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Listening to Our Bodies: Adapting Member Checks in Community Workspaces

Ellen A. Ahlness
Veterans Health Administration

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Introduction

How does one prioritize which project in a to-do list warrants being done *first*? Is it the project that has been looming overhead the longest? Is it the project that is grant funded, or the article that might make a great addition for an advancement or tenure portfolio? Perhaps it is the thesis section that needs *a little bit more* polishing?

Each individual project on a researcher's to-do list may itself contain another bullet list of sub-tasks demanding attention. But how do our priorities change when we rethink how we structure our to-do lists in the first place? What happens when we let something *other* than project details shape how we spend our most valuable resources of all: our time and energy?

That is to ask: is there another way to structure our to-do lists? Is there a process rooted in intuition, that considers what we holistically *need*, rather than what we feel obligated to grant our attention? These questions emerged over the course of a series of early career researcher workspace meetings in which author participated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Answering the questions ended up being the realization of a trajectory that we found ourselves unknowingly already travelling.

Drawing from the experiences of *Intentional Workspace*, an accountability group the author was a member of that met from August 2020 to June 2021, this paper charts the group's evolution and creation of a more holistically rooted process of identifying work priorities. It is well acknowledged that community check-ins with a consistent team are valuable and helpful to mental health. This narrative reflection attempts to build on the notion of community check-ins to illustrate and describe how our Intentional Workspace group members were able to use our own health evaluations as tools and guides to guide which projects we worked on. Through this process, we used the notion of 'self'—a holistically emotional, mental, and physical 'thing' as a gauge to determine what project fulfillment most met our needs.

In other words, we used the Intentional Workspace meetings to try out an experiment: we gave up unilateral control over what specific tasks we would work on (while maintaining a broad focus on core or truly time-sensitive projects), and allowed others in our group help interpret our self-checks, using our own health and body needs to guide what we worked on for those two hours every week. In the end, after over nine months of weekly meetings, we witnessed how the purpose of the group shifted, even as its structure, time, frequency, and number of participants remained steady.

This paper starts with an introduction of the Intentional Workspace's founding, drawing upon inner-group communications in a micro-archival analysis to develop a chronological narrative of the group's founding and critical conversations (Riessman 1993). During the course of the Intentional Workspace's founding, meetings, and reflections, the group accumulated a body of reference materials through lived day-to-day activities and communications: emails and virtual meeting chats. Comprehensively, these communications act as a miniature archive of the group's mission, goals, and operations, providing the added benefit of frequently capturing the real-time emotional and mental processes and reflections of members as they experienced them. Throughout the process of creating and operating the Intentional Workspace, group members unintentionally developed the kind of team log that is valued in qualitative research as its own body of data akin to field notes (Hernández-Hernández 2015) and in reflexivity work as the basis for examining this assumptions, achievements, struggles, questions, and connections that drive individuals and teams (Bondi 2009). The author reviewed miniature

archive texts in a deductive and inductive content analysis (Vaismoradi, Turunen, and Bondas 2013), paying particular attention to trends in common lived problems, experiences, and successes, and the associated strategies adopted to address these areas.

It then transitions into an exploration of the pivoting points that led the group to try something new in how we used our time and energy, drawing from group members' reflections on meaningful conversations and group structure decisions through a phenomenological approach (Symeonidis and Schwarz 2015). Through this meaning-based focal point, the phenomenological reflection pays particular attention to initial group member excitements, reservations, and responses to this new structure.

Next, the paper considers some of the key moments and responses that came from this experiment, including the author's own progressive reflections on the structure over time. These items were selected after reviewing the author's own reflective statements, written over the span of the group work, and reviewing earlier group member communications, lending from the processes of researcher decision audit trails (Sanders 2003). Following, the paper provides reflections from all Intentional Workspace members on the group structure from the months following the group's disbanding. The paper concludes with a summarization of the most notable things members got out of this health-guided prioritization experiment and a reflection of ways members have continued or adapted its lessons now, over a year later from when we initially began, and over four months after our group disbanded.

