

At the Back of Your Mind
S01E04: TikTok

[00:00:00] **Juliette:** Hello, and welcome to *At the Back of Your Mind*, the *Inspire the Mind* podcast that brings you the sciences on mental health, with a no-nonsense attitude. I'm one of your hosts, Juliette, together with my scientist friends, Carolina, and Maryam. We're often joined by fabulous guests, so grab a cup of tea and let's dive into what's exactly at the back of your mind today.

[00:00:31] **Melisa:** Hey everyone, I just wanted to give you a quick heads up about some of the topics touched upon that some listeners may find triggering. So, trigger warning for discussions about suicidal thoughts and behaviour and self-harm. Take care of yourselves while listening and enjoy the episode.

[00:00:45] **Juliette:** Welcome to today's episode of *At the Back of Your Mind*. I am your host, Juliette, and today I'm joined by Maryam.

[00:00:52] **Maryam:** Hello!

[00:00:53] **Juliette:** It's just us today. We're having a very intimate conversation about big life issues.

No, our big topic today is glamorising and romanticising mental health issues on TikTok. I'm sure everyone has heard of it. If you're not using it, your children are using it, your cousins are using it. Right? It's this online platform where people post very short videos that give you either a certain amount of information, of content, of, you know, kind of entertainment, I guess, in a way.

[00:01:27] **Maryam:** And it was formally known as *Musical.ly*.

[00:01:30] **Juliette:** I didn't know that was *Musical.ly*.

[00:01:32] **Maryam:** Yeah, it was *Musical.ly* before and that social media platform, it used to encourage users to record lip-sync videos. So, they would film themselves lip-syncing to like their favourite song or the most popular song that was out at the time.

But now TikTok, obviously it covers a much wider breadth of topics, and you can find all sorts on there. It's a very popular social media platform, I think for younger people. I personally don't use TikTok, but I see so many TikToks on the social media platforms I do use. Like they kind of overlap and they get reposted everywhere else.

But the reason we wanted to talk about mental health on TikTok specifically is because there's this phenomenon of the glamorisation of it; almost like this-this want, this need, this desire to be sad. And it's almost like this, it's got this mysterious air around it.

[00:02:19] **Juliette:** Yeah. I did go on a deep dive of like mental health TikTok compilations.

I don't know if you did the same Maryam, but I really wanted to make sure that, you know, I had like a very good picture of what was actually happening on TikTok and I was not just influenced by how the, you know, the media's picking up on it. And you find everything in these videos, and by everything, I mean everything.

Like I watched some people have like very real, very raw like mental breakdowns on camera and then just posting it and I was like, 'wow!', like. I think people have been doing that like since you know, the early days of internet, 'cause I'm sure you can find that on YouTube as well.

You know, people having like very real, like in the moment breakdown type of stuff.

People having suicidal thoughts and then reaching for TikTok to kind of express the distress that they're in, but then on the other end of the spectrum, you see people supporting each other. You see people kind of saying, you know, this is what I do look at like the journey I've made type of stuff.

[00:03:25] **Maryam:** Yeah.

[00:03:26] **Juliette:** But yeah, I would say, like, I saw some **** that I did not expect. Like I saw a girl make a TikTok on it was all like, you know, the glitter emoji, like...

[00:03:34] **Maryam:** Yeah

[00:03:34] **Juliette:** ...going to my new psychiatric institution, and boy, I get it. You know what I mean? Like, you need to laugh about that. But did I expect this content? No.

[00:03:45] **Maryam:** Yeah, sometimes I think people find it easier to poke fun at it or make jokes 'cause it just, it makes the whole process a lot easier for some and you know, it's like a coping mechanism of...

[00:03:56] **Juliette:** Yeah.

[00:03:56] **Maryam:** ...dealing with that process and that journey. And being like, you know, I can laugh about it, but I know that I'm looking to support myself or like I'm reaching out for support.

[00:04:05] **Juliette:** Yeah, 'cause I was going to say as long as it's like in on the tone of the joke and people are themselves aware of that. I think to an extent it can actually be really healthy in the sense that humour in psychology is considered a coping mechanism and...

[00:04:24] **Maryam:** Mm-hmm

[00:04:24] **Juliette:** ...there's actually, you know, classification of coping mechanism from immature to mature and humour is a mature coping mechanism because you're able, I think, to take a step back and laugh about what's happening to you.

[00:04:35] **Maryam:** I completely agree. There's, and I'm guilty of this, is like making jokes, like, '*oh, I'm just gonna kill myself...*

[00:04:42] **Juliette:** Yeah.

