



Roleplaying Games for Mental Health



# Affective Play

with Dr Jodie Russell

# Backstory



Many people report that playing games of different kinds supports their mental health. One particular type is called a “table-top roleplaying game” (TTRPGs).



TTRPGs are a type of imaginative, story-telling game that usually involve assuming a character or role and ‘role playing’ what your character would do in a given situation



This might involve writing down what your character does, describing it, acting it out or just picturing it in your own head!





# Our Quest!

Main quests:  
To get you to play!

Side quests:  
Learn what TTRPGs are  
Explore why they may be beneficial for mental health  
The discuss our experience, first-hand, of playing RPGs



# TTRPG Lore

Roleplaying games are as varied as most other games. They can:

- Be played by one person (solo) or by many
- Be facilitated by a single person (usually called a “game master” or GM)
- Be facilitated by no one in particular (called GM-less games)
- Involve a range of different tools (dice, cards, dominoes, pen and paper) or no tools at all!
- Take place in any setting you can imagine





# TTRPG Lore

The most well-known TTRPG is Dungeons and Dragons.

This is typically a GM-run game in a fantasy setting that uses dice rolls to determine the success of your character's actions

But even games with set rules can be very flexible!

TTRPGs can be anarchic; there is nothing stopping you from changing the rules, mechanics, setting or style to suit your needs.



# Delving Deeper

**Good Society** – A TTRP based on the novels of Jane Austen. The game mechanics include spreading rumours and writing letters.

**Kids on Bikes** – Want to roleplay AS the kids from Stranger Things? This is the one for you! Inspired by 80's movies like E.T.

**Monster of the Week** – Inspired by villain of the week TV shows like Buffy the Vampire Slayer and The X-Files.





# Roleplaying and Mental Health



Researchers have noted more recently that people report that roleplaying games support their mental health

The benefits of play to mental health are not new:

In his book *Play, dreams and imitation in childhood*, Piaget (1951) puts forward the idea that play is important for the cognitive development in children (to represent abstract meanings and develop a 'self')





