

CO-FOUNDER OF
THE KIND FRIEND
JAMIE LEE

*On forging a strong sense
of community and mindfulness,
through technology
and co-creation*

“A customer shared with me that he uses our journals for gratitude practice. Every day, he'll write down what he's grateful for, and he soon realised that a lot of what he's grateful for in life is associated with people he knew. It may be his friends, his colleagues, or his wife. He turned these journal entries into personalised text messages or phone calls, and that really helped him build and maintain meaningful social connections, even during times where he couldn't meet people. It was such a beautiful thing to do, so I started doing that as well. We always thought that by starting The Kind Friend we'd be helping others, but I feel our community is actually helping me, every single day, to be a kinder and better human being.

The brand started as a passion project on Instagram in January last year, by my husband, actually. He's in the tech industry, but he's always been very fond of words. I remember when we first met, he'd write down all the things that were important to me while we spoke. It felt really rude initially, like, we're having dinner, why are you writing now? Later on, I found out that he turned those little notes into a poem for me. It was really thoughtful, and he's always had this love for writing that he always wanted to use for good.

Before the journals came along, our Instagram page was populated by simple motivational quotes written by my husband. It struck us how quickly the account grew in a short period of time; we noticed that each quote got shared on average about 150 times, and people enjoyed tagging their friends in the comments section. Most of our followers are from Southeast Asia, a more conservative region when it comes to expression of feelings, as compared to the West. It's just not the norm here to go up to your friends and say, 'Hey, I care about you, and I miss you.' With these bite-sized quotes, we were giving these people a way to show care and love to the people around them. As the account grew, we started receiving more messages from our community – over 500

THIS *woman's* WORK

A SERIES OF RAW
CONVERSATIONS WITH
THREE WOMEN WHO'VE
TURNED POIGNANT
PERSONAL EXPERIENCES
INTO BEAUTY *and* WELLNESS
VENTURES *that* CHAMPION
GREAT CAUSES

As told to CHELSEA TANG

in nine months – and it was then we started to pattern-match the sentiments we were getting, and noticed that people were facing an everyday challenge of addressing their stress and anxiety.

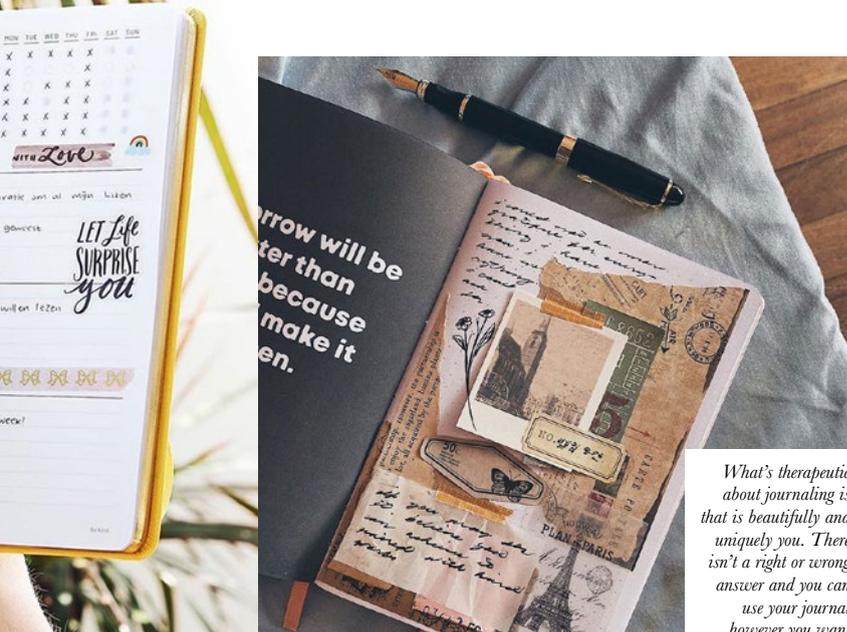
We are more connected than ever, but at the same time, if you look at trends, depression and anxiety rates are going up. I think, connectivity is a double-edged sword.

What was it that *The Social Dilemma* expressed? Those rates went up by 140 per cent among pre-teens. You wonder, hey, they're spending a lot of time online, well, connecting. Why do they still feel so lonely? My take is that we're so focused on getting that external validation – it doesn't matter if you're connecting with others, if you don't make time to connect with yourself, you won't know who you are as an individual, and what your purpose on this planet is. We had students writing in to us to let us know how alone they feel. Working professionals sharing stories about how overwhelmed and under-appreciated

they feel at work. We work with a lot of influencers, and they've also come forward to share about their battles with depression. That's when it all clicked. We took all these insights, and decided to launch The Kind Friend wellness journals in October last year.