This reflection was developed by one of the Intentional Workspace team members. Prior to this reflection's development, team members agreed that any members interested in developing recommendations, manuscripts, guides, or presentations on the group were invited to do so; members who wished to be referred to with a pseudonym shared this desire at this time. As the initial concept for this reflection came together, the author reached out the other colleagues to see whether there was interest in collaboration; colleagues believed it was important for the reflection to take place, yet declined to participate due to alternative work projects, alternative life priorities, some shifting work trajectories away from reflexivity products, and general feelings that they would be unable to contribute to the degree of co-authorship given their competing priorities. In developing this paper, the author utilized iterative reflection, allowing repeated encounters with the theory, material, and reflections borne of increased space from the workspace to impart new insights and considerations of the group's successes and challenges from structured experimenting. The project has increased in value and importance for the author over time; since the initial workspace, the author's work and professional position has shifted to place greater emphasis on methodological and reflexivity processes in the research journey, particularly for health services research.

The Founding of Intentional Workspace

What we came to call the Intentional Workspace meetings initially began as a plan to carve out a two-hour chunk of time for four early career academics and researchers to work dedicatedly on slices of larger projects while working remotely during the 2020-2021 academic year. All of the members lived in Pacific Northwest states (Montana, Oregon, and Washington). Five of the members identified as women, one as a man. Two members were scholars and researchers of color. Three of the four founding members shared their home spaces with family members, necessitating a concrete, weekly period of time where they could reliably work on projects without fear of interruption. For all four members, the promise of accountability for

those two hours a week was appealing. The four members planned to have the first online meeting (held via Zoom, their institution's supported video communications software) in August 2020, but before the first meeting, two members shared that they had told colleagues about the virtual workspace and had received requests to join the workspace. One member shared that their colleague had expressed keen interest in "an intentional workspace that's actually planned rather than reliant on my own bursts of inspiration, cause God knows how rare that is." This exclamation resonated with the members, and led to the first-colloquial, then eventually formal name of the virtual gathering: the Intentional Workspace.

Two weeks before the first meeting, the zoom invite was sent out via email to six members. The group consisted of early career scholars, public health researchers, and Masters and Doctoral students. We frequently invited individuals to join the workshop cluster, but invitees often already had regular groups or scheduling conflicts. Invitees who did show typically attended for one or two sporadic meetings.

The first meeting set the tone, community norms, and envisioned goals of the workspace. The group unanimously agreed that the purpose of the workspace was to help all members get more work done in a structured environment, and that we would keep each other accountable to the goals that each individual set for the week's two-hour slot. We agreed to structure the two hours according to a modified Pomodoro Technique: fifteen minutes of work followed by a five-minute break. After four cycles, we would gather for a twenty-minute joint group-discussion-and-stretch-break.

This initial structure fulfilled our immediate, concrete individual needs for accountability and distinct, earmarked time for work. As the first few weeks passed by successfully, group discussion quickly revealed individuals' other needs. Members began to share that they had hoped—and anticipated—that the Intentional Workspace would also function as a space where they could express vulnerabilities related to COVID, the stresses of research and academia, and balancing remote work with other life responsibilities. Moreover, there was a high degree of hope that the virtual gatherings would be a space to sympathize with other academics and researchers about some of the niche frustrations that were experienced in the field. As one member phrased:

I needed a space where I could talk about frustrations. Not necessarily truly terrible or world-shattering things, not the truly project-ending developments, but also the things that are problem-creators. Those things that become wrenches in the gears that can put an article on pause, or a project on the back burner. Those can happen in everyday life, in our lives before the pandemic, but they seem far more common—far too common—now with COVID looming over us. And you know what they say about straw and the camel's back; something doesn't have to be earth-shattering anymore to make you feel like you've just reached the last straw.

While functioning as an emotional support space had not explicitly been part of the group's initial mission, all members agreed that this function fulfilled the spirit of the group's original goal: to support the completion of quality work. Constructive accountability relies upon spaces that are emotionally, academically, and mentally accommodative. Another member likened the need to talk about COVID, health, and pandemic-related concerns to prior everyday conversation about personal life developments: both encompassed events serious enough to throw a graduation or tenure-track trajectory into question.

Emotional Needs and Necessary Work

One way people try to facilitate work is to create work groups or other forums for accountability (Stracke and Kumar 2014). Often these groups focus on specific, SMART goals (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely; Doran 1981) and explicitly try to create spaces ‘separate’ from life in order to do work in a ‘sterile’, mentally and emotionally (and when possible, physically) separate space.

