

Maybe I'd do it in the bathtub, it'd be easier to clean up. Guns are pretty quick and effective, not always though, so I'd aim for my heart's left atrium; wouldn't want to end up like that guy I met a few weeks ago in the emergency department. He had a superficial self-inflicted bullet wound that was going to heal without too much trouble. He spoke quietly with a glassy, empty look in his eyes, and a furrow in his brow that gave away his deep emotional pain. At that time I was puzzled about why he would do such a thing, the idea that things would ever get that bad was totally foreign. But something had changed in me. I no longer pitied him, I understood and related to what he had done in a way I didn't know I was capable of.

I regained awareness of my thoughts, they had drifted off into a thick dark mist, and when I finally retrieved them I was horrified at what I found. I began to tremble gently as I buried face in my hands and slid into a chair at the kitchen table. I was disgusted and scared that I would entertain those thoughts and wondered whether I was capable of doing something so awful. That was enough, I knew I needed help. I could no longer silently shoulder the burden of hopelessness and depression on my own. I'd done it for a few years and up until that point handled it quite well with a only few minor setbacks. This time was different though, probably the worst I had ever felt. I was disappointed, ashamed, and angry that I had allowed myself to get to that point. The thoughts of harming myself and the effects that would have on those I loved were too much to handle alone or rationalize away. I sent an email, and had an appointment with the medical school psychiatrist within a few days.

A doctor's appointment is a strange encounter for a med student. The whole experience was oddly familiar and yet so alienating. It felt like visiting a childhood home that had been sold, remodeled and was now inhabited by strangers. Forcing the words out was hard as I waded through embarrassment, despair and that mind fog which made articulating a thought process an arduous challenge. My back and neck muscles tightened as I suppressed the shiver which tends to show up when I'm under stress. I got through it though, and after a discussion we determined that medication would likely be helpful. The plan to get through this rough patch, and reevaluate the need for meds in a few months seemed reasonable enough. I've memorized "SIGECAPS", the criteria for clinical depression, and made the diagnosis myself for a number of patients. Obviously I knew that a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) would be firstline therapy, I had just answered it on my shelf exam two weeks prior, and some of my siblings have even been treated for depression, so I knew the drill. But for *me* to take an SSRI felt weak, it felt like giving up, it felt like cheating.

But I did it anyway, and it was the best decision I could have made. My life seemed to transform almost overnight. The various shades of greys, blues, and purples that I perceived in my world returned to the vibrant colors of real life. Seeing patients and learning medicine had meaning again and my hope was restored that I'd be able to pursue a career in my chosen specialty. The internal bargaining and pleadings to wake up and start my day ceased, and I just got out of bed like I used to. Finishing projects brought satisfaction rather than simply temporary relief. The dread for studying dissipated. Finally I could focus, I could learn, and my curiosity for knowledge even came back. I felt like myself again. But every morning I had to take my little capsule of guilt. The physiologic response was absolutely, unequivocally effective, and maybe that is why it felt so wrong. Intellectually I understood that patients with depression, including me, had a neurotransmitter imbalance contributing to the disease process. That imbalance in me was clearly improved with medication and yet it never felt right to have to take medicine indefinitely.

I'm capable of living life without medications. It takes constant effort to maintain balance through culturing meaningful relationships, exercising, praying, using therapy light, reading scripture and enlightening books, completing tasks, creating, meditating, and dealing with my stress instead of

suppressing it. At some point along the way I got out of balance, and I couldn't get back. I slowly and steadily plunged deeper into a darkness that consumed me. I drifted further and further from my true fun-loving, optimistic, laid back, and goofy identity. I needed something else to get me back on track. So did I cheat by using medicine? Did I cheat myself? Did I cheat at life by taking a shortcut out of my problems? Did I cheat my numerous colleagues who battled through their studying with various levels of depression? It didn't seem fair to not stress over the smallest of things. It felt too easy to be patient with other people instead of getting easily annoyed or upset. I thought I should have to work harder to be able to relax at the end of the day. Ultimately, I believed the notion that I could not be an effective health care provider and a healthcare recipient at the same time.

Feeling guilt about being depressed was wrong, and the very illness that established the guilt was a driving force for perpetuating more guilt and thus created a vicious self-propelled cycle. But even when the depression was successfully treated, the guilt continued in my thoughts. Perhaps the stigma of mental illness in our profession and society was also contributing. I strongly believe that we are improving on the policy level. The rate-limiting step for me to get help not a lack of resources from the college or lack of access to care like it used to be. The biggest hurdle for me was to accept the fact that I needed help and fend off the guilt that I was broken, the shame of being stigmatized, and the fear of the ramifications.

As colleagues, coworkers, and friends in medicine we need to support one another more comprehensively. We need to be increasingly vigilant about recognizing warning signs in others and more keenly aware of the guilt and shame that mental illness brings to the one struggling. Each interaction, each comment, each hallway conversation about mental health needs to be centered around support and understanding. Seeking mental health care should be regarded as the clear and rational choice, not a surrender or a last resort. We should be emboldened to share our struggles with each other and have proper forums to do so. We must extinguish speculation, gossip, and any talk that casts doubt or undermines the significance of another's mental health. There is a concern occasionally raised that a small minority of people will attempt to take advantage of this shift in mindset, were to occur. Some may prey on the idea that no one will question their actions if mental health is the reported justification. We should all be willing to accept this miniscule risk when vetted against the benefit of saving a person's life or relieving the burden of a suffering, guilt-ridden colleague.

I hope that my history might increase understanding in those who have never experienced clinical depression and empower those who feel too guilty or afraid to seek help. I'm fortunate to be counted as a success story, and I will never regret the decision to reach out to get help. It may have saved my life and it definitely made my life better, but even now guilt and fear continue to gnaw at me.

See, without that guilt, I'd be able to sign my name boldly on this article, and exhibit the kind of vulnerable bravery that some of my heroes have shown. But I'm not there in my journey yet. I still fear the ramifications of being branded with a mental health disorder. I'm afraid of what a residency director, potential employer, colleague, or friend might think if my struggles with mental illness were publicly displayed. I hope that soon I'll be ready to become someone's hero, or a more influential leader in this perspective shift on mental health. For now though, I remain an anonymous supporter and promoter of greater compassion toward one another.