Why journals, you might ask. It stems from personal experience. When I was 12, my family migrated to Australia, and at that age, I couldn't speak a word in English. So imagine my stress, having to learn a new language, and deal with my parents' divorce at the same time. Before I knew what hit me, I became moody and distracted. I felt stuck, hopeless and isolated, and I genuinely thought that that would be me forever. My mum had to take me to see a therapist – to my surprise, coming from an Asian family – and she got me started on writing down my feelings. That really transformed me; people always say I





What's therapeutic about journaling is that is beautifully and uniquely you. There isn't a right or wrong answer and you can use your journal however you want

have an old soul, but I feel that I've just been very self-aware since I was young, through journaling. When I write down all the things that bother me, it feels like closing all the tabs you have on your Internet browser. It gives me space to reset and empowers me to create positive relationships with my emotions.

You know, our emotions only stay with us for a few seconds. It's actually the story that we continue to tell ourselves that lasts. I thought that since journaling really helped me pretty much through my entire life, I wondered if it would help others, too. We got our answer the most straightforward way: asking. Every bit of our journal has been co-created together with our community – from the templates to the quote that fronts the book. The Kind Friend journal is essentially a response to what was suggested by our followers – they wanted to be able to cope with their emotions, increase productivity, regulate emotions, and track habits. Had we not polled our community, the journal would probably look very different [from what it is now]. I'd wanted a soft cover, as I thought it'd be easier to carry but many people preferred a hardcover book so that it'd be easier for them to write on their laps before bed. We listened. Every step of the way, we were constantly questioning, how can we give people experiences and eventually, what they want? It was a lot of asking, and fine-tuning, and asking again... Essentially, we've created a people-powered ecosystem, and I find that it's so powerful to be able to tap into such a strong community.

I remember learning about a concept called neuroplasticity during one of my psychology courses in school. It talks about how the brain is a muscle that you can train. One of the ways that you can strengthen your brain is through journaling; it's like a mind gym that you go to daily to nurture your mindset. When you write, the act activates the problem-solving portion of your brain. It also slows down mental ageing, language processing, and feeling. Our intent, right from the get-go, was to create a journal to help people in their lives. Everyone wants to live a purposeful life, right? You get that by creating pathways to connect with yourself. Journaling is a great tool, a medium for you to reflect. I always say, the longest journey you can take in your life is from your head to your heart. How often do we embark on that journey?

People are constantly saying that technology is going to revolutionise

the world, but for me, I feel nothing can ever change the world without understanding humanity. That's exactly what the brand was built on; to guide people towards understanding what it means to be human – and that means being mindful of our feelings. Not every day's a good day, but I know I am in a good place right now. Success to me is going to bed every single day knowing that I'm using my passion to value add to someone else's life, and that I'm proud of the person that I am today."

CO-FOUNDER OF EXHALE HEALING SPACE

MING LI TAN

On self-healing being a journey, and a holding space for not only the self, but the broader community as well

"When I took a month off my corporate job in advertising research to fully practice yoga in the Yoga Vidya Gurukul ashram in Nasik, India, there was absolutely no airs about it. It's an international crowd there; we practised in an open-air hall, on the floor. Everyone's just moving and breathing together, living the slow life. You don't get that kind of authentic, down-to-earth experience in Singapore, so to some, yoga [and other healing modalities] may seem like a first-world luxury, but it really shouldn't be seen as such. Yoga is a lifestyle – and in that vein, it should be available and accessible to anyone who needs it.

I volunteered at the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) a couple of years ago, where I taught simple yoga movement to outpatients. During one of the sessions, a man shared that he'd been practising some of the things that I'd taught, and he asked me what he could do to increase his strength to struggle less in future classes. He felt empowered when he managed to execute the poses, and when he felt the changes in his body, it clicked in him that he could also be in control of his mindset. This was something that he wanted to do for himself; he's been in and out of IMH, and he wants to leave and not come back. It's not so much about improving literal strength per se, but about building confidence with yoga – and he never had access to it until we brought it to him and he realised, 'Oh, I can actually do this to help myself.'

If we go back to the core of what yoga is, it's really to find the connection with your body, to move and breathe better. There's a time and place for those who want to do handstands and all – and that's great – but there are also a lot of other people who just need to learn basic mobility, and how to breathe. Teaching people breathing is huge, it can be really powerful. The Exhale Foundation wants to bring various types of healing modalities to three underserved communities: people with mental health issues, people with special needs and senior citizens. We've taught two-hour long classes with art and music for kids

with special needs over eight weeks, and we managed to teach them sun salutations, in a modified, fun way that really helped with their physical mobility and flexibility. For seniors, we like to engage them in something called adaptive yoga, where we make use of chairs, towels, any sort of prop that can get them moving. Thinking in the long term, we do want to develop outreach activities for even more people to have access to these healing modalities.

