



# Each of us

is part of the solution

Let's end mental health stigma together



“My battle with mental ill health started a year ago. 365 days ago of sadness, guilt, anger, chronic fatigue and severe anxiety. One whole year fighting against something that I never fully understood. They say it’s good to know your enemy, unfortunately I knew nothing about mine, which led me to believe that I didn’t stand a chance. I lost everything that made me who I am for a period of time that felt like forever. But looking back on it now, if there is one thing that I never let go of was my strength. This is a story about battling against depression. It probably won’t be the first one you’ve heard and will unfortunately most certainly not be the last. But it is mine, it is part of me now and I want to share my experience to let you know that recovering from mental illness is possible and you are not alone.

I have always been quite stressed as a person, that I won’t deny! I would occasionally get the odd panic attack or two but it was never anything I couldn’t deal with. All my loved ones knew about this, it was never something that anyone considered to be abnormal. At the end of the day, who isn’t a little stressed from time to time? I just lived by the rule of “when life gives you lemons, make lemonade” and that just worked for me! I was known to be an enthusiastic and joyful young woman who always had a beaming smile upon her face and an incredibly loud, maybe somewhat annoying laugh. I invested a lot of time into artistic activities, helping others and having a good time and I managed to do so while pursuing my studies.

However, the odd panic attack or two started turning into a problem as I moved away from home to go to university. They gradually became part of my daily routine, to the point where I would actually plan my days in advance to make sure I could fit an hour or so into my agenda to deal with them. But I got used to that I suppose and just decided to deal with it, one panic attack at a time, rather than make a huge meal out of it. And that was fine but it didn’t stop there. My panic attacks began sending me off to the local emergency ward where I would wait for hours before any God damn doctor would take care of me. I very clearly remember falling to the kitchen floor and not being able to breathe properly and worrying my heart would just explode from beating so fast.

Not long after that, symptoms of arrhythmia then began taking over my body, simply due to my anxiety issues that were gradually getting out of control.

This all became too much for me to handle and I started developing signs of hypochondria which I blame not only on everything I have previously mentioned, but also on contraceptive pills that my body didn’t agree with and which had side effects that made me even more tired than I already was. Following my pill-popping period, I was put on iron supplements to get me up and running again. But even when I came off the pill and got my blood count back to normal, something still didn’t feel quite right. As from then, every little thing that could possibly be considered as ever so slightly abnormal was going to kill me. I started panicking for everything and anything to the point where if I wasn’t panicking about something, I would start panicking about that too!

A few months went by after that and I felt fine. Stressed as per usual and the occasional panic attack would still hit me like a tone of bricks but generally speaking, I was doing okay. But I started losing weight for no good reason. This is where the demon first made his appearance, which was a way for my body to tell me that I had to slow down. I didn’t mind this because I wanted to lose a kilo or two (even though I really didn’t need to) but I lost six of them in the space of a month without changing my diet or exercise habits, even though they probably could have done with some changing I’ll admit! At this point, I was officially underweight and started asking myself if something wasn’t seriously wrong with me. My mum and dad started worrying as well which raised concern even more. After that, my diet really did change, food gradually became revolting and I lost my appetite, leading me to lose even more weight. Even having to buy food then became terrifying, I hated going to the supermarket because when I would go there I would just end up crying in some mucky corner and coming out with nothing. The people, the different smells of food, the uncountable choices of things I didn’t want in the first place would just all get the better of me. I would have nightmares about this and then about having to go out completely.

Anything that would be considered as normal, I saw as a huge obstacle to get passed. Going to university became a massive challenge, as well as having to take the tram, go to the post office or have a drink with my friends. Actually, as the days went by, I didn't want to see them at all, I didn't want to see anybody. I wanted to be left alone. I never wanted to get out of bed. I was bored and couldn't see the good in anything anymore. When I didn't go to school, I would spend my days buried under piles of heavy freezing blankets and my nights screaming into my pillow because I couldn't sleep and was angry at the fact that I had missed class to spend my day doing nothing. My boyfriend, who stuck by me through this nightmare, must have thought I was absolutely mad. I became nasty, I would swear at him, push him against the wall and wouldn't let him touch me. I was convinced that I hated everyone but in fact, the only person I was really hating at was myself.