However, this kind of segregation is counter to the holistic idea of self. We can see this in the ways that emotion, mind, and body are all interconnected (Fletcher et al. 2018). Disturbances, success, or shifts in one sphere of life affect what we do, and how we do it, across the other spheres—emotions and thoughts cannot be separated from the physical (the somatic) effects. In other words, trauma, stress, and other ‘mental’ illnesses inherently have physical components. Liberman (2019), for example, explains how procrastination is a misalignment of ‘knowing’ what needs to be done and negative emotion that keeps you from doing it. *Why You Procrastinate* emphasizes the self-awareness of procrastination; within it, they note that the task is being used to procrastinate may still have value—the problem emerges when the self experiences dissonance between the performance of the task and the mental awareness that *now* is not the time for doing that particular task. The mind may wish to complete a task, but emotion complicates the process, or the body responds to a trigger with an undesired series of sensations or responses. This can most concretely be seen (albeit in a heightened form) by trauma survivors’ emotional and somatic responses to triggers. Survivors may struggle to describe or “author” their narrative or experiences, as doing so can trigger emotional and somatic sensations; the mental self-awareness that one is not living the trauma does not overcome the interconnected self. Even when an individual encounters new information—or in the case of completing work, undertakes a new work strategy—they may unconsciously react to, and integrate, the content or structure onto their pre-existing cognitive, emotional, or somatic levels (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 1991). Allowing for an emotion regulation outlet, such as a discussion group or feedback outlet, can help refix and refocus an individual on the task they ‘should’ be working on (Lieberman 2019) in a space where external voices are regularly and positively countering negative self-narratives. Even if one ends up not have the emotion that initially prompted procrastination in check, they still have others reminding them what they ought to be working on. Serving this function, feedback or work groups are meant to get rid of the ‘self-blame narrative’ that underlies procrastination.

While segregating the self has often been a common strategy, there is a shift and trend for people to more fully embrace or explore what it means to have holistic support in recognition of the somatic understanding of emotion/ethic and holism. We see this in emotional social support (Farrell, Harding, and bouquet 2021; Stracke and Kumar 2014), intersectionality and identity-based support (Bayfield, Colebrooke, and Pitt 2020). We also see how this is enhanced by people who are in similar stages of life, and therefore are providing sounding boards, but not counselling or unduly high proportion or burden for well-being of others while also being in positions to learn from each other (Michaelsen 1992)

We also find that these opportunities to learn from the direction and suggestion of others helps us flex our ‘deep work’ muscle in measured, manageable doses (Newport 2016). Deep work doesn’t just come from putting forth work ethos at expense of feelings, desires, and compulsions, a state of deep work comes when there is meaning—and what is of greater

meaning than having work and self aligned? Oftentimes emotions and life developments are framed as distractions—the kinds of focus-killers that are detriments to accomplishing to the deep work championed by Newport. However, by intentionally focusing on the pull and power of emotion and situations that affect attention—no matter what sphere of life from which they emerge—participants in the Intentional Workspace group found that the dedicated windows of following others’ suggestions on task prioritizing gave them time to flex the deep work ‘muscles’ that allowed them to better focus, even outside of group accountability spaces.

Tensions Between Health Discussions and Mental Health

Despite the group’s unanimous agreement that conversations about health, pandemic developments, and personal stressors were valuable, several members expressed concerns over their own abilities to be sounding boards for others’ stressors. Out of concern for their own mental and emotional wellness, they were wary over the possibility that the workgroup could devolve into a “vent session,” or that in-depth sharing about the mental health challenges could trigger anxiety or depression in others.

After a productive group discussion, we decided to have the meeting host begin the video call ten minutes before the scheduled workspace start time. That way, members who wanted to talk about COVID or COVID-related challenges could do so, while others who did not (or were overwhelmed or experiencing burnout) were not subjected or obligated to participate.

This structure was implemented and conducted regularly for three weeks. Then, on the fourth week, something happened that ended up changing the entire trajectory of our group.

It started with a comment after one study group member shared how they felt. “I’m exhausted and tired of feeling like I’m sludging around and not getting anything done. Working from home, I’ll spend hours on the computer and never feel like I’m actually finishing anything or making progress. It’s hard to feel like you’ve tangibly or materially accomplished anything when you don’t actually move outside of a three-foot radius all day. It makes me feel sluggish and *off*, you know?”

