

Bullet Journal for mental health self-care: the role of Information Design

*Bullet Journal para o autocuidado da saúde mental:
o papel do Design da Informação*

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Bullet Journaling, mental health, self-care, personal data

The Bullet Journal method is an information management tool based on information design strategies. It was developed to manage personal information and improve overall well-being in everyday life. This exploratory study examines the role of information design in the use of the bullet journal for mental health self-care using the Grounded Theory Method in online sources where users share their practices. We discuss the four usage trends identified: Self-Regulation Resources, Self-Regulation Exercises, Psychological Aspects Trackers, and Psychoeducation. The method's flexibility allows users to adapt layouts according to their needs and contexts, supporting self-awareness, emotional regulation, and self-expression. By creating personalized visual systems, individuals actively participate in their mental health care, supporting their autonomy.

Bullet Journaling, saúde mental, autocuidado, dados pessoais

O método Bullet Journal é uma ferramenta de gestão de informação baseada em estratégias de design da informação. Foi desenvolvido para gerir informação pessoal e melhorar o bem-estar geral no dia a dia. Este estudo exploratório examina o papel do design da informação no uso do bullet journal para o autocuidado da saúde mental, utilizando o Método da Teoria Fundamentada em fontes online onde os utilizadores partilham as suas práticas. Discutimos as quatro tendências de uso identificadas: Recursos de Autorregulação, Exercícios de Autorregulação, Rastreadores de Aspectos Psicológicos e Psicoeducação. A flexibilidade do método permite que os utilizadores adaptem os layouts de acordo com as suas necessidades e contextos, apoiando a autoconsciência, a regulação emocional e a autoexpressão. Ao criar sistemas visuais personalizados, os indivíduos participam ativamente no cuidado da sua saúde mental, apoiando a sua autonomia.

1 Introduction

The Bullet Journal method, developed by Ryder Carroll (2018), is an analog way to “track the past, order the present, design the future.” Personal information is recorded in a designated notebook, allowing users to personalize and adapt the system's instructions to their specific needs and intentions. This also enables them to create their own information

designs. Carroll suggests methods for organizing and interacting with this information throughout the notebook, such as using different types of bullets to label categories of information, an index, and techniques for migrating information through the notebook.

The method is defined as “a mindfulness practice disguised as a productivity system” (Carroll, 2018). It was created to support practical and subjective daily life aspects, improving wellbeing through information design. Research has shown mental health benefits of aspects related to Bullet Journaling practice, including: a non-judgmental attitude, meaning in life, self-acceptance, management of environmental factors, autonomy, satisfaction with everyday life, self-efficacy, self-distancing, and self-reflection (Ayduk & Kross, 2010; Keyes, 2007; Schönfeld et al, 2016; Wongpakaran et al, 2021; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992).

Tholander and Normark (2020) investigated how personal information is managed through handcrafted processes in the Bullet Journal. They found that its construction allows users to control their information and organizational structure, establishing personal ways for managing data. Bullet Journals are interwoven with subjective and personal aspects, fostering connections between the user, the information, and its expressions (Tholander & Normark, 2020).

Mental health issues are highly prevalent in the global population. It is estimated that in 2017, approximately 792 million people (10.7%) experienced a mental health disorder (Dattani et al., 2022). Consequently, mental health care strategies are crucial due to their influence on various physical, psychological, and socioeconomic factors. Despite the influence of environmental and structural factors on mental health conditions, individual self-care actions are essential for maintaining quality of life. Creating visualizations can support in the recurrent self-assessment of mental health related factors, contributing to self-awareness.

Therefore, this study explores resources developed by users in their utilization of data and personal information for mental health self-care. The aim is to understand the role of information design in Bullet Journal use for mental health self-care.

2 Method

This qualitative exploratory research was conducted based on the constructivist approach of the Grounded Theory Method (GTM) as described by Charmaz (2009), Bryant (2017), and Gibbs (2009). The theory that emerges from GTM is a comprehensive rhetoric resulting from an interpretive practice that aims at obtaining an abstract understanding of the phenomenon in question, supported by data (Charmaz, 2009). This method was chosen to enable an initial exploration of this previously unexplored context through an inductive examination of the data, which favors the emergence of new descriptions and conceptual rhetoric and points to new research paths.