"IF YOU DON'T MAKE TIME *to* CONNECT WITH YOURSELF, *you* WON'T KNOW *who* YOU ARE AS *an* INDIVIDUAL, AND WHAT *your* PURPOSE ON *this* PLANET IS." – Jamie Lee



The healing modalities that Tan practices are essentially energy work that promotes connection with your body and the sensations that follow



Compassion is a key value in our healing space. It's self-compassion, and also compassion for others, in understanding the issues of the broader community and reflecting on how to support them. We shouldn't be segmenting the have and have-nots; it builds a lot of hierarchical layers, and that's not how society should progress. It's a whole big world out there, and there are a lot of people outside the community you know who need healing, too. And when you balance the commercial side of things with trying to do good for the community, people will naturally feel more connected to your cause. I mean, the Exhale Foundation couldn't progress with just me alone. It has to be a joint effort — the most recent pay-as-you-wish reiki sessions [where money collected will be donated to Pave, an organisation that tackles family violence] are conducted by myself and some of my more experienced reiki students. It empowers people to go out there and see what's happening to the world, then take that observation into the space and reflect on their reactions, and how that relates to themselves and their behaviour.

After returning from India, there was always a nagging voice in my head

telling me that I could create a bigger impact — and that there was more to just work. I never thought that I could, or wanted, to teach; the intention initially really was just to find out more about self-healing. So, I gave myself a year. In this one year, like a gap year from work, I'll try everything — learn as much as I can and attend various trainings. I knew that if I fell on my face really badly after a year, I could always go back to work. What's the worst that could happen? It was only after a week of Forrest yoga training that a lead trainer came up to me and told me I should teach. That's where it all began, and things clicked into place. Being a teacher has great impact. Do you know of the multiplier effect, where you're able to help others take it forward? The way I see it is, if I could move more people towards being able to conduct their own self-healing practice, they can go out and work with others. There are only so many people I can teach, but if people come and whatever we're saying resonates with them, and they spread the practice, that's another two people. These two will affect another four, and a bigger ripple effect is created that way.

My guess is that people are starting to explore more healing options; ones that can help them maintain good emotional health. Just think about it — when people call in sick at work, they go to the general practitioner to get a medical certificate. But we can't get a medical certificate for simply feeling, well, not great. We can't take a mental health day, and say, I'm feeling sad, and I just need to be home to rest and recuperate. It begs the question, are Singaporeans emotionally unhealthy? Very much so, unfortunately. There's a lot of disconnect that's happening in people's bodies, but we tend to override what's happening. It's okay to acknowledge that you're depressed, stressed, or anxious — the first step comes from acknowledging it, integrating the 'shadow sides', and then finding ways to address the issues.

For a long while, I've been iffy about the word 'healing', as it often connotes a sense of resolution from physical or emotional challenges, and is sometimes over-used in various settings. But you know, on our end, we hope to re-educate people that healing is a journey, one of exploration, self-reflection, and that it comes from taking different steps in working through and understanding ourselves. That's why we named the studio a 'healing space'. You need to set the intention of the space, right? The space — be it the studio, or wherever we conduct lessons — is meant to be a safe harbour for people for them to step in, and be as they are. When we send a message that's strong enough and show it with action, people start to be open to possibilities to what they can do, for not only themselves, but for others, too."

"IT'S SELF-COMPASSION, and ALSO COMPASSION for OTHERS, IN UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUES of THE BROADER COMMUNITY and REFLECTING on HOW to SUPPORT THEM."

— Ming Li Tan

FOUNDER OF KEW ORGANICS
LILY KEW

On self-confidence, self-esteem, and how true beauty is having a healthy mindset

Can you imagine being so insecure in your own skin, that whenever friends arrange for get-togethers, you'd have to go down to the meet-up place an hour earlier just to check if the light at the location is too bright or too harsh on the skin? If so, you'd then make up some story and tell them to go somewhere else instead, usually a place with warmer, softer and dimmer light — just so that you can hide your skin as much as possible? I can.