# Roleplaying and Mental Health

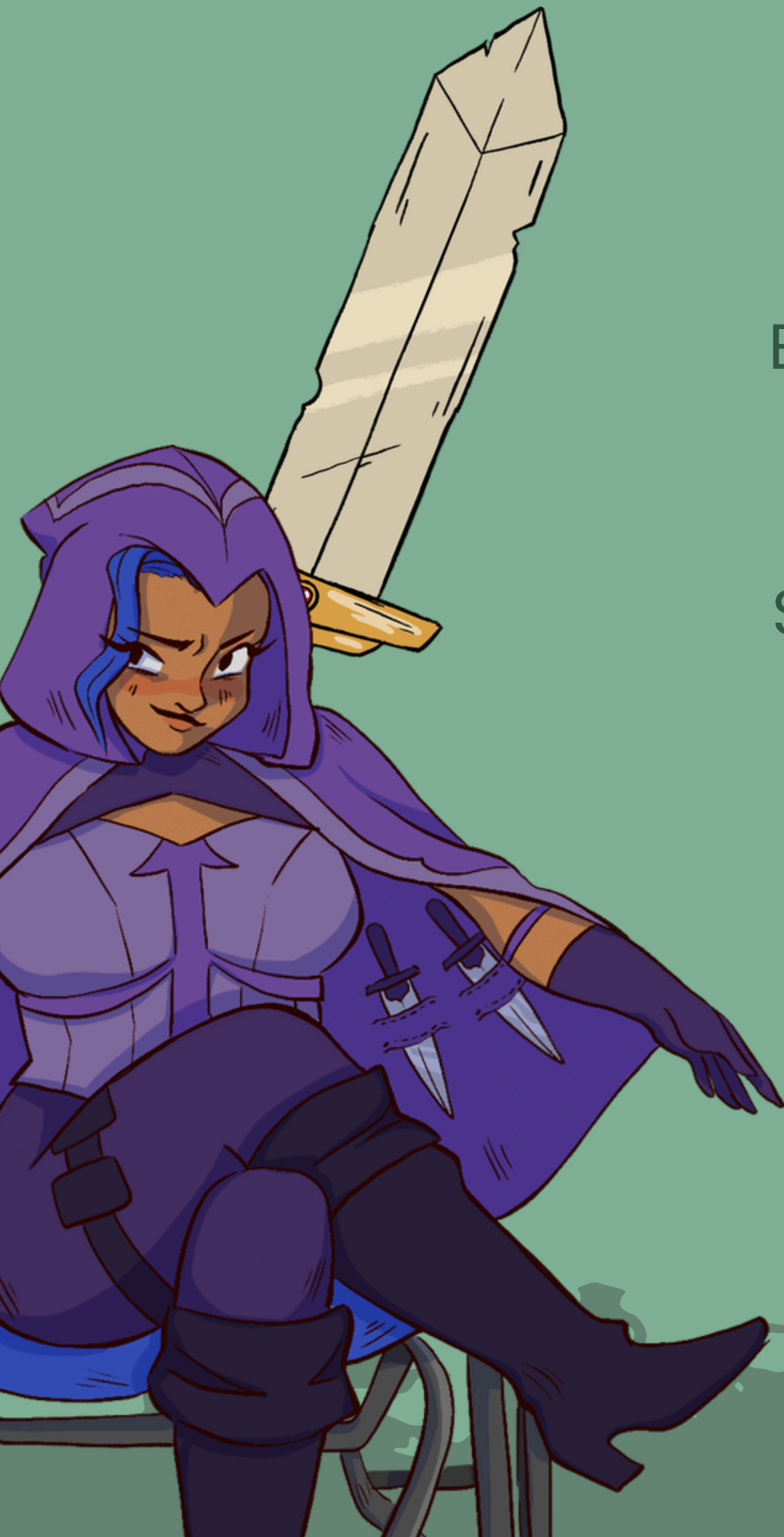


But the mental health benefits have been specifically noted in relation to adults playing TTRPGs

Even then, Dungeons and Dragons was published in 1974  
- why are we only just noticing this now?

Some suggestions from Baker, Turner and Kotera (2022):

- The pandemic helped the benefits of TTRPGs come to light (it became more popular but also people experienced increased mental stress)
- Dungeons and Dragons was famously linked to the 'satanic panic' and psychopathology and therefore stigmatised until recently