As Tholander and Normark (2020) show, social media can be seen as the main source of knowledge, inspiration and experience sharing for Bullet Journal users. For this reason, and given the exploratory nature of this study, we opted for a netnographic approach to data collection, as this method is particularly suitable for investigating online communities. While acknowledging the inherent selection bias of online content, it can provide insights about usage tendencies and practices among Bullet Journal users.

The data were collected from blog posts and YouTube videos in which Bullet Journalists describe their practice. Google and Youtube engines were used with the keywords ‘Bullet Journal’ and ‘mental health’. The inclusion criteria were: containing information about the visual organization used, images of pages or visual demonstrations, and a description of its use and purpose. The first eleven posts that met these criteria were selected for analysis (8 blog posts and 3 YouTube videos). All posts were retrieved on February 26, 2022.

Each selected blog post and YouTube video transcript was meticulously analyzed line-by-line using initial coding. During this phase, every distinct user practice, design element, or stated purpose related to mental health self-care was assigned a unique code. Subsequently, these initial codes were compared and grouped into broader focused categories based on their shared theme. This involved constant comparison across all data points to identify recurring patterns and conceptual similarities, leading to the identification of four general groups of tendencies. These groups were then refined and understood directly from the data, forming the basis for our findings.

3 Results and discussion

Based on the analysis of the collected material, four usage trends were identified: self-regulation resources, self-regulation exercises, trackers for psychological aspects, and psychoeducation, as described in the table below (Table 1).

Table 1 Summary Table: Usage tendencies, its definitions, and information design formats.

Usage tendency	Definition	Examples
self-regulation resources	Using the Bullet Journal to support activities that help regulate and process mental states (emotions, feelings and thoughts) at a particular time or over a period of time.	Journaling pages; artistic expressions; and Fuck this page
self-regulation exercises	Exercises and practices that help to achieve or improve a positive mental state. The regulatory function is achieved through the accumulation of habits or practices.	Habit tracking and Gratitude logging
trackers for psychological aspects	Monitoring mental states or behaviors relevant to mental health.	Symptoms and mood trackers
psychoeducation	Activities aimed at learning concepts related to psychology and regulatory resources.	Trigger tracking and crises plans

3.1 Self-regulation resources

This form of use consists of resorting to the Bullet Journal for self-regulatory activities, aimed at managing related symptoms or states of mind, such as moods, feelings, and thoughts. Some observed activities included expressive writing, artistic expression through drawing, and directing attention to tasks like painting or sketching to manage stress and anxiety.

Expressive writing can facilitate the processing of feelings and offers an experience akin to verbalizing them. Furthermore, it has been shown to significantly reduce perceived stress and depressive symptoms (Danoff-Burg et al. 2010). An example of expressive writing is presented in Figure 1-B, on the page entitled 'Fuck This'. The author states: "I like the title. It makes me feel like I am more powerful than my negative emotions. That I'm punching those hurtful emotions right in the teeth, if you will" (Mariah, 2019). This illustrates how emotions can be processed through subjective constructions, with the page design guiding the user toward a specific attitude regarding the content.

Writing in the Bullet Journal can also enable further analysis of the content, facilitating the gathering of relevant information for self-care or for informing professionals to support the therapeutic process (Wong et al., 2016). Additionally, drawings can serve as a form of artistic expression or a visual means of expressing feelings. Figure 1-C provides an example, where a reassuring sentence is emphasized and conveyed through a drawing.

