Psychology Student Works to Redefine Stigma Surrounding Mental Health
by Lucy Constantino

When someone hears the word “psychology,” they may think of ink blot tests, detailed diagrams of the human brain or even heads hooked up to wires and machines. But for senior Amanda Pennington, the word “psychology” held endless possibilities for her undergraduate academic career at DU.

“I took Foundations of Psychology with Dr. Aimee Reichmann-Decker during my first winter quarter and instantly fell in love with the field,” said Pennington, a Colorado native. “I also have a particularly strong interest in mental health both as a student and student leader.”

Pennington has worked in two psychology labs on campus. During her first year, she researched the “fear of eternity” in the Emotion and Coping lab. Currently she is researching the “stigma of negative emotion” for her senior thesis in the Automaticity, Affect, Control and Thought (AACT) lab.

“Through these projects, I’ve learned that I love research, particularly statistics,” she said. “I have decided to move into the field of public behavioral health with an emphasis on program creation and efficacy.”

Channeling her passion for public behavioral health reform with her desire to provide outreach and education surrounding mental wellbeing, Pennington co-founded the student organization DU MIND in 2012. DU MIND has a mission to reduce the stigma around mental health through education, conversation and action.

“Those three pieces are our key pillars to success,” said Pennington. “We strive to educate the campus on resources and general mental health information, start conversations about help-seeking and the issues that our campus faces, and launch individuals and groups into collective action around stigma reduction, suicide prevention and help-seeking behavior on campus and in the greater DU community.”

Since its founding, DU MIND has hosted multiple roundtable discussions, mental health movie nights, and other mental wellbeing events, including Mental Health Day in 2014 and Mental Health Week in 2015 and 2016.

“Last year, we partnered with 15 organizations to put on a variety of events. This year, we are expanding our number of collaborators, aiming for about 30 separate partners,” Pennington said. “We have a blast during Mental Health Week, and it serves an important purpose by bringing students together, providing resources they may otherwise not have known about, and letting them know that it’s okay and safe to seek help and just be who they are.”

DU MIND has created two films designed to help put a face to mental illnesses and remind people that mental wellbeing is a serious public health issue.
“The first film, *Unsilenced*, is a documentary about seven DU faculty and students who share their personal stories about mental health,” she said. “I am very proud that a shorter, 5-minute version is now used in the Life Outside the Classroom portion of Discoveries Orientation, which is viewed by every entering first-year student,” she said.

“A second, more promotional piece is titled *Stop the Stigma* and features members from thirteen organizations, including DU MIND, sharing what mental health condition they’ve experienced, either themselves or through friends and family.”

Talking about mental health can be seen as an embarrassing, tricky subject that is often swept under the rug during the hustle and bustle of everyone’s daily activities. What’s Pennington’s advice for starting the conversation?

“The easiest way to start is to take it easier on yourself and start putting yourself first,” she said. “You have to do something for you, on your own time, on your own terms. It doesn’t have to be a big step, and it doesn’t have to be made up of anything beyond what you do in daily life, but it does have to be a conscious effort and a priority in all of our lives as stressed out, successful, ever-dedicated college students.”

Post-graduation, Pennington plans to pursue a Masters or Doctorate of Public Health, and one day hopes to work as a best practices director of public behavioral health at a Colorado academic institution.