I've had bad acne and scarring all over my face for a long, long time;

as early on as a young adult. When you're in your 20s, you're at that impressionable age where you mind what people think of you. Sometimes when I saw pretty girls with good skin, I'd get a sour, bitter feeling deep inside and wonder, 'Why am I not like them?' I had such low, basically non-existent self-esteem and self-confidence that it paralysed my social life. Day after day, I was caught in a vicious cycle of masking my acne with makeup, which resulted in clogged pores, and therefore... more makeup. Thinking back of the layers I piled on my face scares me now; there was concealer, to mattify and smoothen the skin first, then foundation, then a concealer stick for thicker coverage, then pressed powder to set everything. Even then, the makeup wasn't enough; I'd be hyper-conscious of the way it was sitting on my oily skin, wondering if it was running or smudging. You'd see me talking to people from a distance, or constantly using my hair to 'cover up', in fear of people judging me for being weird and abnormal because of my skin. I wanted to run for council so badly in university, to join extra-curricular activities, but was always held back because of my skin. Heck, I didn't even dare to make friends.

The epiphany came when I was 29 years old. I woke up one day, had this moment, and thought, I can't live like this forever. How am I going to keep masking myself for the rest of my life? For more than 10 years I'd been going to different facial parlours to get my skin treated, but nothing ever helped. I told myself, there must be a solution. So, instead of continuing the hunt for a good facial parlour or more products – which led to a lot of wasted money – I decided to start a CIDESCO diploma in beauty, aesthetics, and body to find that solution myself. Now, in doing so I didn't have the intention to start my own skincare brand yet. Instead, the Kew Organics facial parlour came first in 2014, and we were using organic skincare from other brands. We made the decision to use organic skincare because I was eating organic food for my bad skin, and found that it really helped my body, so that love spilled over to skincare as well. The results, however, weren't really what I wanted for myself and my customers. Back then, organic skincare wasn't as accessible, and whatever was available was either too oily and rich, or too gentle. I know that there's potential in the field of organic skincare, the effect is just not being maximised. That's when it dawned upon me, why not create my own formulas? Using my own problematic skin as the benchmark for efficacy, I started working with labs that specialised in organic skincare, and created the first 19 products for Kew Organics, all of which are water-soluble and contain a generous percentage of organic ingredients.

Slowly, my skin started getting better. I'm 49 this year, and I've not worn

foundation in more than 10 years, and that's truly life-transforming for me. Imagine that sense of liberation, that sense of confidence, and that sense of joy. But more than that, going through this whole journey, having been at the worst and best side of things, I feel a kind of relief. And I always think, 'If I can achieve this, then there must be many people out there who want change too; who want to dare to bare.' I guess, what people need to know – and I say this because I've been through it – is that there is no such thing as flawless skin. It's simply unrealistic, and you're only going to spiral if you have that as your goal. What you want is clear and healthy skin, even if it means getting the occasional zit, that's going to let you be confident enough to go out without makeup. That's what I aspired for myself, and I want my customers to have that too.

Most people [with skin issues] will try to put up a strong front when they first come. Then, as I start sharing my story, you'll find out that a lot of them are actually very miserable with very low self-esteem. Some even cry as they start to lower their defences, and they'll confide that their skin has affected their social lives. With our facial parlours, we try to create a safe space for the customers that visit. I always tell my girls, because I've gone through those vulnerable days before, when people come in, the first and most important thing that they'll have to let them know is that there's hope. Treatment might take a while, but the good news is, the skin renews itself – and scars, marks can definitely be removed. True beauty and

*“TRUE BEAUTY and
TRUE STRENGTH,
HOWEVER, COME
from WITHIN.”*

– Lily Kew

true strength, however, come from within, and while customers are here to get their skin “fixed”, we want them to feel empowered too. If you think about it, the people who work at facial parlours are called facial therapists for a reason. They have an intimate relationship with customers, and I feel that people come to them for some sort of therapy – be it to have a listening ear, or to have someone to talk to – and it's on them to give troubled souls the support they need and help build them up.

For the longest time since the brand launched, I debated putting myself in the spotlight. Ideally, I'd like to keep a low profile. But I thought, having been through the extreme ends of the spectrum, people relate to my story. Yes, I did eventually achieve clear skin, but thinking about it, it's more about having a healthy mindset. You've got to love yourself at different stages of yourself; I missed out on so much of the good times with my family and friends because I was so caught up worrying about my skin. There are so many other things to live for. As a Christian, as a believer, I know God put me in the beauty industry for a purpose, and I have the answer – it's to go the opposite way of what the industry preaches. That beauty transcends skin, products, material – it's all in the mind.” 📍

The first Kew Organics store was set up at Everton Park, and the brand has since expanded to four other locations. Every single therapist at each outlet works makeup-free, like Kew