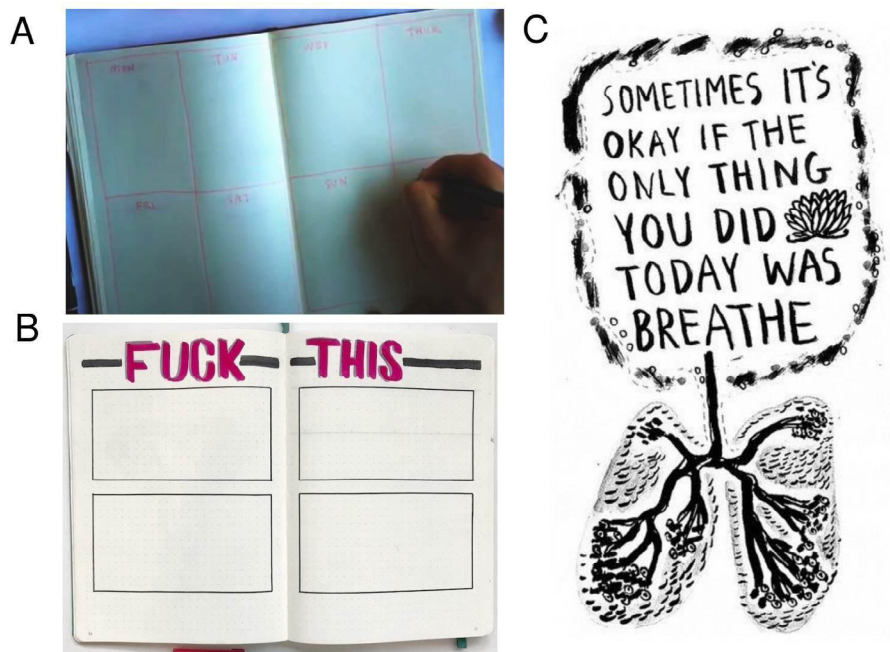


Figure 1 (A) Journaling page from Ziggi Willpower Channel (2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RBOk86BAju8&t=464s> (B) Fuck this page from Mariah (2019), <https://thepetiteplanner.com/bullet-journal-mental-health-spreads/> (C) Artistic expression from Swich (2017), <https://www.pleaselive.org/blog/bullet-journaling-mental-health-faith-swick-life-faif/>

3.2 Self-regulation exercises

Self-regulation exercises are regular activities that support mental health by helping to establish or improve a positive mental state. This regulatory function occurs through the accumulation of habits or practices using the Bullet Journal as a form of support.

One such exercise is the gratitude log (Figure 2-A), a record of things for which an individual is grateful. This practice prompts reflection on one’s day to identify sources of gratitude. Research shows that the practice of gratitude is an effective complementary intervention (Wong et al., 2016). Pages can be designed artistically, enhanced with drawings, and text organized in various ways—for example, by emphasizing certain events through font size or highlighting. Formats that encourage daily practice are particularly impactful, as this intervention has been shown to accumulate benefits over time (Wong et al., 2016).

Figure 1-A shows a weekly layout for long-form journaling or expressive writing. A dedicated space for this can help to encourage this type of reflection on a regular basis, which can have a positive impact on emotional wellbeing (Kim-Godwin et al., 2020). It can also help to establish the habit of describing personal experiences in a particular way, ideally fostering a compassionate or adaptive approach.