I knew I had hit rock-bottom one day when I started wondering how the best way would be to jump out the window. I don't know what stopped me doing it because I had imagined the scene so many times in my head. I guess it was the tiny last bit of inner-strength that I had left that told me to hang on in there. I never told anyone about this because I was afraid they would judge me, call me crazy or just tell me to get my act together, which definitely would have pushed me over the edge. But I couldn't keep it to myself anymore, the mental image of my window was haunting me. So I decided to open up to my boyfriend, hoping that doing so would comfort me but he just crumbled under the bad news. He could no longer cope with all the negativity. And just when I thought it couldn't get any worse, he texted me one day saying that he couldn't deal with all of this anymore, which I could never blame him for. But the moment just couldn't have been worse. He had forgotten that I had an important call to make that day. I received the text and read it ten minutes before I had a Skype interview scheduled to apply for a traineeship in Brussels in order to graduate university.

I just lost the plot and opened the window... But yet again, something was holding me back. I took a good look in the mirror, at my clapped-in face and bony shoulders and just told myself that I had to get my shit together. So I wiped down the streaks of mascara that had ruined my interview-ready make-up and called a friend, who I could never thank enough. She managed to calm me down a little bit so I wouldn't blow off the interview and lose my chance at working somewhere I really wanted to go. So I put on a smile and made it work.

And here I am now, a year later, writing this story for an anti-stigma and anti-discrimination campaign run by Mental Health Europe, the organisation I had my traineeship interview with. I am now advocating for positive mental health and well-being and for the rights of people living with mental ill health or psychosocial

Since I was diagnosed with clinical depression, I have been seeing a therapist and taking treatment that I will soon be able to stop and I feel so much better. I have gained weight, started smiling again and annoying my friends with my loud and irritating laugh because I am no longer depressed!

Anything is possible if you seek help and believe that things can get better, because they do. You can recover from mental ill health, just like you would recover from breaking your leg. The process is sometimes very long and painful but there is always light at the end of the tunnel, I promise you. And never forget that you are not alone. During the whole time that I was depressed, I thought that I lived in a world where I was the only one who existed and that nobody was there to lean on. But all of that was the result of my imagination. My friends and family never ever let me go, they were very supportive even though they didn't understand what I was going through. It is very difficult to understand what depression is if you haven't been through it. I was actually shocked when I found out that I was clinically depressed. Just like anybody else, I thought you had to go through a tragic loss to suffer from that sort of mental illness. But the reality is that anyone can suffer from mental ill health. I never lost anyone apart from myself. Anxiety, stress and pressure just got the better of me. I wasn't crazy, I wasn't weak, I just wanted to be great at everything and forced myself to never slow down. Everything I did was done with a "full speed ahead" kind of attitude!

This may seem far-fetched but I am actually glad that I went through this because it made me realise that I wasn't living a healthy lifestyle. I have learned that I don't need to be perfect at everything I do and when I feel like something is just too stressful then I won't do it, or if I do I'll make sure that I take my time and do what I can within reason. It's important to listen to your body. When it starts sending you signals, listen and take them into account! Don't just charge ahead and ignore the signs like I did! I thought I would never be able to go back to being the enthusiastic and joyful young woman that I was and yet, here I am! I still have plenty of energy to spare and I am finally living life again (within reason!). Not everything needs to be done to excess! I still have a long way to go in order to really get to the bottom of dealing with anxiety but I am definitely on the right path.

If I have shared my story today, it is because I am praying that what nearly killed me will hopefully bring part of you back to life. 🌸

*"I am brave, I am bruised, I am who I'm meant to be, this is me", The Greatest Showman*

**Nina, 21, France**