[00:04:42] **Maryam:** ...or '*I'm so fed up, like I wanna kill myself*'. And I feel like that's such a common thing, especially in like in Millennials and young people. Like we make light of it even if we genuinely do feel that way, even if we are experiencing suicidal ideation. So, I don't, I- I think there are two sides to that coin as well. I feel like that is the way with most things. Relating to social media and social, like just culture when it comes to mental health, the way we talk about it. Yes, we are a lot more open but there's all these kind of like, you know, read between the lines like, '*I'm struggling, help me*', but '*ha ha ha*'. Like, I'm gonna laugh about it as if it's, we're all in the same boat. You know?

[00:05:21] **Juliette:** Yeah, 'cause I think there is always a difference between consuming a specific type of media, of information, of internet

content and what you post, because like, I'm not gonna lie to you. I love the big anxiety meme. You know...

[00:05:39] **Juliette:** I love an anxiety meme. I think they're hilarious. And for me they're a really good way of like feeling that something is really relatable and like absolutely, yes, I have been there a hundred percent. You know?

[00:05:51] **Maryam:** Yeah. It can be helpful in that way. I've seen so many like comics and things like that for like things like ADHD and anxiety and depression, like just to, yeah. The same thing we're talking about now, where it just makes it a bit more relatable and funny. But you can kind of be like, I understand that I'm going through this, but others are as well. And it gives you that feeling of like not feeling alone.

[00:06:15] **Juliette:** Yeah.

[00:06:15] **Maryam:** Not being alone in your struggles.

[00:06:17] **Juliette:** And also, it normalises that everyone can feel like that at some point.

But if I was to pose that type of content on my social media on a regular basis, then I think it becomes something else. As you're saying, it might be like, *'Hey, I'm not feeling good. I need support. I need, you know, I need help, or I don't know how to deal with this'*. I think especially in young people.

[00:06:39] **Maryam:** Yeah, definitely.

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[00:06:40] **Juliette:** I obviously don't have a TikTok that I post trendy videos on. I'm not- I'm not a secret TikToker. But, like I don't know what you had in the UK, like, but we had these things called 'sky blogs' when I was, I don't know, how old was I? 12? Something like that. And like we would all post like these very deep quotes type of stuff. And then like all your friends would come running like, '*What's happening?*'

[00:07:09] **Maryam:** '*Inbox me babe!*'. Like can we like, can we please talk about Tumblr? Because I feel like Tumblr was the predecessor to what is happening right now.

[00:07:17] **Juliette:** I was a hardcore Tumblr girl.

[00:07:19] **Maryam:** Yeah. So, in case anyone isn't aware, Tumblr was, is so well it still is around.

[00:07:24] **Juliette:** It still is.

[00:07:25] **Maryam:** It still is. It's just not as relevant as it used to be, but it was massive. There was like a huge boom of people using Tumblr back in the early 2000s sorry, late 2000s and early 2010s.

[00:07:38] **Juliette:** I feel like it was 2011 with like a big peak at like 2004, 2014.

[00:07:45] **Maryam:** And Tumblr was like the first social media website where you could find all of that content in one place, I feel. All of the kind of mental health content and people talking about feeling alone or suicidal or depressed. And it would always have this like image in the background of someone chilling on the train tracks and it's really artistic and it's like a really nice photograph. And it's like black and

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white or something like that, or sepia. And I remember people sharing those endlessly when I was in secondary school at that time.

[00:08:15] **Juliette:** I don't know about you, but like the thing that was really attractive at the time with Tumblr is that it was anonymous.

[00:08:21] **Maryam:** Yeah.

[00:08:22] **Juliette:** You know, it was not about like who you were, whereas I feel like TikTok, you're putting your face out there, your name is there, but I guess the amount of content is endless. Like, and maybe you're just like drowned into the platform when you post something.

[00:08:36] **Maryam:** Yeah. It could get completely unseen, but to be honest, like yes, I don't use TikTok. I use YouTube for reels sometimes, which are very similar. So, reels are short form content on YouTube.

I think we need to talk about the algorithm on TikTok and other social media platforms because you were talking about how it's just this endless scroll of content and like the algorithm on TikTok, it decides what kind of content to push, so what it feels is popular and what it feels you will like based on your demographic. And I think it's really important to talk about algorithms in general. I know there was that Netflix documentary about how the internet and, you know...