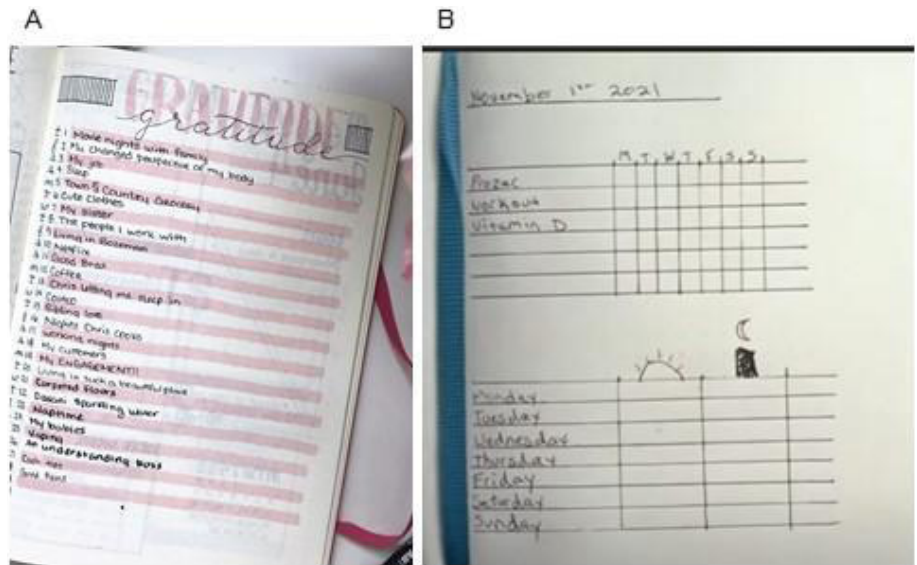


Figure 2 (A) gratitude log from Mariah (2019), <https://thepetiteplanner.com/bullet-journal-mental-health-spreads/> (B) habit tracker from Kittleson (2021), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YXyaf_6qZpk

Another form of self-regulation exercise is habit tracking, which involves recording and monitoring specific habits. Tracking draws attention to habit maintenance, collects relevant data, and enables the observation of behavioral patterns that can be linked to other factors for further analysis, thus providing valuable information about oneself. These trackers serve as

self-regulation exercises by supporting and maintaining habits crucial for mental health. Habit trackers can be visually presented in various ways, from simple tables (Figure 2-B) to artistically designed pages (Figure 3).

Table or chart formats also facilitate focusing on desirable habits and monitoring their occurrence over time. The visual form choice is driven by aesthetic preferences and practicality. However, some aesthetic design choices can affect information intake efficiency. For example, in Figure 3, where low-contrast color choices can hinder the accurate perception of frequency. This also raises the question of whether such use may express low visual literacy (Pettersen, 2009) and/or data literacy (D’Ignazio, 2017).



Figure 3 Mood and habit trackers from Manning (n.d.), <https://bulletjournal.com/blogs/bulletjournalist/5-ways-to-bullet-journal-to-benefit-your-mental-health>

One’s attitude can be a meaningful aspect of tracking activities. For example, a non-judgmental attitude promotes neutral self-assessment regarding the occurrence of undesirable habits or the non-occurrence of desirable ones. This attitude can change based on user needs or other subjective factors. Habit tracking is also crucial for constructing information from collected data, such as indicators of improvement or worsening mental states (reflected in changes in frequency or constancy of mental health-related habits) or self-care routine assessments. Furthermore, it can be a source of positive reinforcement (e.g., when habits are ticked off as done) and accountability.

Another approach to habit tracking incorporates gamification (Figure 4), which can encourage a more positive attitude towards the activity and increase motivation. This helps mitigate feelings of guilt or pressure often associated with visualization formats that highlight missed activities. In

this version, table columns represent achievable points, with the level increasing every three activities performed. Possible activities are listed alongside, color-coded. The desired level is displayed discreetly and is not the visualization’s primary focus, aiming to promote the goal without overemphasis, which could lead to frustration. An ‘easy mode’ is also available, offering activities at various difficulty levels. This allows users to gain a sense of achievement and score points by selecting activities feasible for that day. Crucially, this level of difficulty is not represented in the color coding, facilitating the perception of equality among activities while simultaneously allowing for frequency perception.

