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I'm In Pain, But You Can't See It

Anonymous
Gettysburg College

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I'm In Pain, But You Can't See It

Abstract

Two weeks after I returned home from my freshman year at Gettysburg, I suffered a nervous breakdown. I couldn't get out of bed even though I was unable to sleep. I had no appetite and it felt like pins and needles were constantly poking at my hands and feet. I spent hours wishing for sleep so that I could get some relief, yet I felt so terrified of the possibility that dreams would follow unconsciousness that I turned lights on, played loud music, and sat at my desk in an attempt to do anything that would prevent me from falling asleep. I had become detached from reality, unable to distinguish between what was happening in the world and what was happening in my head.

[*excerpt*]

Keywords

Center for Public Service, Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, anxiety, depression, mental health, mental illness, panic attack, Social Justice, stigma

Disciplines

Civic and Community Engagement | Education

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](https://cupola.gettysburg.edu) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that -isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

I'M IN PAIN, BUT YOU CAN'T SEE IT.

September 28, 2016



Two weeks after I returned home from my freshman year at Gettysburg, I suffered a nervous breakdown. I couldn't get out of bed even though I was unable to sleep. I had no appetite and it felt like pins and needles were constantly poking at my hands and feet. I spent hours wishing for sleep so that I could get some relief, yet I felt so terrified of the possibility that dreams would follow unconsciousness that I turned lights on, played loud music, and sat at my desk in an attempt to do anything that would prevent me from falling asleep. I had become detached from reality, unable to distinguish between what was happening in the world and what was happening in my head.

Throughout my entire childhood, my mind had been my refuge. Whenever I felt afraid, I picked up a book and buried my head in its pages. I let stories carry me through the day and often lived in these fictionalized dimensions in order to deal with the world around me. I lived in my head and trusted my mind over everything else. It had been the one part of my life that I could control. And it had never, ever failed me until that summer.

I lost the will to live.

My parents urged me to be active. They took shifts dragging me out for long walks and encouraged me to keep moving. During the day I would try to sit in a coffeehouse and read a new book, surrounded by people, to stave off the idleness and solitude that were feeding the illness that had taken over my life. My father would stop his workday to take me out for a drive, talking the whole time about anything and everything in an attempt to get my mind to stop from spiraling out of control. Once my mother came home from work they would rotate, and she would take over for a few hours.

I had never felt so weak. I had never felt so pathetic and powerless. I hated every second that I spent immobile in my bed. I despised the fact that my parents – my loving, hardworking, and thoughtful parents – had been forced to take care of me at the expense of their careers; it must have been like having a four-year-old instead of an

eighteen-year-old. My mental state became worse and worse and worse until my mother decided that I needed to see a doctor. The doctor prescribed me medication, warning me that things would get worse before they got better. She was right. Two nights after I began taking the medication, I suffered a massive panic attack. I truly felt like the world was coming apart around me.

It was – and still is – the most terrifying thing that has ever happened to me.

Gradually, the medication began to work. I started to be able to focus again. I could pull myself out of my bed in the morning, even if I really did not want to. I could see the words on the pages of a book once more. I committed myself to remaining active – just like everyone had said – in order to keep improving.

I have not suffered a major anxiety attack since. But my stomach still flips and my hands still shake when I'm nervous. I still have to consciously remind myself to stay calm so that I am not overcome by an attack. I still have difficulty sleeping. And I continue to struggle with bouts of depression that poison my mind with thoughts of self-hatred and drain me of energy. No amount of walks or little blue pills can keep that particular monster from taking control of me. They help me manage it, and that is all that I can hope for.

As time has passed since my breakdown, I have realized that I have always suffered from anxiety and depression. These illnesses did not appear in my life for the first time that summer. I remember breaking out in hives one evening when I was in third grade because I was so stressed. I remember lying down on the bed in my room and wishing that I'd never been born when I was in middle school. An upset stomach was so common for me, growing up, that I assumed it was normal to feel incapacitated by worry before a new event.

I spent eighteen years of my life struggling with anxiety and depression before I ever knew what it was. I struggled and cried and lived in pain, unaware that there was an explanation and that I could get help. I had no idea that I was suffering from mental illness. I wish that I had heard stories from people who dealt with mental illness when I was younger. I wish that there had been open conversations about mental health around me in school, in church, and in the media. I wish that I could have known someone – or of someone – who struggled, so that I could have understood that I was not going to live in pain forever. I wish that I could have known all of this so that it didn't take me eighteen years to get some relief from the monster that's tearing at my brain.

Share your story, if you have one. It would have helped me, and it might still help someone else.

Anonymous

This post is written anonymously not out of shame, but to protect my identity. To contact me, email surgegettysburg@gmail.com.

*The image accompanying this post is taken from a series of photos depicting mental illnesses by photographer Christian Sampson. You can find his work [here](#).

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