Other group members nodded and hummed their agreements. Then a more senior early career researcher spoke up.

“What’s your article looking like right now?”

The original speaker tilted her head, asked for clarification. The member who had spoken up was happy to provide it.

“Your article, last time you shared a screenshot of it, it was all in Calibri font and single spaced. Do you have it all formatted for submission? Do you have the bibliography cleaned up?”

The member responded that no, she had not done either yet.

“Maybe that should be your goal for today. Print off what you have so far, or save it as a different file, do all the work to format the paper, then at the end you can print it off too, or pull it up in a different window so you can compare them side by side. I know you typically do all your formatting at the end, but try doing it today. Then you can end the workspace feeling like you’ve made more visible, tangible progress.”

The initial speaker responded that she would give that a try. The group worked for the next two hours as usual, but this time, when the group reached the end of the meeting and gave individual recaps of what they had finished, the researcher had a smile on her face.

“It worked,” she said, looking brighter than she had at the beginning of the workspace meeting. “I ended up formatting the entire thing, and it really made the whole thing look more polished. That was exactly what I needed—to see that things were moving forward. And it doesn’t just look better, formatting it really let me see how much I’ve already done. I still have the things on my to-do list that I need to incorporate before it’s ready for submission, but it’s nice to have a reminder that I’m further along than I thought.”

Hums and nods of agreement indicated people sympathized with her predicament. That might have been the end of it, if not for an email exchange between two founding members of the workspace that night.

Pivotal Points: Trying Something New

“Hi, I was thinking about our meeting today. I have an idea. Don’t call it hippie.”

That’s how the email started that changed the whole trajectory of our workgroup. Margaret sent it hours after our groupwork ended for that day. The email went on to discuss her idea:

Trish’s comment earlier today got me thinking. I appreciate our group so much—when Trish was expressing frustrations, everyone jumped right in with support and suggestions—I think they all showed how inspiring they are, and how dedicated we are as a group to the success and support of each other. I think we could really harness this moving forward if everyone else wanted to. I’m envisioning a structure where we use how we’re feeling to guide us during the group. There’s some details to be ironed out, but we can do something where we take it easier if it’s apparent people are struggling or having a rough day, or power through if we’re high energy that day. Like that premise, but a little more in-depth. Like how we use researcher checks with each other to get feedback on our methods and appropriate engagement with critical theory, but checks focused on our mental health and overall bandwidth. Creating a safe space for members to be able to focus on the lighter parts of their projects if they’re really having a tough day, rather than perpetuating the constant work and guilt mentality of research.

The last line was a central driver behind the idea of member checks: early career researchers and academics alike expressed concern over the all-encompassing nature of research. Each member could recall numerous times where they felt compelled to spend time on a project while they were feeling unwell physically or mentally out of a sense of guilt or pressure in line with the old mentality of “publish or perish.” At the subsequent meeting, Margaret floated her idea of incorporating some form of check-ins to our meetings. The group was open to this premise, and discussed further what this could mean.

After in-depth, enthusiastic group conversation, we decided on a format and intent for our solution: the introduction of *health checks*. The terminology was adopted from the colloquial phrase *member checks*, which is a technique used in qualitative research to explore the credibility of data and analysis results. Data or analysis findings are presented to initial participants to check them for accuracy with their actual lived experiences. The process is often used to support the validity of a project’s findings or trajectory (Birt et al. 2016). The integration of health checks was designed to address what members saw as a significant emotional and mental barrier to conducting quality work they were proud of: the lack of a space to express and overcome barriers to work of *any* nature (e.g., physical, emotional, mental) that emerged from *any* sphere of life, given the perpetuation of research’s production mentality. Members

felt that it was one thing (albeit a *positive* thing) to give verbal support to a colleague who was struggling; it was another, potentially more substantial thing to *validate* their struggle and acknowledge that it could result in (or even necessitate) real adaptations to their work. Health checks as an experiment strove to transition from ‘lip service’ to one potential way by which a group could practically support one another without placing too great emotional, physical, or mental burden on one another in an already trying time.

