



This Study Guide includes suggestions about preparing your students for a live theatre performance in order to help them take more from the experience. Included is information and ideas on how to use the performance to enhance aspects of your education curriculum: with exercises that respond to the themes presented in the performance and the dramatic and musical elements.

Please copy and distribute this guide to your fellow teachers.

Revised Sept 25, 2024 - added new material to the appendix of resources: an intro to the Change Triangle (a wonderful approach to growing in emotional wellness)

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**ABOUT BURNT THICKET THEATRE & TOURING HISTORY**

# Every Brilliant Thing

By Duncan Macmillan  
with Jonny Donahoe

At Bez Arts Hub in Langley, BC  
September 6 - 17 2023

## Creative Team:

Sarah Robertson - Storyteller

Stephen Waldschmidt - Director, Scenic Co-Designer, Scenic Artist

Mackenzie Dawson - Stage Manager

Tim Bratton - Sound Designer, Music Director, Scenic Co-Designer

Lighting design adapted from the original design by Charlie Peters

Brooklynn Bitner - Burnt Thicket's Marketing Associate

Katie Matheson - Burnt Thicket's Bookkeeper

Sandy Rosen - Bez Creative Director

Russ Rosen - Bez Artistic Director

Kendra Craig - Bez Administrator

EVERY BRILLIANT THING was first produced by Paines Plough and Pentabus Theatre, on June 28 2013 at Ludlow Fringe Festival. The play had its North American premiere at Barrow Street Theatre, New York, on December 6 2014, where it was presented by Barrow Street Theatre and Jean Doumanian Productions.

EVERY BRILLIANT THING is presented by special arrangement with Dramatists Play Service, Inc., New York.

**Audience Advisory:** This play contains discussions about severe depression, not suitable for young children. Recommended for ages 14+.

Video and/or audio recording of this performance by any means whatsoever are strictly prohibited.

## **Director's Note:**

Some stories are just so much fun, so meaningful, that you can't help sharing them over and over. We're so grateful for the invitation to bring **EVERY BRILLIANT THING** to Bez Arts Hub.

Neuropsychologist Rick Hanson says our brains are like velcro for negative thoughts – they stick due to the brain's natural bias – but our brains are like teflon for joyful thoughts, which tend to slide away. We can choose to hold on to a positive thought or experience, and if we savour it consciously for at least fifteen seconds, it will 'imprint' from short-term to long-term memory. Repeating this mindfulness over time will increase the neural pathways associated with positive experiences, growing our capacity for emotional well-being.

This play cultivates joy without ignoring pain. I have wrestled with anxiety about imagined futures and desolation about the past, but the surprising gift of gratitude in the present is like oxygen. To me this story is like a guide walking us through the valley of the shadow and into hope, except the path is actually a hilariously wild rollercoaster.

I pray your experience here generates real connection with the people in your community, and contributes to ending stigma about mental illness in Canada. May you be surprised and inspired by **EVERY BRILLIANT THING**. Buckle up!

– Stephen Waldschmidt, Director/Artistic Director, Burnt Thicket Theatre

## **This Land**

This beautiful land on which we gather today is the unceded traditional territories of the Matsqui, Kwantlen, Katzie, and Semiahmoo First Nations. This production was created on Treaty Six territory, the traditional territories of the Cree, Saulteaux, Dene, Nakoda, Lakota, and Dakota First Nations, as well as the Homeland of the Métis Nation. Burnt Thicket Theatre honours the Indigenous spirit of the treaties, where treaty creates ties of kinship, of belonging together on the land, with commitments of reciprocity and mutual cooperation. So we work to collaborate respectfully with descendants of the original caretakers of these lands, and to participate in positive systemic change. We are grateful for the opportunity to live and perform on these lands that we share, understanding that they have a rich, living history of Indigenous arts and culture. We'd like to encourage all of us to continue our learning journeys towards truth, reconciliation, and growing as peacemakers in our neighbourhoods and our nations.

### **Tim Bratton - Sound Designer, Music Director, Scenic Co-Designer**

Tim is an actor, playwright, and sound designer who serves as the Artistic Associate for Burnt Thicket Theatre. With a broad range of training and experience in both theatre and theology, Tim is committed to telling stories that help us make sense of life. Acting credits include *THE CURST*, and *THE FOURTH WISEMAN* (Dancing Sky Theatre); *LONG DAYS JOURNEY INTO NIGHT* (Theatre Naught); *CYMBELINE* (Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan); *EVERGREEN, MY LITTLE PLASTIC JESUS* (SATAward nominations for Outstanding Original Script and Leading Performance) and *WE ARE THE BODY* (Burnt Thicket Theatre); *ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD*, *BOEING BOEING* (SATAward nomination for Outstanding Leading Performance), *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE* and *'ART'* (Persephone Theatre); *GODSPELL* and *YOU STILL CAN'T* (Pacific Theatre). Sound Design credits include *EVERY BRILLIANT THING*, *TIED IN KNOTS*, and *WE TREATY PEOPLE* (Burnt Thicket Theatre); *ROMEO & JULIET* and *AS YOU LIKE IT* (Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan). Tim lives in Saskatoon with his lovely wife, Amy, and their two children.



### **Mackenzie Dawson - Stage Manager**

Born and raised in Saskatoon, Mac is excited to bring *EVERY BRILLIANT THING* to Langley! He trained in Acting at the University of Saskatchewan, though he dabbles in improv comedy, stage managing, directing, producing... you get the idea. As the Artistic Director of Sum Theatre, he makes new plays in unusual places, like skating rinks and parks. Thank you to Burnt Thicket and Bez Arts for creating theatre that gives us hope. Upcoming for Mac: Directing Theatre on the Rink 2024 (Sum Theatre & La Troupe du Jour)

### **Sarah Robertson - Storyteller**

Sarah Robertson is a multidisciplinary performer with a background in theatre, dance, choreography, mask and clown. She is a graduate of Rosebud School of the Arts (Acting), Bez Arts Mentorship (Dance) and a protégée of the Governor General's Performing Arts Awards Mentorship Program. Past credits include *Every Brilliant Thing* (Burnt Thicket Theatre/Rosebud Theatre), *Radio Silence* (Open Pit Theatre), *A Wonderheads Christmas Carol* (The Wonderheads, 2021, 2022), *Sublimity: A Love Supreme* (Dancing Monkey Laboratories), *The Skin of Our Teeth*, *The Miracle Worker*, *The Lion*, *The Witch & The Wardrobe* (Rosebud Theatre), *Proof* (Leonard's Corner Productions), *Dr. Frankenbean's Halloween* and other science demos (Telus SPARK Science Centre).



