

Playing the cards right: New game aims to help youth improve mental health

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BYU animation student Ivy Rich created custom designs for each playing card.
Credit: Jaren Wilkey/BYU Photo

Over the past several years, discussions about mental health among

children and teens have become increasingly common. Data from the National Alliance on Mental Illness found that one in six U.S. youth aged 6–17 experience a mental health disorder each year, and nearly half of all mental illness begins by age 14.

BYU clinical psychologist Jon Cox is one of many who hopes to reverse these alarming trends. Cox developed a new card game for youth to help them develop an awareness of their thoughts and emotions while teaching them skills to combat common [mental health](#) symptoms associated with depression and anxiety. The game, Cosmic Battle Training, is designed to be fun and easy to play.

"The idea is that this game can help youth learn concepts to help them deal with their emotions and their thoughts better," said Cox, who works in BYU's Counseling and Psychological Services. "Ultimately, the game is meant to help improve coping skills and self-resilience in children and teens."

The [card game](#) simulates an intergalactic space battle. Players pick and execute both offensive and defensive strategies in order to defeat their opponent and win the game. At the bottom of each card is a therapeutic principle that the card represents, which players can read and integrate into their play. The principles are drawn from [cognitive-behavioral therapy](#) (CBT), a popular and effective form of psychological treatment. Examples of statements on the cards include actions such as the following:

- Think about what you would tell a friend if they were in the same situation.
- Calculate the chances or probability of something bad actually happening.
- Use soothing things from all five senses to help you feel better.
- Remove yourself from a difficult situation before you do

something you will regret until you calm down enough to cope with it.

Cox says the game shouldn't be seen as an alternative to therapy but could be used in conjunction with it to help kids learn how to deal with mental health issues. "Then when they're talking with a therapist, they can be more familiar with the concepts and when to apply them; they understand the emotions they're feeling and know which skills can be used for which problems," he said.

The idea for the game came to Cox a decade ago when he noticed that other therapy support games on the market simply weren't appealing to children. For years, he methodically crafted Cosmic Battle Training to be enjoyable for children, writing and revising playing rules that allow the game to be both simple and entertaining.

The last piece of the puzzle was designing the cards. Cox knew the deck needed a strong visual appeal in order to catch kids' attention, so he hired BYU animation student Ivy Rich to create custom designs for each playing card. Rich brought Cox's vision to life with colorfully stunning illustrations of spaceships, laser beams, and characters.

"After talking with Jon and getting a sense for the game I was really excited to work on this. We started with some initial concepts and would go back and forth until we had the basic model and design concepts understood," said Rich. "Then I started creating different illustrations. Each card has a unique and custom design." Rich ended up creating over sixty different high-resolution illustrations for the [game](#).

Rich, a senior from Petersboro, Utah, says the chance to work on a project of this magnitude added to her BYU experience and has given her a leg up in the competitive freelance design market.

"It feels awesome to see my work out there. To have people view and enjoy your work is really the dream of every artist," she said. "This project helped prepare me for future client work, it helped me develop as an artist and become more skilled in the software I was using. Having this opportunity was huge for me."

Cosmic Battle Training is [available on Amazon](#).

Provided by Brigham Young University

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