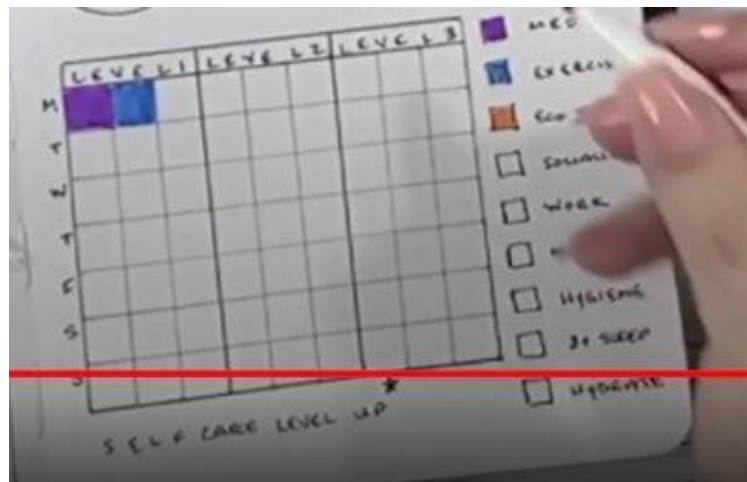


Figure 4 Gamified version of a habit tracker from Dots and Beyond Channel (2021), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zvm81B_bNGE

The described use of habit trackers suggests that attitudes and meaning-making during data interaction are crucial for understanding data-driven behavior change, as discussed by Kersten-van Dijk et al. (2017). In their review of personal informatics (PI) systems designed for this purpose, the authors note: “current PI systems seem to be most effective at making users aware of problems (e.g. being physically inactive), and at helping users maintain new behaviors (e.g. walking more steps a day). However, the steps in between are not supported as effectively” (Kersten-van Dijk et al., 2017, p. 17). Aspects related to the Bullet Journal context (e.g., active data collection and mindfulness) and the mediation of data interaction through information design (e.g., gamification) warrant further exploration to address these intermediary steps.

3.3 Trackers for psychological aspects

This usage tendency involves monitoring mental states or behaviors relevant to mental health. Trackers more directly related to mental health care monitor symptoms, triggers, and moods (as in Figures 5, 6, and 7).

This practice is primarily used to collect data that informs users about their health status and provides an overview of changes over time. The selection of habits to monitor can vary based on context and perceived importance, leading to choices for mental health maintenance rooted in personal experience, self-assessment, current mental health status, or specific needs. The customizability of the Bullet Journal is significant here, as its recurring structures (typically monthly or weekly) encourage a re-evaluation of monitored habits, user needs, or improvement strategies.

The degree of specificity in formats and data can vary depending on user preferences. For example, some trackers may only indicate the prevailing mood, while others allow for a wider range of mood swings to be recorded, or even intensity. In this context, information design can aid in complex decision-making and managing the complexity of modern life by enhancing the ability to utilize information (Waller, 2016). This monitoring provides users with insights that help them better understand or track the evolution of their clinical condition, empowering them to seek resources and strategies independently or with professional support.

Moods can be described in various ways, from general representations like emojis (Figure 3) to more nuanced feelings and descriptive reports (Figure 5). Some representations enable the establishment of relationships between moods and influencing factors, for example, Figure 5-B, which integrates color coding and writing. Additionally, descriptions aid in contextualizing the data and creating a more complete narrative, influencing data perception and interpretation (Braga & Pontes, 2021). The sentiment tracker in Figure 3 further exemplifies how descriptive aspects can contextualize data.