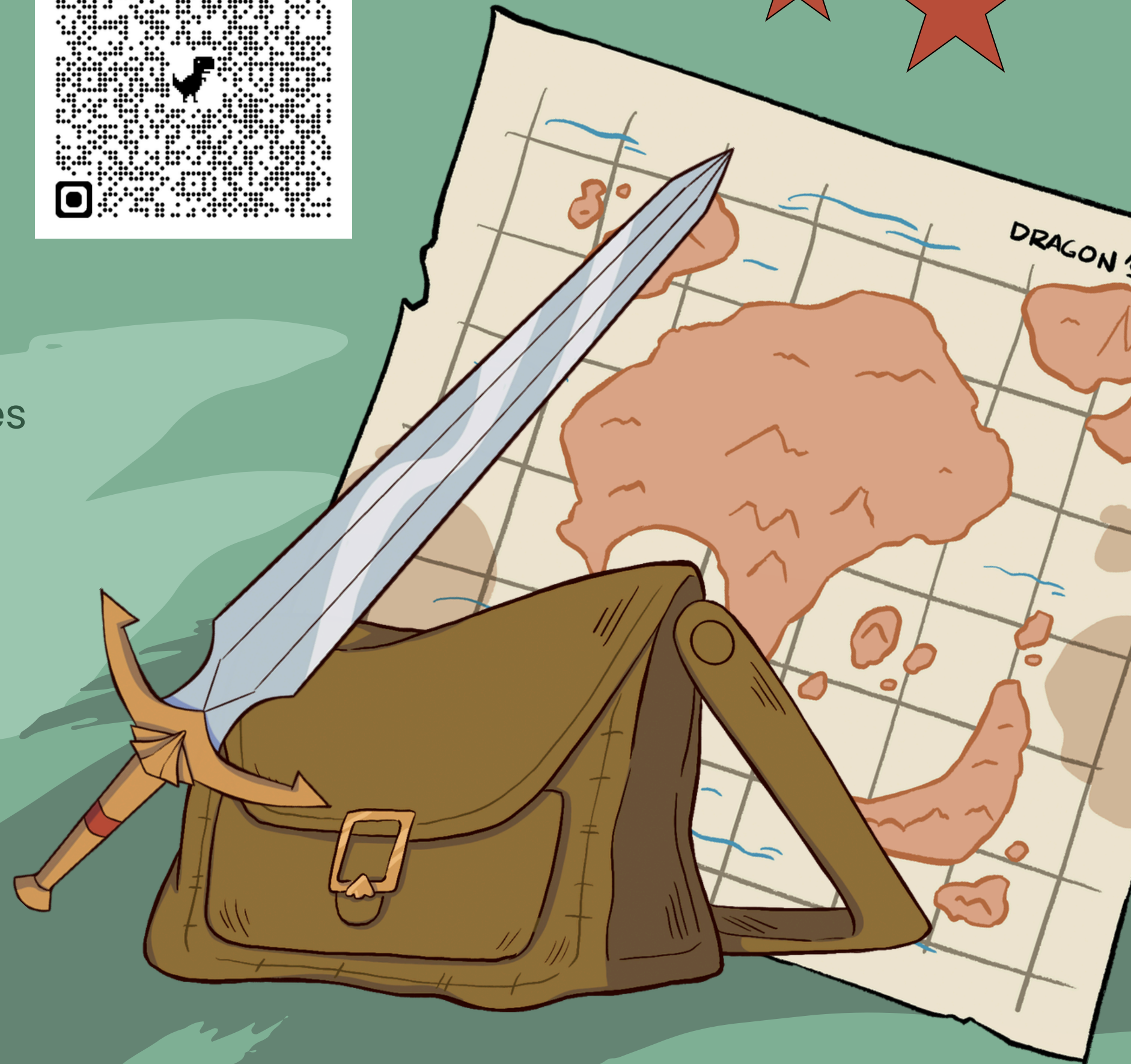
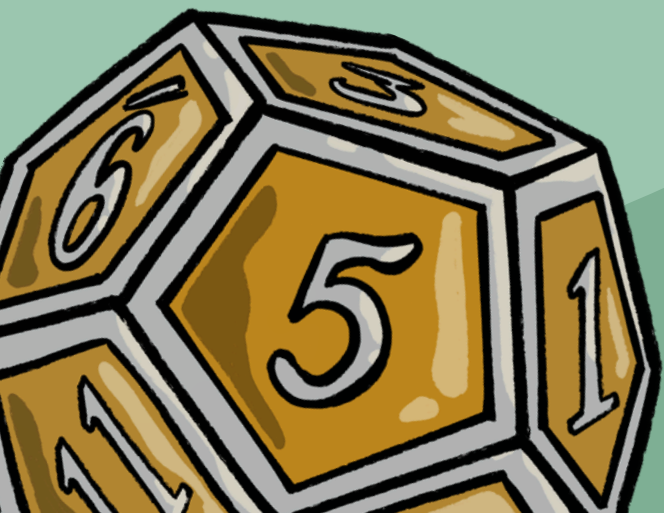
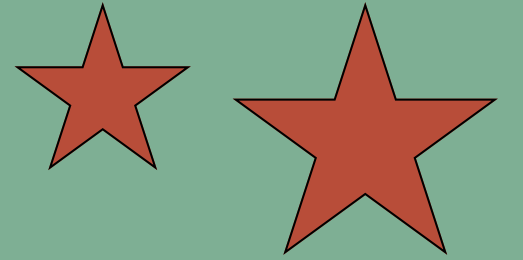
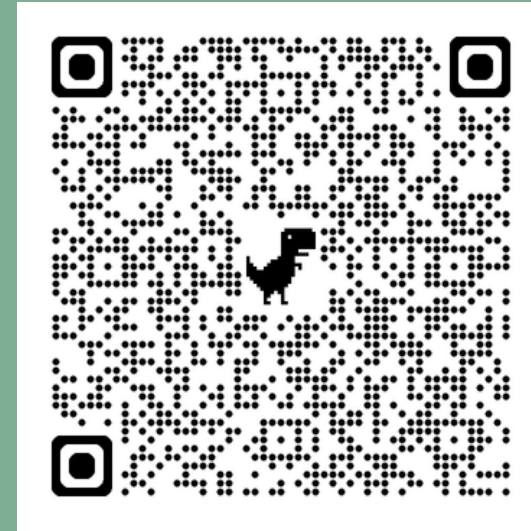


# Some thoughts...

There is a general stigma against play for adults; play and its associated artefacts (toys!) are assumed to be only for children

Adulthood: From Baumtrog and Peach (2019), it describes the ways in which certain standards, e.g. for knowing, are set by adults

I think this could be expanded to capture the idea that there are 'norms' of adulthood and childhood; the norms of being an adult do not include play



# Some more thoughts

In many cases, we want some things to be accessible to adults and not to children (for reasons of safety and psychological wellbeing!)

But it makes less sense for things that were available when you were a child to be no longer available when you are an adult.

Moreover, having access to the 'goods' of childhood, doesn't mean one is infantilised in the process!

I think the problem is in the concept of adulthood as one's "final evolution" or "final form"; Baumtrog and Peach also note that children are often ignored due to perceptions that they are still developing

There may be an underlying assumption that as adults we are finally 'developed' and no longer need play. But the research on TTRPGs says otherwise!



