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OMORI’s Portrayal of Self-Compassion as a Means to Prevent Suicide

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Introduction

“For forgiveness does not relieve someone of responsibility for what they have done. Forgiveness does not erase accountability. It is not about turning a blind eye or even turning the other cheek. It is not about letting someone off the hook or saying it is okay to do something monstrous. Forgiveness is simply about understanding that every one of us is both inherently good and inherently flawed. Within every hopeless situation and every seemingly hopeless person lies the possibility of transformation.” - Desmond Tutu (2014)

I met a friend in my freshman year of college who I got close with very quickly. We bonded over the fact that people had hurt us deeply, and we shared every messy and beautiful aspect of our grief and healing processes with each other. One day, he had been given the chance to forgive someone who had hurt him. The person who had hurt my friend had taken real, tangible strides for the better over the span of an entire decade, and– from my perspective– had genuinely changed. Regardless of that, my friend told me that he wouldn’t forgive that person– or anyone else who had ever hurt him, big or small, for that matter. He said he didn’t owe it to anyone. I think he viewed forgiveness as an act of service to an undeserving perpetrator, as something that took the focus off of the victim. For him, forgiveness was a part of giving peace to someone who didn’t deserve to feel peace.

At that time in my life, I had so many people who had hurt me that I thought I was incapable of forgiving. Even more than that, I thought they were completely undeserving of my forgiveness. Before that moment, I viewed forgiveness almost exactly how my friend described it, but having it verbalized and made real for me changed that. And I would love to say that this foundational change in my perspective on forgiveness came from an inspired compassion for
humanity, but truthfully, it came from jealousy. I saw the steps that this person took to try and earn my friend’s forgiveness, and it made me realize that, if the people who had hurt me took those steps that this person had taken for my friend, I would have forgiven them in an instant. I felt so angry at the people who had hurt me that, for years, I believed that I would never, ever forgive them. But when my friend refused to forgive that person, the idea that I was incapable of forgiveness shattered. When my friend refused to forgive, I realized that, on a human level, I didn’t actually believe that the people who hurt me— or anyone, ever— could be inherently and fundamentally unworthy of forgiveness and peace. I didn’t want to live in a world where people were inherently incapable of change. I held too deep a hope in humanity to accept that.

My former friend and I ended up having a bit of a messy break, though I’ll always be grateful for the things he taught me. After everything, when I was reflecting on the friendship, I despaired over the fact that I knew that he would never forgive me for the hurt I had caused him. I did hurt him, and I felt guilty about that. It made me question whether I deserved forgiveness at all. Before that moment, I hadn’t realized how the messaging about forgiveness that I had received in childhood had impacted me. I had internalized the beliefs that I was unworthy of forgiveness and peace; I had put myself in the very same category of “unforgivable” as the people who had hurt me so profoundly. Something about that caused yet another fundamental shift in my perspective, because if I believed that they could be forgiven, I was more than deserving of some self compassion.

What came next was a three-year long journey of learning how to forgive myself. So many friends, therapy sessions, songs, poems, and movies shaped my journey and changed my opinion on what it meant to forgive myself, but none were as fundamentally perspective-changing as OMORI. OMORI, a psychological horror role playing game (RPG) that released in
late 2020, is a video game about a boy who does something terrible and learns to forgive himself. Through well-written characters, skillful worldbuilding, and a fantastic narrative, OMORI presents a phenomenal depiction of trauma and traumatic memory and the journey to self-compassion, self-forgiveness, and healing. After a brief analysis of the characters, I will define trauma and discuss how the game’s establishing story successfully portrays traumatic memory and post-traumatic symptoms. I will then go further into the narrative that takes place during gameplay in order to demonstrate the main character’s journey towards mindfulness, common humanity, self-kindness, and eventual self-compassion. Ultimately, I will engage in a joint analysis of both game content and current psychological literature to examine how OMORI emphasizes the cultivation of self-compassion as a means to prevent suicidal outcomes.

**Introducing Characters**

OMORI, as a game, tends to emphasize narrative over gameplay. The story focuses on six kids in a small town—Kel, Hero, Aubrey, Sunny, Basil, and Mari—who made up a tight-knit friend group that went through something incredibly traumatic. In order to establish enough context to critically examine the game’s portrayal of trauma, I will discuss the three characters who stand out from the rest: Sunny, his sister Mari, and his best friend Basil. I will most closely follow Sunny’s journey throughout my analysis, but in order to truly understand his character, we must also understand his relationships with Mari and Basil. I’ll begin this section by briefly introducing Mari, Sunny, and Basil’s characters and the dynamics between them. I will then move into defining trauma and explaining traumatic memory. With that context established, I’ll conclude this section of the essay by analyzing the trauma that these characters have endured.
Mari was an intelligent, outgoing, positive-minded 15-year-old girl who filled the role of the caring older sister—not just for her little brother, Sunny, but also for all of the other kids in their friend group. The group always went to Mari first for advice and comfort as she would always pick someone up when they fell down. Despite the burden she took on as the group’s caretaker, she always maintained a positive attitude. Whenever I played through the game, I was taken aback by her depth of understanding and capacity for forgiveness, all of which existed in addition to her ability to push the people around her to be better versions of themselves. The game implies—and at times, outright shows—that Mari’s and Sunny’s parents did not pay their children much attention at all, arguably neglecting them to the point of abuse. Given this context, Mari clearly provided her younger brother Sunny with almost all of the emotional attention that he received.

Despite her core identity as a caretaker, Mari’s character was much more complex than her ability to care for the people around her. She took up the role of the responsible older sister, but Mari was also just a kid, like her friends. With a bit of a mischievous side, Mari liked to tease her friend group with a particular sense of humor that would sometimes escalate into lighthearted pranks. Additionally, under her mask of positivity, Mari hid some intense self-esteem issues that manifested in perfectionism. She completely devoted herself to her hobbies, especially school and piano, with the expectation that she would excel. The idea of not performing perfectly caused her so much stress that, at times, she would lash out. Critically, every now and then, her high expectations and judgements of herself would blur into high expectations and judgements of the people around her. Mari was a caring, upbeat, extraverted, silly older sister with a big heart for anyone who needed it despite her constant struggle with self-esteem and perfectionism. Above all, there was no one she cared for more than Sunny.
Sunny was Mari’s 12-year old little brother, and a foil to Mari in many ways. Sunny filled the common video game trope of the silent protagonist. A silent protagonist is a fully or mostly silent character of a video game whose actions and decisions the player controls. They act as a vessel through which players can experience the world of the video game. Sunny, by nature of his position as the silent protagonist, spoke incredibly infrequently. His characterization beyond his introversion, however, revealed his accompanying negative disposition. Sunny often opted to stay quiet, didn’t like to smile, and held a negative outlook on both himself and the world. While his bleak outlook did tangibly affect his thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, his negativity didn’t extend to his view of his sister or his friends, whom he loved very deeply. He listened to his friends talk for hours about whatever they needed to talk about, always willing to lend an ear.

While Sunny and Mari were opposites in many ways, the two shared self-esteem issues. That being said, Sunny’s self-esteem issues were much more self-defeating than Mari’s. While Mari’s lack of self-esteem pushed her to try harder, Sunny’s drained him of all energy to try. He truly believed that he was weak, helpless, and unworthy of the people around him. This often caused him to feel afraid, timid, and unsure of himself. The intensity with which Sunny experienced his emotions, especially his negative feelings about himself, may have caused his frequent daydreaming. The game suggests that, even before he underwent trauma, Sunny had his own worlds and stories that he would escape to. As a deeply-feeling, introverted, and caring daydreamer, Sunny’s friends would often find him completely lost in his own head. It seemed to be his sister and his friends who tethered Sunny to reality—especially his best friend, Basil. Basil was a kind, gentle, and anxious person who loved photography, caring for plants, and caring for people. Along with Sunny, Basil leaned towards timidness in a group of otherwise big
personalities. He and Sunny would often find their own corner to read or relax in. Basil and Sunny seemed to have a quiet but deeply loving relationship. Basil showed his love for all of his friends through his hobbies of photography and gardening. After his friends gifted him a Polaroid camera, Basil would always take photos of candid, day-to-day moments with them, as those were the moments that meant the most to him. He collected and captioned every single photo he took in a long-running photo album, which he considered to be his “most precious belonging” (OMORI, 2020). Basil essentially acted as the friend group’s historian through his photography. Additionally, Basil would include his friends in his gardening, cultivating a garden with specific flowers and plants that reminded him of the personalities of each of his friends.

Basil had a detrimental people-pleasing side to him as well. He often let his people-pleasing tendencies and his anxiety fuel attempts to make all of his friends happy, and perhaps even more so, to protect them. This tendency was especially present with his best friend, Sunny. Basil would go to drastic measures to make sure everything would be okay for Sunny. Still, similarly to Sunny, Basil would often get overwhelmed by his somewhat severe anxiety. Due to his parents’ severe absence in his life, Basil often found himself lonely and in need of support. Luckily, Sunny was always happy to listen whenever Basil needed a confidant to be there for him. Basil was timid and anxious, though he flourished and demonstrated his love most successfully when he involved his passions of photography and gardening. As a fiercely devoted friend and a bit of a people-pleaser, there was little he would not do for Sunny, who was always there for him to lean on.
Character Dynamics

However—while Basil depended on Sunny as a shoulder to cry on, Sunny did not depend on Basil. No—Sunny depended on Mari as his foundation. As previously mentioned, Mari likely provided Sunny with the majority of his emotional attention. There’s plenty of in-game evidence for this, especially in the emotional climax of the game. Mari was Sunny’s rock. When he felt too disturbed by nightmares and anxiety to sleep in his own bed, Mari held him in her arms until he felt safe enough to sleep. When he felt out of control and overwhelmed by panic, Mari taught him to steady his breathing and calm down. From the moment he was born, it was the two of them. In all of the places where Sunny seemed haunted by his anxiety and sadness, Mari looked out for him and lifted him up. She didn’t only look out for him mentally, though. In the most relevant and dramatic instance of Mari’s care for her brother, she saved him from drowning.

Their group met up at a park that they frequented that was next to a pond. Sunny was standing on a statue over the pond when he was scared by a spider. In his panic, he fell from the statue and into the water, completely paralyzed by his fear. Mari wasted no time to jump in after Sunny and drag him to the surface—literally saving his life. Mari was, both mentally and physically, Sunny’s saving grace and foundation for life. But this foundation was slowly cracking.

Basil’s photo album, which spans from Christmas of one year to September of the next, perfectly tracks the subtle but persistently growing tension between Sunny and Mari. The pictures show how, over this span of time, Sunny stopped seeing Mari as often due to her schoolwork and piano practice becoming more and more demanding. The first Polaroid, taken on Christmas, showed Sunny playing a violin that the entire group chipped in to get him. Based on Basil’s commentary, Sunny used to play the violin but quit at some point in the past. It seemed that his motivation for taking it up again revolved around spending more time with his now
increasingly absent sister: “He’s starting to take lessons again so he can play at recitals with his sister, Mari” (OMORI, 2020). Finally, once summer came back around, Mari had fewer obligations and could spend more time with Sunny outside of their rehearsals. Things between them settled for a while until school started again, at which point Mari nearly disappeared. One of the final photos in Basil’s album showed a picture of Mari and Sunny hugging on September 9th. The description mentioned that “Mari doesn’t come home until late now because she’s taking extra classes to prepare for college. Me and Sunny have been hanging out a lot, but I’m sure he still misses her a lot” (OMORI, 2020).

Typically, Mari was very gentle and accommodating to Sunny, as seen in Basil’s photo from April 9th: “I caught Mari carrying Sunny on the way home from school today. He must have fallen asleep on the bus” (OMORI, 2020). When it came to her passions, however, Mari was an intense perfectionist. This is illustrated in a photo from April 21st: “Mari is teaching everyone how to make flower crowns! Here's Sunny and Kel holding Mari’s example. It looks perfect, doesn't it? If only Mari thought so, too” (OMORI, 2020). By September, the only time Sunny and Mari spent together anymore was when they were practicing for their upcoming recital, time in which Mari’s perfectionist expectations extended to Sunny as well. Mari picked a waltz for them to play. The fact that waltzes were her favorite only increased the pressure that she put on herself— and this time, on Sunny, too. Like everything else she pursued, she wanted this duet to be perfect. And so, for the first time, she began pushing Sunny to uphold her same standard of perfection. And he hated it all— how hard Mari pushed him, the monotony of practice, trying to keep up with her skill level. The last photo in Basil’s photo album, from September 22nd, shows Mari and Sunny practicing together. “After some begging, Sunny came to join Mari for recital practice. They’re still working out some stuff, but they already sound so
amazing! I know they’re going to be great” (OMORI, 2020). I know they’re going to be great, Basil thought.