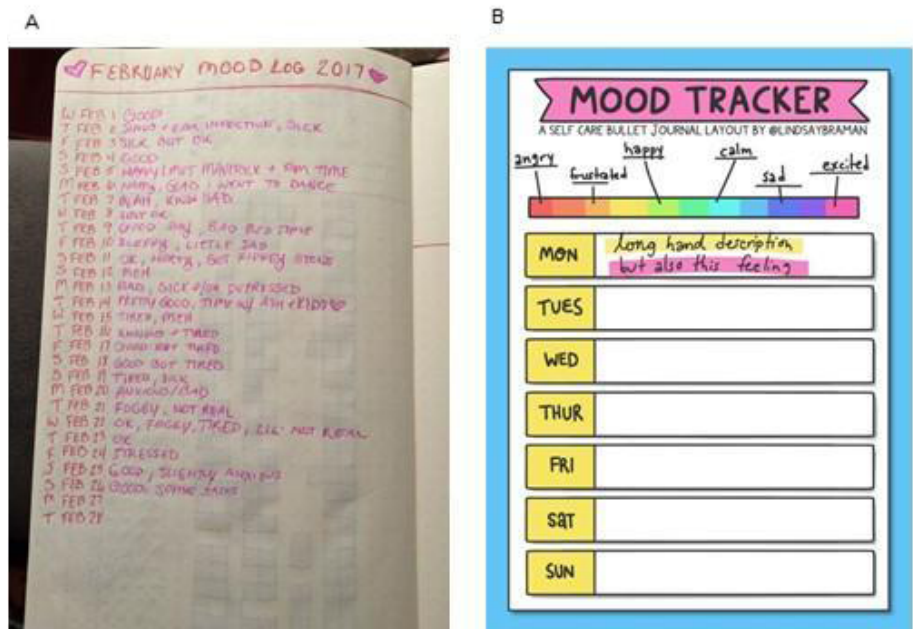


Figure 5 (A) Mood tracker from Swich (2017), <https://www.pleaselive.org/blog/bullet-journaling-mental-health-faith-swick-life-faif/> (B) Mood Tracker from Braman (2021, September 13), <https://lindsaybraman.com/bullet-journal-mood-tracker/>

Another suggested format is “one pixel a day” (Figure 6). Although it does not explore the variety of moods throughout the day, it provides perspective over a long period of time. The comparison over the years provides insight into the development of mental health or well-being in general. It can provide a positive picture of oneself and mental health endeavours. In this sense, the data generated not only represents reality, but also enables subjective constructions and narratives about oneself.

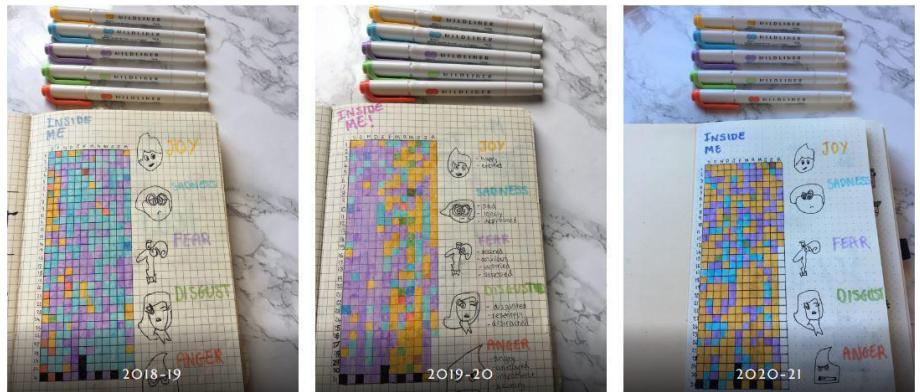


Figure 6 Mood Tracker over time in pixel a day format from Caroline (2021), <https://envirolineblog.com/how-my-bullet-journal-helped-my-mental-health>

Figure 7 presents a visualization proposed for better monitoring individuals with mood swings, where mood is described by three factors: energy level, anxiety level, and self-esteem. Each factor is assigned a numerical value across three parts of the day. At month-end, these numbers are converted into a graph, enabling visualization over time and more direct data interpretation. The same format was used for monitoring self-injurious behavior. In this context, the importance of creating personalized scales for the assigned numbers is emphasized, as pre-established scales might not efficiently express individual feelings and sensations. This multi-variable mood description allows for more detailed observation, albeit requiring greater commitment in data collection.

Mood tracker

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	...
ENERGY	06-12	2	4	3	2	1	1	1	3			
	12-18	3	5	4	1	3	2	2	2	3		
	18-20	1	2	1	3	1	1	3	3			
ANXIETY	06-12	2	1	2	2	3	1	2	3			
	12-18	4	2	3	1	3	3	2	2	3		
	18-20	4	4	5	4	2	3	4	3	2		
SELF-ESTEEM	06-12	1	2	3	1	1	1	2	3			
	12-18	2	3	2	2	1	2	2	3	2		
	18-20	3	3	3	1	2	3	2	3	4		
SUM		14	16	19	19	19	14	14	21	24		