### **Duncan Macmillan - Playwright**

Plays include: *People, Places and Things* (2015-2017, National Theatre/Wyndham's Theatre, West End); *1984*, adapted from George Orwell (2013-2017, Headlong/Nottingham Playhouse Theatre Company, West End, Broadway, international tours, co-adapted/co-directed with Rob Icke); *Every Brilliant Thing* (2013-2017, Paines Plough/Pentabus Theatre, Edinburgh Festival, UK and international tours, HBO); *City of Glass*, adapted from Paul Auster (2017, 59 Productions, HOME, and Lyric Hammersmith); *2071*, co-written with Chris Rapley (2014-2015, The Royal Court/Hamburg Schauspielhaus); *The Forbidden Zone* (2014-2016, Salzburg Festival and Schaubühne Berlin); *Wunschloses Unglück*, adapted from Peter Handke (2014, Burgtheater Vienna); *Reise Durich Die Nacht*, adapted from Friederike Mayröcker (2012-2014, Schauspiel Köln, Festival d'Avignon, Theatertreffen); *Lungs* (2011-2016, Paines Plough and Sheffield Theatres/Studio Theatre, Washington, DC); and *Monster* (2006, Royal Exchange Theatre).



### **Charlie Peters - Lighting Designer**

Charlie Peters (ze/hir/hirs) is a proudly queer playwright, poet, theatre and opera director, actor, lighting designer, dramaturg, and clown. Born and raised on Treaty 6 Territory and the Homeland of the Métis Nation, hir family traces its roots back to England, Poland, and the Campbell lands of Scotland. Hir artistic work has been seen on stages (and in parks, fields, school gyms, living rooms, and swimming pools) across Western Canada. Hir degrees include a BFA in Acting from the U. of Saskatchewan as well as an MFA in Theatre Practice and an MA in Gender and Social Justice Studies from the U. of Alberta. Ze trained extensively at the Manitoulin Conservatory for Creation and Performance and currently serves as secretary of the Saskatchewan Association of Theatre Professionals. Ze is Folk Trail and Live Theatre Coordinator at the Silver Skate Festival, Founding Director of Embrace Theatre, and a former Artistic Associate with Sum Theatre. Hir scholarly work has been published in *Theatre Research in Canada*, *Canadian Theatre Review*, *Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia*, and on *HowlRound*. [www.charliepeters.ca](http://www.charliepeters.ca)



### **Stephen Waldschmidt – Director, Scenic Co-Designer & Scenic Artist**

Stephen is grateful to work as a theatre artist and the artistic director of *Burnt Thicket Theatre*. Directing credits include BTT's *Evergreen*, *My Little Plastic Jesus*, *We Are the Body*, and the national tour of *She Has a Name*. Acting credits include *The Resistable Rise of Arturo Ui* (Persephone Theatre), *Tent Meeting* (Rosebud Theatre), *A Bright Particular Star* and *Chickens* (Pacific Theatre), and the role of Jesus in *The Canadian Badlands Passion Play*. He recently wrote *Land*, an audio play for BTT's fiction podcast *We Treaty People*. Stephen holds a masters of fine arts and theology from Regent College and a BFA in drama from University of Calgary. He sends thanks to Kirsten, his spouse and best friend, to his daughter and two sons, and to this creative team for all their collaboration and beautiful work!



## Every Brilliant Thing Synopsis

*"You're seven years old. Mum's in hospital. Dad says she's 'done something stupid'. She finds it hard to be happy. You start a list of everything brilliant about the world. Everything worth living for.*

*1. Ice Cream. 2. Roller Coasters. 3. Peeing in the lake and nobody knows...*

*You leave it on her pillow. You know she's read it because she's corrected your spelling."*

Twenty years and thousands of things later, the list takes on a life of its own. Be drawn in to this astonishingly funny comedy about depression and the lengths we go to for those we love. Based on true and untrue stories.

Audiences are captivated by this exhilarating solo performance like no other, a deep dive into emotional well-being through wit, wisdom and hilarity, as Sarah Robertson woos audience members to play the other seven characters. Theatre's power to bring people together in loving respect is vividly alive in this play, undoing the stigma around mental illness.

Burnt Thicket Theatre's productions of EVERY BRILLIANT THING received the SATAward for Outstanding Leading Performance, was nominated for Outstanding Production and Outstanding Director, and filled extended runs in 2018 and 2020 at Regina's Globe Theatre, Saskatoon's Live Five Theatre and Winterruption Festival, and Calgary's Fire Exit Theatre. Our show was also featured at Rosebud Theatre in 2022, where it played all summer, and in 2023 at Bez Arts Hub in Langley, BC.

Since 2008, Burnt Thicket Theatre has given over 290 performances in 44 cities across Canada, from Halifax to Victoria.

*Audience Advisory: This play contains discussions about severe depression, not suitable for young children. Recommended for ages 14+.*

## Reviews of the script / original UK production

*"Heart-wrenching, hilarious... one of the funniest plays you'll ever see, full stop."*

-The Guardian

*"EVERY BRILLIANT THING finds a perfect balance between conveying the struggles of life, and celebrating all that is sweet in it."*

-The Independent (London)

*"...very charming... offers sentimentality without shame... guaranteed to keep your eyes brimming... [The script] balance[s] acuity and affability... with unobtrusive artistry... captivating."*

-The New York Times

*"[EVERY BRILLIANT THING] is sad, but it is also gloriously funny and exceptionally warm. It's a show that spells out a little of what depression can do to people, but it also highlights the irrepressible resilience of the human spirit and the capacity to find delight in the everyday."*

-Time Out (London)

### **Audience Responses to Burnt Thicket's production**

"Do everything you can to see this fabulous play at Bez Arts... it is brilliant. Our family LOVED the play and the actor... "Every Brilliant Thing" allowed us to enter a mystical space... Sarah Robertson made us laugh so hard as she taught us, held us, loved us, encouraged us and gave us courage... I can't say enough about the experience..." –Bev Wilson

