Not all that long ago, Dr. Kaz Nelson and her brother, George Joyer, were out to dinner with a friend when they got to talking, in their usual brother-sister banter-y way, about mental health.

It was nothing unusual for the pair: Nelson, an assistant professor and vice chair for education in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Minnesota Medical School, has made it her mission of sorts to demystify mental illness, and Joyer, a county attorney who works in child protection and loyal younger brother, gets a kick out of hearing her put current events into perspective.

What was unusual was their friend’s reaction to their conversation.

“George and I were just talking about a mental health issue, kind of like we always do,” Nelson recalled, “and our friend Brett said, ‘You two should do a podcast. This conversation is just so interesting to listen to.’”
Nelson and Joyer could’ve shrugged off that suggestion, but somehow the idea stuck with them.

An expert source on all things psychiatric, Nelson has known that she wanted to be a psychiatrist ever since she was a teenager. She’s committed herself to breaking down stereotypes around mental illness after witnessing classmates being judged or excluded because of their mental health struggles.

“I had friends with eating disorders, friends with depression and anxiety,” Nelson said. These were young people who seemed from the outside like they had everything going for them:
“People would say things like, ‘Why are you doing that to yourself? Get over it.’ But once you understand that those kind of behaviors are related to a brain imbalance or some treatable illness, you realize that it is unfair to stigmatize or judge someone who is struggling.”

Nelson went to college knowing that she wanted to study psychiatry, and she continued all the way until she earned her M.D.

“I’ve always been one who’s out for the underdog,” she said. “There is so much stigma around mental health and mental illness. That misinformation is pervasive and painful. For me it feels like a social-justice issue that I just can’t ignore.”

**A podcast is born**

Once the podcast idea had been planted in their heads, Nelson and Joyer couldn’t put it down.

Joyer researched how to create a podcast, watching YouTube videos and researching hosting sites. “He was serious about it,” Nelson said. “And before long so was I.”

Nelson admitted that podcasting didn’t seem as though it fit with an academic career, but it was a clear fit with her commitment to mental health education. At the University of Minnesota, she teaches psychiatry students and residents as well as faculty members through continuing education courses, but she knew she wanted to reach a larger audience. And she figured that creating the show could go toward her faculty publication requirements.

“In my career, I have been focusing on education about psychiatry, on deconstructing myths around mental health,” she said. “More and more, it seemed that while I was doing all this teaching of people in the field, while there is clearly work to be done there, in a way I was preaching to the choir. What about the general population, where there are so many misconceptions about mental illness? I wanted to branch out, to reach them, too.”
That sealed the deal, and the siblings set about creating “The Mind Deconstructed,” a bimonthly podcast that focuses on putting mental health issues of the day into context, on explaining topics in understandable language and offering tips and advice for people who encounter those issues in themselves or in others. Nelson and Joyer are the hosts, going by the names Dr. Kaz and George. (“We want to be approachable,” Nelson explained. “We want to keep the tone casual and conversational.”)

Nelson thinks that the podcast, which is still gaining traction, has the potential to attract a diverse audience.

“Many people want to talk about these issues,” she said. “Just last Thanksgiving, for instance, people were asking me questions like, ‘What’s the difference between a psychologist and a psychiatrist?’ They just want someone to explain things to them in a language that they understand.”

**Inside ‘The Mind’**

On “The Mind Deconstructed,” Joyer plays the everyman role, asking Nelson questions that keep her descriptions down to earth. Nelson said her brother relishes this role, even though he knows more than he might let on.

“George graduated from college,” Nelson said. “Then he joined the Marines and did a couple of overseas tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. After that he went to law school and worked in child protection. He’s seen a thing or two and can ask questions in a way that represents what the average person would want to know.”

The podcast’s conversational tone is engaging, and the episode themes, which range from PTSD to borderline personality disorder to intolerable anxiety, are interesting and topical, answering questions that may lingering in the back of listeners’ minds.

“We’re banking on the idea that there are enough people out there who are touched by a mental health issue, who might listen to an episode and say, ‘Huh. I didn’t know what was up with that.’ Or they could possibly be dealing with a mental health issue themselves and listening to our podcast would spur them to get help.”

Drawing connections to current events adds interest. When President Trump passed a cognitive screening test at the beginning of the year, Nelson decided it was a perfect opportunity to talk more about what these tests reveal. Her brother was a willing subject, so she administered the test to him.

“I wanted to provide the basics about what a cognitive screen is,” she said, “to show what kind of elements are included, so that’s what we did.”

That open approach is just what the doctor ordered.
“I want to help people understand, through clear talk and honest education, that mental illness is not a choice or a character flaw,” she said. “I want to break down barriers, to get people to engage in conversation.”

Homegrown
The siblings’ podcast is not professionally produced, but it is thoughtfully developed. The format is two people talking about a subject, dispelling myths and offering practical advice. On the “Intolerable Anxiety” episode, for instance, Nelson offers tips for reducing anxiety, including paced breathing exercises and a tip about applying ice packs to the face to calm an anxiety attack.

While her advice and information is backed by years of research and her own experience working with patients and teaching medical students, Nelson said she does not want “The Mind Deconstructed” to feel like an academic lecture. She and Joyer are not promoting specific treatments or pharmaceutical therapies, either. Their only motivator is education.

“The podcast is very homegrown,” Nelson said. “We have no sponsors. We are not funded by a drug company. It is extremely independent.”

While Nelson and Joyer are proud of their show’s independence, they’re also happy to admit that working together on this project has made them a little more dependent on each other.

“George is one of my very best friends,” Nelson said. “While we enjoy each other’s company, we rarely work on things together. We have separate interests, separate lives. So for us to identify a project that we can share has been great. It’s been fun to work with him, and we both feel like this show can really make a difference.”

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Andy Steiner is a Twin Cities-based writer and editor. Before becoming a full-time freelancer, she worked as senior editor at Utne Reader and editor of the Minnesota Women’s Press.