On the night of the recital, before they can perform, Mari is found dead, hanging from a tree in the backyard.

Sunny shut down completely. Basil wouldn’t look anyone in the eye. The loss was not only totally unbearable, but also completely unexpected for everyone involved. No one took it lightly– but it seemed to have broken Sunny and Basil on a fundamental level. Something was off. It seemed like something happened. Something Sunny can’t remember. Something that’s too painful to remember.

Four years after the day of the recital– Sunny and Basil were unrecognizable from the children they used to be. Sunny completely shut himself in, no longer attending school or leaving the house. Basil became paranoid, hypervigilant, and depressed, actively pushing away anyone who tried to help him. And it is here, four years after the day of the recital, that the gameplay of OMORI begins.

**Trauma**

**Defining Trauma**

Trauma is the thread that weaves the story of OMORI together. OMORI depicts every step of trauma– the traumatic incident itself, the fallout and impact of different trauma responses, long-term coping mechanisms, and the eventual steps towards healing. To understand OMORI and the things it wants to tell us, we must understand trauma. As such, in the following section I will define trauma as a foundation for further analysis.
My preferred definition of trauma comes from Bonnie Badenoch’s book *The Heart of Trauma*. Badenoch describes trauma as “any experience of fear and/or pain that doesn’t have the support it needs to be digested and integrated” (Badenoch, 2017). Within the framework of this definition, when someone experiences fear or pain, it is not inherently traumatic, but it has the capacity to become traumatic if it is not properly processed. That processing looks like digestion—properly taking in what has happened—and integration—accepting it as something that has happened in the past (Badenoch, 2017). To succeed in digesting and integrating fear and pain, one must have the support system, the attention, and the personal coping mechanisms necessary to come to terms with the painful experience. When someone does not have the community to help them or the personal ability to process what has happened to them, then pain or fear becomes trauma according to this definition. If that experience of fear or pain is not processed properly, it will remain in someone’s mind and body as trauma.

Badenoch’s definition allows for a wide range of life experiences to be classified as trauma. For example, it includes experiences ranging from feeling unsafe in your home as a child to getting in a severe car accident. I would be remiss to disregard that this definition's spectrum of experiences allows for a wide range of severity. Additionally, while all trauma holds the capacity to impact one’s mental health negatively, *not* all trauma leads to more intense reactions, such as the development of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Dr. Francine Shapiro, who developed one of the most widespread forms of trauma therapy in 1987, describes this difference in severity through the terms ‘little t’ trauma and ‘big T’ trauma. ‘Little t’ trauma generally includes experiences such as having no one to confide in as a child, while ‘big T’ trauma encompasses witnessing the death of a loved one. However, whether it’s big T or little t trauma, when the body perceives that something traumatic is happening, it will respond biologically.
**Traumatic Memory**

The brain processes traumatic memory differently than it does normal memory. During trauma, a region of the brain known as the limbic system goes into overdrive (Van Der Kolk, 2003). Evolutionarily speaking, the limbic system is one of the oldest structures in the mammalian brain, and its primary job is to keep you alive. The limbic system has many individual structures within it that work together to promote your survival, including the thalamus, the amygdala, the hypothalamus, and the hippocampus. The thalamus receives sensory information – what you’re seeing, hearing, feeling, and smelling – and sends it off to the relevant areas of the brain for processing. The amygdala keeps a close eye on this sensory information, fine tuned to decide whether or not any of this incoming sensory information poses a threat to you. If it senses something dangerous – i.e. something potentially traumatic – it will alert the hypothalamus that you’re in danger (Van Der Kolk, 2003). The hypothalamus will immediately release stress hormones, and your body’s physical reaction to the danger will begin. At this point in the process, before you’ve even processed that the potentially dangerous stimulus exists, your limbic system has already orchestrated a response to it (Van Der Kolk, 2003).

While the thalamus, amygdala, and hypothalamus go into overdrive during a traumatic experience, one part of the limbic system, the hippocampus, gets suppressed (Badenoch, 2017). The hippocampus is one of the many structures in the brain that deal with memory. It aids with storing memory and converting incoming sensory information into memory. Additionally, the hippocampus compares the new information to our other, older memories (Van Der Kolk, 2003). In other words, it helps store and catalog memories and puts them into the broader context of all of your memories. However, the hippocampus is very affected by the stress hormones that the
hypothalamus releases during a traumatic incident (Badenoch, 2017). This disrupts and fragments the creation of new memories. Disruption causes “the imprints of traumatic experiences [to be] organized not as coherent logical narratives but in fragmented sensory and emotional traces: images, sounds, and physical sensations” (Van Der Kolk, 2003).

Dr. Rebecca Campbell, a researcher of violence against women and children, describes memory storage during trauma as “the world’s messiest desk.” In explaining this metaphor, she prompts people to imagine that they’re taking notes about a conversation at a desk, but with one thought at a time on individual sticky notes. In this scenario, once you’ve completed a sticky note, you put it somewhere randomly on the desk. Then she encourages people to imagine leaving the desk alone for some time, then coming back and trying to put all of the sticky notes back in order to make a smooth, cohesive narrative (Campbell, 2017, 3:35). Because of the overhaul of the limbic system in trauma, traumatic memory is often fragmented, disorganized, and incomplete.

The Photos & The Memories

As mentioned before, Basil has a photo album of Polaroids that show the friend group’s adventures in the year before Mari’s death. Early on, the game prompts the player to look through, reorganize, and restore the photo album on multiple occasions. The game reuses the medium of the photo album to portray fragmented traumatic memory. During the emotional climax of the game, Sunny remembers and accepts the events that occurred on the night that Mari died by finding Polaroid photos that show his disrupted memories of the night. Sunny finds the photos out of chronological order and has to create a timeline to actually understand the extent of what happened. The photos–Sunny’s memories–are all drawn in black and white as
blurry imprints of whatever fragmented image, sound, feeling, or emotion they represent (Van Der Kolk, 2003). The use of this simple photo album medium to retell a traumatic incident mirrors the concept of the world’s messiest desk. It represents— not with words but through function and action— the fragmentation, disorganization, and incomplete nature of traumatic memory (Campbell, 2017, 3:35).

As a quick note— the playable events of OMORI take place four years after Mari’s death. Critically, throughout the majority of the gameplay, the player does not know what actually happened to these characters, though it’s made clear that something unknown but intense happened when Mari died. Further, Sunny— as the character that the player can control and experience the game through— lives in a state of constant repression and denial that contributes to the lack of context that defines the majority of the game. While I think the structure of saving the reveal of what truly happened on the night of Mari’s death for the end of the game works brilliantly as a narrative device, I cannot properly analyze this game without the full context of that night.

In his photo album, Basil would typically caption his photos. In contrast, in this photo album representing Sunny’s traumatic memories, the captions are made up of what we can presume to be Sunny’s thoughts and internal dialogue in second person. Thus, when the photo descriptions refer to ‘you,’ they are referring to Sunny.

“Photo of a Wall - You heard some scoffing from behind the wall, but paid it no notice. You were in no mood to focus. You were overcome. You were sick of everything. You know it wasn't a big deal, but you couldn't control yourself” (OMORI, 2020).

Plenty of evidence in the game suggests that Sunny and Mari’s parents emotionally neglected their children. Their dad only appears once in the game in the form of a family photo.
Their mom leaves Sunny alone for several days at a time. In fact, their parents are so uninvolved that the game doesn’t even name them. Mari holds herself to a perfect standard, possibly to try to fully deserve her parents’ attention. Sunny has extremely low self-esteem and deeply held beliefs that he is unworthy of the people around him. This may stem from repeated ‘little t’ traumas of neglect throughout his childhood. If his parents brushed him off every time he expressed a need, he would internalize the idea that something was fundamentally wrong with him that made him unworthy of emotional attention and time. Sunny’s earliest memories of warmth and emotional support only have Mari in them. Everything suggests that where their parents failed, Mari tried to pick up the slack. Sunny was dependent on Mari.

And then, Mari stopped spending time with him. So Sunny tried to pick up the violin to spend time with her again. But Sunny didn’t play perfectly, and Mari couldn’t stand being anything less than perfect. She would make him feel ashamed of his performance, no matter how unfair that was to him. And Sunny internalized that shame— but he also internalized how unfair it felt. And then, the day before the rehearsal, while practicing his part in the duet, Sunny hears Mari scoffing at his imperfect performance from behind the wall. That was enough to trigger a trauma response. He was losing his sister, his only source of emotional stability. He felt abandoned. He felt unfair shame. He felt like he wasn’t worth anything. This was more than upsetting to him— this was dangerous. This put his emotional stability at risk. So his body responded, and his trauma response began.

“Photo of a Broken Violin - Your precious violin lay shattered at the bottom of the staircase. You threw it in a rage. Your fingers were shaking in pain... practicing over and over... but you still make mistakes after mistakes. This was all a bad idea” (OMORI, 2020).
Sunny’s friends had taken on summer jobs and saved money for months to buy him that violin. He should have felt guilty. One way of understanding anger is to compare it to guilt. Anger feels unpleasant, and usually comes with the feeling that someone outside of yourself should not have done something that they did (Kubany & Watson, 2003). Guilt feels similar to anger— but pointed inward, at the self. Even though his friends had put so much effort into buying that violin for him, when Sunny saw it shattered at the bottom of the stairs, it wasn’t guilt he felt. It was anger. Mari shouldn’t have pushed him so hard. She shouldn’t be so angry and disappointed with him.

“Photo of an Argument - MARI was yelling at you. You couldn’t understand what she was saying. She didn’t understand you at all... She didn’t understand that you just weren’t good enough. The only thing you hold onto was your anger. This pain... was it her fault?” (OMORI, 2020).

“Photo of a Fight - MARI blocked your path. She says that she isn’t finished talking. She tells you not to run away... but why not? You did this all for her! Why was she yelling at you? You didn’t understand…” (OMORI, 2020).

Individual responses to trauma are incredibly complicated and diverse. I’m going to describe one way of understanding trauma responses, but no conceptualization can encompass the nuances of every individual experience. When considering trauma responses, most people would start with the fight or flight response. In reality, a trauma response typically involves a mix of fight and flight, as well as many other potential responses. The defense cascade is one way to understand a more multifaceted trauma response (Lang, David, & Ohman, 2000). The defense cascade begins with a freeze response, also known as an “orienting response” (Schauer & Elbert, 2010). Through a freeze response, people take a moment to orient themself to the
danger and take in the necessary information about their situation. Once they’re no longer frozen, the next step in the cascade is the flight response. However, if fleeing the situation is either not an option or blocked from being an option, the cascade will move on to the fight response (Schauer & Elbert, 2010).

Mari was angry. She was yelling. The only person who Sunny fully trusted was so mad at him. He had disappointed her again, and his deep-seated insecurities that he wasn’t good enough were being thrown in his face. After all he had done just for Mari, after he had practiced and practiced, even though he hated it? It was unfair. In the context of this trauma response, Sunny tried to flee. He tried to run. But Mari blocked his path, and told him not to run away. Mari blocked his flight response. And when flight is blocked— it turns into fight.

“Photo of a Murder - You lose all sense and push her down the staircase” (OMORI, 2020).

“Photo of Silence - You watched MARI crush on top of your broken violin. The sound wakes you up to nothing but silence. You called out to her, but she doesn’t answer. Your heart sinks into your stomach” (OMORI, 2020).

One way of understanding guilt is to compare it to anger. Guilt feels similar to anger— but pointed inward, at the self (OMORI, 2020). When Sunny saw his sister laying at the bottom of the stairs, it was no longer anger he felt. It was guilt— crushing, overwhelming guilt. He shouldn’t have pushed her. He shouldn’t have gotten so mad at her.

