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Spark Podcast

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Featured Guest: Zeinab Khawaja
Interviewer: Dr. Catharine Munn
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Dr. Catharine Munn (00:01):

Welcome to the BOUNCE podcast series, hosted by me, Dr. Catharine Munn. This series is inspired by the original BOUNCE project at University of Victoria created by Rebecca Gagan.

In our series, McMaster faculty and alumni share stories which could easily have remained untold or secret. These are stories of loss, grief, rejection, relationship difficulties, mental health problems, and more, based on experiences our guests have had when they were students. This podcast series has been developed by our BOUNCE team, made up of students, staff and faculty at McMaster with a grant from the McMaster Okanagan Special Project Fund. The BOUNCE team are inspired and informed by our own experiences as students, and conversations we have had with students. And we are passionate about promoting more open discussion of failure and struggle at McMaster. We envision that BOUNCE at McMaster can help us to build resilience, individually and collectively, by increasing mutual understanding and creating connections through the sharing of stories. Learn more about the project, our team, and our guests by checking out our website.

So thanks so much for joining us today for this BOUNCE podcast. And as you know, Zeinab, as part of BOUNCE, I'm talking to faculty and alumni at Mac about their experiences and their struggles during their student years, especially the challenging and difficult ones. So I'm hoping that through these conversations we can help students and others to feel less alone, to feel less ashamed, and to feel more connected to each other. So, I'm so looking forward to hearing and reflecting on your experiences, and I know many others will as well. So hello to you, Zeinab.

Zeinab Khawaja (01:48):

Hello. Thank you for having me, Catharine. Great to be here.

Dr. Catharine Munn (01:51):

Good. So I know that it wasn't too long ago that, maybe it seems like a long time ago, but it wasn't too long ago that you were actually an undergraduate student yourself. And now I know you've moved through that and out the other side into the working world, but maybe you can give me a little snapshot of where you came from, how you came to be at Mac and then where you're at now.

Zeinab Khawaja (02:14):

Yeah sure, I can do a brief overview of that. So I actually grew up overseas in the Middle East, in Kuwait. So I did all of my schooling and high schooling there, though I used to visit Canada in the summer. I had a lot of extended family here, and my brothers had moved here before I did. So I moved to Canada in 2013 to start at university, to start at McMaster, in the Bachelor of Health Sciences program. At the time, I really wanted to pursue medicine. And once I got in, I was told that this was the place to be, and I should go. So I didn't really know too much about the program or McMaster, for that matter, when I started, but I'm so glad and so grateful that I ended up coming here because it's been such a huge part of my growth and my journey.

So I graduated in the class of 2017 from the Bachelor of Health Sciences program. And since then I've done a few different roles related to mental health and wellbeing of students here at McMaster. I also worked at the Canadian Mental Health Association at the national level for a while, and I'm just really passionate about, I guess, mental health, more broadly. I'm starting a masters of social work this fall in indigenous trauma and resiliency that I'm really, really excited about. So I'm excited to have these kinds of conversations.

Dr. Catharine Munn (03:25):

Great. It's so good to have you as, I guess, as an alumni, but then I guess also, soon to be a student again. Though, I don't think at McMaster, that's at a different university, right?

Zeinab Khawaja (03:34):

Yeah. That one's going to be at U of T, University of Toronto.

Dr. Catharine Munn (03:37):

Great. So I think you have lots of experience and lots of... I know you have lots of stories that you can share with us today. I wanted to... Really, in BOUNCE, what we're trying to do is really talk to faculty and alumni about some of the more challenging or difficult experiences or encounters or times they may have had in their student years. And so I do want to dive right in there, just so that we can talk and learn a bit from you about some of your experiences and what helped get you through, so that hopefully other people can really connect to those stories, we can connect to one another and feel less alone as a result of sharing stories.