# So why is it good for mental health?

Returning to Baker, Turner and Kotera (2022):

- In clinical practice, TTRPGs are reported to be associated with higher levels of reflection, empathy, creativity, and insight
- Narrative structures about overcoming adversity and exploring alternative identities which mirrors aspects of mental health recovery
- TTRPGS allow players to interact with their own emotional content in an experience that “meant something” that is only (perceived) to be possible in a fictional world



# So why is it good for mental health?

From Walsh & Linehan (2024)

The authors interviewed 10 players and GMs to ask what impact D&D had on their lives, and uncovered 5 key themes related to mental health:

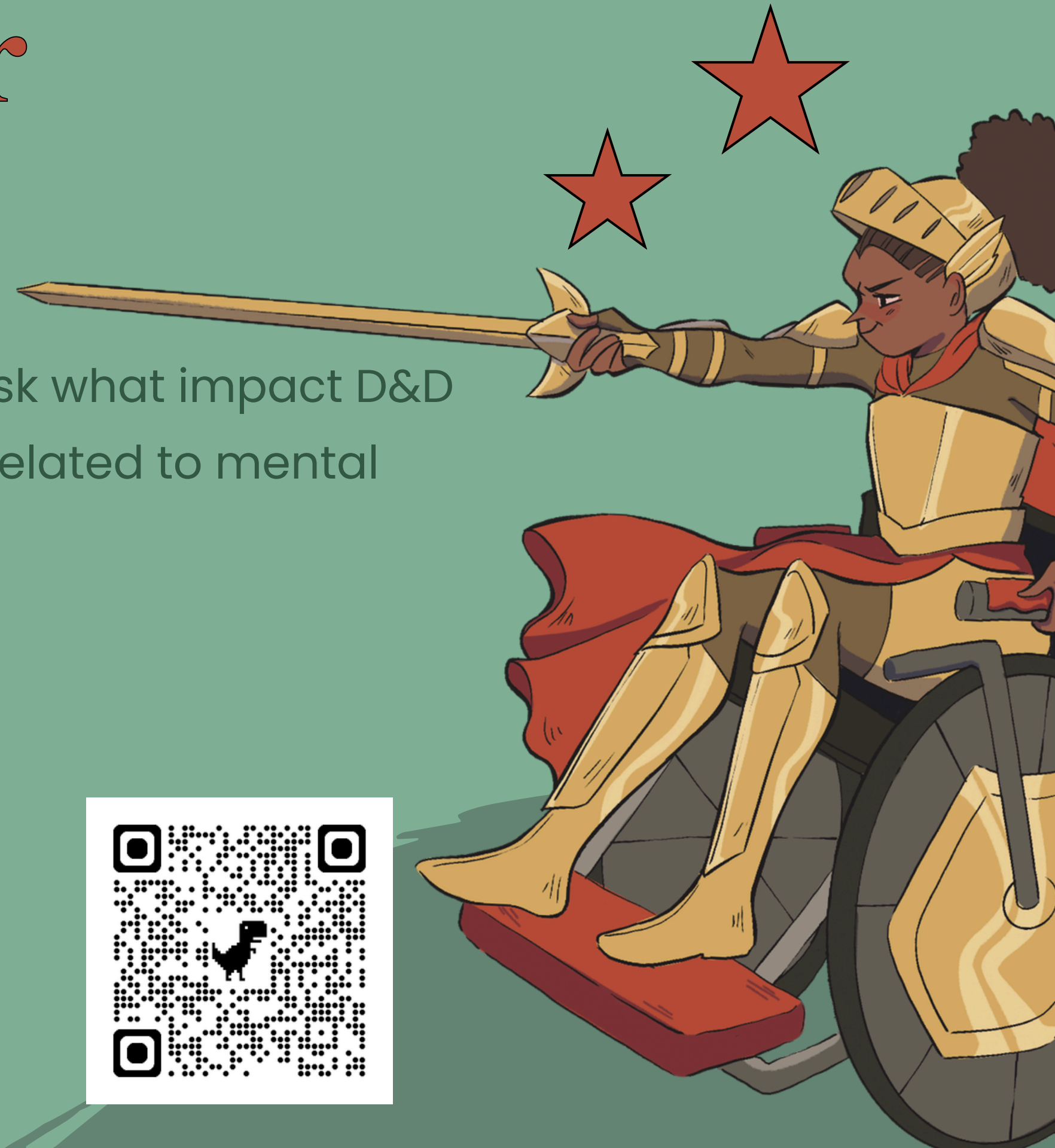
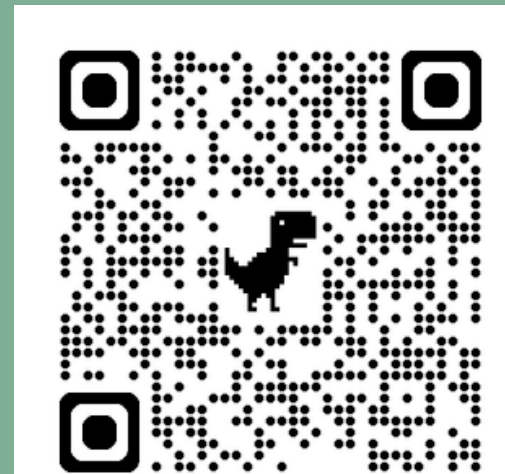
Escapism