“Photo of Panic - It happened in an instant. You didn't mean to do that. Well, you did mean to push her, didn't you? It was an accident, right? You're not sure. You tremble your way down the staircase” (OMORI, 2020).
“Photo of Desperation - You call her name, but she doesn't answer. You sweep the bits of wood from her body. Nothing but scratches. You turn her around and see her face. She looks asleep... but then, why isn't she answering?” (OMORI, 2020).

“Photo of an Accomplice - You pick up Mari and drag her up the stairs. She feels lighter than you think. She just needs to lie down in a bed... She just needs some rest…” (OMORI, 2020).

As previously stated, during trauma, the limbic system is overactivated. The amygdala flags sensory information as potentially dangerous before the information has the chance to make its way to the neocortex. However, it will eventually reach the other parts of the brain. The neocortex is the outside layer of the brain. The neocortex includes many sub-sections such as the prefrontal cortex, whose many concerns include reasoning, decision making, empathy, language, and abstract thought (Van Der Kolk, 2003). If we can call the limbic system the emotional brain, then we can call the prefrontal cortex the logical brain. The limbic system is our oldest brain structure attuned to survival, while the prefrontal cortex is our newest structure attuned to reasoning and relationships. A typically functioning prefrontal cortex helps us process our reality and make decisions based on potential outcomes. If the amygdala misreads something as dangerous, for example, mistaking a jump rope for a snake, it’s up to the neocortex to clarify that no danger is actually present (Van Der Kolk, 2003). However, during trauma— i.e.: when danger is actually present— the limbic system becomes overactivated, and the brain activity in the prefrontal cortex drops dramatically (Van Der Kolk, 2003).

As the prefrontal cortex shuts down, it takes reasoning, decision making, and abstract thought with it. In a traumatic situation, these brain functions become extremely difficult to
access. Due to this, many people experiencing trauma make odd, unwise, or illogical decisions, and faulty judgements.

Faulty judgments such as insisting that Mari was only asleep. Illogical decisions such as bringing Mari up the stairs to her bed instead of calling an ambulance.

“Photo of Disbelief - Your heart beats out of your chest. Your head feels fuzzy. You lose vision. You push the door to the bedroom open, and make your way to her bed. She's going to be okay, right? This is just a dream, right?” (OMORI, 2020).

Let’s return to the defense cascade, which begins with a freeze response before moving into flight, then fight. Schauer & Elbert (2010) propose a more nuanced model of the defense cascade that focuses on dissociation as a trauma response. According to their model, the trauma response “shut down” comes after the fight response. They describe, however, that before people fully begin to shut down, they tend to experience intense symptoms of fear, like, for example, heart palpitations, lightheadedness, and blurred vision (Schauer & Elbert, 2010).

“Photo of an Idea - A whisper comes from behind you, but you ignore it. A cry comes from behind you, but you ignore it. You cover your face with your arms. This isn't real. None of this is real. Why won't you wake up?” (OMORI, 2020).

The shutdown response as detailed by Schauer & Elbert (2010) has many characteristic features fueled by dissociation. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) defines dissociation as “a disruption, interruption, and/or discontinuity of the normal, subjective integration of behavior, memory, identity, consciousness, emotion, perception, body representation, and motor control” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). People experiencing a dissociation-fueled shutdown response tend to struggle with putting together and fully understanding their reality (Schauer & Elbert,
Additionally, shutdown targets the senses. All perception and senses, including eyesight, hearing, and movement can become dulled or non-functional (Schauer & Elbert, 2010). Both of these responses exemplify the dramatically decreased activity of the neocortex during a traumatic response (Van Der Kolk, 2003). Sunny showcases the transition from the fight response into shutdown after he witnesses Mari’s death. Someone else is clearly present, helping him move Mari and trying to speak to him, but the shutdown response has completely dulled his senses. He simply cannot process the scene around him or accept his current reality.

“Photo of Hopelessness - Everything appears dark. The shadows slither around you. You don't understand what is happening... Your head starts to feel fuzzy... You sink into a crevice in your mind... an empty white room” (OMORI, 2020).

To elaborate more on dissociation—dissociation entails a severe disconnect from one’s brain, body, and perceived reality. Dissociation exists on a spectrum, spanning from less intense dissociative strategies like daydreaming to the extreme shut down response during trauma. In an fMRI scan of the brain, which tracks blood flow as a way to measure brain activity, we can see that dissociative trauma responses reduce brain activation on a widespread scale (Van Der Kolk, 2003). It leaves an almost entirely blank slate in the imaging, which OMORI artistically interprets as an empty white room. The white room is a physical manifestation of the dissociated brain, as a space in the corner of Sunny’s mind that exists far away from the part that experiences his frightening reality.

Most people who dissociate as a trauma response indicate that they had used milder forms of dissociation throughout their childhood to cope with stress (Schauer & Elbert, 2010). Before Mari’s death, Sunny would go to school and stare out of the window all day. He would watch the clouds and dissociate while “his mind drifted elsewhere [to] his own worlds, his own
stories, [and] his own adventures” (OMORI, 2020). When interrupted and brought back to reality, he quietly lamented that he’d have to get back to his stories once he had the chance. Sunny had used dissociation throughout his entire life, so he had no trouble slipping into the white room in his head at the worst moment of his life.

“Photo of Guilt - You want to scream for help, but you're afraid... you mumble to yourself... what if they ask what happened? There's no way you can tell them the truth. Who would be able to forgive him? Who would believe... that it was... an accident?” (OMORI, 2020). I’m presenting this photo a bit out of chronological order, as it stands out from the others for a couple of reasons. Most of all, while all of the other photos describe Sunny’s thought process, this photo is the only photo that describes the feelings of the other person there that Sunny had yet to recognize—Basil. When Sunny and Mari began arguing, Basil, who was over to hang out with Sunny, watched from the bottom of the stairs. He saw everything. He was the one who helped Sunny carry Mari up the stairs to her bed, and he was the one trying to comfort Sunny once upstairs.

Basil’s reaction to witnessing Mari’s death opposes Sunny’s response in many ways. While Sunny almost immediately begins dissociating and shutting down, Basil becomes extremely overactivated. As soon as Mari fell down the stairs, Basil’s mind started racing with every possibility of what could happen to Sunny as consequence. Basil had absent parents who left him to live with his grandmother when he was a toddler because they were too busy. As such, Sunny was one of the most important people— if not the most important person— in Basil’s entire life. Basil felt safe with Sunny and came to him with nearly every problem he had because Sunny listened well. Basil had experienced a lifetime of traumatic abandonments. He didn’t want to lose Sunny, too. While Sunny doesn’t have the capacity to process Basil’s words, the very first
scene of the game reveals some of the things he said to a shut down, crying Sunny: “Don’t worry, everything is going to be okay. No matter what happens, promise me that we’ll always be there for each other. Promise me” (OMORI, 2020).

“Photo of Support - Your shoulders feel heavy. A familiar voice whispers something unspeakable. Your eyes widen. It tells you to follow its lead. It says... it’s the only way out... It says... that everything will be okay” (OMORI, 2020).

Another framework with which to understand trauma is the polyvagal theory. While the defense cascade starts with the freeze response before moving into flight then fight, the polyvagal theory begins with human connection (Porges, 2011). The polyvagal theory states that the first evolutionary instinct of a human in danger is to seek out social engagement, and to find safety in other people. If denied this human connection, the person will then begin their fight or flight response. Similarly to the defense cascade, when the person can’t engage in their fight or flight response, they will progress into the freeze and collapse response (Porges, 2011).

Sunny’s safe person was Mari – and he couldn’t turn to her for support. Basil’s safest person, on the other hand, was Sunny. And Basil wanted to preserve that safety. So, mirroring the tendency towards human connection detailed by the polyvagal theory, he comes up with an idea to save Sunny and take care of him. He comes up with the idea to stage Mari’s death as a suicide.

“Photo of Betrayal - You pick up Mari”s body and lift it down the staircase. She feels lighter than you think. You feel multiple eyes shift their gaze to you. You keep your eyes toward the ground” (OMORI, 2020).

As the prefrontal cortex shuts down, it takes reasoning, decision making, and abstract thought with it. In a traumatic situation, these brain functions become extremely difficult to
access (Van Der Kolk, 2003). Due to this, many people experiencing trauma make odd, unwise, or bad decisions, and faulty judgements.

Faulty judgments—such as believing that staging Mari’s death as a suicide was the only way out. Very, very bad decisions—such as bringing Mari’s body down the stairs, and preparing to hang it from a tree.

The next five photos have less content to dive deeply into and analyze, so I’ll describe them all at once. In these five photos, Basil and Sunny take Mari’s body to the tree outside, tie a rope, and hang her body from the tree. Sunny continues to deny his reality and tries to wake up from a dream as he robotically helps Basil carry Mari’s body outside. Once he gets outside and puts down Mari’s body, he stops functioning and moving, only able to stare blankly at the leaves. He experiences sensations and emotions in a very fragmented fashion. The sounds, sights, and feelings nearly pull him back to reality, but he continues to deny his situation and ignores them. At this point, he still hasn’t even fully processed that someone else is with him. He clings to the thing that Basil told him— that everything will be okay— and repeats it to himself as he refuses to look anywhere but the ground. Basil hangs Mari’s body as Sunny remains completely disconnected from reality (OMORI, 2020).

“Photo of Legs - You feel a cold hand clutch yours. You try to jerk away, but it squeezes back; unwilling to let you go. The hand drags you backward. You look up and see your best friend for the first time... BASIL. You see the tears falling from his tired eyes as he looks ahead. You suddenly realize that none of this is a dream. All of this is real” (OMORI, 2020).

“Photo of a Lie - As you and BASIL step into the house, you look back towards the trees and see it. The light engulfs it as it sways in the wind... For a moment, you feel at peace. You
hate yourself for feeling this way. Is that all, then? Is everything going to be okay now?” (OMORI, 2020).

“Photo of Something - Suddenly, BASIL stops. You look up at his eyes... but this time, they’re wide awake, staring at Something. You turn your eyes toward it as well, though you wish you didn’t. An eye meets yours. Your heart sinks into your stomach. You shouldn’t have looked back... You just... shouldn’t... have looked…” (OMORI, 2020).

The game itself begins four years after Mari’s death. After she died, Sunny stopped leaving the house, even skipping school. Abandoned by Sunny, Basil started lashing out and isolating himself from the other friends in their group. The other friendships fell apart just as quickly. Everyone struggled to process Mari’s death, though none of them outside of Sunny and Basil could possibly know the truth of that night. Sunny and Basil never told a soul what really happened, albeit for different reasons. Basil, despite feeling abandoned by Sunny, remained loyal to his best friend. He didn’t want people to believe that Sunny was capable of killing Mari. Even after four years of nothing but silence from him, Basil still wanted to protect Sunny. Sunny, on the other hand, couldn’t have told people the truth. He couldn’t have told people the truth, because he didn’t remember it– or, more accurately– he didn’t want to remember it. He pushed it so far down and dissociated so heavily through every day of his life that he wouldn’t have to remember it.

How do you live with something as heavy as this? With an understanding of the basic mechanisms of trauma, the characters, the traumatic incident, and their trauma responses, we can move into the territory of post-traumatic coping mechanisms and how they can lead to self-compassion and self-forgiveness. Beginning with post-traumatic symptoms, we will briefly explore Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Sunny’s phobias, white space, and the character
Omori. From there, we’ll move into the mechanisms of moving towards self-compassion, and how self-compassion affects people experiencing PTSD and depression.