Before the beginning of the workspace (but after the pre-meeting COVID open discussion), members would typically share what project they planned to work on over the following two hours. Moving forward, we decided to restructure these initial few minutes. Members would say their hellos, then share how they were feeling. If members were feeling stuck or were unsure how to describe their current state of being, they were encouraged to think about the following prompts:

- 1) *How does my energy level feel? Do I feel like I have the capacity and desire to jump into a new task, or do I feel like I am in maintenance mode?*
- 2) *Does my body seem to be directing me toward any particular activity?*
- 3) *How do I emotionally feel when I think about a given project? How do I physically feel about the prospect of transitioning into that project.*
- 4) *If all of my deadlines were pushed back a week, what project would I be most excited to work on?*
- 5) *Would I feel physically drained if I worked for two hours on a task and finished feeling like there was little tangible or visible progress?*

The first three prompts were initially developed by one team member (Ellen) outside of group meetings, shared with the group prior to a regular meeting to allow for individual review and reflection, and the phrasing agreed upon during the next group meeting. The fourth and fifth prompts were developed at the same meeting through group collaboration. After reviewing the first three prompts, several members suggested the value of having a prompt that specifically addressed prioritization more broadly from an emotional perspective. After some discussion, the above phrasing was decided upon, given its positive connotations (use of the word “excited”) and more plausible hypothetical deadline extension window. The group member who had previously gotten feedback based on their comments about not feeling accomplished when they “didn’t actually move outside of a three-foot radius all day” prompted the addition of the fifth question based on their personal experience and the individual value they placed upon materially visible or tangible progress. The phrasing was workshopped into the final form above. The prompting questions were distributed to group members, and remained consistent through the meetings as initial guiding questions, though group members were not bound to the prompts in their reflections or sharing.

Subsequently, instead of members declaring what project they were going to work on, they would list several projects or tasks that they needed to accomplish. Other members could then suggest what task, from among those lists, could best respond to the individual’s emotional and physical messages? In formulating these responses, group members were encouraged to consider and frame their responses as if helping the original speaker answer one or more of several questions:

- 1) *What project mirrors the completion or tasks an activity that your body is directing you toward?*

- 2) *How do you plan to structure the remainder of your day? Do your daily activities hinge on how you feel after this workspace?*
- 3) *How important is it to you to complete this workspace with measurable visible or tangible progress?*
- 4) *Do you feel your emotional health and physical health are currently in line? How might a particular activity bring these two measurements closer in alignment?*

Consequently the initial ten minutes of a meeting followed a general series of events: begin with the first member's self-health report, limiting self-reflection over mental and physical state to two minutes, including a brief overview of items on their to-do list (starting on a rotating basis); have the group respond with suggestions on how to-do item tasks may line up with the expressed physical and emotional needs (limiting total contributions to two minutes); then rotating until every member had a chance to share and receive feedback.

Weekly meeting ended with a member-by-member evaluation of how they felt the health-driven check-ins and member recommendations had gone. Finally, each member would rate their at-the-moment satisfaction level on a scale of one to ten. Their rating was based on how they physically and mentally felt upon completion of the two hours; the concrete amount of work that they completed came secondary.

By the time these revisions to the Intentional Workspace's meeting were fully implemented, only two months had passed. The remaining seven months were dedicated to the full and consistent implementation of the health checks into the group structure. Individual members had regular ups and downs in their lives, and most members went through the typical, quarterly or semesterly cycles of business. Members requested that individual details of their 'boom and bust' periods, as well as family-specific challenges, remain unattached to this article. Instead of this kind of chronicling, members suggested the greatest contribution would be to share overarching reflections and recommendations on the concept of integrating health checks into community accountability workspaces. In the spirit of researcher and community-member responsibility, this paper concludes with these provided post-workshop reflections.

In Hindsight: Personal Reflections on Health Checks

The following member reflections are drawn from two time periods: the first a community debriefing on the last meeting of the Intentional Workspace group, and the second from phone conversations four months after the last Workspace meeting. Each member's reflections are consequently divided into two sections to reflect the immediate- and hindsight-reflections on the group's structure and mission. During the last group meeting, members shared what they believed the best meeting had been for them, as well as what the best 'match' between their physical/mental state and recommended task had been over the previous seven months. Members then had the option to expand on the latter point, explaining what made that match the 'best' for them (further emphasizing the group's mission that 'fit' and 'accomplishment' was centered only on productivity). All member reflections have been edited for length and clarity, and members have been given pseudonyms when requested. Members affirmed post-transcription that the edits maintain their meanings, tone, and intent.

