

What I Learned from Depression

“What I Learned from Depression”. I deliberately made the title simple and straightforward—without code words or hidden symbolism—because transparency is what conversations about depression too often lack. Too often do we shy away from depression and hide behind its wall of taboo.

Last semester, I experienced severe depression for the first time. There was no single event that triggered it—no family death, no break up, nothing. In fact, life was pretty good. I just got back from a relaxing two weeks in California, was reunited with my roommates and girlfriend, and looked forward to a relatively light academic load. Looking at my circumstances from the outside, it would be impossible to guess what I was feeling inside. Even I didn’t acknowledge what was happening, until I found myself walking through the doors of UHS Mental Health.

Before that moment, I never thought I would or could enter those doors as a patient. Even though I was well aware of the unfounded taboo surrounding mental health—knowing that depression is no less a disease than the flu or cancer—I couldn’t help but feel that walking through those doors symbolized my weakness. Little did I know that in actuality, that assumption—that perception—was my real weakness.

I am blessed that I have had few tough times in my life, and even in those times, I have been able to get through relatively unscathed. It’s like I’ve always had some force field or guardian angel protecting me. But instead of cherishing this gift, I took it granted, believing I was somehow immune to depression.

As I entered those doors at UHS, I realized that when depressed, you often just don’t have the energy to care about stigma. No matter how much I rested, I couldn’t focus in lectures, and every time I tried to concentrate, my brain would shut off. Every minute of every day, I would repeat through my head all the emails I needed to send, the work I had to complete, and the days left until break. Although in actuality, I didn’t have much on my plate, I fell into an obsessive mental cycle that just repeated and repeated ad infinitum. Hours became minutes; minutes, seconds.

Even time began to accelerate. I wanted nothing more than time to stop, so I could relax—so I could get my thoughts together.

My logical mind couldn't comprehend what was happening. I thought of the hard times in my past and how I managed to recover: be it a break up, teenage drama, bullying, or even a friend's death. Why then am I not able to recover now, when things aren't even that bad? Of course, the neurobiology major and aspiring psychiatrist in me knew the answer, that depression doesn't need a single trigger and bad events are not a prerequisite. But I was still afraid. My confidence slowly withered away and I began to fall into a state of desperation.

Thankfully, humans tend to be resourceful in times of desperation—it's in our nature. Knowing I had to do something, I managed to do the best thing I could—reach out. I talked with my mom, roommates, girlfriend, conductor, concentration advisor, and of course, UHS counselor. What shocked me every time was how supportive everyone was and how much I felt better after each exchange. Although such responses would normally be expected, when depressed, I thought I would only be a nuisance, a target for judgment, and simply not taken seriously. I sincerely believed people would doubt my condition, think I was just pretending to get out of my work. But that just was not the case. Thank God for everyone who was there to help me, because without them, who knows where I'd be today.

What I learned from depression. I learned that I am extremely fortunate to have had my first experience with depression so late in my life. I learned how debilitating depression is and that anyone around us, including in this room, can be in this state. I learned to take seriously the question "How are you?" But most importantly, I learned that the taboo surrounding mental health is in part kept alive by our own internal perceptions. When you're depressed, it can be difficult to convince yourself that people legitimately want to help, that speaking about your depression is beneficial, but I hope my story today has convinced you that it is. That people are willing and, in fact, want to help.

If you have experienced depression at some point in your life, I'm so happy you are better now. If you are currently experiencing depression and hesitant to seek help, I hope my message will provide you encouragement to reach out. And if

you haven't experienced depression, I really hope you won't have to, but in the case that you do, I hope you'll remember my story, and that it will help give you the strength to reach out as well. Thank you.