Zeinab Khawaja (04:29):

Yeah. I think there's so much power in stories and there's so much healing that can come from stories. Because there's so much that we can learn from other people's stories and from sharing our own, so I'm really excited to be able to share mine. So I can dive right in if you want, and start off with some of the things that were going on for me. So, in high school, leading up to coming here for university, there's a lot going on in my personal life and with my family. And I'll gently jump right into that. So something that was happening for me was very culturally based. My family wanted me to have an arranged marriage to someone who was a close friend of the family, someone I knew tangentially, but was also significantly older than me. Which is a common thing that happens to a lot of people, I think, from a lot of different places. And it was something that was, I guess, a norm in my extended family, I would say.

So what ended up happening, was that immediately before starting here at McMaster, in fact, I would say a week or two before my Welcome Week, I was actually in India having an arranged marriage. And it wasn't something that I was particularly excited about, but it was something that I

had accepted was a part of my life and something I had to do and something that would just be there. And so I remember, the marriage happened, a couple of days later I flew back to Kuwait, which is where I grew up, to prepare to come to Canada. And then a few days later I was on a plane headed over here, headed to Ontario. And then a couple days later it was Welcome Week and there was all this energy and excitement.

And I had, by that point, learned really well how to compartmentalize. So I was just like, "Out of sight, out of mind, I'm here to enjoy my Welcome Week and my university experience and being in this new and exciting place around new and exciting humans." So I very much dove into Welcome Week. I had a great time, I met one of my best friends, who is still one of my best friends. And I had a really, I would say, good Welcome Week experience that I'm very proud of and grateful for. But I still remember, I had the henna on my hands and my feet, and I remember being so conscious of that and so nervous that people would notice. And I remember people would ask me about it, "Oh, that's so pretty. What is that?" And I would just, as a knee-jerk response, just explain that, "Oh yeah, this was, I went to a family wedding in India over the summer. It was so great." And that was technically true, I just didn't mention that it was my wedding.

Dr. Catharine Munn (07:00):

Wow. So that's really incredible to imagine you having to negotiate those two worlds so close to one another, so that you had gotten married.... And just so I'm clear, so you've gotten married in India and then you came alone to Hamilton to start into your undergrad?

Zeinab Khawaja (07:22):

My father had flown with me to Canada and one of my uncles was also able to drive me to university. But yeah, for the most part, I was alone here in Hamilton, which worked out to be in my benefit, overall, I would say. But I did have a lot of extended family here in the GTA area, as well as his side of the family. Both of his siblings were also married and settled here in Canada, so I would be seeing them throughout my first and second year. Especially, I saw them a lot on weekends. They always wanted me to come over, which was both really, really nice, because family and care and food and all this great stuff, but also really, really stressful, obviously. So it was so hard to be present, yeah.

Dr. Catharine Munn (08:08):

Yes. So you were... And your husband remained back in India or Kuwait?

Zeinab Khawaja (08:13):

In Kuwait, yeah.

Dr. Catharine Munn (08:15):

In Kuwait. So he remained back in Kuwait and you were living your life here and he was living his life there. And sounds like this was not something you were sharing with any of the new people you were meeting.

Zeinab Khawaja (08:26):

No. I remember really thinking about this before I got here, and just being like, "I don't want to hide this part of myself." I had hidden it from most people in high school, I could count on one hand the number of friends who knew. And then by the time I left, I think a lot of people had found out, but I

was like, "Well, I'm gone now so it doesn't matter." And I remember thinking, "I don't want to feel like I'm hiding myself in university, this is just a thing and it's okay." But then I remember, and I was sitting there in French 18026, and someone looked at my hand and was like, "Oh, that's such a pretty ring. Is that an engagement ring?" And I freaked out, and instantly was like, "Nope. No, it's not." And then I just reflexively made that decision, without even making a decision.

And so, for the most part, I was not telling many people, but I think there was always this thing inside of me that wanted to be known, that wanted to understood, even as parts of me didn't believe I deserved it or didn't believe I should seek that out. And so, as much as I felt like I had to keep it a secret, I knew that inside I didn't want to, there was a part of me that wanted to be seen and that wanted it to be known and that wanted help. I just didn't even know that that was going on. So I remember, probably, Octoberish of my first year, I ended up telling one of my close friends here at university. And that was the first person in Canada that I had told, and it made it real for me.