Luke

Luke, a public health researcher, was initially invited to the group via Margaret.
 June 2021: *I'm not gonna lie, the whole idea of body checks made me think of yoga and crunchy stuff, a little 'woo-y,' but I'm really glad we did it. There were some days,*

especially in the middle of the year, where I felt so overwhelmed that I started cutting back on meetings and activities. I had a department workspace that I even stopped going to. There were times I was tempted to cut back and not attend this group, but the thing that always stopped me was knowing that I wouldn't be judged if I didn't get a lot accomplished. If I was having a particularly off day, I would know that others would help make up for my low mental bandwidth and point out ways that I could still make progress that I couldn't see at the time.

October 2021: I've found myself applying health checks when working with students and my mentee. I think it's made me a more effective mentor and instructor. I've had my mentee say that they get a whole different vibe of working with me than others. That otherwise there's so often the guilt of not getting as much done as they could, but that they feel that I understand that sometimes they experience burnout. I couldn't believe that felt revolutionary to them—taking care of yourself really shouldn't be—but then I realized how revolutionary it felt to me back during the group meetings, to be able to attend without shame over feeling like I wouldn't be getting much done.

Ji-won

Ji-won is a doctoral student focusing on the medical humanities.

June 2021: I've done a lot of researcher checks before, lots over the past few years, because of my work in medical studies and patient studies. I'm familiar with them, I apply them, I get great feedback through them. The idea of a health check interested me, because it took something that is otherwise sometimes so guarded and personal—our health—and makes us aware that it's a lot like our research—something that we treat so guarded and personal that we sometimes run the risk of forgetting we're in a community. But we can't forget that we are social creatures. Research flounders when it's in isolation. People do even worse, we're not meant to be isolated. But sharing with other people is only the first part of it. We had to open ourselves up to be vulnerable and let other people suggest how we spend our time. That's the most valuable resource isn't it? Thankfully I feel like it worked out.

October 2021: I applied the health checks to another group for the 2021-2022 academic year. What makes this group different was that it is much more of an interdisciplinary group. We have STEM, humanities, and social sciences all together. I think it made people a little bit more curious about the idea of health checks, because many have not had researcher checks before, especially if they don't do qualitative research. The idea is pretty foreign to more quantitative researchers to tend to consider themselves objective and separate from the work they do. That also led to some hiccups in getting people to really be honest about how they're feeling, and not feeling like they have to 'power through' or put on a happy face. But we've largely gotten over those humps. I think everyone feels more comfortable sharing when they aren't bringing their A-game. Actually, I think people feel more comfortable being human in front of other people.

Margaret

Margaret is a Masters student with a spouse and three children.

June 2021: I'm so proud of all we've accomplished. I think about how everyone here took a risk and am so happy that it all worked so well. I've never had a workspace that works so well, and I really feel like I ended up getting to know everyone on a level that we

otherwise would not have reached. I personally experienced a lot of vulnerabilities here that pushed me, but pushed me in good ways. I don't want to assume I can understand where everyone else is coming from or their experiences, but I do think that there were times that I saw 'lightbulb moments' in other people. Those were the moments where things clicked. They might be realizations of how human we all are. These might be realizations that it's appropriate and good to have boundaries and give yourself grace. There was more than one realization that the humanities and critical body pedagogies have a lot to teach us. These are all realizations that have value.

October 2021: It's critical that we think about ourselves as holistic participants in the world. Just as we're not isolated from other researchers or isolated from the impacts and developments of our fields, our minds cannot be isolated from our emotions or bodies. The mental, emotional, and physical are intertwined, and any work schedule that attempts to disregard or deny that is woefully insufficient for sustaining effective long-term achievements. I know not everyone has a supportive community where they can talk about their health and physical wellbeing, much less having that community overlap with work colleagues, so I realize how privileged we are. And most of us have had good health, another privilege. A lot of privilege born of our jobs and fields of work.

Trish

Trish is an early career researcher. She has a chronic condition that puts her at an increased risk for COVID.

June 2021: I started off maybe a bit critical because my experiences in the past made me worry that others wouldn't understand the stress that having a chronic medical condition can place on a person. Everything becomes harder when you're having chronic issues: family, work, home activities, passion projects. But turning a regular part of our conversation to health normalized it. I didn't feel like 'that one person' talking about health and exhaustion. I felt like one person among many who was aware of health and how important it is—how central it is—to everything we do.