"I was riveted by [Every Brilliant Thing]. The script and Sarah Robertson's performance were powerful. I loved how she engaged with the audience before the show and throughout... This experience transformed my understanding of what theatre can accomplish. Bravo and thank you!" –Rosie Perera

"I was blown away by the production and the performance... I hope you are selling out. You deserve to." –Louis B. Hobson (Calgary Herald theatre reviewer)

"Burnt Thicket Theatre's production of Every Brilliant Thing was just that – brilliant! I have never witnessed a play with this much seamless audience interaction. [The performer] has an uncanny ability to make everyone feel at ease, and so the scenes of audience participation were natural, funny, without embarrassment, and ultimately moving in so many ways." –Morris Ertman, Artistic Director, Rosebud Theatre

"As a mental health professional, I was curious about how this play would approach such a challenging topic. With compassion, respect, and humour the audience is invited to experience a profoundly candid glimpse into the impact mental illness has on the family. Every Brilliant Thing reminds us of the incredible resilience, and vulnerability, of the human spirit." –Karen Gibson, Gibson Collaborative Counselling

"We had the great pleasure of presenting Burnt Thicket Theatre's production of "Every Brilliant Thing" in Calgary to launch our season. I could not be happier with this decision. I have rarely seen an audience more engaged, dare I say, enraptured by a performance and a performer. Show after show the audience fully entered into this story and helped to tell it, with full emotion. Being familiar with the script I was not surprised by the laughter, but was caught off guard by the tears. I saw our audience entertained, challenged and healed. The set was simple and effective, the direction was thoughtful and intelligent and I, quite simply, cannot imagine any other actor taking on this role and filling it completely. [The performer] created safe place that made everyone want to play with her. She was magical. This production was one of my favourite experiences in the theatre. Ever." –Val Lieske, Managing Artistic Director, Fire Exit Theatre, Calgary

"As both an actor / playwright and a Mental Health / Substance Abuse Worker I found the play to be very groundbreaking. It had a profound impact of drawing the audience into the story, while at the same time generously educating about mental health, primarily suicide. I loved the interaction with



the audience, and watching how as the story unfolded and produced healing. The content was a heavy subject, yet the play didn't traumatize instead it gave a beautiful dose of insight." –Wanita Bird, Indigenous Cultural Support, Mental Health & Addiction Services Saskatoon, Saskatchewan Health Authority

"Leading our season with Burnt Thicket Theatre's Every Brilliant Thing was a success for the entire Live Five community because it provided an opportunity for our audiences to engage with the art and with one another in a way they hadn't ever before. [The performer's] joyful and cheeky rapport was disarming and infectious; you could feel that people were letting their guards down and really getting into the shared experience of this show." –Kate Herriot, Board President, Live Five Theatre

"When I hear people gush about shows, I try not to get my hopes up too far, but all the very good things I'd heard about Every Brilliant Thing paled in comparison to what was actually going on in the theatre today. A show like this one scares me to death, as it asks a form of engagement I'm often not comfortable with, but [the performer] gave us the most generous, authentic experience of this story and through it, her true, evident care for and of us was truly heroic. She seemed to take each and every one of us by the hand, never with a sideward glance to anyone else, never hinting at a lack of confidence in us or in where she was taking us, and made each of us in that audience feel like one of the Brilliant things on the list. I don't often get sentimental about shows - they have their lives and the close and its good and fine to say good-bye to them, but I hope this specific production finds more ways to hold on a little longer, because it deserves that and more people deserve to experience that. Thank-you Fire Exit Theatre, Thank-you Burnt Thicket Theatre. signed a grateful #431." –Brad G. Graham (resident stage manager, Rosebud Theatre)

"With artful direction and a humane, absorbing performance by Sarah Robertson, 'Every Brilliant Thing' embraces a very difficult subject with extraordinary amounts of empathy and energy, creating a very fine balance between kinetic storytelling and time-stopping, emotional moments."  
– Philip Chiu (international concert pianist, accompanist/music at McGill University, invited professor-accompanist Conservatoire de musique de Montreal and l'Universite de Montreal)

## Playwright's Notes

Every Brilliant Thing is a collaboration between myself, George Perrin and Jonny Donahoe. It is an adaptation of my short story 'Sleeve Notes', originally written for the Miniaturists and performed by Rosie Thomson at Southwark Playhouse, Theatre503 and the Union Theatre and by myself at Trafalgar Studios, the Old Red Lion and Village Underground, by Gugu Mbatha-Raw at 93 Feet East and by various people at the Latitude Festival. George and I worked for over a decade to turn it into a full-length play. During this time it has been through several incarnations, including an installation created by Paul Burgess and Simon Daw for Scale Project. This particular incarnation was developed with Paines Plough and Pentabus with support from Anne McMeehan and Jim Roberts. The play wouldn't exist were it not for George's persistence, his enthusiasm for the story and his openness to work in an entirely new way.

It also owes a particular debt to Jonny Donahoe who, drawing on his experience as a stand-up comedian, found ways to tell the story and use the audience that George and I couldn't have conceived of. By its nature, the play is different every night and, as such, Jonny essentially co-authored the play while performing it.

This text was published after two years of devising, several trial performances around the UK, runs in Edinburgh and London and a four-month run at the Barrow Street Theatre in NYC. It has been filtered through Jonny's interactions with hundreds of audiences. I've provided footnotes throughout to explain certain aspects of the play in performance and to give examples of some of the things that have happened unexpectedly.

–Duncan Macmillan

From *Duncan Macmillan: Plays One* (anthology), published by Oberon Books (September 27, 2016), page 283.

## **THEMES IN THE PLAY**

### **Background about mental illness and depression**

Depression is the most common mental illness in Canada, but it's also the most treatable. It's estimated that one in four Canadians has a depression serious enough to need treatment at some time in his or her life (Ontario Ministry of Health). Each day in Canada 11 people end their life and 210 make a suicide attempt ([www.suicideprevention.ca](http://www.suicideprevention.ca)).

