

Using live bees for mental health therapy

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Meet Amelia Mraz and Natasha Pham, the founders of Half Mad Honey, an apiary at the Navy Yard in Philadelphia. They use their hives to help people practice both mindfulness and distress tolerance through apiary therapy.

Don't worry, bee happy: "It's incredible to see the transformation from fear to joy when people come here," said Amelia Mraz.

"The bees have definitely shown me humility because they can do more than I can, and they don't even have thumbs," Natasha Pham said.

Even though Amelia Mraz was scared of bees as a kid, when she needed to fill an elective for her undergrad degree in psychology at Temple University, she decided to take a beekeeping class in 2016 at the school's Ambler campus.

"I was interested in working with nature, I was not in a good place with my mental health, and I was taking a lot of lecture classes, so I signed up," she said.

When the time came for [field work](#) and Mraz stood among the swarming hives, surrounded by thousands of bees, something incredible and unexpected happened.

"It became a space where I felt calm and focused. I didn't bring any of my other worries into the apiary," she said. "And I fell in love with the bees for how they made me feel."

Natasha Pham didn't grow up loving bees either, but when she saw a picture of Mraz in a full beekeeper's suit on her OkCupid dating profile in 2019, she felt some kind of way, too.

"I was definitely interested in meeting someone who does something so rare," she said.

So Pham, a private school chef, sent Mraz a message: "I'm looking for some local honey."

As they grew sweet on each other, Mraz showed Pham the ins and outs of beekeeping, and she began to see the benefits bees brought to her life, too.

"It's terrifying but it's also exhilarating," Pham, 37, said. "And every time I did it, I wanted more."

In May 2020, the University City couple founded Half Mad Honey, an apiary of nine beehives at the Navy Yard, with the expressed intent of using their honeybees for mental health therapy. The name of the business is a nod to the Mad Pride movement, which seeks to destigmatize mental illness, and to mad honey, a type of hallucinogenic honey found in Nepal and Turkey.

"Our honey isn't hallucinogenic, so we're only half-mad," Pham said.

Inspired by a program called Heroes to Hives, which teaches veterans beekeeping skills, as well as by alternative practices like equine and [music therapy](#), the apiary therapy conducted at Half Mad Honey is believed to be the first of its kind anywhere.

"I wanted to take therapy out of a clinical office and bring it to the apiary," Mraz, 30, said. "This is a space where we can practice safely activating our alarm response and bringing ourselves back down to a calm place."

At its honeycomb core, apiary therapy is about putting yourself in a situation that would typically trigger a flight-or-fight response (Ah! Bees!) and learning how to recognize, cope, and control your emotions within that space so you can transfer those skills to everyday life.

Therapy sessions are co-facilitated by Mraz, who's pursuing her master's of public health degree in social and behavioral sciences and health

communication at Temple, and by Amanda Geraci, a licensed clinical social worker who specializes in trauma and dual diagnosis treatment.

The 90-minute sessions, which are held for groups, couples, and individuals, begin with participants gearing up in beekeeping suits and heading to the apiary. There, Geraci has guests conduct a self-body scan, asking them to relax, take deep breaths, and notice if there's any pain or tension in their body.

"Emotional regulation is really being mindful about what's happening with your body and being as present as possible," Geraci said. "One of the reasons why we do that is to really bring down the alarm response and to increase our calm response ... so that the bees are less alarmed."

According to Mraz, bees communicate through smell and can detect when an animal is stressed through its pheromones, which can make them more likely to sting.

"So it's important to be mindful in life in stressful situations, but in the apiary it's really important for us to be mindful so that we're able to work with the bees," she said.

Standing among tens of thousands of bees, participants must also be aware of their reactions and not just go swatting the bees about out of instinct.

"Part of mindfulness and distress tolerance is learning to just be, literally, with what's happening around you and slow down your reactions so that the bees know you're not a threat," Geraci said. "When we're more mindful, we have more control over our behaviors."

Participants are able to hold frames of honeycomb, watch the bees go about their work, and try to identify the queen. And when the season is

just right, Pham and Mraz will give their guests a spoon to try honey directly from the comb.

While their main focus is apiary therapy, Pham and Mraz do sell their [honey](#) (they netted more than 300 pounds this year) and they host tours of their apiary, which are open to kids as young as 5, with Nicole Rivera Hartery of Bees on Main St.

The apiary is located at a secret location at the Navy Yard to prevent hive theft, but despite being hard to find, Half Mad's hives fell victim to vandals earlier this year.

"They were stupid enough to throw a sledgehammer at a hive, but the hive attacked them and they couldn't get their sledgehammer with them," Pham said. "You can't step up to a beehive and feel like you're superior."

Luckily, the bees survived and Pham and Mraz were able to buy new hive boxes thanks to a fund-raiser set up by a friend.

Today, Half Mad Honey is still a part-time labor of love for the couple—Pham remains a private school chef and Mraz works at a nonprofit that evaluates [mental health](#) services in Montgomery County—but their goal is to make Half Mad Honey a nonprofit, so even more people can experience what bees have taught them.

"Bees taught me trust—trust in myself and trust in the world around me," Mraz said. "And they taught me to not give up, definitely."

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