**PTSD**

The DSM-5 details the key symptoms necessary to meet the diagnosis for PTSD. After the exposure to trauma, people with PTSD will experience intrusive symptoms. Intrusive symptoms include intrusive memories or dreams related to the trauma (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Additionally, people with PTSD will exhibit avoidance symptoms where they avoid people, situations, and things that remind them of the event. They also experience altered cognitions and moods. Cognitively, this includes experiences such as struggling to remember the traumatic event or details about the traumatic event (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). As it pertains to mood, this includes changes such as experiencing symptoms of depression. The last diagnostic symptom that people with PTSD experience is hyperarousal. Hyperarousal manifests through things like increased anger, hypervigilance, and problems with concentration (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Sunny clearly exhibits every symptom necessary for the diagnosis of PTSD. Intrusive memories are often involuntary, persistent, and overwhelming images or emotions that are extremely difficult to control (Iyadurai et al., 2019). To discuss Sunny’s intrusive memories, I’d have us return to the last photo in the photo book—the photo of Something. In this photo, Sunny catches a glimmer of Mari’s eye shining through her long dark hair as she hangs from the tree. In that moment, the uncanny sight of Mari hanging from the tree transforms into Something—not a vague something, but literally a character called “Something.” Something is an inhuman, imposing, dark figure that closely resembles that striking sight of Mari’s hair with one eye in the middle. Something haunts Sunny throughout the entire game. When you look in the mirror,
Something can appear standing right behind Sunny, or in the doorway. There’s a chance to see Something hovering over Sunny’s bed when he wakes up, and at times Something can become antagonistic and attack Sunny. It’s interesting to note that Basil also has a Something that haunts him throughout the game, though it’s not the same as Sunny’s Something. Basil’s Something is stringy and scattered, resembling Mari’s hair when she first hit the ground at the bottom of the stairs after Sunny pushed her. Both Somethings are physical (or metaphysical) manifestations of the intrusive experiences that are hallmarks of PTSD. They act as a means to artistically and symbolically represent the extent to which Sunny and Basil are constantly haunted by intrusive imagery of the events of that night, how unable they are to control these intrusions, and the harm these intrusions can cause. OMORI also demonstrates Sunny’s experience with intrusive dreams, though I’ll go more into depth about that later when I discuss white space.

Sunny’s avoidant symptoms are some of his most extreme. For the four years after Mari’s death, he can’t bear to see his friends in any capacity. He isolates himself from all of his friends, including Basil, by refusing to attend school. Eventually, he stops leaving the house at all, for any reason. At the beginning of the game’s events, none of his friends had seen him— even from a distance— for nearly four years. As the game takes place in a relatively small town, it’s likely that Sunny had a memory tied to Mari in nearly every major location. Every instance of leaving the house would have reminded him of what he’d done, and what he’d lost— so he stopped leaving. Even in his own home, Sunny sometimes refuses to enter the room with Mari’s piano, and he will block out the existence of an entire closet— the closet where his broken violin is locked away. Of course, his most extreme act of avoidance comes through his near-constant dissociation, which I will once again go into more depth about later when I discuss white space.
One way that the symptom of altered cognitions can manifest is through disrupted memories. As described earlier, the storage and formation of memories during trauma is altered by the hormones affecting the hypothalamus (Van Der Kolk, 2003). Typically, in post-traumatic life as a symptom of PTSD, this causes difficulty recalling memories, details, and information about the traumatic incident, as well as a cohesive timeline and finer details. In some cases, however, this manifests as denial and repression. The original idea of repression comes from Sigmund Freud and his theory of psychoanalysis. While I will not go into depth about psychoanalysis, I will briefly touch on its theory of repression. Freudian repression describes the concept that a person will unconsciously repress something that has happened to them. This results in a complete conscious blackout of the event. However, in Freud’s framework of repression, the person will continue to express responses about the event subconsciously until they uncover it again (Boag, 2006).

In the field of psychology, researchers regularly argue about the mechanisms of repression and whether or not it exists at all (Schacter, 1995; Patihis et al., 2013). Psychologists are locked in a frequent debate about what current research says about the reality of the repression mechanism as Frued describes it (Gleaves, 1994). Some arguments for a different kind of repression still exist, like the idea that a person actively trying to forget something can cause repression (Anderson & Green, 2001; Depue, Banich, & Curran, 2006). The point of this essay is not for me to make a stand on the so-called “memory wars,” so I’ll refrain from doing so. However, as I hope to stay as scientifically bound in my analysis as possible, I wanted to present the ongoing debate between researchers as something for consideration. While researchers continue to try to get to the bottom of this, there are many people who have undergone trauma who experience some kind of memory repression (not necessarily in the way
that Freud described it), and I also want to validate that. Again, not everyone’s experience of trauma is uniform, and not everything about the mechanisms of post-traumatic memory is understood.

All of this is to say—Sunny experiences altered cognitions through repression. A character called Daddy Longlegs in a piece of optional, hidden dialogue describes the repression process as it exists in OMORI as an active forgetting process on the part of Sunny (OMORI, 2020). Daddy Longlegs describes that Sunny wanted to dissociate away from the reality of Mari’s death, but he couldn’t stop thinking about it when he tried to disconnect. Eventually, he made a concerted effort to stop acknowledging it as reality and push it away as far as possible for the sake of survival. As mentioned before, it’s important to the narrative structure of the game that Sunny lives in this repression for the greater part of the four years between Mari’s death and the events of the game, as it makes the emotional reveal of how Mari died so impactful.

As for altered mood states, Sunny has clear symptoms of extreme depression that I’ll discuss with further nuance during the analysis of the character Omori. Similarly, Sunny also shows clear signs of hyperarousal through increased anger and hypervigilance, which players see clearest through the construction and expression of the character Omori.

**Game Content**

**Headspace, White Space, & Omori**

The DSM-5 includes a subtype of PTSD in which people experience the dissociative symptoms of derealization and depersonalization (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). People experiencing derealization consistently feel as if the world around them is unreal, dreamlike, or far away and distorted. Depersonalization, the second dissociative symptom characteristic of the dissociative subtype of PTSD, involves experiences of “feeling detached
from, and as if one were an outside observer of, one’s mental processes or body,” sometimes described as feeling as if you were dreaming (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In this section, I will discuss derealization and depersonalization as they relate to Headspace, White Space, and the character Omori. Large parts of OMORI take place in Sunny’s head. Over half of the possible gameplay takes place in dream-like worlds that only appear when Sunny is trying to sleep, in an area known as headspace. Headspace is the overarching term for the locations that exist in Sunny’s mind. White Space, which represents pure dissociation, is one of those many locations. Omori is the depersonalized vessel through which Sunny experiences headspace. Omori as a character is much more complex than just a depersonalized Sunny, which I will explore deeper when I discuss self-compassion. As the descriptions of White Space and Omori can’t exist without one another, I will begin with a brief description of White Space before moving into an analysis of Omori’s character, then back into a more in-depth analysis of White Space.

To begin with derealization, recall that, on the night Mari died, Sunny dissociated into an empty white room in the corner of his mind. As time goes on, this empty white room adapts and grows into an artistic representation of dissociation and derealization referred to by the game as “white space.” When the player loads a new save, they are immediately met with a scene of Basil comforting Sunny—the same scene that took place just before the original creation of white space on the night of Mari’s death. Then, the screen abruptly shifts. “Welcome to White Space,” it says. “You have been living here for as long as you can remember” (OMORI, 2020). Finally, the game loads into white space. White space looks much like it sounds—an expansive, all-white room populated only by a boy and his belongings, a black light bulb hanging overhead, and a door. A computer within the space holds a journal labeled as “Omori’s journal,” which details
days and days of the same two repeating journal entries: “Today, I spent time in White Space. Everything was okay,” or “Today, I visited my friends. Everything was okay” (OMORI, 2020). Of course, White Space is in Sunny’s mind. So who is Omori?

The name ‘Omori’ comes from the term “hikikomori.” The term originates in Japan, and it describes a typically adolescent, typically male figure who avoids social contact in exaggerated ways, for example, Sunny’s refusal to leave his house for any reason for four years (Teo & Gaw, 2016). This trope does not only exist in fiction. At times, the idea of hikikomori has extended to real-life cases that have been so severe that doctors have considered proposing the “japanese culture bound syndrome” as a mental disorder to add to the DSM (Teo & Gaw, 2016). In addition to this inspiration, the name ‘Omori’ also has an in-game explanation, for those who are unfamiliar with the hikikomori phenomenon. With an inspection of Mari’s old grand piano, the player can find that the brand-name of the piano etched across the center board is ‘Omori’ (OMORI, 2020). A cutscene in the game shows Sunny, presumably not long after Mari’s death, distraught and sitting at the piano. In the reflective wood, Sunny looks at his own black-and-white reflection that resembles the character that players control in headspace (OMORI, 2020). Notably, Omori’s character design also resembles a piano, wearing shorts that look like piano keys and a familiar black-and-white color palette.

So Omori, the character who keeps this daily journal in White Space, is an abstract representation of Sunny’s depersonalization. In-game, Sunny dissociates into White Space every single night as a means of falling asleep. Every time he enters White Space, Sunny “becomes” Omori, for the lack of a better term. Now, to be clear, Omori exists within Sunny’s mind and dissociation, and plays an active role in how Sunny copes with the things he’s done and the things he’s been through. He is not an entity separate from Sunny, but rather a part of Sunny
himself. Omori is the part of Sunny that he dissociates away from and watches instead of experiencing. In other words, it is when Sunny experiences depersonalization that Omori “takes over.” However, seeing as Omori exists as a complete and complex part of Sunny himself, his function and character in the game reaches much deeper than a means to represent derealization. Aside from dissociative PTSD symptoms, Omori also serves as an abstract representation of Sunny’s depression, suicidal tendencies, and self-hatred. I will go deeper into those aspects of his character during discussions of self-compassion. First, though, to fully understand the depth of Omori’s character, we must simultaneously analyze White Space and headspace.

Omori holds the most power within headspace. Headspace, once again, represents all locations within Sunny’s daydreams and dissociation. White Space is a location in headspace, but not the only location in headspace. Recall that Sunny, even before his sister’s death, had a history of slipping into daydreams with his own stories and worlds. While the desolate, empty room of White Space represents pure dissociation, the rest of headspace is colorful, vibrant, and full of life pulled from Sunny’s daydreams. Omori entered into this aspect of Sunny’s headspace—this daydreaming—and made it his own, maladaptive daydreaming. Falling under the realm of extreme dissociation, maladaptive daydreaming is “extensive fantasy activity that replaces human interaction and interferes with academic, interpersonal, or vocational functioning” (Somer, 2002). Maladaptive daydreaming, like dissociation, serves primarily to remove someone from a painful reality— but that is not its only primary function. Beyond the disconnect that maladaptive daydreaming causes, it also typically provides dreamers with imagined human connection, friendship, and comfort (Somer, 2002). Additionally, idealized relationships within daydreams are especially prevalent for those who struggle with separation
anxiety (Brenner, Somer, & Abu-Rayya, 2022). These imagined, safe, controlled relationships then often replace or fill-in for lost, painful, but real relationships.

Sunny’s avoidant PTSD symptoms manifested in his complete isolation from his school, town, and friends— who he likely couldn’t see without feeling overwhelming guilt. Maladaptive daydreaming served as a way to continue a safe, controlled version of his closest friendships without having to see them in real life. Omori’s time spent outside of White Space consists of adventures with versions of his three friends who had no involvement or knowledge of Mari’s death— Hero, Kel, and Aubrey. Though Mari exists in headspace, Omori doesn’t let her join them on their adventures, as they often become violent and dangerous. Instead, Mari is bound to the safety of a picnic blanket, where she serves as the primary caregiver. She offers her friends advice, comfort, healing, and allows the player to save the game.

Basil also exists in headspace, although in stark contrast to Mari, he is often the object of Omori’s violence. Even between different dreamers, maladaptive daydreams tend to have similar themes and narratives. Many maladaptive daydreams, including Omori’s, often have heavy themes of violence and aggression (Somer, 2002). Initially in headspace, Basil is treated really well— likely as a reflection of Sunny’s fondness for his best friend. He has a house, a large garden, and all of his friends love him. However, pretty quickly into the daydream, Basil “remembers” Mari’s death— or, more accurately— this mental representation of Basil triggers Sunny to remember what actually happened that night. In response to this, Omori violently and repeatedly makes Basil disappear. After the first time Basil goes missing, the overarching plot of the daydream turns towards Omori and his three friends trying to find Basil.

Maladaptive daydreams also tend to have themes of the idealized self alongside themes of power and control (Somer, 2002). This may be a way for a dreamer to simulate taking control
over themself and their situation when they have lost control over their actual circumstances. These themes add another layer to Omori as Sunny’s idealized, powerful self. Omori has power over his circumstances that Sunny has completely lost. His friends adore him and talk to him nearly daily, his sister is still alive, and he is able to be strong and protective of his loved ones. Sometimes, this protection is violent. Violence appears more often in the maladaptive daydreams of those who tend to feel numb to happiness and struggle to feel pleasure at all (Brenner, Somer, & Abu-Rayya, 2022). Omori’s numbness is expressed through his black and white design, which stands out against the colorful, vibrant landscapes of the headspace adventures. But Omori comes into headspace from white space every day. Omori comes from that place of nothing, that place of survival— and so he feels very little, and he doesn’t live. As Sunny’s idealized self, Omori doesn’t feel the overwhelming despair that Sunny feels. He’s able to remain partially numb, to remain dissociated, and to effectively take out anything that threatens his emotional state of nothingness.