[00:09:14] **Juliette:** ...was it *The Social Dilemma*?

[00:09:16] **Maryam:** That's the one.

[00:09:17] **Juliette:** Yeah.

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[00:09:17] **Maryam:** And I think that was a big wake up call for a lot of people, especially people that aren't familiar with, you know, their use on the internet. Because I felt like, personally I already knew that my data was being used to advertise things to me.

[00:09:28] **Juliette:** Same.

[00:09:28] **Maryam:** Like it's not, it didn't feel like news, but for a lot of people, they didn't realise how much data is being collected. And these young people, a lot of these people using TikTok are like, you know, 13, 14 they're still children, they're underage and they're seeing some pretty intense and extreme content.

[00:09:44] **Juliette:** Do you think that TikTok exposes this more vulnerable demographic to these things because of its algorithm? So just so that you know, people get the context a little bit.

So, you and I were right at the kind of the limit, the hinge between like Millennials and Gen Z. So, as I was telling to you yesterday, I think is very telling, but like...

[00:10:06] **Maryam:** Yeah.

[00:10:06] **Juliette:** My first phone was like, you know, like that Nokia brick with snake on it.

[00:10:11] **Maryam:** The Nokia brick, you can literally chuck it across a room, and it would survive.

[00:10:16] **Juliette:** Put it in the washing machine...

[00:10:18] **Maryam:** Off a cliff.

[00:10:18] **Juliette:** ...you know, and it did three things, right. Calling, texting, snake.

[00:10:22] **Maryam:** Yeah.

[00:10:23] **Juliette:** That was it.

[00:10:23] **Maryam:** Yeah.

[00:10:23] **Juliette:** And my younger sister, she's seven years younger than me and her first phone that she had around the same age as me, so probably around like, you know, 11. It was an iPhone.

[00:10:34] **Maryam:** Yeah, it's absolutely insane.

So, I was born in '95, so I'm like straight on the cusp of like Gen Z, Millennial, and I don't feel like I fit squarely into either of those categories. I feel like I grew up with the development of technology. So, like, I always say, I feel like some young people, they don't. I've worked with year nines, year eight/year seven as part of the study, and they won't know what the 'Save' button is on Word documents because the 'Save' button is a floppy disc. They wouldn't know what a floppy disc is. And like for me, that was one of the first things I used to record stuff on, like a floppy disc and you know, the dial-up internet and stuff like that. And even though I was super young, I still remember that.

So, it's very interesting to have grown up with the development of technology and see now, like my little cousins, you know, that they

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know how to use an iPhone by the time they're like one, they know how to press the buttons and touch the screen, and they know how to...

[00:11:25] **Juliette:** Every time they see a screen, they think it's like a touch screen.

[00:11:28] **Maryam:** Yeah. Even if it isn't, they just start tapping it. [Maryam laughs] And- and I don't have anything against younger people- they obviously, you know, some people talk about like...

[00:11:38] **Juliette:** Okay, boomer.

[00:11:38] **Maryam:** *'You can't get off your phone. You're just always in front of a screen'*. And it's not their fault that...

[00:11:43] **Juliette:** I mean we're the same.

[00:11:43] **Maryam:** Exactly.

[00:11:44] **Juliette:** We're the same.

[00:11:44] **Maryam:** I'm exactly the same, even though I grew up with how much it's changed. But I feel like now there is so much unrestricted access...

[00:11:52] **Juliette:** Yeah.

[00:11:52] **Maryam:** ...to everything, like I'm older than Google for God's sake, but these kids are born, and they can just install TikTok at like 10 years old or something and start scrolling, and I think that's why, that's why this topic is so important.

[00:12:06] **Juliette:** Yeah, because like the demographic we're talking about, they are what? I'm guessing they would be between, 12, maybe the youngest.

[00:12:13] **Maryam:** There's probably an age limit.

[00:12:15] **Juliette:** Yeah, but you can bypass that. Do you remember how you couldn't have a Facebook, like if you were younger than 13?

[00:12:21] **Maryam:** You would just lie.

[00:12:23] **Juliette:** Come on.

[00:12:23] **Maryam:** You would just lie about your birthday.

[00:12:33] **Juliette:** So in terms of mental health, where do you think the potentially dangerous or harmful content comes from because we've touched upon, you know, things that might be helpful in the sense like, you know, it makes you feel less alone, et cetera, but there is quite a big boom at the moment. And when I say at the moment, I mean the last few months, but there's like people commenting on that for like as far back as like two years ago already.

