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COLUMN | FOR THOSE WHO NEED TO SEE THIS: MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS

By yomag (<http://theyomag.com/index.php/author/yomag/>) / May 12, 2020

By Frances Clause

I was finally making progress with my mental health—that is, until the spread of COVID-19 and the mental distress that accompanied.

The decision to take the necessary steps toward healing was already difficult enough. I had spent time off medication that I quit cold turkey after eight years. I got back on track with a doctor that helped me find the right medication. It took three tries, and I was starting to make a lot of progress.

But these days, I feel like I'm back at square one, lacking motivation in the midst of a pandemic and feeling guilty about it.

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If you feel the same way, I think it's important that I start at the beginning of my mental health journey so you understand me better: A panic attack sent me to the hospital over a year ago. That was kind of a wake-up call for me, but it didn't fully sink in until I landed in the hospital two more times. In my defense, I wasn't told it was anxiety until the third visit. I was just told, "Don't drink as much coffee."

Gee, thanks.

May is Mental Health Awareness Month, and no, I'm not just writing this in celebration. It's important to discuss mental health whenever possible, and I feel sharing some of my story can help even just one reader.

So, I'll leave off at my third hospital visit. What sent me there, you ask? Well, something I had never experienced before in all my years of anxiety—I struggled to stop myself from shaking profusely and feeling cold in the middle of a course I was taking right here at Youngstown State University.

Truthfully, I convinced myself I was dying and bolted straight for the door after class ended to call my boyfriend. He took me to St. Elizabeth's in Boardman, where my sugar levels and thyroid were checked. I was even hooked up to an electrocardiogram. All tests came back normal.

"I need to take control of this," I remember saying to him after getting into the car. I felt ashamed for going to the hospital over a non-life-threatening panic attack when nurses were preoccupied with other patients.

But if you suffer from panic attacks, you know how terrifying they can be, and in the midst of a pandemic, they are on the rise.

According to The Washington Post, federal agencies and experts are warning that a historic wave of mental-health problems is approaching from depression and substance abuse to post-traumatic stress disorder and suicide.

A Kaiser Family Foundation Health Tracking Poll also found 56% of U.S. adults reported worry or stress related to COVID-19 has caused their mental health and well-being to decline, especially with eating habits and proper sleep.

As college students with canceled events, virtual graduation ceremonies and a future that may be on hold for now, I cannot stress this enough: No matter where you are mentally, you are needed, and this pandemic will end.

I'm not here to offer advice on what you can do to set your mind at ease because everyone is different, and I'm sure the last thing you want to hear about is my nonexistent daily routine or hours racked up on Animal Crossing: New Horizons.

But I am here to let you know that your mental struggle does not define you, especially during a global pandemic. So be kind and gentle to yourself. Healing isn't linear, and although I got back on track by beginning a new medication and keeping in touch with my doctor, there are days I ask myself, "Am I really going to make it in this world?"

The answer is yes, and you are, too. If you have to step back from college for a while because online classes are too overwhelming, do it. We are so programmed to get our lives together in four years that during this outbreak, we are focusing on the wrong things.



Photo by Aaron Skeens

As for me, I just graduated, and it's certainly unlike anything I could have imagined. I'm focusing on finding work, but I am mainly focused on my loved ones staying healthy and getting through this time together.

As a new alumna of Youngstown State University, I have seen the strength of YSU students throughout these years, and it's even more evident as we support each other through uncertainty. People don't call Youngstown the "City of Grit" for nothing. I hope you continue to do what's best for your mental health, and I'm looking forward to seeing the Penguins back on campus when this ends.

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