### **Background about emotional well-being**

Former US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy says that emotional well being is just as important as eating a healthy diet and staying active: "I think of emotional well-being as a resource within each of us that allows us to do more and to perform better. That doesn't mean just the absence of mental illness. It's the presence of positive emotions that allows us to be resilient in the face of adversity" (National Geographic interview). Murthy insists, "we need to change how we think about emotions. Emotions are a source of power, and that's what science tells us. But many people I encounter have been led to think of emotions as a source of weakness. The second thing we have to do is cultivate emotional well-being. There are tools, and they're relatively simple. They include sleep, physical activity, contemplative practices like gratitude and meditation, and social connection as well."

### **Background about neuroscience, gratitude, mindfulness practices of savouring the good**

"Dan O'Grady, a psychologist, told me recently that our negative and critical thoughts are like Velcro, they stick and hold; whereas our positive and joyful thoughts are like Teflon, they slide away. We have to deliberately choose to hold onto positive thoughts so that they can "imprint." Observing my own habits of thought and in counseling others I see this to be profoundly true. The implications are enormous for individuals and for society.

"Neuroscience can now demonstrate the brain indeed has a negative bias; the brain prefers to constellate around fearful, negative, or problematic situations. In fact, when a loving, positive, or unproblematic thing comes your way, you have to savor it consciously for at least fifteen seconds before it can harbor and store itself in your "implicit memory;" otherwise it doesn't stick. We must indeed savor the good in order to significantly change our regular attitudes and moods. And we need to strictly monitor all the "Velcro" negative thoughts."

—from Richard Rohr's article "Turning Towards the Good" from <https://cac.org/turning-toward-the-good-2016-02-18/>

The Velcro-Teflon image comes from Rick Hanson, PhD neuropsychologist & author, who says we can "change our mind to change the brain to change the mind."

"NEURONS THAT FIRE TOGETHER, WIRE TOGETHER. Repeated patterns of mental activity require repeated patterns of brain activity. Repeated patterns of brain activity change neural structure and function. YOU CAN USE YOUR MIND TO CHANGE YOUR BRAIN TO CHANGE YOUR MIND To benefit yourself and other beings."

More from Rick Hanson's TEDx Talk:

"This is not about covering over negative truths. Paradoxically the more we take in the good, we're more able to see the bad and do something about. In fact this is about taking control of the brain's stone-age bias in the 21st century to excessively focus on the bad and over-worry about it. Any single time we do it isn't going to change our life, but the gradual accumulation, both in the flow of our day and at special times if we want to, like at means nighttime before bed or meals, or after meditating or a workout, we can gradually build this up inside our selves.

"I think of it as the law of little things. Its' usually lots of little bad things that take us to a bad place. And it's lots of little good things that take us to better one. There's a saying they Tibet, I think about it often, 'If you take care of the minutes, the years will take care of themselves.' I find that so hopeful, isn't it? What's the most important minute in your life? It's the next one, right? Can't do anything about the past; a few minutes into the future we start losing a lot of influence. But the next minute is a phenomenal opportunity for us.

"What will we do with the most important minute in our life? What will we do with the good that's authentically available to us in it? Will we waste it, or will we, few times a day or more, actually take it in to ourselves? For me there's a buddhist saying that really speaks to the heart of the opportunity in the most important minute of our life. It goes like this: 'Do not think lightly of the good, saying it will not come to me. Drop by drop is the water pot filled. Likewise, the wise one, gathering it little by little, fills oneself with good.' So may you and I and all beings everywhere, fill ourselves with good."

–from Rick Hansen's TEDx Talk, "Hardwiring happiness" from <https://youtu.be/jpuDyGgleh0>

### **Two Wolves - A Cherokee Legend** (from [www.firstpeople.us](http://www.firstpeople.us) )

An old Cherokee is teaching his grandson about life. "A fight is going on inside me," he said to the boy.

"It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil - he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego." He continued, "The other is good - he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you - and inside every other person, too."

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?" The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed."

### **Background about Anxiety and the Fight-Flight-Freeze Stress Response**

Consider watching this video for teaching teens from Anxiety Canada:

<https://www.anxietycanada.com/articles/fight-flight-freeze-anxiety-explained-for-teens/>

## **Background/Connections between the play and Burnt Thicket Theatre**

Every Brilliant Thing cultivates joy without ignoring pain. Burnt Thicket Theatre feels compelled to produce this play for three reasons: its winsome unveiling of depression, suicide and grief; its beautiful invitation to a posture of gratitude; and its participatory community-building experience for audiences.

The storyteller gathers an audience in order to give them the unique gift of her story and list of every brilliant thing worth living for. She invites her listeners to join her in exploring the reality of disappointment and depression while they have a ball. She woos them to grow in emotional well-being, connection in community and capacity to love well.

This production gives our company a chance to explore with audiences our curiosity about the intersection of art and lived experience through this make-believe story about mental health. The unique audience participation conventions of this play are huge artistic risks, but I believe they will serve to heighten its potential for meaningful interchange between the art and peoples' actual lives.

What emerges by the end of the play is a shared experience of understanding and hope. Through exploring the traditional artistic practice of theatre in a new way, this play offers a beautifully personal and astonishingly communal encounter with the challenges of mental illness and a journey into emotional well-being. We believe augmenting the play with audience engagement in talk-backs will allow us to develop our approach to the art/life intersection and will serve to advance artistic practice in how other theatre artists envision the roles their work plays in the public realm.

We are passionate about how our encounter with art affects how we perceive and live our actual lives, as individuals and as communities. We want to promote an environment of engagement and exploration between artists and audiences. Part of our intent with this production is to stimulate conversation about mental health and emotional wellness in our community, reducing stigma related to mental illness and removing perceived barriers to treatment. We believe art plays many roles in human action and, while public advocacy is not the main role of the arts, we recognize these contributions this production can offer. The experience of the play itself and talk-backs offer meaningful opportunities for people to share their experiences with mental illness, to reflect on becoming better listeners, to find encouragement to access treatment resources as needed, and to adopt practices to cultivate emotional well-being. As well, the six artists who work directly on the theatre production will engage learning experiences to become more emotionally healthy as individuals and grow as life-long mental health advocates for others.

## **ACTIVITIES**

### **Pre-Performance**

#### **Theatre Etiquette Conversation**

Talk about the similarities and differences between watching a movie, a television show and a live theatre presentation. Include discussions about how the performers prepare for their roles in each of the situations. For instance, how an actor in a movie or a television show can redo a scene if a mistake is made versus an actor in a "live" performance must carry on regardless of mistakes. Also discuss how an audience impacts each type of performance.

