

## Connect Corner: The Power of Play Among Us

Shreesh Prasad, MD, Ozra Nobari, MD, Melinda Armstead, MD, Naren Clark, DO, Kevin Nowrangi, MD

The first few months of my child and adolescent psychiatry fellowship have occurred amidst a raging global pandemic, large-scale civil unrest, and increasingly polarizing political discourse. Given our Northern California locale, a literal flaming countryside and ashen sky have completed the apocalyptic tableau. It should come as no surprise that staving off burnout has been on my mind lately, but when Drs. McBride and Wadell announced we would be playing Among Us,<sup>1</sup> an online multiplayer social deduction game, in place of one of our regularly scheduled didactic sessions, I was skeptical. From the plethora of memes I had seen on Reddit, I knew the game had exploded in popularity among teenagers, but I wondered whether a group of doctors awkwardly stumbling through it would be better for our mental health than simply having an extra hour off to decompress after a stressful morning.

The premise of Among Us is that you and your crewmates on a spaceship are accompanied by a sinister stowaway who kills off the crew while sabotaging key systems on the ship. The crew's win condition, on the other hand, is to either complete a set of maintenance tasks or, more commonly, detect the imposter and summarily eject them from the nearest airlock. The twist: nobody can speak outside of meetings, which are called when a body is found or on an emergency basis when a crew member believes they have discovered the imposter. From the moment my little astronaut avatar dropped onto the ship, it was clear my skepticism had been unfounded. I felt a sense of kinship with my co-fellows and attendings that had been quite sorely missing from my fellowship thus far. The experience was a simple reminder that the true antidote to burnout is connection. It was as if we were all truly on that ship, striving toward a common goal—despite the fact that one of us was actively trying to murder the crew and subvert our mission. Or was that me?

- Shreesh Prasad

As a team, we have talked, learned, healed, presented, and advocated for the same cause. But have we ever played? Nope. At the encouragement of our thoughtful program leaders, UCD child psychiatry fellows and supervisors started to play the online game Among Us. None of us had played before, but after a brief practice run the crewmates began completing tasks as the imposters killed off the crew in secret. Our inner children played, relaxed, and laughed. I realized that just as water puts out the fire, play and interconnectedness hold back the real evil sneaky 'imposter' killer among us, burnout.

- Ozra Nobari

First year of child psychiatry fellowship has been much different than I thought it would be. The world is evolving into an unfamiliar scary place for patients and providers alike. COVID-19 continues with no end in sight and telehealth has become common place leaving us with limited human interactions. In California, the wildfires rage, making a difficult situation even worse overnight. After one particularly difficult week, I was surprised to learn at Zoom didactics that I wasn't alone in this sentiment. What was really 'among us' was feelings of isolation, fatigue, and burnout. It was at that point our program directors encouraged us to engage in what child psychiatrists have been incorporating into practice for years, the power of play.

The next week we started off our typical Zoom didactics as a cohort by playing the game Among Us. I admit I was hesitant. I am not an avid gamer; even as a child I was terrible at video games and I hate playing anything where I know I will lose. More importantly I felt there was no way this would be a good use of our time but at this point figured it couldn't make things worse. After just 10 minutes I found myself genuinely laughing and bonding with my co-fellows and supervisors. The feelings of isolation faded away and the burdens of

the day seemed less heavy. What I thought would be a waste of my time was actually the highlight of my day and I finished the game refreshed, ready to engage in didactics with renewed mindset.

– Mindy Armstead

During a recent clinical interview on an adolescent inpatient unit, my attending asked our patient to explain the idiom grasping at straws. She quickly answered, “the man who is drowning is desperate and will grab anything to try and survive.” I didn’t know it at the time, but this would end up perfectly describing my state of mind as I pleaded with my co-fellows and our program directors not to eject me into the cold abyss of space. I was desperate, and I was innocent.

When I heard we would be playing the game Among Us in place of our usual didactics, I dismissed it without much thought. These past few months have been an extraordinary challenge; there have been more than a few moments of grasping at straws. As the majority of our encounters have become virtual, the biggest detriment to my own mental health has been the associated feeling of disconnection. This disconnectedness created a desire to hibernate until we can crawl out from our caves, shake hands, and embrace again. I was skeptical that a game about murderous cartoon astronauts could wake me from my slumber. But as my little blue astronaut wandered aimlessly about the spaceship, I found myself smiling and laughing, until I was promptly murdered by the real imposter. Aside from being fun, it demonstrated the power of play and its ability to create

connections. It made me realize that we can still use creativity and ingenuity to reach through the virtual void and connect.

– Naren Clark

I warily observed my colleagues, hearing their qualms and rebuttals as each were accused of being the saboteur on our spaceward voyage. Among the mixture of mentors and colleagues with whom I have worked closely and believed I knew well, there was a malicious culprit. Shreesh exclaimed, “It had to be Kevin. I was near Ozra and Mindy!” Erik, Mindy, and Naren somberly gazed as I pleaded my innocence, exclaiming, “I am not the imposter!” Paula had rallied the cohort to cast their votes and I was quickly banished from our ship into the void of outer space. The miscreant eventually succeeded in halting the journey as our vessel sailed forward, haunted only by the ghosts of the innocent. It was discovered that the deceptions of Anne, the true imposter, had led to our demise! In spite of my early ejection, I found that this captivating adventure had lifted some of the burdens I had been experiencing over my difficult clinical cases. The bonding, cheer, and laughter amongst my colleagues was an uplifting end to a difficult week, and I am already looking forward to our rematch next week.

– Kevin Nowrangi

### References

1. Among Us. Innersloth. <http://www.innersloth.com/gameAmongUs.php>

### About the Authors

**Shreesh Prasad, MD**, is a child and adolescent psychiatry fellow at the University of California, Davis Medical Center, Sacramento. Dr. Prasad's interests include forensic psychiatry, early psychosis, neurodevelopmental disorders, and trauma.

**Ozra Nobari, MD**, is a child and adolescent psychiatry fellow at the University of California, Davis Medical Center, Sacramento. Dr. Nobari's interests include neurodevelopmental psychiatry, interventional psychiatry and cultural psychiatry.

**Melinda Armstead, MD**, is a child and adolescent psychiatry fellow at the University of California, Davis Medical Center, Sacramento. Dr. Armstead's interests include early psychosis, neurodevelopmental disorders, and cultural psychiatry.

**Naren Clark, DO**, is a child and adolescent psychiatry fellow at the University of California, Davis Medical Center, Sacramento. Dr. Clark's interest include early psychosis, collaborative care, and public psychiatry.

**Kevin Nowrangi, MD**, is a child and adolescent psychiatry fellow at the University of California, Davis Medical Center, Sacramento.

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