

Story of Hope

by Kjersta

I think for me, it all started when Covid hit. I was in college at the time, and I had to leave my school and my friends behind, and that was hard. On top of that, getting forced into isolation was very damaging for my mental health. I spent the entire summer locked away in my room, alone with my thoughts. I spent way too much time ruminating. But now, after extensive therapy, I have learned that ruminating is not healthy. We think we can solve our problems if we think deeply enough about them, but lots of our biggest problems don't have a solution. For example, my main existential question "what's the point of life" does not have an answer. And ruminating about it just makes you feel worse in the end. I was doing a lot of ruminating that summer.

Depression feels suffocating. Like there are so many things you want to do, but just can't bring yourself to do them. Like there is a bully living in your head, criticizing your every move. Like your body feels heavy. I couldn't pull myself out of bed. The intense, negative thoughts were so distracting that I couldn't focus on anything, and my school work started to suffer. I had no interest in doing any of my favorite activities anymore. It felt like nothing could make me happy. You feel numb- meaning you can't feel anything at all. I remember being with friends, laughing, but I couldn't feel it. I remember my mom hugging me, and I remember knowing I was loved, but I couldn't feel it. It felt like I was dead already. I couldn't take care of myself anymore, I couldn't succeed in school, and I just felt like such a failure.

After living like that for about six months, the suicidal thoughts started. I didn't understand what the point of life was if I couldn't be happy. All of the reasons people listed for staying alive didn't seem good enough. And nothing seemed to be getting better, so I started to lose hope that it ever would.

Furthermore, I couldn't get past the idea that my depression "wasn't bad enough" to be considered depression, and that I was making it up. I felt intense shame that I was suffering because I knew that others had it worse.

I finally reached out when I started getting my period every two weeks from stress. It was a great excuse for me to see my care provider. I was terrified to talk with her about it, so I made a list of all of my symptoms of depression, spanning a whole page and a half. Having that list made it so much easier to communicate- all I had to do was hand it to her. I handed her that list, and then I had help.

In a span of five months, I was hospitalized three times, had one suicide attempt, five different therapists, was enrolled in a partial hospitalization program, and one intensive outpatient program. It was a lot, but it really helped.

Today, I have just finished my intense outpatient program through Rogers Behavioral Health, and I am in such a better place. Life has color again. And I'm happy. I'm so, incredibly happy. When people tell you things will get better and you think they're lying, they really aren't lying, it's true. Things do get better. You just have to keep holding on long enough to get there. I promise.

I want to leave you with some things that I've learned along the way.

I learned to focus on what I can control, and to stop worrying about things I can't.

I learned to avoid ruminating. There is no answer to those questions you keep rolling around in your head. "What's the point of life?" "Will it ever get better?" "Why did this happen to me?" Etc. There aren't any answers. And thinking about it over and over just makes you feel worse.

The hospitals are there to keep you safe while you're suicidal, they aren't there to fix you. I went into the hospitals expecting to feel better afterwards, but that isn't their job. If you don't feel better when you leave the hospital, don't feel discouraged- it was a step in the right direction because it kept you safe, there are just a few more steps to take before you start to feel better. Medication and therapy is what worked for me, but there are many different paths you can take as well. Just know there is hope.

I learned that our behaviors impact our thoughts and emotions. So, to feel better, sometimes it is easiest to change our behaviors; pulling ourselves out of bed even if it is the last thing we want to do. Doing chores. Doing those things we used to love to do. And the positive emotions follow.

Another thing that really helped me was building a crisis kit. My therapist had me collect a whole bunch of things that I love, and things that appeal to the five senses, and put them in a box. The idea is that when you are in a crisis, be it that you are looking to self-harm, ruminate, lash out, or engage in any other maladaptive coping skills, you can open your box and some of these comforting things might help you feel better and prevent you from engaging in those behaviors. I collected some of my favorite pictures, some essential oils, positive notes from friends, DBT crisis survival skills worksheets, a list of reasons to live, a list of people that love me, some lotion, some nail polish, some chocolate, etc, and put them in my box. I used it a lot. In therapy we learned that delaying acting on maladaptive coping skills even by a few seconds may be enough to stop you from hurting yourself, so digging around in a box for a while can be really effective. So give it a try.

Progress isn't linear. I thought I was getting better, and then I was in the hospital again. I had to start my partial hospitalization program over again, and keep trucking forwards. Even though it feels awful, and it feels like you're moving backwards, whatever path you take is progress. Because you're fighting through it, and you're staying alive. You're learning how to live through a crisis, and that is progress in itself. Staying alive every day is progress. Don't sell yourself short.

We don't have to compare our suffering to others. Someone else can be suffering and so can you. It isn't a contest, and everyone deserves help, regardless of the severity of your depression.

I also learned that everyone lives for different reasons. I always had this idea in my head that if I went to therapy, they could give me answers. Why am I alive? What's the point? But I learned that there isn't an answer, because everyone's is different. After I was out of my depressive episode, I went back and asked some of my friends what they live for. Lots of people live for their family. Some have goals in life that they really want to accomplish. Some live to spite others who once told them they couldn't make it in life. Some live for the little moments of happiness. I live because I lost a friend to suicide, and I know how awful it feels, and I don't want my loved ones to feel that pain. I live because I want to help people. I live because I want to have a family one day. If you can't find a reason to live, keep looking. Everyone has different reasons, and yours is out there, you just have to find it.

If talking about your depression is too hard, write it down! This helped me communicate with my family, with my psychiatrist, and with my provider. It is nice to at least collect your thoughts sometimes before having a conversation.

If you are wondering if you have a mental illness, reach out. I pushed it off because I thought I was faking it, and waiting made my mental health so much worse. Even if you aren't sure, I suggest reaching out. Better safe than sorry.

And finally, just know that you can do it. You have survived 100% of your worst days, and you can survive the next ones too. You are truly stronger than you think you are. You are strong enough to reach out for help. You are strong enough to fight through this. You are strong enough to live in this world. Live to tell your own survivor story one day.