What is the potentially dangerous TikTok mental health content?

[00:13:04] **Maryam:** Okay. So, I feel like it definitely has been like such a hot topic over the last few years. I consume a lot of YouTube and I've seen so many, you know, video essays and commentaries about this topic, and it's very interesting to kind of see all the kind of "scandals" that have come out of TikTok and certain influencers, shall we say, like talking about their mental health problems or "faking"

mental health conditions for, you know, for popularity, for clout, which- which means like getting more followers, getting more likes, getting like a bigger audience, developing that audience and having a big following. And I think the damaging part would be when they are faking this, that is very damaging, you know, the use of mental health problems or conditions as a way of gaining an audience especially if the content they're putting out is incorrect or not factual, and where do we draw the line? Do you know what I mean?

I know there are doctors and things like that on- on TikTok, sharing very reliable information. But then there are people who are using that in a very kind of negative way. They're using it as a way to, yeah, just to be popular. And I think that's- that's where it goes wrong. You know, where they're making mental health, like trendy, like, oh, you know, now you said like the sparkly...

[00:14:24] **Juliette:** ...like the glitter emoji. I love it but...

[00:14:25] **Maryam:** I love those emojis. But then it's like, oh, '*I have ADHD*' '*if you have these symptoms...*', and they'll list out some like very common things that people can experience. So, I don't know, like not being able to focus for a long amount of time, or that's just one I pick up, pick out of my head, but they'll list very kind of vague... it's almost like a horoscope. It's almost like a horoscope for mental health. They'll be like, oh, you know, '*if you- you struggle to focus on your work if you- you struggle to keep up with your friends or see your friends or you cancel on them constantly*'.

Stuff like that, that people do all the time and doesn't necessarily mean they have a mental health issue and they'll be like, oh, '*that means you've*

got ADHD or you might have ADHD', and then you've got this whole generation thinking that, you know, starting to think, oh, maybe I can self-diagnose myself. Or like they take it as a diagnosis, like, oh, *'I tick all of those boxes, so maybe I do have ADHD'*. And then going around thinking they do. And I don't think that's beneficial for anyone. But I do agree with you in the sense that sometimes this raises awareness and I've actually learned a lot about certain disorders because of seeing TikToks or videos about it from people who are actually struggling with that.

[00:15:42] **Juliette:** So with the videos I watched, I did see what you were reporting, which is a lot of like *'Signs you may have, you know, depression, ADHD'*, and then sometimes you can see that it comes from, you know, a random teenager in their room. And the signs are very, very general. And I think of course, sometimes that can be helpful, but what I think we need to remember is that, you know, all these mental health disorders, mental health issues they are diagnosed according to a precise set of criteria, but also the most important thing for mental health issues for, you know, that might be a good reason you- you would search therapy for, is that it negatively affects your quality of life.

You know? 'Cause you- you could cancel on your friends like every other day, but then it actually doesn't affect your life and it's just because you're flaky and it's not related to anything else. So, I think people do need to ask the right question, and I think it could be, potentially misinformation or, you know, misleading for a younger audience that is not educated on that content or is still developing their critical thinking thoughts. Because, you know, we're a little bit older, as scientists we're also trained to question everything, to make sure we have the right source of information...

[00:17:08] **Maryam:** And a reliable source of information as well.

[00:17:11] **Juliette:** Yeah, exactly. Before, you know, just believing everything that we see, but, like, you know, what about when I was 12?

[00:17:17] **Maryam:** You used to take things that face value more often, and I think that's why this whole endless scroll and the algorithm pushing certain content is so draining. They- they designed these apps in a way, these social media platforms to keep users on there for as long as possible. And I don't think young people should be spending hours and hours and hours scrolling TikTok just consuming all of this specifically, you know, the- the mental health content that is misleading. Hours and hours of that content when they could be out socialising with their friends. And especially over the last couple of years with the pandemic, they've been locked in just looking at all of this stuff. So, there's definitely been a surge.

[00:17:58] **Juliette:** If you're exposed to that kind of content without having, you know, the ability to take a step back, that could be dangerous, 'cause what I'm assuming is that some of these kids, some of these teenagers, they don't always have an adult that can, they can actually rely on and...

[00:18:18] **Maryam:** ...speak to about these things.

[00:18:19] **Juliette:** You know, to speak to if they're like, ooh, you know. 'Cause like I remember when- when I was a teen, if I ever had like a worry if, you know, if I was like, '*Oh my God!*'. Like, it was never about mental health, but if I was like, '*Oh my God, that's it. Do I have*

cancer?' Type of thing. You know what I mean? Like, I- I have like wonderful parents.