This is how Sunny exists after trauma. Every day, he deals with his Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and his Something through total isolation, dissociation, White Space, headspace, and Omori. And, according to the journal entries in White Space, he visits headspace every single day, using it as a means of numbing, stability, and ultimately, as a means of survival for the four years leading up to the events of the game. And it’s here, at the beginning of the narrative, that the stability of headspace and the effectiveness of Sunny’s coping mechanisms begins to crumble. Because it’s here, at the beginning of the narrative, that he ends his isolation. He and his mom are moving away from this town in three days. And his old friend has come to knock on the door, to try and spend one last day with him before he goes.
The Narrative

On the night of their duet, Sunny pushed Mari down the stairs, instantly killing her. Basil, in his attempt to help Sunny and save him from consequences, hung Mari’s body in the backyard to stage her death as a suicide. This night irreversibly traumatized both boys. Sunny developed PTSD, lived in a constant state of denial, and resorted to dissociative strategies like maladaptive daydreaming to cope with day-to-day life. This worked well enough for four years, until Sunny’s mom sold their house. They were moving somewhere new. This is where the gameplay of OMORI begins, with three days left before Sunny moves away from his hometown. Suddenly, his old friends are back in his life, and he’s forced to face the truth with Basil before he loses the chance to do so forever.

Sunny, Mari, and Basil had three other friends that act as major players in the game—Kel, Hero, and Aubrey. Kel and Hero were a pair of brothers that lived in the neighboring house to Sunny and Mari’s. Hero, the charismatic older brother, naturally excelled at anything he put his mind to. He and Mari were dating when she was alive, and as such, he took her perceived suicide particularly hard. For a year after Mari passed, he hardly had the energy to get out of bed, much less to participate in all of the extracurriculars that he had put so much time into before. Hero realized that he needed to pull himself together about a year into his grief when, overcome by his anger and sadness, he snapped at his younger brother, Kel. When their parents, in response, gave all of their attention to Hero and ignored Kel, Hero realized that he needed to pull himself together for Kel’s sake. Someone had to be there for his younger brother. From then on, he picked up most of his passions again, and by the start of the game, was attending college. Kel, as Hero’s younger brother, was much more hyperactive and rambunctious than Hero. He did everything with unashamed passion, both annoying and loving his friends like no one else could. He had a big personality that often clashed with Aubrey’s, and Hero would frequently have to
resolve disputes between the two. After Mari’s death, Kel changed the least, feeling that he had to remain strong for Hero’s sake. Aubrey, who also had a big personality, was outspoken in her own right. With an absent father and an alcoholic mother, she had her own problems that she often confided in Mari about. After Mari’s passing, between Sunny, Basil, and Hero’s complete withdrawal and Kel’s focus on Hero, Aubrey felt totally abandoned by her group of friends. She grew resentful towards her old friends, creating a new friend group that fostered her new tough, unbothered persona that kept away the people she didn’t want to see anymore. Kel, Hero, and Aubrey never learned the truth about Mari’s death, and Sunny and Basil kept it secret from them for four years.

In this game summary, I will follow the structure of the game. The player experiences a prologue that takes place the night before the first full playable day. The first playable day is called “Three Days Left,” marking that Sunny has three days before he moves away from his hometown. Following suit, the next two days are called “Two Days Left” and “One Day Left.” While the rest of the days will be almost entirely plot summary without analysis, in order to properly describe the events of One Day Left I will combine summary and psychological analysis of self-compassion.

**Prologue**—Welcome to White Space. You have been living here for as long as you can remember.

The prologue begins in White Space, with a door that leads to greater headspace, also known as the maladaptive daydreams. A room known as the neighbor’s room sits on the other side of the door, where headspace versions of Kel, Hero, and Aubrey wait for Omori to come and play. Unlike the current, traumatized versions of Sunny’s friends that he would come to know again in the next three days, these headspace representations acted how their friend group acted.
before Mari’s death. As a group of four, they leave the neighbor’s room to meet Mari, who has to stay on her picnic blanket, and cannot join them on their adventures. Mari sends them down to Basil’s house where they put together a photo book of their headspace memories—memories that echo real memories from the best times that the real group spent together before Mari’s death. One of the photos falls out of the book, but when the headspace representation of Basil goes to pick it up, it looks different than all of the other photos—Sunny’s broken violin at the bottom of the stairs. Basil immediately grows terrified at the returning memory of what he and Sunny have done, but before he can say or do anything, the screen cuts to black and Omori abruptly returns to White Space. The door to the neighbor’s room is gone. If the player checks the sketchbook present in White Space, a drawing of Something has appeared on the last page. Omori closes it in a panic, as the sound of a heartbeat rings out. With no clear exit or method of progression in sight, most players will open the menu, at which point they see a new option—“STAB.” With no other way to progress, the player has to use the “STAB” option on OMORI to lessen Sunny’s complete dissociation, and step out of White Space.

The player wakes up as Sunny, alone in his childhood home, in the middle of the night. Sunny’s mom has left him completely alone for at least a week in preparation for the move, with her neglect going so far as to forget to pay the electric bill, leaving Sunny in complete darkness. Sunny tries to go to the kitchen to get food, but the stairs become long and distorted, as tendrils of darkness begin reaching out towards Sunny. The creature behind the tendrils engages Sunny in a fight, revealing itself as another “Something—” this time, a horrifying representation of his fear of heights. This Something hits Sunny hard, doing real damage, while Sunny’s counter attacks do nothing at all. This fight is occurring in real life, but the mechanics are similar to fights that take place in headspace. Within fights in headspace, the characters can feel different
emotions that boost or lessen certain aspects like strength or speed. Omori and enemies in
headspace can make anyone engaged in a battle Happy, Angry, or Sad if they make the right
moves. However, in this real-life fight against his acrophobia, Sunny feels a completely different
emotion that seems impossible to get rid of—Afraid. Amidst his mounting fear and panic, when
he realizes that his attacks do nothing to deter Something, he hears a voice—Mari’s voice—
soothing him. “Take a deep breath… Don’t be afraid. It’s not as scary as you think” (OMORI,
2020). Sunny steadies himself… and remembers how to CALM DOWN. Using the skill “CALM
DOWN” removes Sunny’s Afraid emotion, and ends the fight, completely banishing his
acrophobia and making the stairs appear normal again. Eventually, Sunny tries to sleep again.

Welcome to White Space. You have been living here for as long as you can remember.

In headspace yet again, Omori meets up with Kel, Aubrey, and Hero to learn that Basil
has gone missing. Finding Basil quickly becomes the overarching plot of the maladaptive
daydreams in headspace, with Mari giving them guidance to direct their journey. When they
check Basil’s house, Sunny’s Something stands in the middle of the room before disappearing,
leaving a crack in Basil’s floor. Eventually, Mari encourages the group to look in Otherworld—
an area of headspace that they can access by climbing a huge ladder. Mari encourages Omori to
face his fear of heights, and though the tendrils of something return momentarily at the bottom of
the ladder, Omori banishes them, and the game informs you—“You are no longer afraid of
heights” (OMORI, 2020).

The rest of the adventure involves various adventures and hijinks with Space Pirates and
junkyards. This eventually leaves Omori alone in a field, following a shadow of Basil through
echoes of Sunny’s best memories with his friends. Eventually, the shadow of Basil leads him
into a long, disturbing hallway, at the end of which sits Something. Something chases Omori
back down the hallway, before the screen abruptly cuts to black once more, returning Omori to white space with his heartbeat pounding in his ears.

**Three Days Left:** There are three days left before Sunny is set to move. Sunny wakes up from White Space in the morning, to the sound of Kel knocking on the door. Kel, four years older than the last time Sunny saw him, expresses disbelief that Sunny actually opened the door, and asks if he wants to spend the day together before he moves away. When they go to the park, they run into Aubrey and her group of friends in a confrontation with Basil. Everyone in the situation is clearly shocked to see Sunny, with Aubrey especially questioning—“How long has it been since you left your house? Three years…? Maybe four? Must have been nice to live in your own little bubble” (OMORI, 2020). The confrontation ends with Aubrey and her friends leaving Kel, Basil, and Sunny alone in the park. Kel, oblivious to the awkward tension between Basil and Sunny, who can barely speak to each other, offers to walk Basil home. Before they leave Basil at his house, however, Basil asks them in a bit of a panic not to leave him, revealing that the confrontation arose because Aubrey had taken his photo album. He asks Sunny and Kel if they’d try to get the photo album back for him, to which Kel passionately agrees.

After looking around town, Sunny and Kel find Aubrey alone in the church. Sneaking silently in, they sit in the pew behind her and confront her in whispers about the photo album. Aubrey insists that they don’t understand the situation, and expresses her bitterness and anger that they can’t possibly understand since they all abandoned her after Mari died. After Kel points out how unfair that sentiment is, they get into a screaming match, and all of the older folks in the church begin whispering about Aubrey. In her anger and embarrassment, she runs out of the church, leaving Sunny and Kel behind. When they follow her to her house, they just manage to catch her throwing the photo album in the trash. They dig it out of the trash, and though some
photos are missing, they return it to Basil. Basil’s caretaker, Polly, invites Kel and Sunny in for dinner.

At dinner, Basil learns for the first time that not only is Sunny moving away, but he also only has three more days left in town. Stuttering through his sentence, Basil excuses himself to the bathroom. Sunny takes the chance to follow him into the bathroom, where Basil’s Something is holding onto him in the thralls of a panic attack. Basil frantically repeats to himself the same thing he repeated to Sunny on the night that Mari died— “Everything is going to be okay” (OMORI, 2020). When Basil finally turns to see Sunny, he asks him in fear whether he can also see it— whether he can also see Something behind him. When Sunny looks in the mirror, he does see his Something behind him, and immediately starts panicking himself, turning to leave the bathroom. Basil begs him— “Please, Sunny… Don’t leave me… Not again” (OMORI, 2020). But the player, at this point, has no option but to leave. The entire scene is very disturbing between the tense, panicked music, the visuals of their Somethings haunting and tormenting them, and the dark atmosphere with the only source of light being the reflections of Basil’s eyes. So Sunny leaves Basil’s house, and splits off from Kel to go home.

When he enters his home, it’s dark and distorted again, and full of spiders. Sunny tries to go upstairs, but Something waits for him at the top. Upon inspection, Something morphs into a memory of Mari, and Sunny falls to his knees and breaks down. His fear of spiders chooses this moment to attack him, and Sunny has to again use his “CALM DOWN” ability. This time, however, calming down alone isn’t enough to get rid of the arachnophobia. Mari’s voice calls out to him again— “It seems like there’s a lot going on… You need to block out the little things… and figure out what’s important!” Sunny clears his mind, and remembers how to do a new skill called “FOCUS.” After he calms down, clears his mind, and focuses— the arachnophobia
disappears, and the distortion affecting his house has ended. At this point, after an extremely long day, Sunny goes to sleep.

Welcome to White Space. You have been living here for as long as you can remember.

White Space adventures continue with Kel, Hero, Aubrey, and Omori’s attempts to find Basil. To reach the next area of interest, they have to go through a spider infested forest, which Omori is afraid of. But thanks to more encouragement from his sister and his friends, Omori heads into the forest as the game informs the player—“You are no longer afraid of spiders” (OMORI, 2020). The White Space adventure— the maladaptive daydream— takes our heroes through the palace of a boisterous queen and her army of Sprout Moles. Though some disturbing intrusions haunt the adventure, it generally proceeds as normal— until the end. A giant hole appears in the middle of the Queen’s castle, and jumping into it with his friends leaves Omori alone in an Underground Library, with books that reflect Sunny’s favorite memories with his friends. However, when Omori nears the end of the library, a hole opens up in one of the bookshelves. When he sticks his head inside, he sees a vision of Basil from the night of Mari’s death, turning to face him with Mari’s hanging body reflecting in his eye. The screen goes black.

