

MUNtal Health

My high school did not have a MUN program, so my first experiences with Model United Nations were collegiate crisis committees, in my freshman year. I still remember those first conferences for the friends I made and the notes I wrote. But those memories also have a familiar gray cloud over them.

While most people wouldn't be able to tell on the face of it, I struggle with long-standing mental health challenges. Primarily an anxiety disorder. I am fortunate that with therapy and treatment, I lead a healthy life. My mental health does not typically constrain me like it did years ago, and I have grown miles since my worst days and months. But sometimes I fall back down. That's normal and okay. Even if it is at my first MUN conferences.

During my first conferences I was thrown into MUN head-first, with little real experience. I was learning parliamentary procedure and delegate strategy on the fly through sheer observation. In addition to stressing about taking a weekend away from my textbooks, I was worried about socializing fluently, speaking loudly, writing well, and not looking like a novice with uncontrollable nerves. In short: my brain was constantly running at 200% for the entirety of the conference. It was intense and exhausting. And that was before the socials drained me even further. Going to those was probably one of the worst things I could have done in the short-term. By the conference's end I was happy to have a couple new friends, but I was emotionally exhausted, and absolutely drained.

It was easy for me to think that I was the only one that felt this way, and I just needed to "grow-up." But in talking to delegates and friends from the high-school and collegiate circuits, I have found some similarity with our experiences. Cutthroat atmospheres have aggravated anxiety in others. My friends find conferences similarly exhausting. And others with conditions different from my own face separate issues. For example, delegates with conditions such as ADHD may struggle to manage concurrent tasks consistently or stay focused and seated through hours of moderated caucuses. No matter the specifics, I have found that Model UN presents some common difficulties for people with mental health conditions.

It turns out, not everyone's brain fits naturally into Model UN as it stands now. Not everyone is comfortable speaking strongly, quickly, and proudly. Not everyone can easily sit in uncomfortable rooms for hours on end, listening to moderated caucuses. Not everyone can handle and process the constant stimulus of a typical Model UN

committee. Not everyone's brain looks like that of the glorified power delegate, capable of debating quickly, exercising strategy with ruthless efficiency, and multitasking with three different arcs in the balance.

The adage "if you can't take the heat, get out of the kitchen" comes to mind, but that dismisses what MUN should be. MUN should *not* be an intense game where people are cut out for not fitting the typical mold, or for not being alarmingly competitive. MUN *should* be a place where we acknowledge the differences of others, their different brains, their different backgrounds, and their different perspective. Ultimately, MUN should be the training ground for future problem-solving and intellectual engagement. Not a place for overt aggression and merciless competition.

This is not to say that we should stop trying to advance our own goals in crisis committees or stop sparring in debate—that's what makes MUN engaging. But that should not stop us from being aware of our own differences and the barriers that we're creating to participants.

As MUN staff and delegates, we should seek to encourage a conference environment that is healthy for everyone—one that does not stigmatize, create toxic competition, or needlessly overwhelm. And we should be more accepting of mental health struggles when they do come up in committee, so delegates like myself don't feel like they'd be better off hiding.

I cannot speak to everyone's mental health presently, nor can I provide clinical or professional recommendations to conferences and delegates about how to handle mental health. What I can do is speak to my own experiences, and what I think could have helped (or has helped at later conferences):

- Breaks: One of the biggest stressors in conferences is the constant flow of information, and the need to multitask to do well. Over a four-day conference this can wear on anyone. Short, frequent breaks in committee sessions allow delegates to recollect themselves and hinder burnout. They also have the added benefit of providing Secretariats and Committee staffs time to readjust policies or practices if necessary.
- Moderating Participation: When I was chairing a committee, my co-chair and I decided to tally when everyone spoke in a moderated caucus. This information is useful for several purposes, but we especially liked to note who was being called on the most and who wasn't. My co-chair would frequently write names of the most-spoken and least-spoken. This allowed me to call on delegates who were being overlooked, and make sure no one delegate was dominating the

conversation. I think that this helps to create a more open, collaborative atmosphere in committee, and reduce negative pressures that can affect mental health. I encourage all chairs to adopt similar measures in their chairing style to help moderate participation more effectively.

- Shift emphasis: Another way to reduce toxic environments that can harm mental health is to de-emphasize awards in favor of other forms of validation—personal growth, ingenuity, and enjoyment. This is not to say that awards should be abolished, just that Head Delegates would be wise to focus on holistic measures of encouragement beyond awards, and that chairs should foster an environment that encourages good humor, and acknowledges creativity and collaboration, rather than a room focused solely on competition.
- Discussion (the NPR Rule): It is the nature of Model UN that serious topics will arise in committee. It is the responsibility of everyone involved to make sure these topics are discussed with the gravity and maturity they deserve. I am partial to a guideline I refer to as “the NPR Rule.” This rule of thumb stipulates that topics should be addressed with the seriousness and nuance that an NPR program would use. Further, if a topic would not be addressed on NPR (or framed in a particular manner) it should not appear in committee. I like this rule because it offers both flexibility and maturity. NPR programs cover a range of serious topics, as do MUN committees. But they do so with the professionalism and thoughtfulness I think we should all strive for as delegates.
 - As an addendum to discussion, it is important also that Secretariats and Crisis Directors exercise maturity and clarity in making sure that aggressive, crude, or offensive actions are not exercised through crisis arcs (i.e. major war crimes, violence based on suspect class.)
- Pay attention and accommodate: Inevitably, there will be delegates who still have some challenge, difficulty, or inhibitions. That’s okay. Conferences should work to make sure that this can be acknowledged. Chairs should pay attention and offer any adjustments they reasonably can to make sure the environment and debate are comfortable for delegates. Secretariats should also make sure that their chairs are aware of the differences that delegates bring to the table, are approachable, and are able to both acknowledge and make accommodations where necessary. Lastly, I would recommend all conference Secretariats create anonymous feedback forms for their delegates, to be publicized by chairs at the start of every session.
- Delegations and Advocacy: Obviously, head delegates and delegations know their own members better than the conference will. Delegations should work to make sure they are creating a non-toxic environment and that their members feel comfortable acknowledging their circumstances. And they should actively

seek to address difficulties and push for an inclusive environment. Lastly, they should advocate to Secretariats for their delegates if there are any changes or conditions that could improve the experience of delegates with mental health concerns.

Some of these recommendations are vaguer than others, and the topic of mental health in MUN cannot be fully approached by committee changes alone. It will require constant awareness on the parts of both conferences and delegations to be welcoming of people with mental health conditions or other disabilities. We must acknowledge that mental health is varying, and the needs of each delegate will be different. But it is important that we maintain open minds and create a culture that welcomes different delegates and banishes toxic practices.

By Joshua O'Brien