

Mental health

How can I begin to describe my relationship with these two words that, when paired together, evoke so many different feelings?

Mental health – they tell you that you should speak up if you're suffering, that stepping forward will empower you. They paint the picture as though everything will fall into place if you just make that first appointment, if you just reach out to someone. Like the meaning behind all those unexplained tears, fits of anxiety or months of lethargy will magically be revealed.

How wrong I was to fall for this façade...

"I've come to talk to you about my mental health concerns" – the words that I told my doctor, stumbling out of my mouth like bambi learning to walk for the first time.

10 minutes later and I'm at the pharmacy, filling prescriptions for drugs I can't read or understand.

The fog, the confusion, the flurry of emotions that don't really feel like they're mine. The tears without meaning, the days that turned into nights into days – they're all still there. The "I'm just going to take a nap" which turned into all day in bed. The last minute plan cancellations because the thought of leaving my room exhausts me. The fear that eventually all my friends will give up on me. The binges, the hangovers, feeling hopeless and then feeling like the pain is over, only to be hit by surprise again.

This is the roller coaster of mental illness, and it's not as simple as just seeing a doctor or reaching out once.

They told me that coming forward would make me get better. They told me that telling the truth would set me free....

But instead, it just gave a name to the chain around my foot, the shadow that follows me around, and now it's a label that I just can't shake. This declaration that was supposed to set me free held me back from a job abroad because I wasn't 'deemed fit', it pushed a friend away when I told them 'I need help', it left me feeling more alone and more confused than before I ever gave this reality a name.

Mental health – there are services now, and fundraisers...yes, we've come a long way, but this name is still not my friend. You told me that uttering your name would set me free, but now I've got this label attached to me that I can't scrub clean. This tag "mentally ill" "depressed" "anxious" follows me wherever I go.

If we've come so far, how am I still biting my tongue when my doctor asks me how I'm doing? Why do I have to tell people in such vague terms that I'm "just not feeling great" and "I'm just tired" when I'm overwhelmed and need to be alone? Anything, anything to avoid speaking these two loaded words: "mental health" when I'm feeling deflated, numb, heavy, worthless, terrified...

All the A's on my report cards, all the honours and magnum cum laudes and extra-curricular mentions on my CV might cover up any hint of my past battles, but they don't erase them.

I have friends, good friends, who I tell in hush tones and sentences without sugarcoats about my mental health. They know when I'm not OK. Nobody has to say anything. They treat me like I'm still the same person, because I am. They stand by my side whether I'm freaking out or not. They listen. They care.

I cannot kill these monsters under my bed. If I could, I would. Even on a good day I know I have support, it's so hard to reach out when I'm not well...sometimes talking doesn't help, sometimes those monsters creep out at the most unexpected times and rob us of our voice. They whisper lies in my ear, they remind me of every insecurity I have, every time I failed, and every mistake I've made. These monsters make me scared of yesterday and worried about tomorrow. Fighting these monsters consumes so much of my energy.

That's what some select people who have never known what it's like to have depression, anxiety or other illnesses don't understand – people who struggle with mental illness are trying. They want to be rid of these monsters, they don't want to be victims of their own mind, but you telling us what we can or cannot do, what we are and are not capable of, what we do or do not need, robs us of what little control we still possess. You tell us to ask for help and then you judge us for what we say. How is this a fair way to approach you, "mental health"?

You can see now why I have a tricky relationship with the word "mental health":

Why I wonder sometimes if I should bring it up or push it aside,

Why I check 'no' when forms ask me 'Do you have any history of depression or anxiety?' or 'Have you ever tried to commit suicide?'

Why I avoid the doctor's office for fear of another guilt trip. It's my choice if I want to take medicine.

Because you don't know why I went through what I did, but if you even knew half the story, you would look at me with pride and wonder when you saw that I was still here.

You would see me as a brave warrior, cloaked in strength.

You would see me as a relentless fighter who refused to give up when all cards were not in my favour.

You never see me as any less capable for admitting that sometimes I am depressed and anxious.

The day that you start to see what it really means to have these experiences will I stop having to think twice about my relationship with these two loaded words:

"Mental health."

If you really want to help someone who's feeling mentally ill, know that your sincere presence is the most valuable, helpful thing you can offer. Listen without judgment, and only give advice when asked for. Often times, we know these thoughts and feelings aren't rational, but that doesn't make the feeling any less real. Help us see that we have a safe place to go.

Thank you for reading.

