
Why And How Adolescents Are Affected By Generalized Anxiety Disorder And Clinical Depression

Puberty hits most kids hard, but mine was a significantly more difficult struggle. Genetics and brain chemistry created the perfect storm, and, at age thirteen, I was diagnosed with clinical depression and generalized anxiety disorder.

The initial months of undiagnosed agony were the worst. Depression is not evident like a broken bone or a case of the sniffles, and worse yet, it urges the sufferers to hide their symptoms. Constant self-hatred and criticism led me to believe that my problems were my own fault and that I shouldn't bother anyone with them, and there was little outward sign that anything was wrong with me. When I stopped eating entirely, however, it became evident that this was no teenage mood swing and I was hauled to a psychologist.

My family is well-versed in mental illness; it runs rampant in our bloodline, a hemophilia of the brain, a Hapsburg lip that cannot be bred out. Everyone in my immediate household has struggled in some way with a disordered mind, from my brother's crippling and lifelong battle with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and my mother's brief prescription to Prozac in her mid-twenties. We even have a family psychologist, one Doctor Irving, who has had appointments with everyone but my father, and the stockpile of Zoloft at my house is pretty much up for grabs whenever a family member feels another bout of their respective torment coming on.

The first two years of my diagnosis, I crashed and burned. Dr. Irving was incredible, but he wasn't licensed to write out prescriptions, so I hopped from doctor to doctor to find the medications I needed. The first psychiatrist we found was insistent that my insomnia should be treated with heavy sedatives (ones I later found out were often abused for recreation), and the combination of intrusive thoughts and psychoactive drugs rendered me dopey and numb. I honestly don't remember much of my first two years of high school, and don't even know what kind of person I was. My days were static, hazy, melding into one another into some dull and formless thing. It took everything I had to stay awake in the daytime, and at night my head was too full of intrusive thoughts to fall asleep. After a while I began hallucinating; shadows flickered at the edges of my vision, invisible things took the voices of loved ones and whispered for my attention or said my name at random intervals. At some point my brain sort of shut down and I didn't even feel real anymore, like life was some twisted simulation, as if my consciousness was separate from my physical body. Time passed strangely, the hours into eons but the days into mere minutes. I floated through life for what seemed like eternity. But after a few new doctors, we eventually found the medications that worked for me, and I slowly returned to the realm of the living.

Depression comes and goes like the tide, and I've dealt with this Sisyphean struggle long enough to know what is a day-to-day hiccup and what is an alarm bell. The ceaseless urge to sleep is the first sign the boulder's crashing down the hill again. There is a bone-deep, all-encompassing ache, an undefined sense of hurt, which follows soon after. Simple tasks, things I used to love, are no longer appealing. I ignore texts, let my paintbrushes collect dust, watch life slip through my fingers and opt for burrowing under covers, taking catnaps on the sofa. There is the anxiety, too, an incessant buzz of worry at the base of my skull that drives me to sob without

tears or noise at random intervals, or claw at my body until it bleeds, like adding bodily injury will somehow ease my suffering.

These complaints are mild. They are a mosquito bite, a stubbed toe. Actual depressive bouts are shark attacks, being slowly steamrolled, in comparison. I'm lucky I don't remember much of them.

My symptoms never completely disappear, but that's not to say they are without some small benefit. When I am a functional human being, my self-loathing and pessimism make for great pieces of art. It is one of my few convictions that art is not art unless it makes its audience feel something. True artists are tortured, and in this regard I am a modern Van Gogh. Expressing my negativity makes for nasty, mangled work, pieces that without a doubt demand response from the people that see them. They are bitter in their message, yet they are still a more aesthetically pleasing complaint than "I am hurting". Depression twists into something almost beautiful when it manifests as ink and canvas.

I do not crave my sickness. The payoff for anguish is mere pennies, no way to be living. Mental illness is a disability and I am the queen of savants, a mildly interesting party trick for your enjoyment. Ask me what day of the week November 22nd, 1987 was and be faintly surprised when I am correct. For the most part I am difficult and uninteresting, a "Ripley's Believe It or Not!" entry to forget about after a few weeks; ho-hum entertainment for strangers and a living nightmare for my loved ones.

After years of relapses, I have found small ways to delay the inevitable. There are little ways to cope and I intend to uncover them all. I constantly write out memos to myself, to-do lists that break up already simple tasks into smaller ones; "answer journal questions 1-6", "write out depression essay", "add entry into table of contents". Even thoughtless tasks need to be bulleted. "Go to Meijer and buy snacks", "play guitar if you're up to it", "text your best friend today". When my thoughts get too unbearable and I am alone, I know to turn on the television and pretend that cheesy sitcoms are human interaction, that cooking shows are some sort of company. I know to spend hours relaxing before bed, to drink chamomile tea and take Benadryl tablets, because too many nights of restless dozing leads to the nasty movement in my peripheral, the voices not my internal monologue saying devastating things in my ears. I know not to do too many things in a week, that I need to have days off, lest the stress of living becomes too much and I revert to marring my skin, like a wild animal gnawing off its leg to escape a trap.

It takes monumental effort to get up in the mornings, when the thoughts are so heavy I feel I cannot lift myself from my mattress. When I manage to keep moving I award myself small things; coffee from Tim Horton's, a new gel pen, aimless Sunday driving for self-reflection. Isaac Newton was wrong; this object in motion does not stay in motion but instead skids to a halt at some time between forgotten dreams and the dawn. I have yet to find inertia. I remember to take life one step at a time, always looking forward, even though where others can see for miles I see only the ground under my feet. I relish in the small victories. I applaud myself for the days I have courage enough to make small talk with strangers, nights it takes less than two hours to fall asleep. I have not missed any of my classes this year; I'm thinking of getting my hair redyed as an award, a participation ribbon for a race I know I'm not winning but give effort for anyways.

I don't know if I will ever have a happiness that lingers, a life that I love living, if I will ever love living. But I am capable of momentary contentedness, of laughter, of being okay. I have found the will to survive. And that is enough. It must be enough.

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