Well, and, and you know, I have a really good relationship with my mom. It's like I could always just go like, '*Mom!*', and then she'd be like, '*Okay...*', you know, she'd be the adult. But not everybody has that, which I- I think that can potentially be quite harmful.

[00:18:55] **Maryam:** I feel like a lot of-a lot of parents now, and again, it's not their fault, but they're not monitor...

[00:19:01] **Juliette:** It's tough.

[00:19:01] **Maryam:** ...the usage and they don't quite, you know, understand the- the severity of some of the content children are consuming and- and it's not by choice. You know, the algorithm is pushing these videos and that's why I was saying it's so damaging like this- this algorithm of keeping them on the platform for as long as possible and just feeding them content that could be potentially incredibly damaging to their mental health.

It's an impressionable user base. You know, we've said it that 13 is the age limit, but there's all these kind of hashtags like weight loss progress, calorie deficit snacks, and like encouraging people who watch these videos to limit their calories. I- I feel like there is- there is room for- for kind of limiting this kind of content on the platform.

[00:19:43] **Juliette:** But to get back to, you know, like our initial question, right? So I think we've established that based on what content it is, it can be both positive in the sense that it might provide you, you know, like relatable content, you know, humorous relief or, I think

there's actually quite really supportive TikToks of being like, you know, *'If you have suicidal thoughts, like, watch this'*.

[00:20:06] **Maryam:** Like building a community...

[00:20:08] **Juliette:** Exactly.

[00:20:09] **Maryam:** ...and giving actual advice and guidance, so things like the 5-4-3-2-1 technique for anxiety, breathing techniques. I think those are definitely, you know, that's a positive side to it. 100%. These communities of people supporting each other.

[00:20:23] **Juliette:** Yeah, and then on the other side, you've got content that is potentially, you know, dangerous, that could be harmful, that could be completely misleading because it's not put in the right context, or also it's made by people who don't realise the reach that their content could have, and it's not necessarily content that should be put out there on the internet for, you know, people as young as 13-year-old to- to consume.

But do you think that this content has reached a point where we are actually romanticising and glamorising mental health issues? Because I feel like that's kind of really what's buzzing out there, if you look at videos on YouTube trying to, you know, comment on the situation, if you look at some media outlets, is it actually glamorising? And is this a new phenomenon really? Because if you look at the past few years, we've had a lot of mental health related content that could be triggering. I'm thinking about, you know, the huge boom that like *13 Reasons Why* was.

[00:21:23] **Maryam:** Oh, my goodness.

[00:21:25] **Juliette:** That was a thing, right?

[00:21:26] **Maryam:** That a whole thing.

[00:21:27] **Juliette:** I personally really forgot about it, but that was a whole thing. That was, I mean, that was- that was pre-pandemic, right? That's how I divide time.

[00:21:38] **Maryam:** Pre and post.

[00:21:40] **Juliette:** Pre, and then now.

[00:21:43] **Maryam:** I- I think you're right. I don't think it's anything new. I feel like it's just taken on a more insidious form, the fact that it's just on their phones and they can access it whenever and spend hours and hours on it, you know, rather than doing other things which could..., or being critical of it, like you said.

I saw this post on LinkedIn. I don't know who saw it. If you hear this podcast, let us know if it was you who wrote it, but they said something along the lines of, you know, '*Mental health...*', and this was during the pandemic because obviously a lot of people started talking about mental health. A lot of people started experiencing struggles and problems with their mental health because of the pandemic.

So, it became a huge topic and they said, '*Mental health isn't being destigmatised, it's being commercialised*'. And I feel like that can be taken in a number of ways, not just in the sense of using it to your advantage to make money or to profit off of people who are struggling with their mental health, but also to push this *narrative like, 'Oh, I have a mental health problem...'* and it's very interesting and rather than to

raise awareness, but more to be like, you know, '*Look at me, I'm special. I have X, Y, Z*', and that's why people are faking disorders, and it is sort of, I- I feel it is being glamorised.

[00:22:58] **Juliette:** Yeah, because, you know, I was just like looking at the definition of romanticising just to make sure, you know, we were look, being very scientific. First define the issue.

[00:23:10] **Juliette:** Define what we have and then look to it, right? But like the Google definition of romanticising is "deal with or describe in an idealised or unrealistic fashion". And you know, if you think about it that way, aren't with social media, romanticising absolutely everything?

