



End the Stigma

ANONYMOUS

The author recounts how her unpunished rape in high school exacerbated a spiral of depression and isolation. Combining vivid, unsparring personal testimony with scientific findings about neurology, the author powerfully condemns the stigma surrounding open discussions of trauma and mental illness. This essay was written for Writing I with Mr. Alex Coleman.

At the author's request, this essay appears here anonymously; Anne Miller, the speaker's name in the text, is a pseudonym.

Content warning: This essay includes descriptions of sexual abuse and self-harm that readers may find disturbing.

I WASN'T A HAPPY KID. Don't worry, I wasn't beaten by my biological father, who I never met. I wasn't bullied in school, and I was never hungry or neglected. My life was seemingly perfect, or as perfect as anyone's could be. I had a loving mother and stepfather, who has easily taken on the role of my father. I had many siblings close to my age, so I always had someone to hang out with. I had a big family who would do anything and a half for me. I was raised in a half-black, half-white household, which meant we had family over every Sunday for cookouts, watching football and, believe it or not,

contests for who could make the best Kool-Aid. My father always won.

I had absolutely no reason to be sad, but I've always felt like something was missing. I've always had this bad case of butterflies in my stomach, and not the good kind. I would struggle to breathe and would collapse gasping for air. This was when my misdiagnoses started. The first time I was misdiagnosed was when they thought I had asthma. Next was with ADHD, due to my inability to focus and sit still. When I slept too much during the day, I was told to sleep at night. When I couldn't get the motivation to get out of bed, I was called lazy. I was suddenly a "moody bitch on her period" when I was irritable. When I started to engage in self-harm, I was called dramatic, but when I stopped wearing sleeves and bracelets, I was called attention seeker. I was sad, and their solution was to tell me to "get over it." When mental illness is brought to attention, people tend to deny its legitimacy because it isn't visible. That denial complicates things more.

In seventh grade, I was raped in the girl's locker room. The guy was in my gym class. He would harass me and my friends every day, and he would touch our behinds even after we continuously told him to stop. We told the gym teacher, and his solution was to separate us from him. The guy was probably six feet tall. He towered over me like the Empire State Building. He was a football player, one who my brother played with. They were not the best of friends, but they had no resentments against each other. When it happened, it was a normal day, until it wasn't. Volleyball practice was over, and I had to stay after late waiting for my ride. When I was sitting outside, I realized I left my clothes from the school day in my locker. When I went back inside, he followed me in, and he attacked me. I tried to fight, but he was six foot and I was five-one. He had the upper hand. Looking back now, I don't blame my gym teacher. I don't blame my volleyball coach for leaving me. I don't blame myself. I blame him.

I told my gym teacher, and he told the principle. Then, a week later when I was in math class, I was called to the office.

“Come in, Anne,” the principle said after I knocked on the door. I swung open the heavy wood and I saw him. My principle and my rapist, sitting in the small room. The guy turned around in his chair and gave me a dirty look. A threat. “Please have a seat, Miss Miller.”

My heart was beating out of my chest. I took a deep breath and shoved my emotions down, trying to stay strong, trying to not seem weak. I walked around the guy, keeping away from him, and sat in the other seat. I scooted the seat further away from him. The principle asked me about the situation. While trying to push the tears back, I told him quietly. I kept my head down watching my fingers fidget with each other. As I told the brutal story, my rapist kept denying what happened. He kept screaming that I was lying. Standing up to pace around as if he were a victim.

The principle did nothing. “... is a good athlete; he just made a mistake.” “Boys will be boys, Ms. Miller.” “I think maybe you said yes and changed your mind? Forgot you said yes? Could that be possible?” “This is all just a big misunderstanding.” “Did your friends convince you to lie about what happened?” “Maybe next time don’t wear such short shorts to volleyball.” “... didn’t mean it. You don’t want to ruin his life, do you?”

Yes. I do want to ruin his life. I want him to suffer. I want him to rot in hell after what he did to me. I want him to feel guilty for the rest of his life. I want him to feel the repercussions for doing such a horrible thing. I hate him. I want him gone. I want to ruin his life.

“I think we are done here aren’t we, Anne?”

