a kitchen schedule and maybe I can introduce you to some South Asian dishes? Sharing our cultures can be a way to connect."

SCENE 4: Gee's Isolation [Narrator #2: *Gee is sitting in his dorm, pondering the uncertainty brought by COVID-19*]

Gee: [Alone in his room, staring out the window]: "I thought coming here would be an adventure. But because of the pandemic, it's just...lonely. I don't know what to do..."

Residence Advisor: [Knocking on the door] "Hello?"

Gee: "Hi. The door is open."

Residence Advisor: "Hey Gee, as your Residence Advisor, I've noticed you've been keeping to yourself lately. There's an Asian student cultural club meeting tonight. I was wondering if you wanted to come with me?"

Gee: "Hmm, I appreciate the invite, ma'am. Yeah, I am just missing everyone at home. Maybe it's time I break out of my shell. Sure, I'll join you tonight."

Residence Advisor: "Yeah, I sort of feel the same way... It's okay to feel overwhelmed or lonely during this time. What's important is reaching out, especially when you're struggling with your mental health. This club, this community, we're all here for you. Oh, and remember to wear a mask!"

Gee: "Will do. Thank you!"

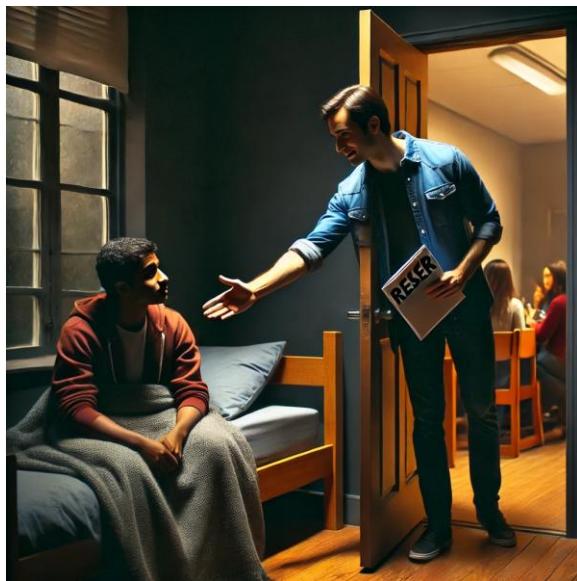


Image 2: Gee's isolation and support from the Residence Advisor (OpenAI, 2025b).

SCENE 5: Support and Resolution [Narrator #1: Back to Liran and Bala's dorm]

Liran: "I'm sorry for snapping about your food earlier. Maybe we can find a way to balance things better. By the way, I spoke with the Advisor and he gave me a list of student supports and resources I could access

so I wouldn't feel overwhelmed with everything going on. You were right, there is support for me. Thank you."

Bala: [Smiling] "Of course. And I'll help you with your studies too. We're in this together."

Scene 6: Narrators' Conclusion [Narrator #2]

Narrator #1: "Through understanding, support, and communication, the shadows of mental health struggles can be illuminated."

Narrator #2: "No one has to walk their path alone. Together, we can build a community of care, respect, and mutual support."

Narrator #1: "As our story reaches its close, we're reminded of the power of connection, empathy, and shared experiences during the pandemic. The journeys of Liran, Bala, and Gee are a testament to the strength found in mutually supporting each other in spite of cultural differences and vulnerability. This also highlights the courage it takes for Asian-Canadian youths to reach out to others."

Narrator #2: "In every struggle, there is a beacon of hope when communities come together. Whether it be with university advising, a residence advisor, or a roommate, mental health is a journey, not a destination, and it's one we don't have to travel alone. Let's take steps, however small, towards understanding and supporting each other."

End Scene

Conclusion

The primary message of *Together Through the Struggle* is that overcoming difficulties—particularly mental health challenges—is possible through empathy, understanding, and connection. The story shows how genuine support can dissolve boundaries of ethnicity, culture, and personal circumstance, creating unity among individuals who may at first feel isolated or misunderstood.

In *Scene 1*, the narrators set the stage by emphasizing the impact of the pandemic on Asian-Canadian youth and the importance of breaking the stigma around mental health. This introduction highlights that

cultural strength and community are key tools in healing. *Scene 2* shows Liran struggling silently under academic pressure and not seeking help, representing students suffering in isolation out of fear of appearing weak. Bala's offer of support highlights empathy as a potential solution. In *Scene 3*, cultural tension between roommates surfaces, but it's resolved through mutual respect and willingness to understand, demonstrating that empathy can bridge cultural divides. *Scene 4* focuses on Gee feeling lonely and isolated as an international student, which is overcome by the Residence Advisor's reaching out to him. Her simple gesture shows that small acts of care can break communication barriers and provide emotional support, in turn helping youth feel more seen. *Scene 5* brings everything together: Liran takes Bala's advice, apologizes, and opens up, showing that accepting vulnerability and weaknesses leads to growth and overcoming them. Bala responds with kindness, emphasizing that we're stronger when we support each other. Finally, *Scene 6* wraps up the message clearly: community, communication, and empathy are the keys to healing—and no one has to go through struggles alone.

Ultimately, the pandemic was a difficult time for everybody. Regardless, by being empathetic towards others, circumstances that initially seemed dire can be overcome together, effectively allowing everyone involved to live in a manner that better fosters inclusion and well-being.

Reflection on the Readers Theatre Exercise

Upon reflecting on our experience with "Together Through the Struggle", we all learned a lot—not just about mental health, but about each other, our cultures, and the power of shared storytelling. Working on this script gave us a chance to have honest conversations about the struggles many of us have faced silently, especially during the pandemic. For us, one of the most impactful lessons was understanding how different mental health is perceived across cultural backgrounds, how stigma, family expectations, or silence can shape someone's experience. By hearing the stories of others and co-writing scenes rooted in real emotions, we learned how empathy isn't just a feeling, but an action—something we practiced by actively listening, validating, and building on one another's truths. It

became clear that while mental health challenges don't look the same for everyone, empathy is a universal language that brings humanity together.

Throughout the process, we also recognized the importance of cultural identity in shaping how people deal with stress, isolation, and seeking help. Writing the RT script pushed us to explore perspectives beyond our own and find shared ground in the stories of resilience and growth. The act of collaborating, sharing ideas, and shaping this narrative taught us the importance of listening and supporting one another, both within and beyond the RT script. Personally, participating in the RT process was both eye-opening and emotional aspect of RT was engaging. It challenged us to think more critically about our assumptions, and we gained confidence in contributing to sensitive topics through writing and performance. Group discussions became a space where vulnerability was welcomed, and we felt a deep sense of connection with our peers as we crafted scenes that blended authenticity, emotion, and hope. Ultimately, this experience reminded us that even when we feel alone in our struggles, community and compassion can make a huge difference in overcoming loneliness and isolation.

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