

INSTITUTION Science Museum of Minnesota

LOCATION St. Paul, Minnesota

Making it Okay to Talk About Mental Health

On a recent trip to St. Paul, I stopped in to the Science Museum of Minnesota and was intrigued by an exhibition with a topic I rarely see in science museums: mental health. *Mental Health: Mind Matters* is a 5,000-square-foot traveling exhibition that aims to reduce stigma against people with mental illness. It was originally created by Heureka, the Finnish Science Centre and adapted for North American audiences by the Science Museum of Minnesota.



fig. 2. The hand-drawn interior illustrations bridge the contemporary look of the slab facets with the antique look of the dark wooden furniture.

The exhibition is beautifully designed. Slabs of laminated veneer lumber set at angles create faceted spaces for each exhibit element (**fig. 1**). Antique wooden furniture contrasts with the smooth-lined contemporary structures. Scenic backdrops pull these wildly different looks together with black-and-white line sketches of Edwardian-inspired home interiors (**fig. 2**).

A particularly powerful exhibit element is the personal narrative booth. When you enter the booth and choose a story, a video of a real person appears sitting across from you, projected at near life-size. They narrate their experiences with conditions like depression, anxiety, and bipolar as if they were speaking directly to you. I imagine this may be the first time some visitors hear someone speak openly about their experiences with mental illness.

The most enjoyable element of the exhibition for me was working the cathartic “Worry Shredder” (**fig. 3**). I wrote a worry on a slip of paper and fed it into the machine. As I turned the hand crank, I watched my worry get torn into a hundred tiny pieces and land in a pile of other shredded worries.

fig. 1. The faceted structures demarcate space for each exhibit element while maintaining sightlines throughout the exhibition.



fig. 3. The “Worry Shredder,” in all its retrofuturistic glory.

Mental Health: Mind Matters concludes with a selfie station featuring the hashtag #MakeItOK and a talkback space for visitors’ responses. From what I read in the comment book, many visitors have been personally moved by this exhibition.

Margaret Middleton is an independent exhibit designer based in Providence, Rhode Island.