[00:23:29] **Maryam:** Agreed.

[00:23:30] **Juliette:** Not just mental health, but like our entire lives. I do that with like the most mundane things just because the pandemic hit and you needed to start romanticising doing the dishes because boy, [Juliette laughs], you know, there is nothing else to do. I don't know if it's just being grateful or if it's idealising just being like, '*Look at me, you know, being the main character, taking my little authorised walk in the park*'.

You know that kind of stuff. And I think for those things it can actually be a bit healthy 'cause it's like, '*Hell yeah, I'm taking a walk in the park. Hell yeah, it's nice. Hell yeah, I'm breathing in...*', like, you know what I mean?

[00:24:16] **Juliette:** Are we romanticising mental health now to a point where it's noticeably more than say, 10 years ago?

[00:24:22] **Maryam:** I don't feel like mental health was talked about, you know, as much. The awareness is a lot higher, but then the misinformation is also a lot higher. And so, I think it's so important, especially as scientists, like we're always aware of making sure we're using reliable sources. And the reality of a lot of these mental health disorders, you know, it's- it's horrific to live with. And to be saying, '*Oh, it's so fun. Look at me. I'm depressed, I'm anxious. I'm anxious, ha-ha!*', like... oh, I don't know.

[00:24:52] **Juliette:** That's like a big mechanism though.

[00:24:55] **Maryam:** No, no, but I totally...

[00:24:56] **Juliette:** '*I'm having a panic attack*'.

[00:24:57] **Maryam:** I totally get that. Yeah, exactly.

[00:24:59] **Juliette:** It's Tuesday, like that's my coping mechanism.

[00:25:03] **Maryam:** But there- there is some, you know, it can have a negative impact on some people where if they actually are struggling with their mental health to treat it as a joke, because I was one of those people, I would joke about my mental health all the time, you know, I mentioned earlier. I realised that, over time obviously throughout my mental health journey that vocalising this stuff, it's not always helpful because when you vocalise certain things, your brain kind of internalises it, like, '*Yes, you are suicidal. You are feeling this way*'.

[00:25:34] **Juliette:** '*It's real*'.

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[00:25:34] **Maryam:** Yeah, *'it's very real'*. But if you instead turn it into positive..., so I used to follow a lot of meme pages about, you know, about feeling suicidal and about mental health and depression. There's this fantastic, well, I say fantastic, maybe not. But I- I- I'm in this group on Facebook called – yes, I use Facebook, don't judge me. I- I have- I have curated a perfect timeline, but it's still popping. Okay. My Facebook is popping, my Facebook timeline.

But I'm in a group called, 'Wow, I'm Cured', and they post tweets or- or content that they've seen online or things that their family or friends have said to them when they've expressed that they're struggling with their mental health.

[00:26:13] **Juliette:** Yeah, and they've been, like, not validated.

[00:26:14] **Maryam:** Things like... Yeah, *'Go for a walk'*. You know, *'Have a salad'*. Yeah. Literally *'Go outside. Have a bath'* and people will say, *'Use crystals'*, you know, like people that promote... [Maryam laughs].

[00:26:26] **Juliette:** Yeah, yeah. Don't worry. Yeah.

[00:26:27] **Maryam:** ...like, crystal therapy and they post it on there to poke fun at it and be like, you know, *'What the hell?'*

[00:26:34] **Juliette:** Yeah.

[00:26:34] **Maryam:** Why are people still reacting with all this cliché s*** when I'm expressing struggle with my mental health?

[00:26:39] **Juliette:** I think you've made a really important point here, which is that, you know, even if you're joking about it or like romanticising it just to like make content on social media, it should be with the awareness that mental health is not something to take lightly if you're struggling, that you know you can't joke your way out of everything, and that is important to know that there are resources, there is support available. You can talk to your GP. Get therapy, you know, like actually get some help, because at the end of the day, like that is what is going to make a difference.

And I think it can become a problem if your audience who's on, you know, the receiving end of the content does not realise that too.

[00:27:25] **Maryam:** What about people on TikTok promoting certain medication?

[00:27:29] **Juliette:** Oh, what?

[00:27:30] **Maryam:** Yeah, but they might not even be being paid. So, they might have found their own-their own form of medication or something that wasn't prescribed or- or like some sort of home remedy. Right? And promoting this.

[00:27:44] **Juliette:** Oh man.

[00:27:45] **Maryam:** Yeah, that needs its own episode. But that's a- that- that's a thing on TikTok as well, you know, young people who are trying to self-medicate.

