#DiggingWhileDepressed: A Call for Mental Health Awareness in Archaeology

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Abstract: During the excavation season in 2018, I experienced a depressive episode on site and struggled to maintain productivity with the rest of my team. I felt like I wasn't a “real” archaeologist, and turned to Twitter to vent about my situation using the hashtag #DiggingWhileDepressed. To my surprise, others used the hashtag to express their own feelings about mental wellness (or lack thereof) in archaeology.

Now that discussion has started, this paper will propose the next steps for our discipline to tackle this pertinent issue. By challenging the toxic masculinity and ableism inherent in the way we view archaeological labour, I will posit tangible ways in which we, as archaeologists, can support each other on and off the field.

I. Introduction

With a recent turn in academia towards critically engaging with mental health, similar discourse has taken hold in archaeology (Rocks-Macqueen 2016; Fitzpatrick 2018; Whitaker 2018) and anthropology (Ernst 2019; The New Ethnographer 2019), specifically with regards to the effects of fieldwork on mental health conditions.

However, discourse is not enough. A different course of action is required for archaeologists to be physically, mentally, and emotionally prepared for whatever they face in the field, with safeguards in place to support them when necessary. This paper, drawn from personal experiences of myself and others with mental health during excavation, will pinpoint the most problematic elements of commonly accepted practices in archaeology and broadly suggest ways in which we, as a discipline, could do better.

II. The Origins of #DiggingWhileDepressed

In the summer of 2018, I was injured after a bad fall on the first day of a three week long archaeological excavation. Due to an already existing fear of heights, this accident was rather traumatic and instilled a real fear of attempting to reach our archaeological sites again. After a discussion with the excavation directors, it was
decided that I would stay off-site for the remainder of the season and do post-excision work from the base camp.

Although I was happy to work off-site, it didn’t take long for depression to settle in. I had already felt guilty for “abandoning” the team, as well as pretty embarrassed for only lasting one day before injuring myself. After a few days of working alone in a makeshift lab, I found the isolation to be torturous. And yet, I also struggled to spend time around my much happier colleagues once they returned from site at the end of the day. Away from my friends and loved ones, I eventually turned to my usual outlet for expressing such difficult feelings: Twitter.

I have never been private about my mental illness – in fact, I have an entire section on my blog dedicated to posts about mental health. I was officially diagnosed with depression in 2017 after a dramatic nervous breakdown, but had been dealing with symptoms since I was thirteen. Once diagnosed, I took a month off from my PhD studies to get acclimated to my new medications. It was during this period away from my research that I initially became interested in turning to social media to write about archaeology – and, more specifically, on my struggles with mental illness as a full time academic and archaeologist.

I started a Twitter thread that night about my recent experiences, using the hashtag #DiggingWhileDepressed to track the various discussions that started to occur in response. Over a series of evenings, I opened up about my recent spiral into depression and how various aspects of the fieldwork environment seemed to have exponentially increased my unhappiness and general anxiety. In turn, others shared their own stories and experiences with mental health during excavation and fieldwork.

III. Mental Health and Archaeology

The #DiggingWhileDepressed discussion illuminated several factors that I found consistently through other archaeologists’ stories. For example, fieldwork is inherently isolating; we are away from friends and family for long periods at a time, and often working alone for hours in the trenches. Fieldwork also creates inconsistency in our lives, where archaeologists may experience shifts in their daily routine as well as frequent bouts of unemployment that make our livelihoods rather
precarious. In a similar vein, **casualization** has been noted to be particularly rampant among commercial sectors in regions such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Excavation is known to often be very labour-intensive, so there is also a constant risk of injury on site. Some archaeologists have noted that being injured can lead to feeling as though you are a **burden** – your self-esteem is lowered with feelings of uselessness and depression. In addition, there are financial burdens that may be associated with injuries, which can add further stressors to one’s mental health. The **general environment** of fieldwork may involve constant pain, high stress, time pressures, and poor climate, which can exacerbate negative thoughts and emotions. This can be worsened by off-site conditions as well – fieldwork schedules may not allow for decent amounts of sleep, accommodations may also be poor and not provide the needed nutrients to get through the day.