#### **HOW TO BE A POSITIVE AUDIENCE MEMBER**

Remind your students to notice the way that the set, costumes and music help make the performance of Every Brilliant Thing exciting and fun to watch!

Prepare your students for watching a "live" performance by discussing the characteristics expected of an audience. For example, a positive audience member...

- » Will sit quietly so everyone around can see and hear the performance
- » Will listen attentively and remain focused on the actors and will not distract performers by moving about or by waving or calling out to performers
- » Will laugh and applaud appropriately
- » Will contribute to the performance when asked

#### **CHARACTERS AND THEMES**

Review the character notes and themes (above) and character notes, and choose what information is most useful and appropriate to share and discuss with your class prior to viewing the performance.

##### **Character - Storyteller**

This character lives in an in-between space unlike traditional characters in plays. They are greeting the audience beforehand and inviting them to help tell their life story. There is no 4th wall dividing the world of the play from the audience, it's direct address to the nth degree, but the actor is not telling the actor's story (obviously). The character's overarching objectives are to bless the audience with their story, to be healed of their own pain in sharing it, and to woo the audience to grow by cultivating joy, to live in the reality of their experience without being trapped by the past, and to learn to love well and be loved.

#### **IMPROVISATION IN THEATRE**

This play includes elements of improvisation and audience participation - although audience members always are given the choice to consent or not participate, and they are coached and drawn along by the performer in a remarkably hospitable way. Introduce your students to fundamentals of improv with this lesson plan with improv games for using with teenagers:

<https://owlcation.com/academia/improv-lesson-plan>

**CONVERSATION ABOUT GRATITUDE** - Ask students, "What's on your list of every brilliant thing? Can you name one thing?" See where the conversation leads you.

## **ACTIVITIES**

### **Post-Performance**

Questions for conversation following the show:

- What surprised you about this play?
- Was there a particular moment or image or sound that resonated with you or might stick with you when you go home?
- There was a lot of audience participation, what made it work?
- How did you feel during the audience involvement?
- How does comedy and laughter help us talk about difficult things?
- What makes it hard to talk about mental health challenges?
- Did you see yourself or a loved one in the story?
- The audience became a mental health support group for the storyteller. How might talking about mental health challenges help us all?
- This story has been described as an invitation. What would you say it might be inviting you to?
- Is there anything you'd add to the list?

### **Ideas for Activities/Assignments**

There are a variety of ways for students to respond to, reflect on and analyze live performances: through talking, writing, stories, art, singing and playing drama games.

### **Make a class list of 1000 brilliant things**

#### **STORYTELLING WORKSHOP**

Have students retell the story using their creativity and imagination. Or write a summary of their favorite scene of the play or create a skit in groups. Encourage your students to be as creative as possible! The sky's the limit!

#### **STEPPING INSIDE**

How would you feel if one day you discovered one of your family's biggest secrets was about mental illness? What would you do if you had to hide that important secret? Have your students 'step inside' the lens of the character and discover what it would be like to be in their shoes. Some things you may want students to explore include the character's feelings, opinions, values, characteristics, and relationship to other characters etc. This can be a free write/ journal entry or a 2-3 minute monologue as the character.

#### **SHARING CIRCLE/COMMUNITY CIRCLE**

A sharing circle or a community circle is a way to gather the class to share or discuss a topic.

You may bring in or create an item such as a special rock or stick as a symbolism of a talking object. During circle time, the object is passed along to each individual in an orderly manner.

Explain to the class that the person who has the talking object is the only one who should be talking and sharing ideas. The rest of the class is paying attention by caring and listening. Here are some sample questions or topics:

- 1) What did you like about the play?
- 2) What did you learn from the play?
- 3) Choose someone in your family who you admire. Why did you choose that person?
- 4) Name one thing that you are thankful for.
- 5) Why is it important to learn about your family history/heritage?
- 6) What makes your family special?
- 7) What does family mean to you? Why are they important to you?
- 8) If you could use one word to describe your family, what would it be?
- 9) I will always remember the time when..

### **Review the play as a theatre production**

The following questions can be used for whole group discussions or for sharing with a partner or in a small group. After sharing with a partner, students can take turns sharing ideas with all .

Or use the questions as a writing activity:

- » Who was your favourite character? Why?
- » How did the actor use their voices and bodies and movements to make the characters more believable in the performance?
- » What do you think it takes to be a good actor or musician?
- » What was the scariest part of the performance? Why?
- » What was the funniest part of the performance? Why?
- » What part of the performance surprised you the most? Why?

### **News Media & Suicide Prevention**

Discuss the list of suggestions for how the media can talk about suicide in ways that help:

Don't provide technical details.

Never suggest that a method is quick, easy, painless or certain to result in death.

Avoid dramatic headlines, terms like 'suicide epidemic' or 'hot spot.'

Avoid sensationalist pictures of video. Avoid excessive detail.

Avoid using the word 'commit'. Don't describe deaths by suicide as 'successful'.

Don't publish suicide notes.

Don't publish on the front page.

Don't ignore the complex realities of suicide and its impacts on those left behind.

Include references to support groups, such as the [TalkSuicide.ca](http://TalkSuicide.ca).

Don't speculate on the reason. That's crucial.

Don't supply simplistic reasons such as he'd lost his job' or 'she'd recently become bankrupt.'

### **Teaching mental health first aid**

See the one-pager about teens' mental health first aid: [view the tMHFA one-pager](#)

Explore with your students how they could learn the principles and pass them on to your whole school. Perhaps there's an instructor who could come to your school?



## **Reduce Stigma**

Brainstorm with your class or in small groups how might they develop a project addressing some aspect of the stigma around mental health? Create it and present it in their school or community!

## **Personal mental wellness pathways**

Ask your students, “What’s one thing you’d like to do to support your own mental/emotional well-being?” Work with them to identify a trusted friend they can ask to help them follow through.

