

It's time to normalize getting help

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When I was a little kid, I saw the world in black and white, as most children tend to do. When I heard the words 'mentally ill,' my mind would connect it to words like derangement, insanity or madness. But in eighth grade, I was told I had generalized anxiety and severe depression, and I was put on medication. I was so scared to tell my friends because I did not want to be seen as weak by them. I felt isolated. It was like I lived in a bubble where I was the only one dealing with this. My grades slipped, and so did my attendance. I was ashamed and anxious about what my teachers would think of me. It was a struggle to get out of bed each morning. I pushed through, but I could never have done it alone. When these thoughts and feelings began to appear, I knew I had to tell someone. If it had not been my mom, it would have been a teacher or a guidance counselor or a friend, someone.

Senior year I started psychology, and the first thing Ms. Sandy James told us was that her goal was to make people view mental illness the same as physical illness. In the biology unit, we learned that people like me with depressive and anxiety disorders have something chemically unbalanced in their brains. I am not just lazy, stupid or crazy.

Two weeks into school, I had a major depressive episode. My parents, friends, teachers and counselors were understanding and supportive. I took a leave of absence from my job and was admitted into an Intensive Outpatient Program with group therapy for three hours three days a week. I feel no shame about my mental health history. Asking for help is the best thing I could have done for myself. There is nothing to fear.

Getting help starts with communication. I told my mom that I wanted to see a therapist in the eighth grade, and so I did. Many are not so fortunate to have that support. If a parent does not seem like a viable option, tell a school counselor, a favorite teacher or an adult figure who can help. If there is a crisis, the national suicide hotline is now 988. Websites like BetterHelp and Talkspace are created to be more affordable, online options compared to in-person therapists. Therapists are not just for mentally ill people; therapy can help a person manage life's challenges. Everyone deserves a therapist. Everyone is important. How can someone function without themselves?

The stigma around mental health manifests in two ways: socially and internally. A common misconception about mental illness is that those who face it are weak. We are not weak, we are suffering. Internally, people might feel discomfort in reaching out and getting the help they need; they minimize their struggles because that is what society tells them to do. This stigma increases the likelihood of suicide, especially with the stigma around men's mental health. Whatever the gender identity, do not let stereotypes or expectations interfere with personal health.

Let us create a new expectation. Destroying the stigma begins with language. Ask questions: "Is there anything I can do to help?", "How are you feeling today?", "Do you want to talk?". Be supportive: "I'm here for you when you need me", "Thank you for opening up to me", "I love you". Please don't minimize someone's feelings: "Everyone feels that way you know", "Try to look on the bright side", or "Just deal with it".

Getting help took sacrifices: I could not be as devoted to Student Council, and I gave up my involvement in the fall play. It is worth it. We are all worth it. Progress begins with us, and we need to normalize getting help.