Two Days Left: Sunny spends this day once again hanging out with Kel. Right away, they hear Aubrey and Basil yelling at their old hangout spot by the pond in the park. Aubrey begins fighting with Sunny and Kel, and she accidentally pushes Basil, who can’t swim, into the pond. Sunny jumps in right away to save Basil, but quickly becomes paralyzed by his fear of drowning. In his head, he’s back on the stairs in his house, behind an apparition of Mari. Before long, his thalassophobia engages him in a fight, but instead of attacking, Sunny has to use his abilities to CALM DOWN and FOCUS. At this point, Sunny hears Mari’s voice yet again, telling him: “You have to keep going. Don’t give up. No matter how impossible it seems” (OMORI, 2020).
Mari’s encouragement allows Sunny to remember how to PERSIST. To defeat thalassophobia, Sunny has to PERSIST three times.

Once Sunny comes to, he realizes that Kel’s older brother, Hero, had returned home from college and had arrived just in time to save both Basil and Sunny from drowning. After Kel yells at Aubrey, Hero, Kel, and Sunny all take Basil back to his house so he can get warm. Once he’s all settled in his bed, Basil looks miserably at Sunny and asks—“Oh Sunny… There’s… no way out of this… is there?” (OMORI, 2020). The brothers and Sunny end up leaving Basil alone to recover, returning to Sunny’s house to have a sleepover. When they look through the photo album, they notice that all of the photos with Mari are missing from it. At the end of the night, Hero and Kel make a tent on the ground next to Sunny’s bed, and the three of them fall asleep.

Welcome to White Space. You have been living here for as long as you can remember.

Tonight, in White Space, everything is off. Omori comes to in the neighbor’s room, and a look through the door into White Space reveals that Something is in White Space, invading Sunny and Omori’s only escape from it. Leaving the neighbor’s room, Omori then finds that everyone but Mari has disappeared, and Mari has left the safety of her picnic basket, ready to swim with Omori in the waters to the north. After the game informs the player—“You are no longer afraid of drowning,” Omori and Mari jump in together, in an attempt to find their friends.

At the end of their journey, Mari compliments Omori for overcoming so many of his fears. “But there’s still one big thing that you’re afraid of, isn’t there? Something… a little bit harder to overcome. OMORI … It seems that you have forgotten something important. Are you okay with that? I’m not too sure… You’ve seen this curtain once before. The last time we went to the lake. This is my stop though. I know I shouldn’t have come… It just gets a little lonely without everyone. It’s not my place to say anymore, but… I hope you’re still there… SUNNY…
I really miss you. Goodbye… little brother” (OMORI, 2020). The headspace conception of Mari, one of the only two who knows the truth, had the audacity to call him Sunny instead of Omori. To remind Omori that he is real, and that he is running from himself. The next time Omori sees Mari, he acts very cold towards her.

Omori finds his friends in a casino under a well called the Last Resort. They adventure through the Underwater Highway, the Deeper Well, and Humphrey the Whale, and throughout it all, they slowly forget Basil. It begins with forgetting what he looked like, then expands to forgetting that he was missing at all, and finally ends with them seeing a basil plant without it causing any recollection of Basil, their friend, at all. Throughout this adventure, dialogue of the non-playable characters scattered around becomes more disturbing and often calls out Omori directly, pointing out the flaws in and fragility of White Space. Someone confronts Omori as he tries to leave the Deeper Well, explaining that the path to the truth was closer than ever to his precious White Space— in Basil’s house. All this time in headspace, the player has been participating in an ongoing game of hangman. In order to guess a letter, players must find it somewhere in headspace and collect it. Once Omori escapes Deeper Well, there’s only one thing left to do— collect the last letter, and reveal the sentence that the hangman has been waiting to say this whole time: “WELCOME TO BLACK SPACE.” When they visit Basil’s house, his gardens full of flowers that remind him of his friends are dying, and the hole in his floor left by Something at the beginning of the game has expanded greatly. Omori decides to jump in the hole, and descends into Black Space.

While White Space serves as a place to disconnect from any thoughts and feelings, especially those thoughts and feelings about Mari’s death, Omori, while in Black Space, cannot go anywhere to escape the overwhelm of disturbing, violent imagery fueled by pent up anger,
desperation, self-hatred, and misery. In Black Space, a landscape of doors each lead to some new horror situation, most of which involves Basil dying in some way. Once Omori collects all the keys to unlock the final door, the shadow of Basil confronts him—once again speaking past Omori and directly to Sunny. “Sunny… The truth is here. You’ve been running from this for so long. But this time, we can face it together” (OMORI, 2020). At the end of the room, Basil struggles against the power of his Something. “Sunny… Why did it end up like this? Sunny… I’m so sorry. Will you forgive me? My best friend…” (OMORI, 2020). Omori, or perhaps Sunny, chooses to save Basil, which sends them to a distorted version of Sunny’s living room, looking outside to the backyard where they hung Mari. Basil gets dragged away and attacked, and begs Omori to save him, but Omori, taking control over the situation, decides to kill Basil.

Sunny wakes up from his nightmare to hear echoes of the duet he and Mari were meant to play dancing through the house. When he visits the room with the grand piano, he sees a ghost of Mari, playing the piano. “You know… Waltzes were always my favorite. That’s why I chose this song for our last recital. But you always hated it, didn’t you? How I’d lock myself away on the piano… All that practicing… Playing the same song over and over. When you first picked up your new violin, you were so eager to play. But keeping up with something isn’t so easy. Maybe I pushed you too hard. I’m sorry… I just wanted it to be perfect. We never did get to play at that last recital. Did you want to play it with me now?” (OMORI, 2020). Unfortunately, the ghost of Mari disappears when Hero, who swore he heard piano coming from the room, comes in to check on Sunny. He sends Sunny back to bed, taking a moment to cry over the piano. This time when Sunny goes to sleep, he has no dream, no White Space, and no headspace.

**One Day Left:** With Hero back in the picture, things begin going more smoothly with the friend group. Hero, Kel, and Sunny visit Aubrey, and Hero mediates a fight between her and Kel
where they both get a chance to vent their frustrations. The group finds the missing photos of Mari in Aubrey’s room and puts them all back where they belong in the photo book, leaving only one picture missing. When they then go to visit and apologize to Basil, Polly informs them that he’s at the hospital with his grandmother, whose condition has worsened. They decide to come back later to check in on their friend, and instead go to Sunny’s house to reminisce at the tree house they all built together the summer before Mari died. The final missing photo from the book rests in the treehouse, with a key taped to the back and a message—“Don’t forget. It’s in the toy box” (OMORI, 2020). When they go to leave, they talk more about their feelings surrounding Mari’s death while standing around the stump of the tree that she had been hung from. Aubrey explains that her anger towards Basil came from his treatment of the photo album. She found that, shortly after Mari’s death, the boy had scribbled out every photo, including the ones with Mari in them. So she stole his book, and started calling him a creep to her friends. However, she understands now that everyone was grieving in their own ways, and that it was unfair of her to treat Basil that way. Before she leaves, Aubrey places a pinwheel on the stump of the tree.

**Self-Compassion**

Imagine how Sunny felt, standing in front of the stump of the tree from which he and Basil had hung his sister with all of his best friends for the first time in four years. Imagine hearing them lament Mari’s suicide, still wondering years later why she would decide to take her own life, repressing all the while that they had been lied to. That they didn’t know the whole story. …But what was the whole story? Was Sunny strong enough to face it? The group returns to Basil’s house to find that his grandmother has passed away. Basil has locked himself in his room, and won’t respond to any of his friends calling through the door.
Hero and Kel both decide that the biggest mistake they made when Mari died was drifting away from this group. “Last time we all made the mistake of leaving each other when we needed each other the most. This time… we’ll stay together” (OMORI, 2020). So they all make camp for a sleepover in Basil’s living room, hoping to help him once he is ready to face them.

Conversations before bed turn emotional quickly, and Hero, Aubrey, and Kel thank Sunny for everything. “I hope you’re not too worried about moving to a new place. If anything, you always have us! Life gets better. You just have to stay positive” (OMORI, 2020).

At this point in the narrative, everything seems to build towards a tender display of forgiveness towards Sunny and Basil from their friends. The group has been getting closer again, acting from a place of vulnerability for the first time in years, and expressing just how much they love Sunny and want to support Basil. While that seems like the obvious trajectory of the story, a dreadful question still haunts every interaction—could they ever forgive Sunny for killing Mari and keeping it from them for so long? This is OMORI at its most subversive— it has laid groundwork for an intense moment of forgiveness— but that ultimate decision will not come from Sunny’s friends. That eventual forgiveness, if it comes at all, will instead come from Sunny himself.

OMORI is a game about self-compassion. But what exactly do I mean by self-compassion? In Buddhist thought, self-compassion has its roots in the ‘compassion contemplation’ meditation. Self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-experience sit in the center of this practice (Peng & Shen, 2012). Self-awareness involves realistic and objective thinking about the self and others, with an understanding that causing and experiencing harm is simply a part of being human (Baer, 2010; Peng & Shen, 2012). Self-regulation relates to the concept of acknowledging thoughts and feelings without letting them take control (Baer, 2010). Finally,
self-experience calls for the experience of hardship through the feeling of certain positive emotions “(maitre (loving-kindness), karuna (compassion), mudita (delight), and upeksa (renunciation)” (Peng & Shen, 2012). One of the lead researchers in self-compassion, Kristin Neff, has drawn on Buddhist theology to create her own definition of self-compassion that is suited for the context of Western research labs. Similar to the Buddhist ‘compassion-contemplation’ conception, Neff’s definition of self-compassion includes three domains: self-kindness vs. self-judgment, common humanity vs. isolation, and mindfulness vs. overidentification (Neff, 2023).

**Self-kindness vs. self-judgment:** This aspect of self compassion is relatively straightforward– extend kindness to yourself rather than judgment. In order to fully understand it, though, I have to explain what I mean by judgment and kindness. Stopping self-judgment does not include riddling yourself of all guilty feelings or skirting responsibility for your actions. The self-judgment that self-compassion calls you to replace encompasses self-hatred and self-punishment (Neff, 2023). Similarly, self-kindness does not include absolving yourself of what you’ve done. Instead, self-kindness means caring for your physical and mental health, recognizing and getting support for your needs, and approaching yourself with more warmth (Neff, 2023). One core aspect of Omori’s character is his judgment and hatred towards Sunny–towards himself. Later, in the grand conclusion of the game, Sunny has to choose self-kindness over Omori. Since this conflict between Omori as a manifestation of Sunny’s self-judgment and Sunny’s struggle towards self-kindness is much better understood in its greater context, I will talk more about it later.

**Common humanity vs. isolation:** Common humanity vs. isolation relates to the self-awareness aspect of the Buddhist ‘compassion-contemplation.’ In isolation, people will often
disconnect from humanity and the shared human experience. This disconnect often causes extreme distortions of the isolated person’s own mistakes. It can produce the faulty belief that they, as a person, are morally and personally much, much worse than the people around them. Instead of understanding that causing harm and experiencing harm are an unavoidable and shared part of the human experience, they feel broken and unfixable compared to the people around them who they perceive to have not hurt anyone before (Neff, 2023). The antidote to this isolation—common humanity—involves vulnerable, emotional connection to other humans. The very action of listening and being with others can change the perspective someone holds about suffering and mistakes. Instead of overexaggerating the depravity of their own character, people can come to understand that everyone messes up, and everyone feels hurt (Neff, 2023). The essence of common humanity is the fact that every single human experiences suffering and makes mistakes. No one of us is inherently worse than the other; in fact, our experiences are more similar than one might think.

Sunny had, by the beginning of the game, spent four years in total isolation. The only social interaction Sunny experienced, he experienced in headspace, with stunted representations of his friends and the way they used to act as much younger children. His real-life understandings of his friends centered around his guilt and aversion, and in his catastrophization, they became characterizations of his worst fears. In reality, his friends once cared deeply for him.

OMORI, as a game, demonstrates the power of shared humanity first through Kel. Kel ends Sunny’s four year isolation and treats him like his own person, not just as the little brother of his friend who died. He makes Sunny realize that his mistakes don’t negate the past and the memories that they have. As more of their friends rejoin the group, and especially in the sleepover scene on One Day Left in Basil’s house, Sunny realizes that his old friends did and do
still love him, which makes him question his self-hatred. He begins to think that maybe, under all that guilt and shame, he is lovable, and worthy of love that comes from himself.

