

Getting a Grip – Quite Literally

My whole life, I have struggled with my mental health — specifically with depression, various forms of anxiety, bipolar tendencies, self-harm, and suicidal ideation. It's like I've been on a rollercoaster my whole life. Sometimes, the ride is smooth and I get to enjoy the view. I get to smile and laugh, put my arms up in the air, and feel the wind in my hair. Within a blink of an eye, I'm suddenly hurling forward at top speed with no concept of time or space. I can feel the drop in my stomach, almost like a sense of impending doom. I never told anyone about the constant loops I rode day to day; I didn't want to be a burden and cause yet another problem in the lives of the people I love most.

I wanted more than anything to stop the rollercoaster. Riding all day was becoming tiring, and I couldn't pretend to be okay anymore. During the morning of November 9th, 2022 — which happened to be during the fall of my senior year — I took matters into my own hands and tried to stop the roller coaster. I attempted to take my own life.

My mom woke me up for school on a seemingly ordinary Tuesday. I had stayed home from school the day prior, so my mom was adamant about me going to school. I was in yet another one of my slumps. I couldn't get out of bed, I had no appetite, and doing anything except staring at my off-white walls felt like a chore. I had heard of the phrase "rock bottom," but had never truly felt like I'd reached it before that moment. I was truly as deep down as I could reach.

My mom left my room and went to work expecting me to get out of bed. But I couldn't. I lay on my back, staring at my ceiling, my tears effortlessly streamed down from my bloodshot eyes. It's as if my tears contained all the happiness I once had. It was all escaping my body and I was left with nothing... almost as if I was nothing. My once blank slate of a mind began filling with thoughts that paralyzed me with fear. Thoughts of harming myself swirled around in my brain. At this point, I was sitting up in bed, rocking back and forth hoping the thoughts would drift away as fast as my happiness did. Deep down, I knew that these feelings of pure hatred for myself would pass, but I was tired. Tired of putting in work to "get better" only for all my progress to be lost for seemingly no reason. I had begun to make up my mind and began carving my sorrows into my thighs in hopes it would help the suicidal thoughts subside – it didn't. Bloody and in a state of pure fear, I texted my mom. I let her know about the thoughts that seemed to be controlling me. I still feel a sense of guilt for putting her through so much worry. I can't imagine the fear she felt driving home from work to make it to my side.

Around ten minutes after my mom received my text, she got home and came running up to my room. She found me in a daze, shaking and sobbing. I had impulsively taken a combination of pills I had found around my house, ranging from my prescription SSRIs to painkillers. Looking back on it, I really don't know why I did it. I had different coping mechanisms memorized that I could have used, but this morning sucked the remainder of life and will to fight out of me. My mom lay in my bed with me and I opened up about everything that had been going through my head. I broke the news that her little girl hadn't wanted to live for a while. She immediately called my dad at work and he

drove an hour back home to figure out what to do with me. None of us knew what to do, especially me.

Fortunately, I didn't take a lethal dosage of medication, so physically, I was fine. Mentally, I was lost. My parents called both my psychiatrist and therapist to let them know what had happened and to hopefully get some guidance as to what should be my next step. Both doctors thought it would be best to go to the emergency room and see if any in-patient facilities had any openings for me.

I've been asked before if I wanted to go to the psych ward, and I never know how to reply. Of course I didn't want to be isolated from everything I knew for an unknown amount of time, but I also knew if I stayed at home, nothing would get better.

Upon my arrival to the emergency room, the doctor saw me for a total of two minutes before starting the process of looking for an opening at a hospital for me. I lay in the rock hard hospital bed for two hours with a man sitting in my doorway. This man was assigned to watch me; making sure I didn't try to hurt myself or anyone else. He watched me as I ate my cold, crumbly, and oddly bland apple pie from the hospital's cafeteria. It was at this moment, my mouth dry from the stale pie crust, that I realized that I had lost the privilege to take care of myself. I was a threat to myself and had lost any trust I had built up over the years.

Finally, after waiting for an update for hours, a nurse came in and informed my dad and I that an in-patient care facility an hour away from my hometown had a spot for me, and was expecting my check in within the hour. With that, my dad drove me home and helped me pack a bag. My mom was home from work and hopped in our busted minivan with my dad and I to drive me away. I called my sister, who lives in Michigan, to

let her know what had happened. My other sister had been home at the time of my attempt, so she already knew. My chest hurt knowing I was putting this drama and fear on their shoulders to carry. I had texted my friends at school letting them know what had happened and how they could expect to not hear from me for a while. It was strange, they didn't seem to care or almost thought I was joking. Maybe it was foolish of me to expect them to care more, I'll never know.

An hour later we arrived at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Appleton, Wisconsin. My parents walked me to the front desk and checked me in. My mom, dad, and I waited for a few minutes and were then met with a nurse. Janice was tall and slender with peppered hair and eye bags that seemed to pull her face into a frown. She guided us up to the third floor, the mental health facility. We walked into what I know now is called the processing room, a small gray room with no windows or decor, just a desk, computer, three chairs, and a metal door. Sitting down in front of the nurse, we went through my medical history together and spoke about how the program I wound up in worked. It still didn't feel real at this point, it just felt like yet another therapy appointment, but that changed in minutes.