I looked at the principle with tears in my eyes. His eyes cold, trying to tell me to drop it. “Yes, I’m sorry.”

I left the office quickly, feeling so much shame. Feeling so much hatred towards myself. I left that office and blamed myself for what happened. I questioned my own memories. My own pain. I ran to the bathroom around the corner and barely made it to the toilet before my breakfast came up. Did that just happen? This is when I had one of my first panic attacks. There I was on the dirty floor of my middle school hyperventilating because I was told my story didn’t

matter. I was told I didn't matter. My heart hurt in a way I can't explain. After gathering myself, I stood up and looked at myself in the mirror. A broken girl. Black eye and bruised neck hiding behind makeup. I looked at a girl in the mirror and I didn't see myself. I saw a stranger. A ghost.

After that day, I never saw him again. Not in person, just in my dreams. I wish I could say I forgot his face. I wish I could say I don't have nightmares and flashbacks. I wish I could tell you I can talk to boys without a problem. I wish I could tell you I forgave him. But I can't. Because that would just be a lie. A lie I wish was true. But wishes don't always come true.

I've never told anyone about that day. I never went to the police. I never told my mom or sister or dad or brothers. I never told my best friends that story. I've hidden it away deep down inside. This led me to a dark part of my life. This is the cause of my depression. This is how my depression really began.

I started to pull out my hair. No, not like the comic drawing you see when you type "stressed" into Google. I'm talking about pulling out one strand at a time, frequently. I knew what I was doing, but I never questioned why I was doing it. It started with my hatred for my hair. He liked my big, curly, frizzy hair. I would search for the most coarse and curly strand and pluck it out. Wishing if I pulled all the biggest curls, I would have straight hair. I know it sounds crazy, but I just wanted his hands to be removed from my memory. That's all I ever dreamed of. Before I knew it, everything got out of hand. I soon had two very big bald patches starting near my temples going back, I had to start wearing hats to school. Rumor was I had cancer.

As time passed, I got more insecure. I cried every night, slept too much, ate too little, and stopped smiling. I completely lost myself. I completely forgot who I was before this began. I couldn't find any good memories. I was a completely different person. I was so irritable, mean, and passive-aggressive. I was nothing good. A monster. I felt stuck in this dark hole. I felt like I was suffocating. I didn't see the light at the end of the tunnel. I didn't like who I was becoming.

I didn't think it would get better. Every night I debated if this was the day to die.

Everything I just described was hell, obviously, but I couldn't let anyone know I was struggling. I was the class clown. I was an athlete. I was smart. I was popular. Of course, I couldn't let anyone know I thought about suicide every night. Of course, I couldn't let anyone know I was hurt, broken. Of course, I couldn't let anyone know I hurt myself. I couldn't let anyone know I was sad because it would ruin my reputation. At least that's what I thought. I couldn't really tell any of my friends because they were suffering too. One was an anorexic, one was a cutter, one was suicidal, and one did drugs to numb the pain. I think a small part of me believes that I became depressed because I was surrounded by depressed people. But that isn't true and isn't fair to them. They coped in the wrong ways but, in my head, if it worked for them it would work for me.

I struggled a lot with trying to get help. I didn't want to talk to anyone about my struggle because I didn't want them to look at me differently or call me a psycho or be demeaning. I was scared someone would just push me aside and ignore what I was telling them. I was scared someone would say I didn't matter. My story didn't matter. Like the principle said.

When I gathered enough courage to express what I was feeling, I told my best friend. Let's call her Susan. The conversation didn't start with me sitting her down in her room with the door closed then pouring my heart out to her. I wish. The conversation started at the drive-in movies in line for the concession stand. We went to drive-in movies a lot. I stood there and listened to her complain about her boyfriend for the millionth time. With my arms crossed over my chest I stared at the pavement below our feet. After five minutes of her going on and on about her boyfriend, she realized I was totally zoned out and asked if I was okay. Of course, I said I was. But inside my heart ached with sadness.