October 2021: I've been very fortunate not to have COVID enter my household, but that doesn't mean that the last few months haven't been hard. The transition back to autumn is hard. Going from more outdoors activities and safe gatherings to the indoors—which for me, means much more isolation because no degree of indoor unmasked exposure is safe for me—is hard. That makes virtual workspaces matter that much more. I have a couple going on depending on my unit, department, and past colleagues, but none of them have been willing yet to do this idea of health checks. And I won't lie, I'm wary of bringing them up because I don't want to be the immunocompromised individual who's always on about health. But I've been putting out invitations for another workspace of people I know would be more open to this idea so we can talk about it right away at the first meeting and in pre-meeting planning.

Fatima

Fatima is an early career scholar with a family. During the pandemic, she has lived in a different state than the other workspace members.

June 2021: I think this group is one of the major ways I kept from feeling isolated this past year. That might be one of the positives of remote work. Even though I miss seeing everyone in person it feels like everyone is making such an effort to connect and stay in

conversation with one another. This is the only regular virtual workspace that I've done through this year. There were some meetings that only happened once or twice but I wouldn't count those as significantly impacting. Because I have not been in other work spaces virtually before this whole structure felt very new to me. I would not have known that we were trying something new if we had not talked about it so much before. It felt very natural and I plan to continue it.

October 2021: Shortly after our group stopped at the end of the academic year I caught COVID. I was very fortunate that it was not a bad case, but I did have far less energy than normal for two weeks. I found myself wishing that I could talk with our group during our normal meetings because over those two weeks I felt the guilt of not working and pushing through. The sickest I'd been in years, and that was how I was feeling. I had to do a lot of self-talk to remind myself to listen to my body. But instead of my body telling me to do one project over another, it told me to rest. One day I cleaned up my workspace because I knew my body and knew that once I was feeling healthy I would want to jump right into work and have a clean workstation ready to go.

Ellen

Ellen is an early career researcher who completed her dissertation during the workspace's run.

June 2021: The idea of health checks wasn't unfamiliar to me, but the whole idea of having others use that information as third parties to recommend strategies for getting your work done was a fun experiment. There were times that everyone pointed out how I could break down a large task, or reorganize my tasks, so I could leverage my energy at the beginning more effectively. Sometimes the opposite was true, and others pointed out that it seemed like I needed to get a little bit of trajectory built up on easy work so I'd feel empowered to tackle a more complex task with moving parts. I tend to structure things purely according to deadline, so this strategy offered insights into alternative structures that ended up being effective as well.

October 2021: Thinking about how I'll apply this to the future does make me think about the continued importance of consent and privacy. This group worked well for health checks, I think, because we were talking about general states of being. Anyone who wanted to talk about particular health conditions or events did so voluntarily, which mitigated the chance of private information being pressured out. I think for any of us who plan to keep integrating this check, we'd want to make sure that we're not talking about conditions or private information. We're talking about a broader sense of wellness, more of that day-to-day scale of operation. As long as that's something that's clarified in a formal or informal way, made a norm of conduct, it's a good practice to continue to incorporate.

Conclusion

While there are some variations in how the Intentional Workspace members plan to adapt health checks to future individual and group work, it is a positive sign that all found the practice helpful and plan to continue it as they move forward in their careers.

Incorporating health checks fit the needs of the Intentional Workspace members well, particularly as our needs for the 2020-2021 academic were so heavily shaped by the broader cultural, social, economic, and health trends connected to the pandemic. One member

pondered, prior to the final meeting, whether we would have incorporated health checks if work had not shifted to a fully-online model in light of COVID; most members hypothesized the group would not have experimented with the holistic checking without the pandemic as a prompt.

Ultimately, the integration of the experimental health check conversations allowed the personal to blend with professional in line with a principle common to qualitative research: the researcher is never fully separate from their research. Similarly, the medical practitioner is never fully separate from that which they practice. All the members of the group practiced or leveraged research designs that placed them as active agents interacting with patients, community members, and research participants. All were familiar with the practice of research checks—getting feedback from colleagues and peers on the appropriateness of researcher behavior and design choices—and thus anticipated an intuitive link to the idea of health checks. Just as researchers are active agents in research, our bodies are undeniable components of the researcher, capable of compelling or limiting us.

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