## **APPENDIX - TEACHING RESOURCES**

Canadian Mental Health Association’s Teacher’s Guide for secondary students:

Talking About Mental Health: A guide for developing an awareness program for youth

<https://www.camh.ca/-/media/files/guides-and-publications/tami-teachers-guide.pdf>

- with links between the program and the Ontario Secondary School Curriculum Guidelines
- and many ideas for class activities and projects

Mental Health Teaching Resources from SK Teachers’ Federation:

<https://www.stf.sk.ca/professional-resources/emma-stewart-resources-centre/resources/related-links/mental-health>

# RESOURCES IN OUR COMMUNITY

Mental health is more than the absence of a mental health condition or illness: it is a positive sense of well-being, or the capacity to enjoy life and deal with the challenges we face. Below you will find information and resources to help face the challenges to mental health in daily life.

## FINDING HELP

Some people worry about asking for help because there can be stigma around mental health problems. They may believe that asking for help means admitting that something is wrong. Some people worry about how others might see them. Asking for help means that you want to make changes or take steps towards your new health goals. We should celebrate the courage it takes to speak up and make changes. Getting help is part of recovery.

## BUILDING YOUR TEAM

The first steps may be the toughest, but knowing where to look for help is a good start. Here are good places to begin building your team:

- Talk with supportive friends and family. Share your feelings with them and let them be part of your team.
- Talk to your family doctor. They are a great resource and can link you to other professionals, if needed.
- Connect with community mental health clinics or organizations like the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) for information, support, and services.
- Call a help line. Some organizations also offer support online or through text messaging.
- Learn more about mental health. You can find useful books, websites, and other resources through your provincial or territorial government and community agencies.
- Connect with others who have personal experience with a mental illness and learn more about their recovery journey.
- Attend workshops and education sessions hosted at community centres, agencies, schools, colleges or universities.
- Talk with a member or leader you trust from your faith or cultural group.

## HELP LINES

### **988 Suicide Crisis Helpline** (24/7 Canada-wide)

Call or Text 9-8-8

[TalkSuicide.ca](https://talksuicide.ca) or [988.ca](https://988.ca)

### **Healthline 811** (24/7 Canada-wide)

Call 8-1-1 (translation in 100+ languages)

### **Kids Help Phone** (24/7 Canada-wide)

Call 1-800-668-6868 / Text 68686

[KidsHelpPhone.ca](https://kidshelpphone.ca)

### **Trans Lifeline** 1-877-330-6366 [TransLifeline.org](https://TransLifeline.org)

### **Indigenous Hope for Wellness Helpline**

Call 1-855-242-3310 (24/7 Canada-wide)

[HopeForWellness.ca](https://HopeForWellness.ca) (with online chat)

### **Farm Stress Line** (SK-wide) 1-800-667-4442

### **Free Rapid Access Counseling** (SK-wide)

[counsellingconnectsask.ca](https://counsellingconnectsask.ca)

### **Canadian Mental Health Association SK**

306-525-5601

[sk.cmha.ca](https://sk.cmha.ca)

## Intro to The Change Triangle

a helpful approach to emotional wellness by Dr. Hilary Jacobs Hendel

from [hilaryjacobshendel.com](http://hilaryjacobshendel.com)

### What is the Change Triangle?

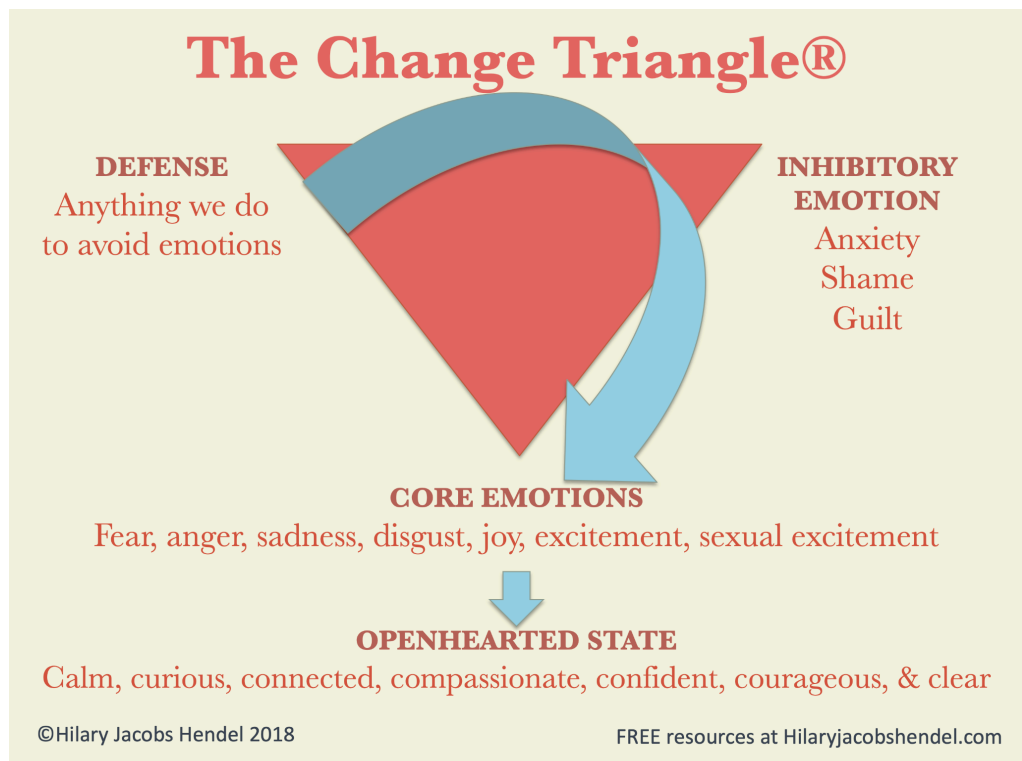
The Change Triangle® tool for emotional health is a guide to carry you from a place of disconnection back to your true Self. It's a step-by-step process for simply feeling better. It works by getting you reacquainted with core emotions like joy, anger, sadness, fear, and excitement. To my own joy and satisfaction, it has helped me and many people I have worked with recover a vital, more engaged, more authentic Self. ([download The Change Triangle slide below here](#))

The concepts underlying the Change Triangle tool were first described by Dr. David Malan in the 1970s and later by Diana Fosha, Ph.D. in her pioneering text *The Transforming Power of Affect* (Basic Books, 2000). Much of my work is based on Fosha's.

