

Mental Health Awareness Month | *Article*

Katie's Story: A Personal Mental Health Journey



Getting help saved my skin

I've lived with depression since I was 13 years old. People may not believe this because of the positive beacon of happiness and energy I portray. But I struggle with negative thoughts and the urge to take them out on my skin every single day.

I had a really good life. I knew my parents loved me. I was smart, applied myself, had great friends and stayed involved in activities. What could possibly be wrong with me? So when I began feeling really down, I thought this had to be a silly childhood phase. Others thought the same, thinking I was going through a typical adjustment phase and I would magically grow out of it. For a long time, I thought I would grow out of it too.

I didn't shake out of it. It only got worse. I started cutting and was completely embarrassed. I thought to myself that only troubled kids seeking attention do this kind of thing, not this girl. I tried to kill myself a few times. I cut back hours at my part-time job. I dropped activities so slowly that even I did not notice until I graduated high school and spent the whole summer before college staying up all night and sleeping all day to avoid people. At the end of each day was a sinking feeling that I probably could not keep this up much longer. It felt like I had been in quicksand for six years and I finally let it pull me under.

I thought attending college would snap me out of this "funk" once and for all. It worked for me for awhile. I joined clubs and stopped thinking about death so much. I felt a little less like I was sinking into the quicksand. But the cutting didn't stop. Instead I moved to scratching myself with my fingernails in the same spots over and over until there was nothing but scabs covering my arms, wrists, feet and legs. I hid them because I was ashamed. I still felt like that silly kid looking for attention. Only now, I was a frustrated and angry adult that should have grown out of this.

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Thankfully, I had a few dizzy spells that year after overworking myself, not sleeping and failing to eat correctly. I say thankfully, because this caused my friends to pay a little more attention and I was finally caught. For a time, I was never left alone and eventually, I was dragged to the on-campus counseling office and forced to speak with someone.

At the counseling office, the graduate assistant took one look at my scabby arms and I was rushed to the front of the line. I am incredibly thankful to my friends and to the Northwest Missouri State counseling center for literally saving my skin. And for teaching me appropriate coping mechanisms. Now I can rationalize what I am feeling and if it's too much for me to take in, I know there are healthier ways to release that energy.

For me, fighting the stigma around mental health, depression and especially cutting, is important because no one should be made to feel like their problems or struggles are less important.

I agreed to be interviewed for the university newspaper about my experience with the counseling center and let them put a giant photo of my face all over the front page because I wanted people to know that I was not ashamed that I sought help. I was proud of myself for going back every week, even when my friends stopped dragging me, because it was the best thing I could have done for myself.

I still struggle, and some days it is really hard to reject the feeling of my crawling skin. But I keep my nails short and I talk it out with anyone who will listen. I owe it to the people who helped me to do my very best to help myself and others.

And most importantly, I never stop working on myself. This includes continuing to check in when my feelings, emotions or behaviors are getting the best of me. This includes finding a new therapist before I give into the urge to scratch when my usual coping techniques are no longer doing the job. And as of recently, this includes finally being treated for the previously undiagnosed bipolar disorder that has been complicating my recovery.

Part of that recovery is understanding that seeking out help is not a sign of weakness. I am stronger today than I was yesterday. I use that strength to share my story no matter how hard it is because I know how important it is to get help. If you are struggling, I want you to know it is worth it to seek out the help you need. It is worth it to drag yourself to the counseling center. It is worth it to save your skin. You are always worth it.