Exploration of self

Creative expression

Social support

Routine





# Even more thoughts....

As a DM myself, I am very aware of how a session of a game can go wrong...

- Failure to schedule a session
- Coming unprepared/being overwhelmed
- Wild character choices
- Annoying players (sorry!)
- Traumatizing events in and out of game!

Do people feel the mental health benefits despite these things, or are there factors that make a session successfully support mental health?





## Even more thoughts....

Within the roleplaying community we have the concept of a “problem player”

The problem player often plays the game as if they are the ‘main character’, treating the game as a ‘sandbox’ to carry out any of their specific plans

They quite often ignore the collaborative aspect of the game and it’s difficult to enjoy a game *with* them

I think that by looking at why problem players are a problem, we can get closer to understanding what supports mental health in a session

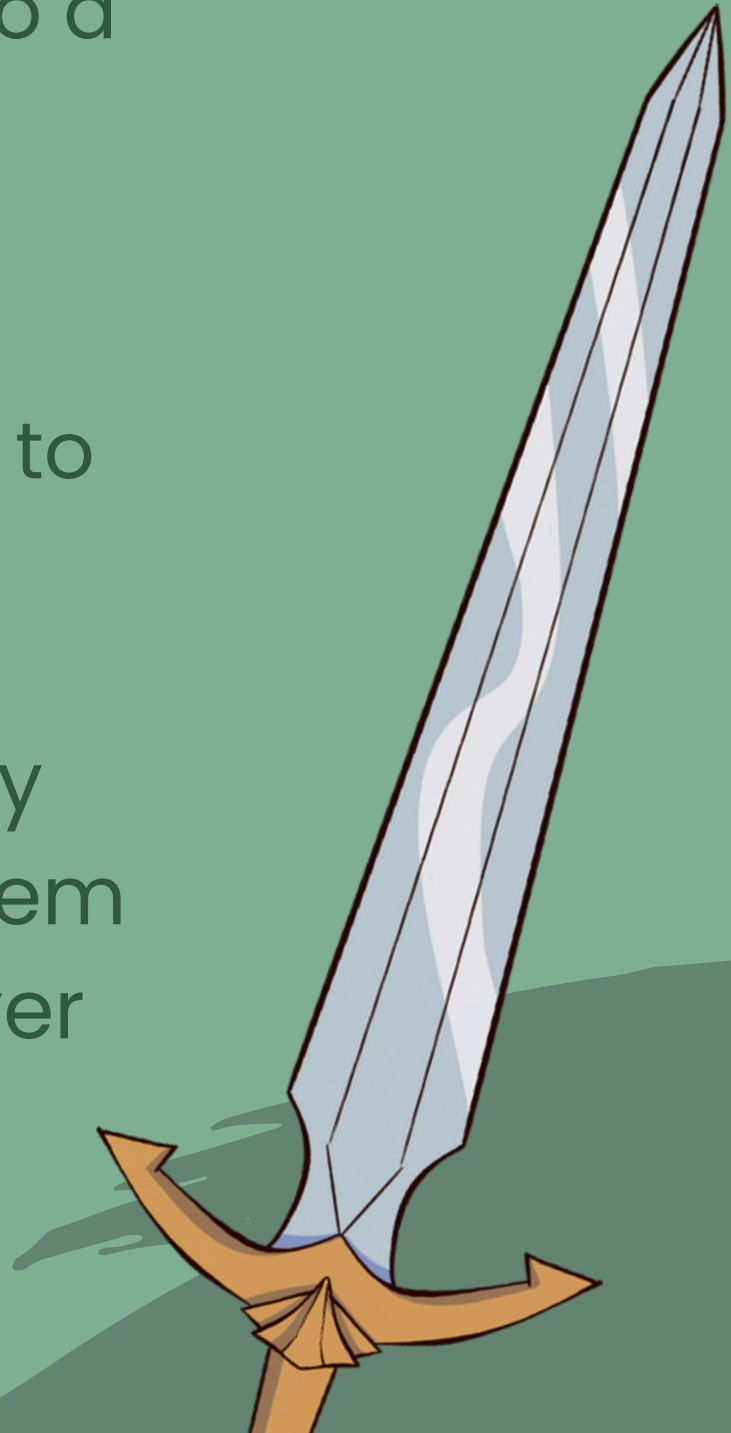


# Good Roleplaying as Affective Roleplaying

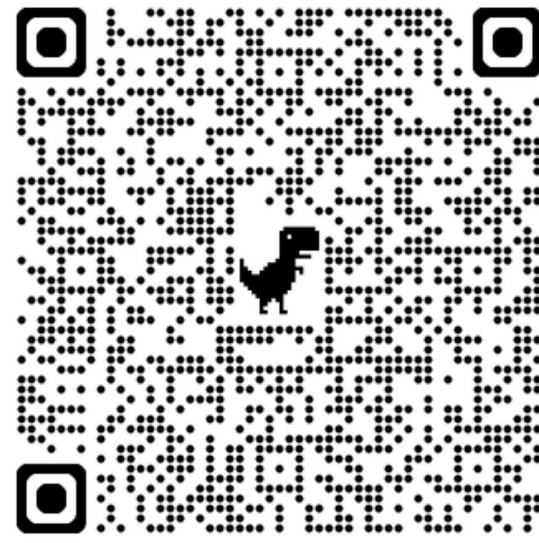
I think the 'problem' of the problem player is often a failure to do a form of emotional labour (the work of communicating and managing the emotions of ourselves and others)

In particular, they fail to give 'uptake' or respond appropriately to the emotional needs of others

E.g. they fail to consider the emotional narratives weaved by other people, what things in the imaginary world matter to them and their characters, or even the emotional state of the player in general



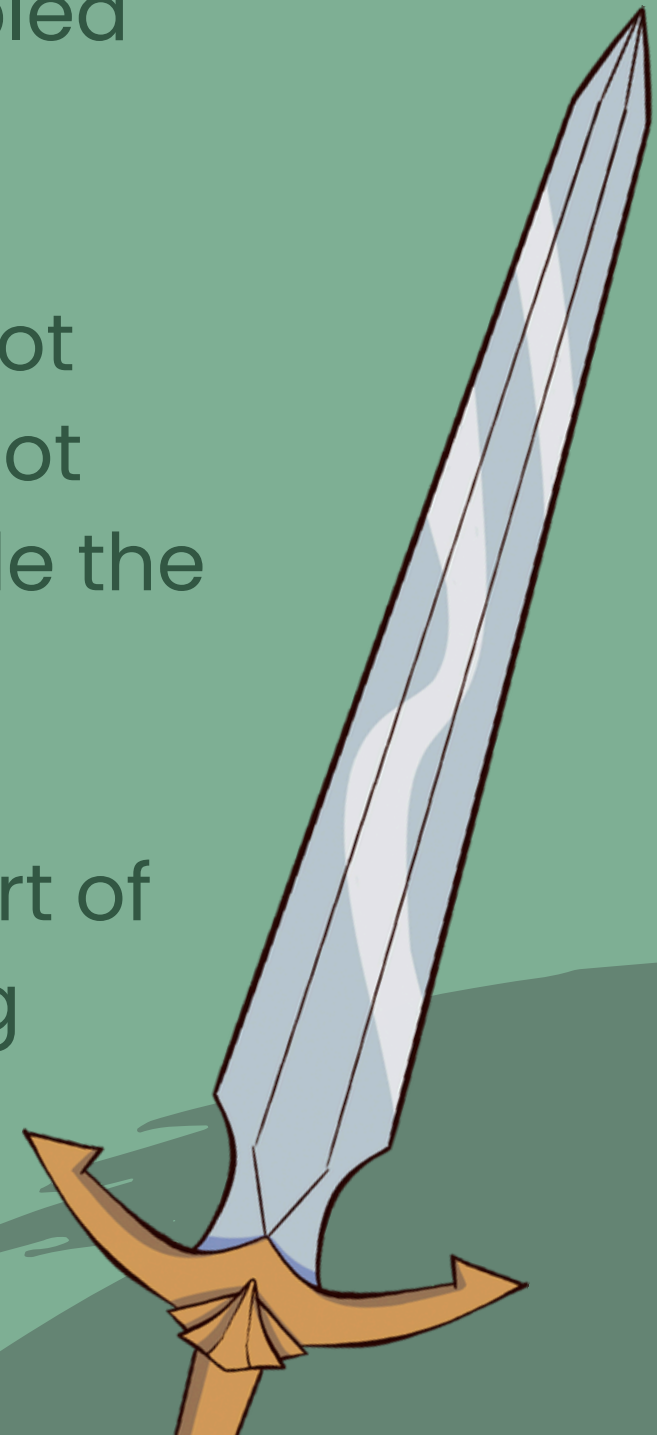
# Good Roleplaying as Affective Roleplaying