All the paperwork was complete so the nurses asked my parents to leave the room while I got strip searched. No shirt, no pants, no socks, no jewelry, no bra, no underwear, just my body encapsulated in cut up skin. It's strange, standing in front of the three nurses scanning my body for anything dangerous, I felt less vulnerable than I did opening up to my parents about what really goes on in my head. For years I had been shoving down trauma hoping I'd wake up one day cured and now all my dirty

laundry was on display for everyone to see. The facade I had been creating for years had finally slipped away, I was the rawest version of myself, clothes on or not.

Once I was cleared by the nurses, I was given stiff blue scrubs that made my skin feel like it was covered in mosquito bites and grippy socks with a bold smiley face that stared up at me. My parents came back into the room and from there, we were guided into the facility through the small dungeon-looking door out of the processing room. The walls were bare, I heard a girl screaming and crying as if she was being attacked, and my nose burned from the strong sterile smell. This was home and I didn't know how long I was going to be there. Days? Weeks? I didn't know how long I was going to be here, and there was no knowing what was in store for me. Nurse Janice stopped in front of a door labeled "Room 4" and unlocked the door for me to enter. I was met with a bed, desk, and chair that were all bolted to the floor and walls so they couldn't be moved. My bathroom was a tiny boxed room with a metal shower, metal toilet, and a metal mirror—no glass was allowed on the psychiatric floor. And smack dab in the corner of my room, there was a big circular camera that would watch my every move. Janice left my parents and I to look around my new room, and it finally hit me. I was in inpatient treatment because I tried to kill myself.

I completely broke down all over again and collapsed into my mom's arms like I did so often during childhood. I didn't want them to leave me in this prison, I just wanted to go home and have everything go back to "normal." However, there was no normal; I had completely fallen off the rails and needed to do something to save myself.

Before they left for home, my mom and dad both just held me and cried. I'd never seen either of my parents cry and the second their tear drops reached my skin, I

knew that I had broken them. As someone who tries not to burden anyone else with what goes on in my life, it hurt more than any physical pain I had put myself through. To worry my loved ones. After a few minutes of just holding each other, my mom and dad left, leaving me there alone. I think I felt every emotion possible; I was mad that my parents left me, I was sad to be alone, I was scared to not know anyone or anything. It was just me, my smiley grippy socks, my god awful-scrubs, and a quilted blanket one of the nurses had given me.

The next seven days would consist of the same things: doing group work, watching outdated movies, seeing a variety of therapists, playing Apples to Apples, and making puzzles in my room. After my first two days, I fell into a routine and would go about my day like the rest of the kids in the facility. I met this boy, Anthonye, who seemed to carry the sun in his smile and laugh; he was always cracking jokes and getting yelled at by the nurses. He was inpatient for his fifth time so he knew all the little tips and tricks to cheat the system of rules we had. I learned that if I asked the male night nurse, Chris, for an extra pillow, he would sneak away and grab one from the storage room. I also learned that I should steer clear of the egg breakfast because it – in Anthonye's words – gave him "explosive diarrhea".

The psych ward was split up into three groups: one for children under ten, one for kids ages 11-14, and then the 12-17 age group that I was in. We were not allowed to speak to or even look at the kids in other groups, which was kind of strange. Luckily, the group of people I was with knew how to fill a room with laughter even if we all didn't feel like it. I don't think I would have had the positive experience I did without my peers and nurses making me feel at home.

Only parents or guardians were allowed to visit during certain hours and in certain areas. My parents would come up nearly every day to solve puzzles with me and keep me company. They brought printed out pictures from home to put in my room to make me feel more comfortable. One of those photos was of my cat looking out our porch window with his paws on the glass looking at the first snowfall of the year. I had missed my cat's first time seeing snow and that really broke my heart. It was then that I realized I've been so caught up in my head that I forgot everyone else's world had continued to turn.

Seven days of focusing solely on myself came and went. Before I knew it, I was called into our TV room by a woman in a freshly ironed white jacket and sparkly purple crocs. I knew this was the head doctor who passed out little yellow release slips... a yellow slip of freedom. After talking with who I now know was the head psychiatrist of the floor, I was awarded my yellow slip and was sent to pack up my belongings.

Pacing back and forth in my room, I waited for my parents to arrive. I couldn't tell how I felt. I was excited to see my friends again, to cuddle my cat, to hug my sisters, and to go back to life. I couldn't help but also be scared, I didn't want to be released and fall back into my depression. Seeing my parents walk down the hallway to my room assured me that I was happy and excited. They had brought my baby blanket – which I still sleep with – for me to finally hold again. I held their hands as we walked to the car from the third floor. My sister was waiting for me in the backseat with open arms and a smile that seemed to warm my once cold heart. I was home.

The following months I would see my therapist once a week and started anew on a sparkling clean slate. I slowly began going back to school and catching up on my

homework. I had also established a true support system and was routinely taking my medications. I was healing.

It took me reaching rock bottom to truly blossom into who I am today. There's a negative stigma surrounding both mental health and inpatient care, but from my personal experience, getting help is well worth it. I've learned to fall back in love with life and all its little quirks. I love watching squirrels run across the street and feeling the wind in my hair through open car windows. I love laughing until my stomach hurts and learning all I am capable of. I can proudly say that I am happy to be alive. It's so cliché to say but truly, "it is okay to not be okay." I think knowing that it's okay and that people are surrounding you with love and support can change the whole game. It's strange for me to be so thankful for something as traumatic as a suicide attempt, but without it, I don't think I would ever be where I am today. I am honest with my loved ones about how I am doing and have broken toxic habits like self-harm. I got back on my crazy rollercoaster ride, and now I'm enjoying every view, even around the unexpected winding turns.