Mood tracker graph

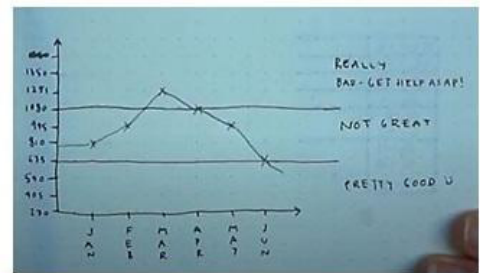


Figure 7 Mood Tracker using numbers and its graph from Ziggi Willpower Channel (2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RBOk86BAju8&t=464s>

The symptom tracker in Figure 8 considers multiple factors and uses both numeric and event descriptors. In some formats, there may not be sophisticated ways to enhance the user's data view, such as in Figure 5-A, where logging is associated with an exercise in self-awareness rather than data collection for building future information. In such cases, mood monitoring becomes a regulatory exercise, focused on recognizing and naming emotions experienced throughout the day, rather than a purely data-driven tracking process.

Monitoring based on systematic observation and data collection can foster autonomy regarding one's mental health. The collected information can be more specific and efficient than external assessments, as it structures the observation and evaluation of one's mental health status based on personal references and subjectivity. Nevertheless, this does not preclude the possibility of input based on professional guidelines. Such self-assessments can thus also inform health professionals and serve as a source for developing coping strategies and assessing their effectiveness.



Figure 8 Symptoms Tracker from Ziggi Willpower Channel (2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RBOk86BAju8&t=464s>

An example of visualization to support therapeutic work is the mood tracker expressed by inner voices (Figure 9), where aspects such as anxiety, depression, anorexia, and rationality are understood as inner voices. Their occurrence is depicted in a graphic that enables a better understanding of the user's internal state through visualization. This form of visualization can be classified in the category of coding based on psychological theories described by Thudt et al. (2017): "Such theories can be used for developing visual encodings that more closely reflect specific human experiences" (Thudt et al., 2017, p. 56). This approach simultaneously constructs a visual narrative of psychological experiences, providing insights and enabling their elaboration.



Figure 9 Mood tracker Internal voices tracker from Caroline (2021), <https://envirolineblog.com/how-my-bullet-journal-helped-my-mental-health>

3.4 Psychoeducation

The category of psychoeducation describes activities aimed at learning concepts related to psychology or internal psychological dynamics. In this case, it could arise from a need recognized by the person or through professional guidance. In Figure 10, the design leads to the experience being perceived and registered in a particular way. In this context, the importance of combining technical information with personal observation to enable empirical learning about the topic is emphasized.

Another possible approach involves creating pages that systematize information for later consultation, supporting the user in specific situations. For example, Figure 11 shows the “My Personal Crisis Plan” page and the “Pick-Me-Up Spreads”. Such pages are crucial because, during crises or amidst strong emotions, recalling healthy coping resources can be challenging. If these resources are listed in advance, it’s easier to apply them in times of distress. In addition, this is a type of psychoeducational exercise that guides individuals to think about possible actions in moments of crisis and focus their attention on effective actions informed by their personal experiences. These pages can also serve to quickly teach strategies and provide clear, effective instructions to those assisting in crisis management. Importantly, these lists can be compiled from personal experience or in collaboration with a mental health professional.