And then it was towards the end of my first year, very much at the end of my first year, that I told the first quote, unquote, grown up, I told my first year inquiry facilitator. In the bachelor of health sciences, you have... we are fortunate enough to have a smaller setting where you have one inquiry facilitator to 15 to 20 first years. And you have one-on-ones with your facilitator throughout the year, usually about four throughout the whole year. So I remember at my last end-of-year interview being like, "I'm going to tell her." I literally spent... I was up till 4:00 AM that week, just writing out, just pouring out my life story and trying to motivate myself and tell myself that I could tell someone, that I could do it. And I remember getting to that interview and not being able to give it to her and not being able to say it to her, and walking away from that interview.

It was still a great interview, we chatted about other stuff I was stressed about. It was a great conversation, but I remember feeling so disappointed in myself for not telling her that I was going through all these things and not giving her this notebook full of twenty pages of my 4:00 AM ramblings. And what I ended up doing was, I ended up sharing it with another friend who was in that class with me and saying, "Hey, you can read this. I'm not ready to talk about it, but you can read it. And then could you give it to the facilitator for me at your interview? Just so that she has it, because I couldn't bring myself to give it at the time." But I still knew that I wanted to be known, I wanted that story to be heard and I wanted her to know it so that we could talk about it. I just wasn't able to do the telling part quite yet.

Dr. Catharine Munn (11:21):

So somehow for you, at that time, you mustered up the courage, I guess, to write it down, first of all, and to know that it was okay to write it down and to think about sharing it. But then also to share it with your friend, and then knowing that you shared it with your friend to allow her to share it with a faculty member. And tell me, how did she react? Or did you have a follow-up conversation to that? I'm interested to know how that went.

Zeinab Khawaja (11:54):

Because I gave it through someone else, there wasn't an obvious, imminent conversation. We didn't have an appointment book, there was nothing. And so, I could have very easily just floundered that

somewhere and not talked to her again and never had to talk to her about it, which is something I had considered. But I ended up just randomly going into the office at some point early on in that summer, the BHC office, because I needed something for some paperwork, or something or the other. And she was there because she has an office there, and she saw me and was like, "Hey, you're here. Let's talk." I was like, "Sure." And I knew that I wanted to, but I also really truly didn't want to.

And so, we were able to talk, she's like, "I read your note." And I was like, "Oh, good." And she was like, "Wow, that's quite a story." I'm like, "Yep. It was quite a story indeed." And then she wanted to set a time and she just gave me... It's hard to remember exactly what happened, this was now back in 2014. But she just gave me some space to share what I'd been through and how I'd gotten through it. And it just felt really good to tell people and to allow that part of myself to be known and didn't feel like it was something that I was having hold within myself, because it was a lot to hold onto, it was a lot to hold space for. And I just truly didn't have the tools to hold space for it myself.

I was surviving, and I'm so proud of that. But part of that was avoiding it or letting phone calls go missed and not returning voicemails and not returning texts. And I didn't like doing that, it didn't feel good, and yet... And I had a lot of judgment on myself for not doing those things, but I think I needed to at the time to survive that. And so, finally being able to talk to another human who had some world experience and wasn't another teenager just trying to figure things out, which is... All of my friends, they did their best to support me, but truly none of us really knew what we were doing. And so, having that person was such an important step for me. And it led to me being able to talk to other people about it and accepting some truths within myself. Right. Which was really, really powerful.

Dr. Catharine Munn (14:01):

Yes. And I'm struck by really still thinking about how you were having to hold this secret, the secret about your marriage, while you were being a student, which is already stressful enough. But then I also wonder, were you having to hold secrets about your life here from your family back in Kuwait, as well? Was it that you were having to keep track of which life you were living, and which secrets different people have?

Zeinab Khawaja (14:29):

Oh yeah, I would say definitely. In first and second year, probably not as much. I wasn't actively keeping secrets from my parents, I just wasn't volunteering a lot of information, either. They couldn't tell you much about my day-to-day, and they were just like, "Oh, are you doing well? How are your studies going?" We didn't have very deep conversations that went into my day-to-day, or how I'm doing or my plans or my studies, or anything like that. It was very high-level conversations, and I also avoided a lot of their phone calls.