[00:27:53] **Juliette:** No, but do not self-medicate. Always speak to a doctor.

[00:27:58] **Maryam:** Exactly. I know for a fact like a lot of people self-medicate. I know in America it's a lot more popular.

[00:28:04] **Juliette:** Yeah.

[00:28:05] **Maryam:** But it's still an issue and, yeah, I think it was worth mentioning that the promotion of medication is a thing as well on TikTok.

So, what are- what are scientists saying, Juliette? What have you found?

[00:28:24] **Juliette:** Okay, so we've seen how the media how, like, YouTubers, how, like, people have picked up on the phenomenon. But the science, I don't wanna say that it's like behind, but the problem is to start running a study, something has to be picked up on and then scientists have to get to it. So sometimes you don't see the results of scientists' work until maybe like a year and a half later, just because it takes time. Good science takes time. Science that you can replicate, science that has been validated, science that you can trust. That has got to be my motto: 'Good science takes time'. So, I found a few briefs from like conference presentations. It's all fairly fresh and new and not quite published yet.

[00:29:14] **Maryam:** It's a very new area, isn't it?

[00:29:15] **Juliette:** It is a very new thing to study. The papers that I've seen, they were essentially just trying to understand and characterise the content on TikTok properly. So just say how many videos are out there, what is actually the tone of most videos, what are they about in the context of mental health.

There was one paper that I found, which is essentially about how child and adolescent mental health services in the UK are represented on TikTok, and within the videos they collected in their sample to study, 40% of them were actually about raising awareness on mental health symptoms and how to manage that, which is, 40% is really good, right?

But the rest of the videos 27% were referencing self-harm. They don't precise if it's in a positive or in a negative way from like what I've read. And then they were saying, another 20% was a negative perception of child and adolescent mental health services. For me, the self-harm is really like what pops out.

[00:30:20] **Maryam:** Yeah.

[00:30:20] **Juliette:** So, I'd like to understand if it's, you know, kind of, you know, let's say videos of like '*What can you do when you want to self-harm?*'

[00:30:27] **Maryam:** That would be the positive side of it.

[00:30:30] **Juliette:** It was actually, I think at the end of the day, really sweet, 'cause it's like you can write your feelings on a sheet of paper and then tear it apart.

[00:30:36] **Maryam:** Things that might have worked for them, just suggestions.

[00:30:39] **Juliette:** Yeah. I think it's sweet. But then on the other hand, I guess you might have some more triggering content referencing self-harm.

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[00:30:46] **Maryam:** Kind of moving away from self-harm, but more a focus on depression and anxiety, which are obviously two of the most common mental health problems...

[00:30:54] **Juliette:** Yeah.

[00:30:54] **Maryam:** ...that people face. There was a study of around 3,000 Chinese students in their first and second year of high school, and they found that those who were considered more, I guess, addicted to TikTok, their study suggested that these students had a reduced working memory capacity, and there was also higher scores for depression, anxiety, and stress.

[00:31:15] **Juliette:** But what we need to remember, I'm gonna come in with what you've all learned in your research methods class.

[00:31:22] **Maryam:** Yep.

[00:31:23] **Juliette:** Correlation does not equal causation. What they have shown is that people who watch TikTok within that sample, do appear to have reduced working memory capacity, and there was increased depression and anxiety symptoms, but that does not mean that TikTok caused these things.

It might be that people who have higher symptoms of depression and anxiety are more likely to spend more time on TikTok, because we do know that if you have sometimes really high anxiety or if you have depression, one of the symptoms of depression is withdrawing from, you know, from your circle of friends...

[00:32:01] **Maryam:** ...from your friends, from your family...

[00:32:02] **Juliette:** Exactly, and it might be that, you know, in consequence of that you spend more time online. But it is very interesting that research is starting to...

[00:32:10] **Maryam:** ...to find these kinds of correlations, and I think, yeah, thank you so much for saying about the correlation-causation thing. 'Cause I think- I think that's something people miss a lot of the time. I feel like, you know how we were talking about how the media has perceived...

[00:32:23] **Juliette:** Yeah.

[00:32:23] **Maryam:** ...what is going on. And over the last, I don't know, 10, 15 years, social media has received a lot of slander in the media, you know, a lot of people feel that social media is like one of the main causes that young people aren't as sociable or aren't developing certain skills that we would've developed when we were younger because they are spending more time on social media.

