

My Anxiety Journey

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I've always had one eye on the future; the next step, the next phase of my life plan. It has been this way for as long as I can remember. As a kid, I would daydream about the kind of person I was going to be in high school. I would plan the outfits I would wear, think about all the friends I would have, and plan dates with my perfect boyfriend. Since then it has been variations of that fantasy just in different setting. For example, in middle school I would think about college, and now I think about my career and life after my education.

At first, these were just harmless daydreams I would sink into during a boring class or while trying to fall asleep. It wasn't until freshman year of high school that it started to cause problems. I began to worry about not getting future that I had imagined for myself. I decided that I needed to get into the right college so that I would meet the right people and get the right job and have the right life. This fear of not getting into the right school caused me to become obsessed with grades. I would check my grades every time I opened a computer, and if I so much as had one A- my brain would go into panic mode. My throat would close up and my palms would start sweating and my stomach would drop to the floor. Everything in me went into planning how to change that A- into an A so I would feel normal again. I thought that when I did get that 4.0 after first semester it would all go away and I could relax, but second semester was even worse. Instead of only feeling anxious about grades, it would leak into other parts of my life. I became obsessed with being the costumes crew head for the school play and losing weight and getting a boyfriend. I thought that if I had power and was skinny and was in a relationship then I would get all the things I wanted. I didn't know it at the time, but anxiety was the driving force behind every decision I made, from the classes I took to what I ate for lunch.

The summer before sophomore year I decided to make a change. I made the conscious decision to stop freaking out about grades and being crew head, thinking that that was where all of my anxiety was coming from. If I stopped obsessing about getting into college, then I would naturally stop worrying about everything else. That's not what happend. I started to be anxious about the little things in my life, turning the simplest decisions into life or death situations. That was when I had my first attack. Every thought went out of my head, there was only feelings. I

was dying, suffocating under the weight of everything. It was like a monster had taken over my brain and was smothering me to death. I was trapped inside my own head, almost completely unaware of the physical world around me. After the first attack, I knew there was something wrong with me. My mom always said I had big emotions, but this was more than that. Despite knowing this, I thought that since I still had friends and felt pretty much fine most of the time I didn't deserve help. My resistance to going to therapy allowed my anxiety to get worse and worse. I couldn't fall asleep because I would get so anxious when left in a quiet room without distraction that my throat would close up. In fact, anytime I wasn't actively being distracted by something my throat would be closed. After a few weeks of this, I had another attack. I dismissed it as stress because of the play (I was now on sound crew), and did nothing. I spent my days in a constant cycle of anxious or distracted, and sure enough, a few days later I had another anxiety attack. Then, a few days after that another one. Finally, on one of the final days of the play I could feel myself going into another bout of bad anxiety, and I knew I needed to talk to someone. I told my friend everything I had been feeling and about the attacks I had been having. She helped me as best she could and told me that it was probably a good idea for me to get some professional help. It was that night that I realized that what made the anxiety and the attacks so unbearable was the feeling of helplessness that came with them. When I was in the middle of an episode, I had no idea how to help myself. I was stuck inside my mind, feeling like I would be anxious forever. That night I knew I needed to be done fighting a losing battle with my own brain, so the next morning I told my mom I wanted to go to therapy.

I went to my first therapy session thinking that it would be easy, that the hard part was summoning up the courage to actually go. I was wrong. That first appointment was one of the hardest things I have ever had to do. I felt like I was laying my soul bare in front of a woman I had never met. But, gradually, it started to get easier. I have learned ways to deal with my anxiety and prevent attacks when I feel them coming on. I still have a very, very long way to go before I have what is considered a normal relationship with anxiety, but the hopelessness is gone. I am still anxious a lot of the time, but I no longer feel like my anxiety is in control of me. For the first time in two years, I feel like my brain is my own.