So there was a lot of freedom for me to be able to do what I want. I don't think that there was necessarily stuff that I was actively hiding. It wasn't until towards the end of my second year, when I... That was when I started to realize that I'm queer, and come to terms with my sexuality, which was a big part in helping me leave the marriage. Which I did, by the way, I don't think I've clarified that yet, so far. I am officially divorced, and I just want to throw that out there so people know that. But yeah, towards the end of my second year, I had received all this wonderful, positive messaging from my friends and the instructor that I talked to, and other people that I was allowing myself to support me. Because you have to allow people to support you, I believe.

And so, people were telling me to be kind to myself and that I deserve to be happy. And then I was volunteering with peer support services. So I was learning, I was receiving training about consent. That was a concept I had never been talked to about before in my life. And so, that was life changing. I had training around how to support LGBTQ+ communities. And that was also pretty big for me, because I'm like, "Oh yeah, it's okay to be queer. And it's okay to not be straight." And all of these things were... messaging was coming at me throughout my second year because of this volunteer opportunity. And so by the time I got to the end of my second year, I was like, "Oh, okay. This is okay then." And I was finally able to, just within myself say, "Oh, I want to leave this marriage," which was a big step in and of itself and came with a lot of stuff.

But then from that point onwards there was more to, I guess, hide from my parents and there was more of myself that I did have to manage. What truths do my parents know, what truths do my friends here know? And it's something that I struggled with, even back in high school, because that's when I started balancing these two parts of myself. I really just felt like, "Who even am I?" Right. I felt like I'm one self when I'm at school and with people who I feel like accept me. And then I feel like I'm another self with family. And I just, I hated this feeling of not knowing who I was and feeling so incongruous within myself. I just wanted to have one harmonious vision of who I was. And so, I very actively and intentionally had to work towards that. I just, "Okay, what parts of myself do I think aren't true?" Right. And who do I think I truly am?

And I remember, because my home life and that personal stuff was so deeply painful in so many ways, not that it wasn't good stuff with my family too, but because all of this stuff was so deeply traumatizing, I was so actively invested in making the other parts of my life as good as they could be, and really being a version of myself that I liked and loved and could be proud of in all these other areas, so I volunteered. In high school, I was Head Girl and I was in all the sports teams. Coming here, I did Intramurals, I volunteered with the peer support line. I made so many friends, I connected with instructors and teachers. I sought out mentors and opportunities everywhere I could. I really, I feel like I put a lot into university as well as high school. And I got a lot from it that gave me a sense of worth, worthiness and belonging and feeling just good about myself and liking who I am. And then having to merge those identities was a lifelong ongoing journey, if I'm being honest.

Dr. Catharine Munn (18:10):

Yes. So it sounds like, even though you had these huge challenges, you were still pretty committed to making university be something good for you that, to me-

Zeinab Khawaja (18:18):

Yeah, for sure.

Dr. Catharine Munn (18:20):

It sounds like you were back then, I know of you now, as a pretty outgoing spirited kind of person, that you really... Those were the strengths that you had that you used to really connect to other people in your community and to find things that you could do that made you feel good, even though there was all this other stuff going on that was really hard to sort out and confusing. And it sounds like a lot of identic struggling to figure out who you are and how you fit in. Which I think is really what a lot of people struggle with, especially at that time, but made even more complicated by your circumstances back then.

Zeinab Khawaja (19:08):

For sure. I think that's... Yeah, figuring out who you are is such a big part of university. And I was very committed to just, I just wanted to enjoy parts of my life. And that's not to say that I was super thriving throughout university, obviously I was going through this stuff and there were days where I didn't want to get out of bed and I was crying at night and I was up late and I was doing all things. But it's always been very important to me to not let grief be the only emotion I'm feeling. And I do believe that, obviously give that space, and maybe I could have given it a bit more space, I was maybe compartmentalizing and avoiding some stuff, but it was also important to me to also have joy in my life, to also have connection and meaning. And there's always been such a strong drive in me to just reach out for that. Right. To reach out for connection and to reach out for belonging and to reach out for acceptance, I've always had that in me. And so, I just tried to lean into that.