Perhaps the most common complaint I saw was that people felt like they had no support when it came to these issues. That they either felt too “taboo” to speak to their supervisors about, or that even if it was mentioned, there was no tangible support to help them out. And that’s not surprising – mental health has generally been a topic that gets avoided in past discourse. It also doesn’t help that archaeology as a discipline has bought into its own presumptions of toxic masculinity and *Indiana Jones*-esque adventurer chic. Archaeologists are supposed to just accept that our work will require painful labour, fighting through the worst weather and dealing with the most inhospitable environments for the sake of “knowledge”, and that one must have suffered to be a “real” archaeologist. This is, of course, a ridiculous assumption but also a prevalent one that continues to create real obstacles for archaeologists who may already be marginalised amongst their peers. If we are to combat the issues that continue to exacerbate physical and mental conditions, we must first accept a broader definition of archaeological fieldwork that isn’t *just* about “toughing it out” in the mud.

**IV. Awareness over Avoidance: Approaches to Mental Health in the Field**

One of the main takeaways from this discourse is that, ultimately, our approach to mental health in archaeology must emphasise “awareness” over “avoidance” – that we must normalise mental health considerations – as well as other disabilities – and reform our excavation and fieldwork practices to centre them. Some discussants with
the commercial sector mentioned that their respective companies have recently instated mental health policies as part of their Health and Safety standards, legitimising mental health conditions as issues deserving the same serious consideration and care as any other medical conditions; this form of legitimisation is especially helpful as one of the more common rebuttals against raising concerns regarding mental health is that they are either something that can be “gotten over” or are “figments of the imagination”. In addition, more archaeologists are speaking out about their own experiences with mental health in the field and making it less of a taboo subject.

Of course, “awareness” means nothing without tangible support, and I’d argue that this is where archaeology, and academia in general, fails the most. The current state of the academy, as a neoliberal market that sees students as “consumers” and education as a commodity, exacerbates mental health problems by its very nature (The New Ethnographer 2019). Rine Vieth (2018) discusses mental illness as an “invisible disability” – not only in that most mental illnesses are not noticeably obvious, but also in that mental illness is not sufficiently considered by institutions when developing funding and accommodations for disabled students. As an example, Vieth provides a personal anecdote in which they are applying for a grant to fund fieldwork, but notes that funding bodies clearly do not consider the need for medication or support in their financial calculations. If mental illness is considered at all, it is usually as an afterthought that barely covers the minimum amount of aid needed – as Vieth points out, even receiving extensions on work does not come with financial support for that period. A more thorough accommodation process will clearly be necessary for any and all institutions and organisations collaborating with students and researchers on fieldwork, with financial means to support both visible and invisible disabilities (and perhaps a body of students and faculty available to review new approaches towards student healthcare). To reiterate an earlier point: disabled archaeologists must be centred and this must be normalised. We are not an afterthought, an endnote at the end of an archaeology that only prioritises a certain kind of archaeologist.

V. Conclusion
So, where do we go from here? What is archaeology’s pathway to inclusivity and accessibility? Personally, I believe that we ultimately need to completely collapse the foundations of academia as a neoliberal institution to make lasting, tangible progress in a more equitable and healthier environment. Perhaps that sounds dramatic, but consider this: how else can we remove the toxicity of a system originally built on Western patriarchal and colonial concepts without going directly to the root?

To truly address these issues, archaeology as a whole will need to undergo radical changes; we need to change the way we perceive and perform archaeology, moving beyond the “Indiana Jones” archetype that so many in the discipline still cling onto. This archetype, named for the famous pop culture icon, demands archaeologists to perform intensive labour at the expense of their own well-being, where the material gain is worth any amount of suffering by the individual. If Indiana Jones can outrun a rampaging boulder to loot artefacts, then any archaeologist must be willing and able to bleed for the never-ending quest for archaeological knowledge. The Indiana Jones archetype is imperialistic, capitalistic selfishness personified, a danger to colleagues’ safety clad in a leather jacket and fedora. And it must be dismantled.

While change as radical as that may lie in a very distant future of collective organisation and action, as individuals today we can open ourselves up and become more sympathetic to our colleagues’ struggles. Let’s press forward with the intention to creating better, safer, and more inclusive spaces for ourselves and for others within our fieldwork. Excavation should not require a sacrifice of mental and physical wellbeing – no amount of knowledge should ever be worth that.

Works Cited