**Mindfulness vs. over-identification**: Just as “forgiveness does not relieve someone of responsibility for what they have done,” (Tutu, 2014) self-compassion does not allow someone to ignore the mistakes they have made. Mindfulness, like self-compassion, originates from Buddhist meditation practices (Bishop, 2004). A common definition of mindfulness used in Western labs involves two components: self-regulation of attention, and an orientation to experience. The first component, self-regulation of attention, calls for someone to bring their attention into their present physical environment and sensations (Bishop, 2004). Teaching therapeutic patients basic self-regulation and mindfulness techniques is usually the first step of treating a patient with trauma. This attention towards the body and the present, physical environment requires mental energy that could otherwise be put towards rumination and obsession over one’s thoughts (Bishop, 2004). The second aspect, an orientation to experience, calls for people to orient themselves to the thoughts that they are experiencing with a sense of curiosity and acceptance. A thought will pass, and without internalizing it or ignoring it, the mindful person can accept it and move to the next thought (Bishop, 2004).

Many other psychologists have tried to operationalize mindfulness in a similar way, but their scientific and Western focus has received some criticism. In an article that considers the definitions of non-academics on their understandings of mindfulness (Alvear, Soler, & Cebolla, 2022), one definition from Anālayo (2016) stands out: “someone who is aware (mindful) and has the ability to remember what has been done or said a long time ago.” This understanding of mindfulness still centers around connection to the present moment, with the added ability to remember the past without getting lost in it. In almost every conception of mindfulness,
however, there exists an avoidance of over-identification, also understood as getting lost in rumination (Alvear, Soler, & Cebolla, 2022). In the context of self-compassion, mindfulness demands that one acknowledges head-on the pain and guilt that they feel without deeply internalizing it (Neff, 2023). It involves the ability to face, recognize, and understand the feelings you feel without obsessing over or lingering on them.

**Mindfulness**

From the very start of the narrative of OMORI through to the very end, the game takes Sunny on a journey that cultivates these tenets of self-compassion. Of course, at the beginning of Three Days Left, Kel ends Sunny’s isolation, and his other friends remind him of common humanity. But even before Kel asks Sunny to spend a day with him, the game begins teaching Sunny mindfulness. During the Prologue, in the first sequence that players spend out of headspace and in real life, Sunny tries to go downstairs. Frightening music, distorted visuals, and a racing heartbeat in the background set the scene of a panic attack when Sunny’s fear of heights attacks him. At first it seems like Sunny can do nothing to combat it, until a voice– Mari’s voice– instructs him to take a deep breath, and reminds him how to calm down. Mindfulness exercises often begin with a focus on steady breathing in order to bring someone into present awareness of their body and surroundings.

The next time Sunny faces a fear, it’s during Three Days Left when he faces his fear of spiders. Once again, Mari’s voice calls out to him, encouraging him to clear his mind and focus. In doing so, Sunny takes the next step towards mindfulness and towards self-compassion, as Mari’s advice allows Sunny to put his focus towards his safe, present reality rather than over-identifying with the fear he feels (Neff, 2023). During Two Days Left, in a more dangerous
situation, Sunny struggles to face his fear of drowning while paralyzed underwater. Though he remembers to calm down and focus, those two aren’t enough to get rid of the fear. Eventually, however, Mari calls out to Sunny once more. “You have to keep going. Don’t give up. No matter how impossible it seems” (OMORI, 2020). This encouragement reminds Sunny how to persist, and after doing so three times, he overcomes his fear of drowning.

One’s capacity for mindfulness negatively correlates with suicide attempt history and present suicidal ideation (Per et al., 2022). Additionally, mindfulness— but especially the ability to Focus on the present experience rather than over-identify with current emotions— correlates with lower severity of suicidal ideation (Chesin & Jeglic, 2016). People who practice mindfulness tend to have fewer and less intense suicidal thoughts and behaviors. The game prepares Sunny for this moment where he faces his fear of drowning by teaching him mindfulness. Instead of dissociating away from his fear or internalizing it much too heavily, Sunny can calm down and focus to stay present in the moment. As such, it makes sense that when facing this fear of drowning while his life is genuinely put at risk, Sunny finds it within him to persist. This moment holds so much power because Sunny was in genuine danger, and he had the choice to give up in a way that would potentially lead to his death. But his ability to relax and connect with the present moment, however, allowed Sunny to choose to persist, three times for good measure, and to live another day.

Common Humanity

Returning to the narrative, it is in Basil’s house, waiting for him to come out of his room in a sleepover with his closest friends, that Sunny has proven himself. Everything the narrative has equipped Sunny with comes together— his mindfulness, his persistence, and the common
humanity of his friends— to prepare him to finally face the truth. But preparedness does not equate to the absence of fear. When Sunny closes his eyes, he sees Basil, surrounded by his Something. The screen goes black after Basil begs you: “Will you forgive me? My best friend… Please…” (OMORI, 2020). Sunny wakes up in White Space. Not Omori— Sunny. As opposed to Omori’s usual empty, neutral expression, Sunny looks afraid. When Sunny walks forward in White Space, he runs into an unmoving Omori. Omori has nothing to say to him. He doesn’t even turn to look at Sunny. So Sunny continues forward, and inspects the black light bulb hanging in White Space. Sunny reaches up, takes the light bulb in his hand, and shatters it on the ground— effectively killing White Space. Just before the screen goes black, Omori turns towards him frantically— but he’s too late.

In the darkness, Sunny’s final phobia engages him in a fight. Sunny is finally facing his Something. He has to build up his attacks and fight through his fear. Using CALM DOWN turns his Something into his fear of heights, and using CALM DOWN again turns it back into his Something. This continues when he uses FOCUS, which turns Something into his fear of spiders, and again with PERSIST and his fear of drowning. After he PERSISTs through his fear of drowning, however, Something has become something else— something blurred. Through repeated use of CALM DOWN, the image gets clearer and clearer, until the image is unmistakable— Mari, hanging with a noose around her neck. He feels like he’s in danger. His lungs tighten. The attacks from Something take more and more health. He is experiencing a post-traumatic response. Sunny’s too afraid to CALM DOWN, but as long as he keeps PERSISTing, he can’t die. Eventually, Sunny can use what he knows about mindfulness to calm his body, slow his mind, gather all his courage, and learn to OVERCOME. Overcoming ends the fight. Sunny,
startled, opens his eyes, as if awake and aware in his own head for the first time in years, and he takes the light bulb. It was time for him to face the truth.

I discussed the mechanism that the game uses to reveal the truth and portrayal of traumatic memory in depth earlier. By collecting scattered Polaroid photos in various disturbing rooms that represent aspects of his trauma from that night, Sunny slowly pieces together the truth. However, imagine as a player, collecting all of those photos one by one, and slowly realizing exactly what happened on the night of the duet. Sunny pushed Mari down the stairs. Sunny killed Mari. Then, Basil hung Mari from a tree to cover up the circumstances of her death. Sunny and Basil have done terrible, terrible things. Throughout the sequence, Sunny gets more and more bloodied, moving slower and slower as the weight of the truth begins resting on him. It physically and emotionally damages him. But he has the power to PERSIST, and the power to OVERCOME.

Finally facing the truth was a damaging, painful experience— but it was an experience necessary for Sunny to cultivate self-compassion and eventually forgive himself. Self-compassion includes both taking care of oneself and persevering. Germer and Neff (2019) describe the yin and yang of self-compassion. Yin self-compassion involves the self-care demanded by self-kindness, the perspective that pain is a shared experience demanded by common humanity, and the ability to hold emotions in the present moment demanded by mindfulness (Germer & Neff, 2019). Overall, yin self-compassion includes showing yourself the love that you feel others deserve. Yang self-compassion, on the other hand, involves persistence, taking action, and making the changes necessary for your own wellbeing. “Yang self-compassion can manifest as fierce, empowered truth” (Braehler & Neff, 2020). Relearning the truth meant Sunny finally left behind his avoidant post-traumatic coping mechanisms and embraced the
difficulty of re-experiencing. Even within those who experience PTSD, people with higher avoidance symptom severity like Sunny tend to have much less self-compassion (Thompson & Waltz, 2008). Avoidance and self-compassion tend not to coexist. Though re-experiencing the truth was traumatic and painful for Sunny, it was a necessary part of cultivating the persistence and empowered truth of self-compassion.

When Sunny wakes up, he goes straight to Basil’s door. The game prompts the player upon inspection of the door: Do you want to save Basil? For the first time since the day of Mari’s death, Sunny opens the door to save Basil. In the grasp of his Something, Basil expresses a sentiment that he’s repeated many times throughout the game—“There’s no way out of this, is there?” (OMORI, 2020). Basil, completely haunted by the reality of what he’s done and the weight of keeping it a secret for all these years, sees only one way out. To Basil, the only way out is death. Basil always tried to help Sunny. Even when he was hanging Mari from a tree in their backyard, he was trying his best to help Sunny. Even when, standing in his room that night, he attacked Sunny in a bid to kill the both of them, he was trying his best to help Sunny. To Basil, killing Sunny is a gift. It’s something helpful. It’s a ticket to the only way out. When the fight gets physical, Basil slashes Sunny across the eye with gardening shears, and Sunny attacks back. Pretty quickly, both boys pass out and are rushed to the hospital.

Sunny returns to headspace—though involuntarily. This time, headspace doesn’t quite look like the empty white space, the harrowing black space, or the sprawling truth. This time, it looks like his neighborhood— and after a bit of walking, he finds his house. A version of Basil stands outside, and apologizes that every time he tries to help, he only seems to cause harm. He apologizes—“I want to say that everything will be okay. That we have no choice, but to carry on. But… that’s up to you. Aubrey, Hero, and Kel are good friends. You have to trust that they’ll
forgive us. It’s hard to fully believe that, but… The photos in our album, they’re not just photos. They’re real memories” (OMORI, 2020). What is the other way out but to tell the fierce, empowered truth? There is none. In order to survive, in order to start living again, the way forward is the truth.

When Sunny enters his house, the game reminds him of the photo he found in the treehouse that read– “Don’t forget. It’s in the toy box” (OMORI, 2020). Sunny makes his way towards the closet with the toy box, though his house is now full of life and evidence of the people who love him: his Mom’s flower arrangement, toys scattered across the room from Kel, and Hero’s homework in the kitchen. However, above all else, the sound of Mari’s half of their duet echoes through the house. Sure enough, Sunny finds Mari sitting at the piano. She doesn’t stop playing as she speaks– “We all make mistakes… You’ve been running from this one for a long time now. It’s tough to own up to them sometimes, but you’ll forgive yourself, won’t you? You can do this, Sunny” (OMORI, 2020). You’ll forgive yourself, won’t you? Basil assures Sunny that his friends will forgive them, but Mari begs Sunny to realize that he has to tell the truth, whether or not they forgive him. She communicates both to the player and to Sunny that, whether or not his friends forgive him, he must forgive himself.

With nothing else left to do and a clear path forward, Sunny finds his broken violin in the toy box. It still has strands of Mari’s hair in it. After all these years, Sunny picks up the violin. After all these years, Sunny physically acknowledges what he’s done, and it allows him to remember the things that he’s lost. When he holds the violin, the scene changes to a road with street lamps that transports Sunny into a beautiful display of common humanity– a showcase of his memories with his friends and his sister. In this area– known as memory lane– the game allows the player to experience the moments that Basil captured within his photo album.
firsthand. And after each reliving, Sunny remembers some aspect of his friends’ love and his old relationships. In turn, after each scene, a part of the violin repairs itself. The final memory Sunny and the player experience is the Christmas before Mari’s death, when Sunny’s friends gifted him his new violin. At this point, his violin regains its complete shape, and he reaches a doorway to the end of memory lane.