#### *What are core emotions?*

They are largely physical sensations that we come to recognize and name as a particular emotion. Core emotions inform us about our environment. Am I safe or in danger? What do I need/want and don't want? Am I sad? Am I hurt? What brings me pleasure? What disgusts me? What excites me? Core emotions are hard-wired in the middle part of our brains, meaning they are NOT subject to conscious control. Triggered by the environment, each core emotion is pre-wired to set off a host of physiological reactions that prime us for an action that is meant to be adaptive, like running from danger. Core emotions are brilliant: if we don't block them, their innate programming tells us important information to help us thrive. The core emotions are: sadness, fear, anger, joy, excitement, sexual excitement and disgust.

*What are inhibitory emotions?* Inhibitory emotions block core emotions. Shame, anxiety and guilt, the inhibitory emotions, block core emotions: 1) when they are in conflict with what pleases others whom we need like parents, peers, and partners; 2) when core emotions become too intense and our brain wants to shut them down to protect us from the emotional overwhelm.



*What are defenses?* Defenses are anything we do to avoid feeling core or inhibitory emotions. Depression is a defense because in that state we are out of touch with our core emotions. There are an infinite number of defenses but some of the other common ones in our culture are: joking, sarcasm, too much "screen time," criticizing, spacing out, procrastination, preoccupation, negative thinking, misguided aggression, working too much, over-exercising, over-eating, under-eating, cutting, sex, obsession, addiction, etc.

### Here's How The Change Triangle Tool Works

When an event or situation causes you distress or to be off-balance you must:

- 1) Determine where you are on The Change Triangle: defense, inhibitory, core?
- 2) Determine where you want to go...clockwise around The Change Triangle through core emotions, which inherently provide guidance to peace, perspective, or solution.

The Change Triangle is a place to turn to in that immediate moment when something within you, or someone or something in your environment causes you to experience emotional struggle. I turn to The Change Triangle because almost as soon as I figure out "where I am on The Triangle" I feel better for two reasons: 1) just from gaining some distance and perspective from my immediate feeling; and 2) from having some direction of what to do to help myself feel better.

Here are the basic steps:

- *Identify* which corner you most closely find yourself.
- *Pause*, breathe, and calm yourself for a few seconds at least.
- Try to *name* all the underlying core emotions coming up in the moment. There may be more than one. Name each one you can.
- *Listen* without judging to what the emotion is telling you.
- *Think* through the best way to proceed in the moment.

With a little practice, when you ask, "Where am I on The Change Triangle right now?" you will realize that your emotional state is found at one of three corners of The Triangle:

- 1) Top left corner - Defense
- 2) Top right corner - Anxiety, Shame or Guilt
- 3) Bottom corner - Core Emotion

Or below The Triangle, in a calm state of peace and openheartedness - where we all hope to spend much more time. The state below The Triangle is accessed by "listening" to what the core emotion of the moment is telling us, by honoring what it says and by letting the associated body sensations move through freely until they naturally subside. Core emotions are wavelike in nature: rising then ebbing.

In my [blog](#), [book](#) and [articles](#), I use stories, tips, practical experiments as well as discussion of neuroscience and much more to share specifics and How To's. Here's a quick How To Overview to give you an idea of the basics I'll expand on in my blog:

### Example of The Change Triangle Tool in Action:

I use The Change Triangle frequently myself to feel better. Here is a recent example from my own experience:

Today I am anxious about writing a blog. I feel fluttering in my chest and my stomach is all bubbly-feeling. Because I don't like feeling my anxiety, I'm avoiding it by having negative thoughts like "maybe I can't do this" and I'm obsessing about an unrelated phone call I have to make. (This initial move from emotions to defense largely happens unconsciously and automatically.) This is an example of me moving from the top right corner of The Change Triangle where anxiety and other inhibitory emotions are located to the top left of The Change Triangle where defenses are located. I do NOT want to feel my anxiety!

Once I notice my negative thoughts ("I can't do this!") are really defenses (which takes some practice in becoming aware), I know I can work The Change Triangle to feel better, so I begin by asking myself,

"Can I figure out what core emotions are driving me right now?"

To find core emotions, I shift attention to my body. This is key!

To no surprise, when I shift my attention away from my defenses (negative thoughts that I can't do this) back to my body, I feel my anxiety again--that fluttering in my chest. I am back on the upper right corner of The Change Triangle; but this time I'm going in the RIGHT direction, towards dealing directly with my core emotions. My goal is to connect to my Self on a deep level and stop listening to those negative thoughts that I created to avoid my feelings.

To deal with my anxious feelings, I take long deep breaths as I focus on the physical feeling inside. I focus on the physical feeling of my anxiety with a stance of compassion and curiosity versus fear and judgment. Once my anxiety diminishes a bit by breathing and other self-calming strategies (see my blog posts), the underlying core emotions begin to emerge.

Sometimes the core emotion I'm experiencing is obvious. Other times, it's hard to figure out. In the challenging moments, I literally "try on" each core emotion, one by one. Here's how:

My attention is still in my body - below my neck. I ask myself, "Is there sadness there? Is there anger? Excitement? Joy? Is there fear? Or disgust?" There is usually a sense of recognition when I find the right core emotion - and there may be more than one! I find and name them all. Then I tend to each emotion, one by one.

I discover that under my anxiety is the core emotion of fear.

Fear feels similar to anxiety but anxiety doesn't come with a prescription for what to do. Anxiety tends to paralyze instead of inform. But fear? We can actually deal with fear! Here's how:

I ask my fear, "What is it you are afraid of?" My fear answers me, "I'm afraid of embarrassing myself, afraid of disappointing my readers."