And I was so fortunate that I found people who were able to receive that, and hold space for that, and support that. But I think something that I've learned is that there are people out there who care and want to, and can support you and help you. You just have to be brave enough to reach out for it. Even if you don't feel like you deserve it, even if you're not sure what will come of it, even if it might end up being bad and hurtful, the trying is what mattered. Knowing that I... Every time I tried to tell someone, it was like I was telling myself, "You deserve to be heard." Every time I spoke up, it was like me telling myself, "No, you deserve to take up space. Your story deserves to be heard. Your story is important. What you're going through matters and it's valid, your pain is valid."

Dr. Catharine Munn (20:47):

How did you come to believe that, or to find the courage to do that? I guess that's what I'm wondering is, where did that come from? That you knew that it was okay to do that, you could do that, and that you would keep doing that, even if you would have an encounter that wasn't a good one. What kept you going back to reaching out?

Zeinab Khawaja (21:12):

That's a great question. I wish I had a clear, well-thought-out answer. But I think it was just, every moment of peace and safety I had ever known had come from sharing and allowing that to happen. Right. Whether it was intentional or not. And I was very fortunate to have people who actively would check-in on me, and actively would ask me these things. And even if I was aggressively uncomfortable, they'd be like, "You don't have to talk about this, but maybe you could benefit from it." And so, I was fortunate to have that. But I think, just knowing that it brought me so much peace to be able to share it, and it made the burden feel a little more manageable anytime I shared it. And the slightest glimmers of hope and opportunity that came out from sharing, I knew that that was worth it, and I knew that I was worth it.

And, again, I don't want to undersell this, I was aggressively uncomfortable with all of the sharing that happened. It's not like I was like, "Oh yeah, I'm going to share and it's going to be easy and it's going to help me. And it's going to be great." That would be a great mentality to have, because I believe that now. But back then it was so uncomfortable, I couldn't even hand someone a note. But I knew it needed to be done because I knew I needed someone to hear it.

Dr. Catharine Munn (22:28):

You somehow knew that sharing this about yourself was going to help you at some level, even early on before you'd shared it, you felt the need to share it.

Zeinab Khawaja (22:40):

There was no choice. I truly just could not hold onto this within myself. And I had talked to friends about it in the past. And again, they did their best, and it was so powerful to be able to share space with them and share some of the sadness without worrying about overwhelming people, and I was so fortunate to have that. But yeah, there was just this drive in me. And I think we all have it, it's just silenced by society and our upbringing, or whatever else that happens. But I think we all have this drive in us, this need to be known and to be seen and to be heard and understood. And I didn't necessarily know that at the time, but I think in order to feel like you belong, in order to feel like you're accepted for who you are, you have to allow people to see who you are. You have to allow people to know who you are.

And I've always... One of the hardest things for me was feeling like I wasn't being my full self with my friends. It was like, this is such a huge part of my life and it has shaped my identity so much, and I want these people to know me better. I want them to know who I truly am. That's where it came from. Right. It wasn't necessarily like I need them to know my secret. I just wanted to feel like I was known and understood for who I was, and not like I was hiding myself. Because I was like, "Why am I hiding?" Well, I know why I was hiding, but you know what I mean.

Dr. Catharine Munn (24:00):

Yes. And then it sounds like, over time then, this distance between who you were with your family and who you figured out you were with your friends and at school became so far from each other, especially, it sounds like, when you realized you were queer, or came to grips with that. Then what happened? How did you navigate that knowledge, and then figuring out how to share that?

Zeinab Khawaja (24:31):

So, it was pretty chaotic, I'm not going to lie. It was pretty messy. It's interesting to think back and be like, "Oh yeah, all those things happened." I think my queerness was helpful in helping me to identify that I needed to leave the marriage, and so was learning about consent. But I think my queerness was not on the forefront of my mindset in terms of what I need my parents to know. I was not thinking about dating or any of those things, I was still very much like, "I'm still married." That was the only thing that I was thinking about, in those regards. So I think it was just, I needed to be surrounded by a lot of love and support. That was what I needed. And I was fortunate to have that with some excellent friends, both friends from back in Kuwait, back home, who I was still in contact with virtually, as well as the friends from here who I had allowed to know me in that way.

