The boy who didn't cry wolf

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Someone once told me that during his life, Winston Churchill would often refer to his depression as a "black dog" — a vile, loathsome creature that would shadow every decision and thought in his mind. But to me, it was not just a dog, but something more sinister and predatory.

The beast followed me in the same way that a lapdog would follow its master, though there was no doubt of who was in charge. Behind every thought, decision and doubt in my mind, the black dog would be not too far away, waiting for a moment of weakness. Feeding off my shame, regret and self-loathing, its hunger knew no bounds and it could smell the fear that seeped from my skin.

For most of my adolescent years, that's what it was like living with my depression. Every day was a new trial for me to fail and a new reason to undermine my existence. No matter what I did, no matter how hard I worked, I would always come home beaten and shamed. I was constantly making mistakes and no matter how trivial they were, I always punished myself. Every transgression I made was a constant reminder of how worthless I was.

I never felt more alone than I did during those years. While my peers enjoyed themselves by going out, playing sports or singing in musicals, I spent my breaks eating my lunch alone. I always compared myself to them, asking myself why I couldn't be like them. Each time, the conclusion was the same; it was because they were normal and I wasn't. I felt there was something wrong with me, something I couldn't fix. It was a period of time in which I felt my life was spinning out of control and my sanity was slowly unravelling.

The only thing keeping me alive was my desire to do medicine. Even before I met the black dog, becoming a doctor was all I ever wanted. To work in a craft that was centred around people and their ability to care. It was my calling in life and it was something that I needed to do. But most importantly, it allowed me to push past my depression and survive. No matter how hard things got, I had the strength to continue. I wanted desperately to speak to the school counsellor and confide in her all the pain and misery I was feeling. Maybe there was a cure. I owed it to myself to try. But what would happen if people found out that I was seeing her? What if my peers thought I was insane? The disgrace and humiliation I would feel if everyone knew would be too hard for me to handle. No, I decided. It was my burden to bear and no one else needed to find out.

It wasn't long before I tumbled. Months passed, the days became harder for me to bear and my depression deepened. As life continued and my peers moved forward, I was left behind, forgotten. It was as if everyone was in on a big secret that I was not privy to. The cruel isolation wreaked havoc on my self-esteem, pushing me further towards the brink of insanity. As my mind unravelled, my body ached with constant agony.

And then everything became too much. I felt numb and sick at the same time. Waves of nausea, spite and humiliation washed over me as all my mistakes flashed before my eyes. My breathing became laboured and what little tenacity I had left crumbled. I had finally convinced myself that I was a complete and utter failure. I wept. While I sobbed, I wondered what it was like to feel normal and why I lived a cursed life. I pleaded with the Almighty for sweet relief, one way or another. I didn't care anymore, I just wanted out. As the depression took hold, I reached the chasm's edge. One step and I would be committed forever. I asked a God I didn't believe in to give me a break.

> "I felt my life was spinning out of control and my sanity was slowly unravelling"

To this day, I am thankful for what happened next. After I confessed everything to the counsellor, she helped me realise that no matter how alone I felt, I had my family, my friends and the school to stand by me. That this unbearable agony I was feeling was common. That people do care. It was something I needed to hear. I was quickly referred to a psychologist for further treatment and I began acceptance and commitment therapy, where I learnt how to acknowledge my faults and move on with my life. Just sharing my problems with someone else and feeling as if they cared was enough to relieve my grief. The pain and doubt that used to hound my every move had less of an impact now. With each session, I could feel the dog — my dog — being pushed further away until it was out of sight.

During the course of the next few months, I was able to complete my final year and secure an interview for medicine. As the date of my interview approached, I became nervous and anxious but I strengthened my resolve. It was my only chance to rectify what had happened to me and I wasn't going to throw it away. When the day came, I gave it my all. I talked about why I loved medicine and how I couldn't see myself doing anything else. I showed them the passion I had for the profession and the drive necessary to succeed. Afterwards, I was able to rest knowing that I did everything I could. My biggest fight was over.

One month later, I received a call that I had started to believe would never come. I was offered a place to study medicine. It was as if a burden was lifted off my chest. I finally had what I so dearly coveted. It made me realise that anything was possible. That I could live again. Despite being harder than anything I had ever done, studying medicine was the best thing that ever happened to me. I was no longer held back by the expectations that others had of me and was able to become whoever I wanted to be.

That said, I still needed to control my depression. At times, I could feel it edging back into my life and I fought to keep it in check. It was the little things, like new experiences and social pressure, that I struggled with. However, the hardest part was learning about depression at university. Learning about its causes and symptoms made me relive the trauma I went through. But I always remembered what my life was like before medicine, and how grateful I am for my life now.

Despite my terrible ordeals, I feel that my depression has made me more empathetic. As I remember my clinical experience as a patient, I find it easier to understand what the patient is going through. This recognition allows me to identify with the patient and develop rapport. I know that the dog is not gone forever and I still have bad days. But for the first time in my life, I think I can handle it. I am ready for the next step and this time I'm not alone.

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