I think that the benefits that Walsh & Linehan (2024) note are enabled when there is emotional uptake between players

For Whitney (2018), “To refuse a person uptake for their anger is not merely to respond agnostically; it is to treat their anger as if it is not about anything: as if it is a reflection of psycho-physical events inside the angry person only which bears nothing on the world we share”

Emotional uptake, then, is to treat someone’s emotional lives as part of the shared world. In a TTRPG context, this means acknowledging emotions above and below the table.



# Good Roleplaying as Affective Roleplaying

My take-away point:

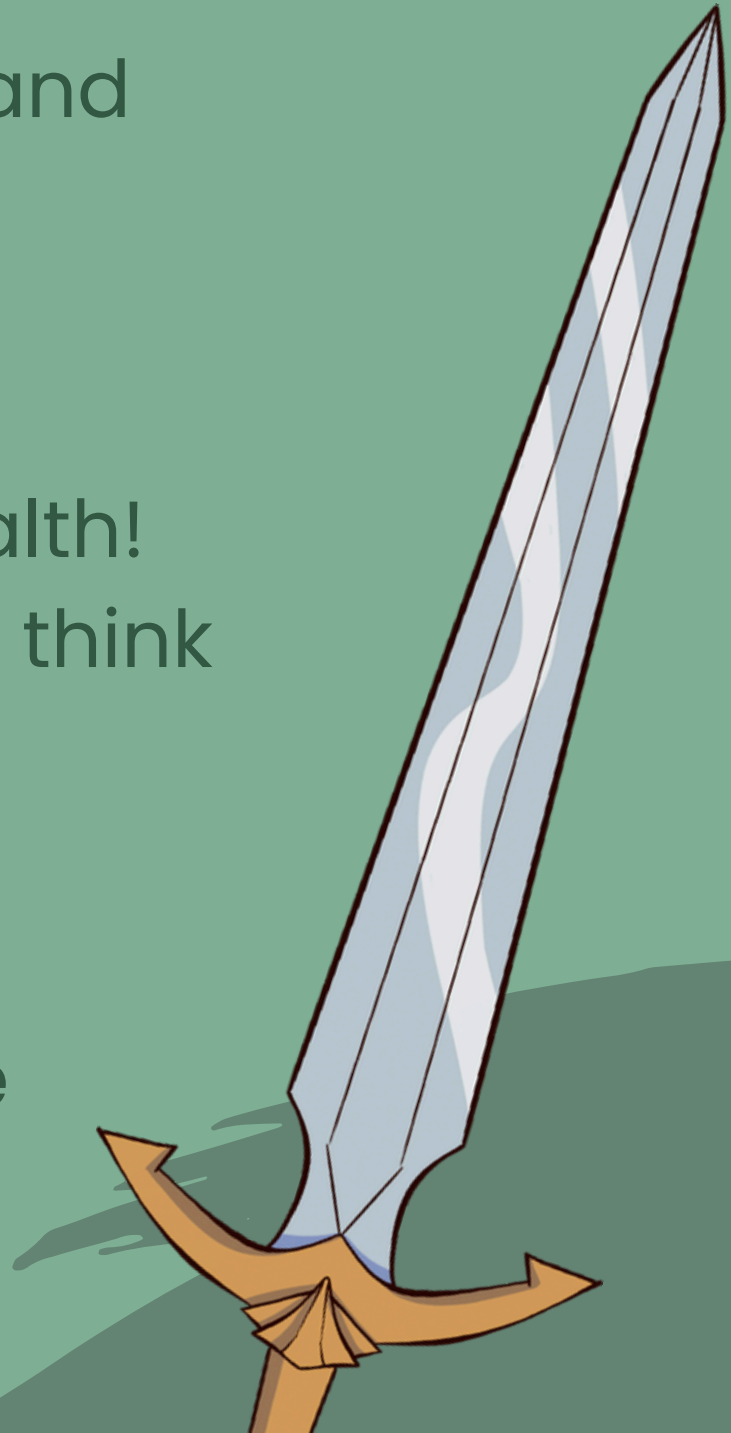
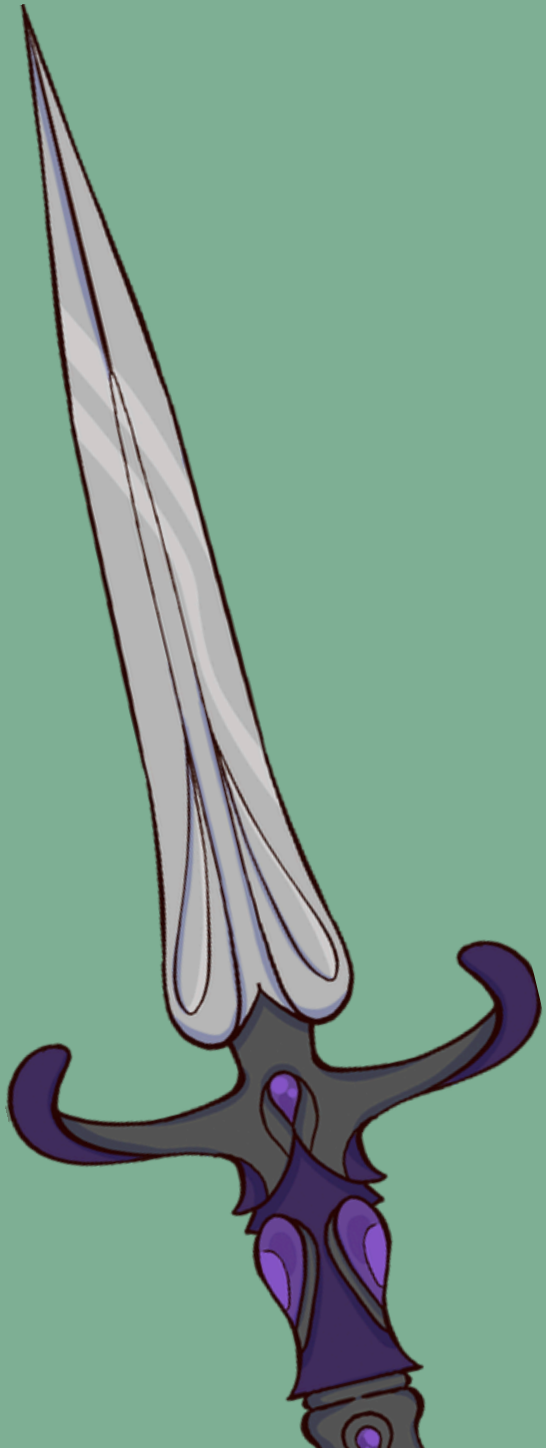
TTRPGs support mental wellbeing when played with equality and inclusion in mind for its players