After getting our root beers and sitting back down on the blanket beside her car, she brought her phone up to take a photo. I adjusted

and smirked just a little bit. I can't really explain the situation very well, but I will try my best. My not making a silly face in the photo made her furious. Confusion and judgement painted over her face. With a tight, demanding voice, she asked what the hell was wrong with me. "What happened to my Anne? What happened to you? I miss the old you. So, whatever is going on, build a bridge and get over it." I was scared. Terrified. I was shaking in my boots and looked at her with big, fearful eyes. It felt as if she were towering over me.

Susan, I'm just sad. I feel like I have this black hole in my heart that is sucking up every bit of happiness I have left. I feel like my happy memories are fading away, so all I know is sadness. All I remember is sadness. I can't seem to find a single thing that makes me genuinely happy. I have to fake it because of you and everyone else in my life. I'm sad, Susan. I'm fucking sad, and I'm struggling. How did you not see this? I was broken, and I need your help. I need someone. I can't find a reason to stay alive anymore. I'm just so sad. How could you not see this? How can you not hear me?

"I'm fine. I've just been tired this past week."

I knew she wouldn't understand. I knew she wouldn't hear me out. She wouldn't help. I smiled the biggest fake smile and finished my soda.

When I say depression is hell, I mean it. It won't let you do anything. When you have depression, doing the simplest things seem to be the hardest. I struggled to get out of bed in the morning and could never find a reason to. There is no point to go to school if we all die in the end, unremembered anyway. Your grades and GPA drop so quickly with depression. I would wait at least four days to shower because it was a chore to get in without sitting on the ground and crying. Not knowing what were tears or just the running water. I went days without eating, then I would overeat and throw it all up. My relationship with food was very unhealthy. When I say depression is hell, I mean it. It won't let you do anything. It won't let you smile, have fun, or breathe without ruining your day.

Weeks after the drive-in, I faked listening to every conversation. My zombified self just sat there and stared into nothingness wishing this endless loop of life would end soon. Most of my memories from that year are hazy because I was so absent minded. At lunch every day, I would grab a salad and pick it apart, staring at the food and the way it moved. The group I hung with joked about things I used to laugh at. Jokes I would die laughing at, holding my belly and crying joyful tears. Jokes that made me happy. But something changed in me and when Brian—who was dating Susan—said a joke. I half-way smiled and continued to play with my food.

“Anne, are you going to eat that?”

“Yeah.” I placed the piece of dry lettuce in my mouth and chewed. “I’m not that hungry.” A lie I would end up telling for too long.

I got a text. It was one of my closest friends. Let’s call her Don. She said she wanted to talk to me and asked me to go to her house with her after school. I agreed after debating for a while. She just wants to help, I told myself. Don’t be nervous. She just wants to help. It’s okay.

Don’s house smelled of roast that had been cooking all day. Her mother was in the kitchen slicing up some more onions. I followed her back to her room, and we sat there in awkward silence. Her dog was barking loudly at the squirrel outside. Don broke the silence by talking about her school day. She continued on about her crush and how he isn’t flirting with her anymore. She said she is struggling. This worried me. I knew that Don used to engage in self-harm. Maybe this was my chance to seek help?

“Me too. My life is going to shit, and I don’t want to live anymore. I am so sad and broken, and I don’t know what is happening.” I remember this day well. I remember the look on her face. I remember the fear I felt. She laughed at me and told me I was being dramatic. Don was convinced I didn’t have depression because I didn’t hurt myself. I wasn’t being real, and I didn’t count. Don said I was selfish and never listened to what she said. I reached out for help for

the third time, and I was dismissed for the third time. I was tired of the disappointment.

My mother didn't know I was struggling with such intense feelings. I don't really blame her now, but at the time, when this happened, I hated her for not noticing her daughter drifting away. At the time this happened I was pissed she didn't see that I was gone. I lost weight. A lot. I'm not hungry, I told her every day and she went with it. When my room was a mess, she called me lazy. I didn't like having a messy room, but I couldn't find the motivation to clean it. I didn't like having nappy hair, but I couldn't find motivation to shower. My mother was completely oblivious when it came to me.

She only started to ask questions when I started having a stinky attitude. I was raised in a household where you respect your parents. You don't talk back; you do what your told or you will get a belt to the ass. I was raised in a household that would clean and watch football on Sundays. I started to give attitude to my mother when she would ask me a simple favor; that's when she started questioning what was wrong with her daughter.