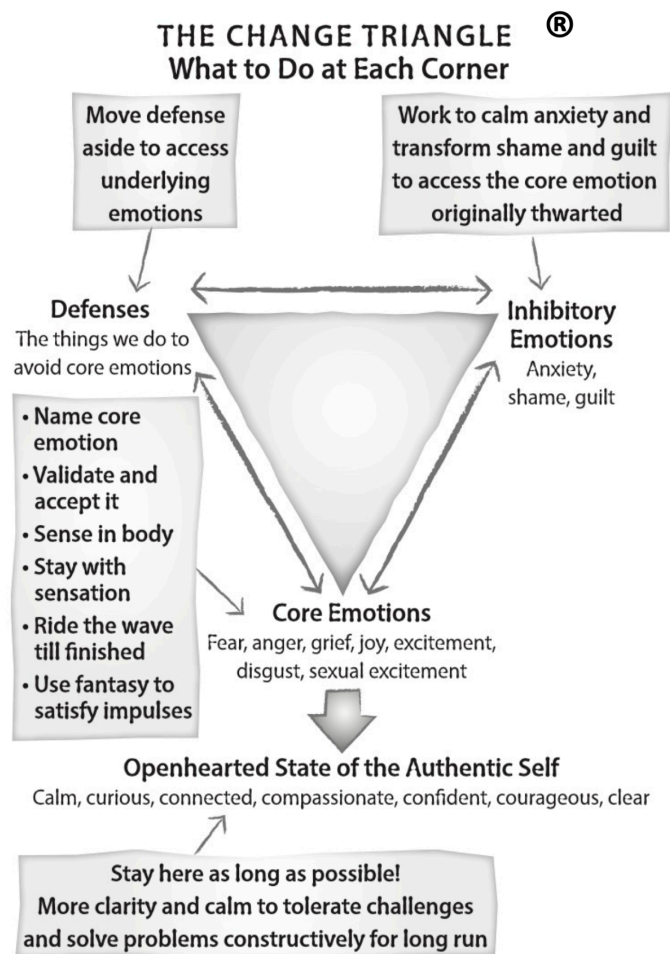
Ahhh... now I'm really getting somewhere. Fear, like all core emotions, includes hard-wired impulses. Fear tells us to run away as if we're in danger from a pouncing lion. So, here's what I can do to manage these impulses:

I ask myself, do I want to act on my fear and run away from writing the blog? Or do I want to tolerate my fear (courage!) and have a go at it? I decide to try. I remind myself that even if my fear comes true I will most certainly survive (unlike if a lion pounced on me).

So, how am I feeling now? Better. Now that I've found and named my fear, my anxiety diminishes. I feel calmer because I am clearer about what is upsetting me. I've chosen courage over fear and I'm inspired to get this blog done!

Our feelings are a compass for living. Ignoring emotions leads to stress, anxiety and difficulty finding joy and peace - a feeling of loss of Self.

It doesn't have to be this way! Anyone can live a life in harmony with his or her core feelings. How? By getting to know those emotions. That is what The Change Triangle is all about: it's a map back to the true Self.



[\(link to the Mindfulness Map PDF at right\)](#)

©It's Not Always Depression p.263 (Random House & Penguin UK, 2018)

For more free resources on emotions visit [hilaryjacobshendel.com](http://hilaryjacobshendel.com)

You'll find many more stories of people working the Change Triangle to increase their wellbeing, with experiments you can practice that help ease depression, anxiety, shame, and guilt, in the articles I write and in [the Change Triangle book](#).

**FREE 12-Class Curriculum on The Change Triangle**

Access my [free, trauma-informed curriculum](#) that teaches this new approach to emotions.

**Emotions Education 101 Turnkey Curriculum**

We, AEDP psychotherapists and educators, Heather Sanford, LCSW, MPA and Hilary Jacobs Hendel, LCSW, author of *It's Not Always Depression* (Random House and Penguin UK), developed this Emotions Education 101 curriculum because *we believe emotions education should be basic education for all starting in high school*. We wanted to make it easy for anyone to share this information in their community, agency, hospital, workplace, coaching practice, counseling practice, psychotherapy practice, or school. [Learn more here...](#)

## About Burnt Thicket Theatre & Every Brilliant Thing Touring History

Burnt Thicket Theatre is an independent company producing live and digital theatre that brings awareness to real issues in our community on Treaty Six territory, planting seeds for positive social change. Our vision is a world of hopeful people who know their immeasurable value in the midst of brokenness and who work together towards a shared future marked by justice, equality and love. Our mission is to tell stories that kindle hopeful change in people's lives.

With over 290 performances to date in 44 cities across Canada, Burnt Thicket Theatre began in 2007 as an artist collective in Calgary. Founding artistic director James Popoff and current artistic director Stephen Waldschmidt created *Hockey Dad: A Play In 3 Periods*, which toured across western Canada, inviting audiences to family reconciliation. In producing the world premiere and cross-Canada tour of *She Has a Name* by Andrew Kooman, we moved people to join the work of abolishing modern-day slavery with performances in 13 cities from Halifax to Victoria. After prairie tours of *Solo Joe* and our first living room show *Twinkle*, we became a charitable society in 2013. Our world premiere tour of *We Are the Body* by Andrew Kooman called people to advocate for prisoners of conscience. The company offered theatre education for youth and presentation of other companies' shows before transitioning to our Saskatoon home in 2017.

*Every Brilliant Thing* offers audiences a powerful comedy about depression, suicide and gratitude, with multiple tour presentations over 15 weeks, including extended runs and sold out shows:

- in 2018 at Saskatoon's Live Five Theatre and Calgary's Fire Exit Theatre;
- in 2020 at Regina's Globe Theatre and Saskatoon's Winterruption Festival;
- in 2022 at Alberta's Rosebud Theatre for eight weeks;
- and upcoming September 2023 two weeks at Bez Arts Hub in Langley, BC.

*My Little Plastic Jesus* by Tim Bratton is our most recent commissioned live world premiere, which we've toured to living rooms across Canada since 2019 (yes living rooms, kind of like a house concert). When COVID-19 shut down in-person shows, we created two original fiction podcast series. The first, *Tied In Knots*, presented 5 audio plays that embrace the challenges of marriage. Our second, *We Treaty People*, is now playing on all podcast platforms (along with a radio broadcast on CFR 90.5FM and in Native Earth Performing Arts' festival Weesageechak 36), offering 18 episodes of audio plays and interviews created by 49 Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists exploring the question, "What does it mean to embrace all our relations?" In 2023 we produced the SK premiere of Krista Marushy's award-winning play *Evergreen*, an intimate thriller which wrestles with loneliness, faith and the risks of love. We also presented the SK premiere of *New Blood: A Story Of Reconciliation*, in partnership with Persephone Theatre and Gordon Tootoosis Nīkānīwin Theatre, an epic musical with dozens of performers blending the music of Peter Gabriel and Blackfoot tradition. [www.burnthicket.com](http://www.burnthicket.com)