Mental Illness: It Takes Courage, But You Can Do It.

This story and others can be found at [www.nami.org/PersonalStories](http://www.nami.org/PersonalStories).

For most of my life I have described myself as an extreme person. Not in the Bear Grylls sense of jumping out of planes and drinking weird things, but rather in the sense that I never did anything moderately. It was all or nothing.

I either slept a lot or not at all. I was either too exhausted to move or so full of energy I would exercise for hours on end. I would either study obsessively or skip my classes for days.

I would either eat everything or nothing at all.

I was either extremely sad or the happiest person on earth.

The truth is I knew this wasn’t normal, but I felt that this was just who I was. I had been dealing with these ups and downs for as long as I could remember, as far back as when I was just five years old. But as I got older I realized I could no longer reconcile the ups and downs of my mind with the unpredictability of “the real world.”

My freshman year of college was pretty rough. I was all over the place and generally out of control. In the spring, I hit a wall. The constant back and forth was exhausting, not to mention I had mono for five months. I decided then that I needed to take care of myself.

The past few years since then have been a journey. I’ve started, stopped and restarted basically every form of treatment. At several points I’ve thought, “Oh, I’m better now. I’ve moved on from that and I don’t need to do anything else.” But that has never turned out to be true. One of my best friends always says, “the stuff you have is the same stuff you’ll carry for life, so you might as well deal with it.” It’s taken me a while to fully embrace that. You can get better at dealing and living with mental illness. Taking care of yourself is a lifelong project.

To be honest sometimes I do wonder why I have to be like this. People always say, “Oh, I wouldn’t change my mental illness if I could; it’s made me who I am!” Sometimes I think that’s ridiculous, but truthfully it has made me who I am. I think that everything I’ve gone through has given me a great perspective and outlook on life. There are a lot of things I don’t worry about because I know that in the grand scheme of things they won’t matter. Instead I appreciate and embrace the little things, things that just make me smile or laugh. I still have ups and downs, but I finally have a routine of self-care and I’m in control.

My hope in telling my story is not to get any sympathy. There’s nothing tragic or pitiful about mental illness. I’m also not trying to reveal some big secret because I’ve never really tried to hide any of this. I really just want to contribute to the dialogue surrounding mental health. It’s okay to talk about it - it’s actually great to talk about it! I’ve found that when I share my experiences with others they generally understand and can even relate. Discussing mental health reduces the stigma.

Commit to taking care of yourself.

Go to the doctor.

Go to a psychiatrist.

Go to a therapist.

Take your meds. Work on yourself. Forgive yourself.

Everybody deserves to be in control of themselves.

Everybody deserves to be understood.

Everybody deserves to be happy.

Everybody deserves to live their best life.

It takes some courage, but you can do it.