**Self Kindness**

Ultimately, Sunny pushed his sister down the stairs because of the pressure he felt to perform. This performance and this violin took the worst aspects of his and Mari’s relationship and pushed it to its limits. Everything that happened that night happened because of this duet. And as such, the duet is where this all must end. The door at the end of memory lane leads to a stage where Aubrey, Hero, and Kel are waiting to encourage Sunny. Of course, this is all happening in Sunny’s head— but the steps he’s made towards self compassion are finally producing results. The mindfulness he’s learned in order to face the truth coupled with the feeling of common humanity cultivated by memory lane delivered him to the final pillar of self-compassion— self kindness vs. self judgment (Braehler & Neff, 2020). This is the hardest aspect of self-compassion for Sunny to face, and the most important, as it determines forgiveness. The way his friends encourage him sets the scene for a moment where Sunny will either choose to forgive himself, or not. Kel assures Sunny that “just because you’ve done something bad… doesn’t make you bad” (OMORI, 2020). Hero asks Sunny to trust his friends, and assures him that “life gets better… and you can be the one to make that happen” (OMORI, 2020). Finally, Aubrey tells him that his future is up to him. “No matter how far you push your feelings down,
they’ll always come back somehow. And what you do with those feelings… that will be your truth. Hey Sunny… Break a leg for me, alright?” (OMORI, 2020).

Sunny finally takes to the stage. He picks up his mended violin, and in an act of extreme self kindness, after all these years, he plays his part of the duet, alone. He can’t even finish it before he falls to his knees and sobs.

In his moment of weakness, he is pulled into White Space. Omori has called him here, and he wastes no time to attack Sunny. While Omori represents derealization, the idealized, and powerful self in maladaptive daydreaming, and emotional numbness, he is even more complex than just that. Omori hates Sunny. Perhaps more accurately, Omori exists as an abstract representation of Sunny’s self-hatred, guilt, and shame. Shame as an emotion has two aspects—the internalized feeling of defectiveness, and the outward perception that others perceive you negatively in some extreme way (Lee, Scragg, & Turner, 2001). Even before the aftermath of Mari’s death, Sunny felt shame regularly. He internalized his feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness, and feared that his friends also saw him that way. Then, when he pushed his sister down the stairs, he confirmed his worst fears about himself, causing his pre-existing shame to balloon into a monster. Shame is an incredibly powerful emotion. Early childhood experiences involving shame have the capacity to produce the same emotional responses observed in PTSD (Matos & Pinto-Gouveia, 1997). This is because these early experiences involving shame are often traumatic themselves. Intense shame episodes can cause intrusions, avoidance, and dissociation (Matos & Pinto-Gouveia, 1997; Lee, Scragg, & Turner, 2001). Omori, then, as a dissociative entity, exists also as a manifestation of the inwardly focused self-hatred of shame.

Self kindness is not so easy when you have a manifestation of your shame, guilt, and self-hatred that holds immense power inside your head. But, although it is not easy to cultivate, self...
kindness is powerful. Individuals with higher self compassion tend to have lower levels of shame (Sedighimornani, Rimes, & Verplanken, 2019). Compassion focused therapy that cultivates self kindness reduces levels of self-judgment in people with PTSD (Karatzias et al., 2019). And these reduced levels of shame and self-judgment can save lives. Self-compassion and self-forgiveness are associated with lower levels of suicidal ideation and self-harm (Cleare, Gumley, O’Connor, 2019). People with higher self-compassion have less history of suicide attempts (Per et al., 2022). When put together, a pattern emerges revealing that self-compassion and self-forgiveness may be incredibly powerful in lessening shame and preventing suicide. And this moment—this conflict between Omori and Sunny—is the moment that Sunny chooses between self-forgiveness and suicide.

Omori, this inward shame, attacks Sunny and his attempt to show self kindness. Omori’s words get harsher and harsher as the fight continues—“You’ve caused so much suffering, and you’ve done nothing. And so you’ve earned nothing in return. Your friends will never forgive you. They’ll abandon you like you did them… and that’s what you deserve” (OMORI, 2020). Sunny uses the mindfulness and common humanity that he’s learned, staying alive by cherishing the memories of his friends. He tries to crush that outward shame, and the idea that his friends may never forgive him. He remembers Kel saying that he’ll be there for him, Hero promising that he wouldn’t leave him this time, and Aubrey hoping that he could find peace one day. But as the music gets more and more mournful, Omori’s words get harsher and harsher: “Your friends are wrong about you. The person they love isn’t you at all. You let them believe in a lie to protect yourself. You’re nothing but a liar… and when they see the truth… They’ll hate you as much as you hate yourself. People like you don’t deserve to live” (OMORI, 2020). Sunny recalls Basil’s hope that maybe everything could go back to normal— but Omori’s attacks only become
more and more intense. His face distorts, and a picture of Mari’s hair at the bottom of the stairs haunts the space behind him. Finally, Sunny tries to remember Mari’s request—“You’ll forgive yourself… Won’t you, Sunny?” (OMORI, 2020). This causes Omori to become even more frightening and aggressive. “You killed Mari. She loved you and you killed her. Hero loved her and you killed her. Aubrey loved her and you killed her. Kel loved her and you killed her. Basil loved her and you killed her. You loved her and you killed her. You loved her and you killed her. You loved her and you killed her. You should just die. You should just die” (OMORI, 2020). Omori’s strength is overpowering, and his attacks become too much. After several minutes of persisting, Sunny finally loses all of his health, and succumbs to his wounds.

In the blackness of the brink of death, questions swirl through Sunny’s head. Will his friends forgive him, or not?

Does he even deserve to live?

He’s too far on his journey to push everything down again. To die would be the only way to never face it again. To live— to have compassion for himself— would be to tell the “fierce, empowered truth” (Braehler & Neff, 2020). It would be to move forward with courage and face what he’s been running from for four years.

Does he deserve that closure?

To gain that closure would be to tell his friends that he killed Mari.

Do his friends deserve to know the truth? Does he owe it to them to carry on, so that they can finally know? Would they ever forgive him?

Like so often, he’s reminded of Mari. “You’ll forgive yourself… Won’t you, Sunny?” (OMORI, 2020).

Whose forgiveness does he need? Is it his friends’ forgiveness? Or is it his own?
This moment between life and death is the moment that Sunny chooses between self judgment and self kindness. This is the moment that Sunny chooses between forgiveness and suicide. This is the moment that the entire game has led up to. This is the moment that Sunny’s entire journey of self-compassion has led up to.

The game prompts the player– Do you want to continue? The unspoken question is clear– does Sunny forgive himself?

Sunny killed Mari. He loved her, and he killed her.

Does Sunny forgive himself?

I pick yes, every single time. I believe that his friends deserve to know the truth. I believe that Basil deserves closure. But most of all, I believe in forgiveness. Forgiveness doesn’t save Sunny from the consequences of his actions. It doesn’t mean I believe he’s a good person, or that I believe he’s a bad person. It just means that I believe that he’s human, and that I believe that he can change. “Within every hopeless situation and every seemingly hopeless person lies the possibility of transformation” (Tutu, 2014).

In choosing yes, Sunny chooses self kindness. In choosing self kindness, Sunny chooses self-compassion. In choosing self-compassion, Sunny chooses life. And so, Sunny persists and overcomes. He forgives himself, grabs his violin, and with a look of fierce determination, rises once more. He looks Omori defiantly in the eyes, positions his violin, and begins to play the duet.

The piano surges in, and Mari’s part of the duet begins first. For the first time all game, both the piano and the violin play the simple waltz together as memories of Sunny’s and Mari’s relationship wash over him. The final duet is one of those pieces of video game media that I still cannot watch without being moved to tears. It is grief walking hand in hand with love, guilt
walking hand in hand with forgiveness. It showcases the unbearable pain of Sunny’s loss, but also the unending love that he received from Mari when she was still alive. At the end, the piano fades out, leaving just the violin alone. It’s just him, now. He’s lost Mari. So he’ll have to take care of himself, like she would have.

Sunny, violin in hand, stands face to face with Omori, knife in hand. Sunny has won the fight, that much is clear, but he doesn’t attack Omori. No— in an ultimate act of self-compassion and forgiveness, Sunny instead falls into Omori’s arms and embraces him. Omori hugs him back, relaxes, drops his knife, and then disappears. It’s just Sunny alone in White Space. He walks towards the door, turns and takes a bow, and then walks through it (OMORI, 2020).

Sunny wakes up in the hospital with a bandage over his wounded eye, and he cries. For a moment, all he does is cry.

Once Sunny gathers his courage and his strength, he goes to find Hero, Aubrey and Kel, who are all together in Basil’s hospital room. The screen goes black, with Sunny’s words to his four friends written on it: “I have to tell you something” (OMORI, 2020).

The credits start rolling. The game ends there. We don’t get to see how his friends reacted, because this whole time, OMORI has never been about whether or not his friends would forgive him. No, it was always about whether or not Sunny would forgive himself. In a brief after credits scene, however, players do get to see Basil and Sunny wordlessly confronting each other, with each of their Somethings— the representations of their unbearable guilt and trauma—hovering behind them. Basil looks afraid at first, but then Sunny smiles at him with tears in his eyes. As Sunny smiles, his Something fades away. With the burden of the truth finally lifted from them, Basil can’t help but smile as well, and his Something disappears as well. Suicide
wasn’t the only way out. No– self-compassion was their true way out. Self-compassion was their true way into healing.

Self-compassion is clearly a very powerful force in combating suicide. Once again–people with higher self-compassion have attempted suicide much less than those without much self-compassion (Per et al., 2022). It also decreases certain risk factors for suicide: people with higher self-compassion tend to have have less severe PTSD symptoms, lower levels of self-judgment, and less suicidal ideation and self harm (Thompson & Waltz, 2008; Cleare, Gumley, O’Connor, 2019). Due to these associations, there has been a call for an increased focus on cultivating self-compassion in interventions meant for people with PTSD that I hope to unmistakably echo here (Karatzias et al., 2018). I have hope that the researchers who focus on self-compassion as a life-saving force will bring about real change in mental-health interventions for those at risk of suicide. However, it doesn’t take a mental health professional or a deep dive into psychological literature to communicate the power of self-compassion in preventing suicide. Beyond changing how we see the world, the media that we consume holds the power to change how we perceive ourselves. OMORI knows this. Each part of OMORI’s portrayal of trauma, PTSD, and self-compassion pushes players to critically examine what they have and have not forgiven themselves for, and whether or not they’ve been compassionate with themselves. It was ultimately playing OMORI that helped me accept that people are radically and beautifully capable of change, and as such, capable of self-compassion and self-forgiveness. What a fantastic achievement for a game to make.
Conclusion

I love this game. I think it’s doing something so incredibly powerful. The day after I finished it, I had to call out of work just to think, and cry, and play it again, and cry more. If Sunny can learn to forgive himself—can’t I? I felt so seen and understood by the portrayal of trauma and post-traumatic experiences that I couldn’t help but also see myself in the process of self-compassion and forgiveness. Truly— if Sunny can learn to forgive himself—can’t I? I genuinely believe that I am far from the only person to have that same thought process after playing OMORI.

This game helped me come to terms with the idea that there are people out there who I’ve hurt who might never forgive me. In the end— that’s their right. No one has to forgive anyone else. The game even understands this by not showing Aubrey, Hero, and Kel’s reactions. Those three are under no obligation to forgive Sunny. No one has a right to forgiveness. But I have a right to believe in my own humanity without avoiding accountability, to believe in my own capacity for change, and to forgive myself.

This last year of my life has been one of unreal academic and personal growth that has been propelled forward by my engagement with OMORI, self-compassion, and my own healing journey. My healing in the last year felt like it went so quickly; like it snuck up on me, and caught me by surprise. One sunny fall day, after nine years of struggle, I suddenly woke up without a single suicidal thought crossing my mind for the entire day. I had somehow learned to hold hands with love and grief at the same time, and how to live with the fact that life is terrible and beautiful all at once. However, this healing was anything but sudden. I can look back to nine years worth of healing and see a long line of turning points that set me on the path towards who I am now, and who I love to be. And there, with that mindful perspective, I can see that OMORI stands in a long line of video games, movies, songs, poems, and people that taught me to forgive.
But it will always, always stand out as the one that pushed me to finally and truly go through the hard, frightening work of forgiving myself. I thought my situation was hopeless for so long. I thought that I was incapable of change. But I changed, regardless. I changed into someone who knew that Sunny deserved to forgive himself— that I deserved to forgive myself. So all I can say now is: Thank you to Sunny. Thank you to OMORI. And thank you to me.
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