But just being told that I deserve to be happy, by many people multiple times. And being told that it's okay to let other people down, if you're doing what's right for you. And being told that it's okay to prioritize myself, to be kind to myself, all of this messaging was, I just sat with it for a while. And then the process was, I told my parents, they knew that I was struggling, but they were just of the mindset of, she'll get used to it. This is just what happens. And then the women... Then they just get broken down and then you're just settled into this life, kind of thing. So I was very clear, I was like, "I am struggling and I don't want this, and I want to get out of this marriage." And again, they were very dismissive. I had to tell them, retell them multiple times, which was exhausting in and of itself. But I won't go over all the iterations of telling them, and all the ups and downs and highs and lows of that.

But what happened at the end was, this was at the end of my third year of university, the summer before my fourth year. And at this point, I felt very grounded in my sexuality, very grounded in, I am getting out of this marriage. And so I just had a very honest conversation with my parents. I

talked to them and I was just like, "I no longer expect you to support me in this. It would be great if you could, but either way, I am getting out of this marriage now. I'm getting myself out of here. Your support would be helpful and make this process a lot easier for me, but either way, it's happening. And you can choose to either be on my side, you can choose to support your daughter and continue to have a relationship with your daughter, or you can choose not to. That choice is yours to make, but I've made my choice." And that was a terrifying conversation to have. I still think about that, and I feel shaken.

Dr. Catharine Munn (27:07):

Zeinab, how did you get to that place where you could have that conversation? What helped get you to that place?

Zeinab Khawaja (27:15):

My friends, my support systems, and the inquiry facilitator, the prof who I mentioned earlier, all the peer support training that I received was really powerful as well. There I was learning how to support other people, learning how to validate other people, learning how to tell other people it's okay to struggle, it's okay to have needs. And I am someone who, I believe in practicing what you preach. That's my highest value, I would say. And so, I was like, "If I'm saying this to all these other people, if I'm telling other people, it's okay to be queer, it's okay to have needs, it's okay to be all these things, I have to apply that to myself." So it was just a process of a lot of journaling and reflecting and a lot of crying and a lot of talking to people and sharing a lot of my journaling with my friends.

I remember, I would slip some papers under my friend's door, being like, "I don't want to tell you, but I want you to know this." And then we would eventually be able to talk about it. But I basically, I did whatever I needed to do. That's it, that's the bottom line. I knew that I needed this and I knew I wasn't ready yet, but I knew I needed it. And I knew I would do whatever it took to get me there. And that it was okay to do whatever it took to get me there, as long as I was not being actively terrible to anyone, which I wasn't, I knew that it was what I needed.

Dr. Catharine Munn (28:31):

Yes. And so it sounds like mostly it was through your friends and supports in your program and people you knew and talked to. And was there a time that you reached out for professional help, or it was more the informal piece?

Zeinab Khawaja (28:45):

So during undergrad itself, during all of this, I did not reach out for professional help. I think, I was in so many help-seeking settings, all of my friends were peer support workers who had been trained. And I was exposed to a lot of people with a lot of that mental health background. And I was doing a lot of that learning. So I felt like, "Oh, I have a lot of this knowledge around being kind to myself and validation and all these things." So I felt like, "Oh, I know I don't need that professional side." But I feel like I could have benefited from it, for sure, at the time. But it wasn't until after the marriage was over, over, and I was done with undergrad, and I think it was, maybe the summer after my first year was over, that's when I first sought out professional therapy.

Because I felt like I'd reached a point where I'm like, "Okay, I'm no longer working on stuff, I'm no longer growing. I feel like I've done as much of the processing as I feel like I can do with the

tools and knowledge that I have, and I need a little bit more." And now I'm working through the trauma, right. It's called post traumatic stress for a reason, you have to be post the trauma. And so, once I was post the trauma... Theoretically, are you ever? But once I was out of the marriage and it was official, and he knew and his family knew, and all of that stuff, then I was like, "Okay, now I have the space to feel what I'm feeling, and now I need help processing all of the things I'm feeling, and all of the ways it's continuing to impact me in my thought processes and stuff."