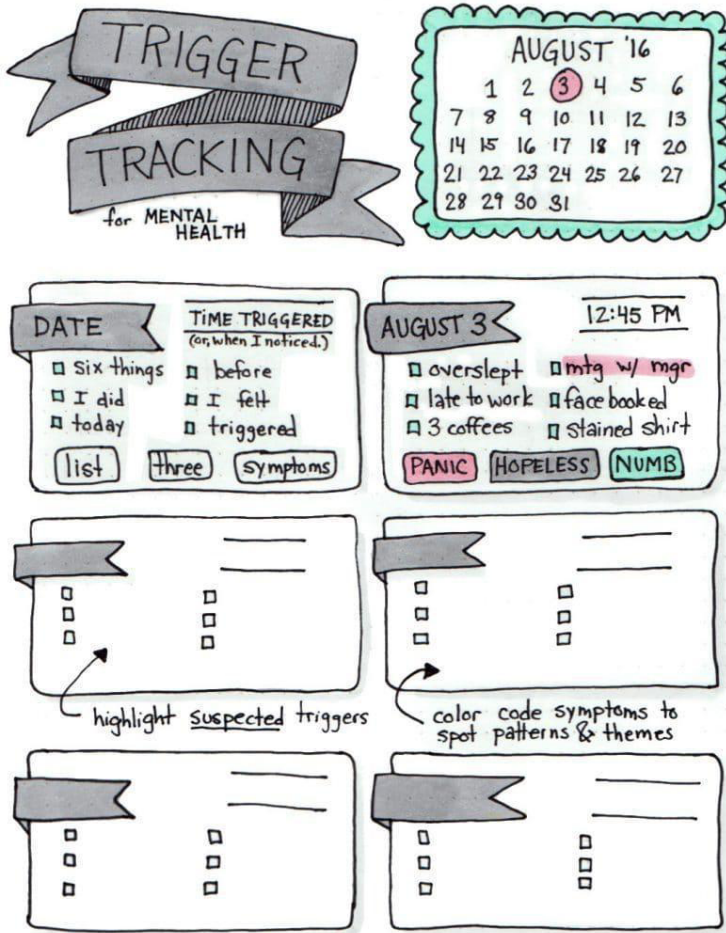


Figure 10 Trigger-Tracker from Braman (2019), <https://lindsaybraman.com/trigger-tracker-worksheet/>



Figure 11 (A) Crisis plan from Braman (2021, September 7) <https://lindsaybraman.com/mental-health-bujo-layouts/> (B) “Pick me up spread”, from Manning (n.d.), <https://bulletjournal.com/blogs/bulletjournalist/5-ways-to-bullet-journal-to-benefit-your-mental-health>

4 Final considerations

This study aimed to understand the role of information design in the use of Bullet Journals for mental health self-care. Through a qualitative exploratory approach using the Grounded Theory Method, we identified and discussed four main usage trends: self-regulation resources, self-regulation exercises, trackers for psychological aspects, and psychoeducation. Our findings demonstrate how users adapt this tool to support their mental well-being according to their needs, available resources, personal experiences, and understanding of mental health self-care, thereby fostering a more autonomous approach. This ability to determine how to manage one's mental health through personalized information design represents a significant exercise of autonomy, empowering individuals to take an active role in their well-being.

Our findings reveal that Bullet Journals serve as personalized information design systems where users create visual representations of their mental states, emotions, and self-care practices. The journaling aspect allows users to document and later analyze their experiences, providing valuable insights for both personal reflection and potential professional therapeutic support. The visual expression through drawings and artistic elements offers an alternative communication channel for emotions that may be difficult to verbalize.

Particularly noteworthy is how Bullet Journals function as a self-regulation tool, encouraging users to design notebook layouts and content based on their current psychological needs. This aligns with Pettersson's (2010) assertion that information design solutions must be adaptable to specific contexts. Also, its customizability invites the user to think about their relations with everyday information and their informational needs and create their solutions and designs.

The significance of this research extends beyond understanding a specific journaling method; it highlights how user-driven information design can support mental health practices outside clinical settings. By creating personalized visual systems, individuals actively participate in their mental health care, potentially complementing traditional therapeutic approaches. It also encourages academic debate and the recognition of design by non-professionals.

The sample size and exploratory nature of the research mean that findings cannot be generalized across all Bullet Journal users. Additionally, the analysis relied on publicly available content rather than direct user interviews, which may limit our understanding of users' intentions and perceived benefits.

Future studies might explore in more detail the narrative constructions of users regarding the data collected on their mental health. Additionally, further research could investigate the connections between information design and the development of narratives of oneself. In addition, the user's ability and knowledge to design their own solutions could also be further explored to understand how professional designers could contribute to this context. It is also important to better understand the extent to which the user consciously designs their experiences, interactions, and visual representations and the processes they use to support this practice.

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