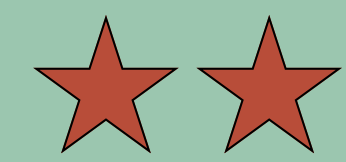
My suspicion:

There's probably nothing special about TTRPGs for mental health! Lots of types of play and games may give similar benefits (but I think emotional uptake is key)

So why TTRPGs?

You need very little to get a game off the ground - and the possibilities are endless!





Your mission, should  
you choose to accept  
it...

Let's put some of these thoughts  
into action and try and roleplay!



The background of the image is a warm, inviting library. In the foreground, there are stacks of old, yellowed books and papers. A vase with a bouquet of purple and orange flowers sits on a surface. In the background, wooden bookshelves are filled with books of various colors and sizes. A framed picture hangs on the wall. The overall atmosphere is one of quiet knowledge and comfort.

# The Wandering Librarian

In this game, we are adapting a solo, journaling RPG into a collaborative story-telling RPG

Get into groups of 4. Elect someone to be the “wandering librarian”. Roll the dice to determine the location of your library and answer the “Getting Started Questions” out loud.



The background of the slide is a photograph of a library or study. It features wooden bookshelves filled with books, a vase of colorful flowers on a table, and stacks of books in the foreground. The scene is warmly lit, creating a comfortable atmosphere. The title 'The Wandering Library' is written in a large, white, cursive font across the top of the image, with decorative white floral corner ornaments in each of the four corners.

# The Wandering Library

Roll the dice again, one to determine the column and the other to determine the row of the “prompts”

Read out the prompt and decide what the librarian does. How do they feel about what’s going on?

When it involves other characters, other individuals in the group should volunteer to be that character and describe their appearance and actions.

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# The Wandering Library

Repeat the last step again so you have another prompt. Imagining this happens all on the same day, describe how you got from one situation to another.

What happened to characters from before? Did they help or hinder, or where they not there?

Repeat the process again for the third time. How does the librarian feel at the end of the day? Where will the library travel next?

# Thoughts, Feedback and Questions

How did it feel to play for 5-10 minutes?

Did you come across any issues?

Any questions for me?



# Thank you for coming on this adventure!

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