After my mother finally connected the dots, she sat me down on her bed in her room. Her eyes were warm and soft. I was scared. I was terrified until I realized, this is great. I can finally get help. I can finally tell someone how I feel. I'm free. Finally. God came through. My mother started the conversation by mentioning my hair. I expressed to her what I had been doing, and she said she already knew. She asked how I felt. I told her I felt scared. Anxious. I felt like I had been suffocating. I felt like I was trying to swim but I couldn't. I was in the ocean, drowning. I felt like I want to go to sleep forever. She understood what I was saying. She said that she talked to Don's mother and she suggested a place where I could go to see a therapist. Finally.

I'm telling you all of this to prove a point.

Too many people don't believe mental illness can kill or is even real. A lot of people struggle with the idea that just because you can't

see it, that doesn't mean it's not there: "Instead of treating those facing mental health conditions with the compassion we would offer to someone with a physical injury or illness, we ostracize, blame and condemn" (Lady Gaga and Tedros). Since mental illness isn't completely visible to the naked eye, like a broken arm, people are skeptical about believing in such a thing. It's easy to look at a broken arm and see that it's broken, but you can't look at someone and see that they are broken too. People are quick to say, "You are sad; get over it," around people expressing depression, but I assure you, no one says, "It's cancer; get over it."

There is a stigma around mental illness, and it is dangerous and toxic. People have been in denial about mental illness and its effect for ages. Though there is scientific proof—which I will talk about later—that people still commonly deny the idea that medicine can help: "To deny the role of medication can do great harm to those who may need it" (Novella 19). Finding resources for mental illness was very difficult until recent times. There should be more options for people to get help when struggling with mental illness: "Previous literature has demonstrated a history of bias, misdiagnosis, and cultural insensitivity that has resulted in skepticism and mistrust of the usefulness of mental health service" (Curtis-Boles 1). Denial is keeping people from being correctly diagnosed and getting the right medicine.

When denial is widespread in the field of psychology, it can be extremely dangerous for many. If a mental illness goes too long undiagnosed or unspoken for, it is more likely to explode, meaning the illness will progress until the person with the illness either kills themselves or somebody else. According to John Snook, "It should horrify but not surprise us that people with untreated mental illness are overrepresented in deadly encounters" (qtd. in Sifferlin). Mental illness is important to talk about and recognize because without treatment it can lead to death.

There is new scientific proof that brain waves can fluctuate and sometimes change the brain entirely in people who are diagnosed

with certain mental illnesses. The different types of brain scans work because the neurons require nutrients, oxygen, and blood sugars. Position emission tomography (PET) scans send radioactive glucose that moves to areas that are more active. This form of scanning shows where the most active parts of our brains are. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), another popular brain scan, focuses on the oxygen in various levels rather than focusing on the radioactive glucose: “MRI scans have provided useful insights about depressive disorders. For example, they were critical in determining that depression is associated with shrinkage of the hippocampus” (Weiten 96). By looking at the brain and which parts are the most and least active, we can track the differences in mental disorders.

Psychology is a science, arranged facts and truths, meaning there is factual proof that mental illness isn't just in your head: “Glial cells may play an important role in mental disorders such as schizophrenia and depression and in neurodegenerative diseases” (Griggs 45). Dysfunction in the cell can be caused by genetic faults. The substantia nigra is the area of the brain that controls movement. Parkinson's can develop when dopamine-generating cells die, because dopamine is a chemical functioning as a neurotransmitter. If the substantia nigra is overactive with dopamine, it can cause hallucinations and delusions relating to schizophrenia.

I was raped in seventh grade, which left me in pieces. I stopped eating; I stopped caring; I stopped being happy. I stopped being me. I was in the darkest place for so long, and it was fucking exhausting. For years, I've had suicidal thoughts because I thought my story didn't matter. I thought I didn't matter. Now I know, of course my story matters and so does everyone else's. No one should have to go through the experience of being told that what they are struggling with isn't real. No one should have to be shut down because others are closedminded. Suicide rates are as high as they are because people believe they are alone in their fights and have no one to talk to. If people deny the existence of mental illness, then it can kill a person's soul, a body and a being. End the stigma. ►►

►► WORKS CITED

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