Dr. Catharine Munn (30:04):

Yes. Yes. And I think, you have different people find their help in different places at different moments, I guess. For you, it was very much finding your people, the people you could talk to. And you were able to do that just by, sounds like, putting yourself out there over and over again.

Zeinab Khawaja (30:20):

Yeah, basically.

Dr. Catharine Munn (30:22):

And trying to find people who were able to listen to you and also to hear what you needed to hear.

Zeinab Khawaja (30:32):

Yeah, very much so. I think that was it.

Dr. Catharine Munn (30:36):

If you think about yourself back then, maybe in first year, are there things that you wish that somebody had said to you, or that you could have heard at that time, that might have helped?

Zeinab Khawaja (30:51):

Yeah. I needed someone to say, "You are doing so great. You are trying so hard and you're doing the best that you can with the tools that you have and the knowledge that you have available for you right now. And none of this was your fault, and it's okay to need help. And it's okay to be afraid, and you don't have to face all of these things alone." Those are the things that I needed to hear back then. And those are the things that I tell myself now to this day, I'm a big fan of inner child work. I'm not sure if you're familiar with that, but I love writing letters to my childhood self.

Dear 13-year-old Zeinab, I'm sorry I blamed you for a lot of stuff. You are so great. Dear 18-year-old me, I'm sorry I blamed you for so long. You had no tools and you did such a great job, and you found us joy and connection despite everything you were going through, how amazing. I judged you for so long, but you did such an amazing job. Even if you weren't thriving, even if you weren't processing everything as perfectly as you could have been, you did so amazing to survive that and to get through that, and to get us to this point now where we have the love and support and tools that we need to get through.

Dr. Catharine Munn (32:00):

Wow. I mean, I must say, I'm thinking all those things about you right now. And honestly, thinking about really, what an amazing really journey it has been, it sounds like, through all of this. And how you were able to come through and be the kind of joyous, exuberant person you are right now, is

really an amazing thing to hear about. I don't know if there's anything else that you want to add, knowing that there are students listening to this and maybe others on the university campus, and anything else you wanted to add about your own experiences or what you hope maybe other people could learn from you and from your story.

Zeinab Khawaja (32:48):

I think the main takeaway is just that you deserve to be heard, you deserve to be seen, you deserve to take up space and you're not a terrible person. There are no good or bad people, I think. We're all just doing the best we can with the tools and the upbringing that we were given. And if there's something that you're struggling with, there's support out there and there's nothing that you can't work through. It might not be easy, it might not be fun. It's probably going to be real hard, and you're probably going to cry a lot, and that's okay. You can be supported through that, and you can work through that. But I cannot oversell the importance of reaching out for connection, even if you don't believe you're deserving of it, you are. And reaching out for connection, even when you're not deserving of it, is how you learn to believe that you are deserving.

Isolation can feel safer sometimes, because you're like, "Oh, no-one can hurt me, and no-one can judge me," and all that stuff. So isolation can feel safer, but it's not really. It's okay to need some time on your own, obviously, but you need community, we all do. And we need to feel like we're accepted. And we have to allow ourselves to take that risk and be vulnerable. The act of sharing is what's healing. Obviously, having a good response is also good, but the act of sharing in and of itself is so powerful.

Dr. Catharine Munn (34:01):

Thank you so much, Zeinab. It's been such a pleasure and a real privilege to talk to you today, and hear about your journey through undergrad. And I know you're also going to be sharing with us some spoken word, that we will also be linking up with this podcast eventually, so we're very much looking forward to listening to and hearing that. And again, thanks so much for being here today.

Zeinab Khawaja (34:26):

Thank you for having me.

Dr. Catharine Munn (34:29):

Thank you for listening to this BOUNCE podcast. We hope that you have been taken on a bit of a journey by listening to the podcast and hearing this story and perspectives shared. We would love to hear more of your reactions to and reflections on our story, if you wish to share them with us, at bounce@mcmaster.ca. You can also check out our website, which is linked on the podcast description and our social media on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. Thank you so much.