However, there have been a lot of studies that have found that social media doesn't actually have the impact, that negative impact that we think it does.

[00:32:53] **Juliette:** Yeah.

[00:32:53] **Maryam:** So, I think it's very interesting that, you know, media outlets will latch onto these kinds of studies where it's a correlation and make it sound like a causation. Or these kind of clickbait news articles, I think can be very negative, and I think that's why it's important what we're saying about checking the sources and checking

the study itself and checking the article out and finding out exactly what they found.

[00:33:16] **Juliette:** Or just find, you know, scientists online or medical professionals online or reliable news sources that have, you know, like...

[00:33:25] **Maryam:** ...updates on what is being found, especially regarding social media.

[00:33:30] **Juliette:** Yeah, and like actual, like, science correspondence...

[00:33:33] **Maryam:** Yeah.

[00:33:33] **Juliette:** ...for example, who are journalists but trained to, you know, understand and get, like, reliable information, but make it accessible for everyone 'cause yeah, scientific articles...

[00:33:45] **Maryam:** ...they can be very difficult to- to- to read.

[00:33:48] **Juliette:** Oh boy. And if- if you're not trained to understand everything...

[00:33:52] **Maryam:** I mean, even as a scientist, I still have to do double takes and reread papers sometimes just to understand what was... what the methodology was or what they actually set out to do. Sometimes it's not clear. So, I think yeah, you're completely right in like seeking that information if they- they're not quite understood what- what is going on.

I think it's such a hot topic and TikTok is such a new platform. It's really taken the world by storm. I think that's why it's so important that we're talking about it and its links with mental health because there is such a huge mental health community on there.

[00:34:22] **Juliette:** Yeah.

[00:34:23] **Maryam:** And it is gonna take time for the research to actually start taking place and for us to see, you know, what is actually going on here. Like, you know, how is TikTok impacting young people and what are the long-term effects of that? We're not gonna see that for years to come. We're not really gonna understand how it might impact their brains how it might impact their mental health, their skill development, their interactions with others, their perception of the world.

[00:34:46] **Juliette:** Controlling for things. Yeah, 'cause I was gonna say, all this is happening with like a background of like two years of intense pandemic at periods of time that are very crucial for your brain. Like when you're a teenager, your brain is not a fully formed adult brain yet, some things are still developing, setting in place. Like it is very important, and it's not that it is going to affect you negatively necessarily for life, 'cause we know, you know, the brain is plastic, humans are adaptable. We have a lot of resilience abilities inside of us if we have the right support, the right environment. But whatever we see happening with TikTok I think we also need to have, you know, like the background in mind, but have we- have we answered our big questions?

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I think so. You know, is- is Gen Z romanticising mental health on TikTok? I think maybe not necessarily more than 10, 15 years ago. Yeah. It's just done in a different way. And as with everything, you know, TikTok is a tool, right?

[00:35:48] **Maryam:** And it comes with its own, you know, disadvantages, its own benefits. And that's something that needs to have more research done on it.

[00:35:56] **Juliette:** Exactly.

[00:35:56] **Maryam:** As always.

[00:35:58] **Juliette:** Classic science phrase here. We have brought out all the science bangers for you. I will say. Today was a big day.

Correlation does not equal causation.

[00:36:08] **Maryam:** Science takes time.

[00:36:10] **Juliette:** It needs more research. Yep.

Maryam was amazing to talk to you today. I had a lot of fun.

[00:36:17] **Maryam:** Absolute pleasure.

[00:36:17] **Juliette:** It was so fun. Thank you everyone for listening, and we'll see you very soon with another episode.

[00:36:23] **Maryam:** Thanks so much.

[00:36:23] **Juliette:** Bye.

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[00:36:26] **Maryam:** Buh-bye.

[00:36:30] **Melisa:** Hey everyone, it's Melisa. This episode of *At the Back of Your Mind* was recorded on the 9th of June 2022, featuring our hosts, Juliette and Maryam.

Be sure to check us out on Instagram @ATBOYMPodcast and visit inspirethemind.org/ [atthebackofyourmind](https://atthebackofyourmind.com/) for more episodes, transcripts, social media, and contact information. A big thank you to our editors, Melisa Kose, Subeyda Ahmed, and Amina Begum, and our research team, Celeste Miller and Nare Amasi-Hartoonian. Last but not least, thank you to *Inspire the Mind* and our editor-in-chief Professor Carmine Pariente in helping us bring this podcast to the air.

Thanks so much for listening, and we'll see you next time.