

2018 International Essay Contest for Young People

[Youth Category – 3rd Prize]

End Mental Illness Stigmas

(Original)

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(Age 22, U.S.A.)

Today, the world is littered with negativity, hate and judgement, specifically within my generation- the millennials. One topic that has so many stigmas attached to it today, and is near to my heart, is mental illnesses. These illnesses are unfortunately very common in people today. In fact, one in five Americans suffer from a form of them every single year, including myself, and that's why I want to make a change.

I was diagnosed with chronic anxiety and panic disorders about five years ago after graduating high school, but unknowingly showed symptoms throughout my entire life. Anxiety and panic disorders effect just about every aspect of a person's body, but mostly target the brain. During my attacks, my breathing becomes compromised, my thoughts increase at the speed of light and all of emotions serge through my body at their extremes. However, I believe that mental illnesses come in different shapes and sizes, causing each "sufferer" to experience their own list of invisible symptoms. I've personally lost friends, relationships, jobs and almost my life due to my illnesses.

It's been a little over a year since my suicide attempt and, although I was able to peel myself from rock bottom, I still struggle every day. My symptoms linger in me constantly, making daily activities and even my job difficult to get through. I recently landed my dream job as a journalist which, ironically enough, also ties into my biggest nightmare, being social. Mental illnesses pump people full of irrational fears like this which makes just about everything a challenge.

I started getting frustrated with the world for not understanding what I was going through. Since my symptoms are invisible and confusing, outsiders or "non-sufferers" weren't taking me seriously when I talked about my situation. I knew what I was going through was very much real and painful but I wasn't getting through to anyone, until I started my blog.

I created my blog in December 2017 and named it Coffee with a Side of Xanax. At first, I was just submitting little stories about a day in the life of a twenty-something anxious

female. Some posts were funny, others were inspirational, but I never knew what was going to come of it. People in my community then began to privately message me and tell me how related to the situations I talked about in my posts. It was then that I realized my writing had become therapeutic, not only for me, but also my peers.

I was first driven to make a bigger impact when I heard that only half of those one in five Americans suffering seek treatment. I immediately thought of three possible reasons why those people weren't looking for solutions or help: they were either uneducated on these specific illnesses and didn't know they were experiencing symptoms; they were embarrassed due to the velocity of stigmas attached to these illnesses or they just didn't have the money to seek correct treatment. My heart sank deeper and deeper into my chest the more I thought about those hopeless, untreated sufferers, so I decided to start the "You Are Not Alone Movement." I wanted to find a way to end stigmas, provide support to those suffering and maybe even save a life or two.

I developed the first phase of the movement in May and called it StruggLetters, which I decided would be anonymous submissions of a daily life struggle or obstacle by someone living with a mental illness. I opened up a post office box in my town and encouraged people to mail in their StruggLetters without a return address, leaving it completely anonymous. I've also set up an anonymous commenting option on my blog for people to submit StruggLetters that way. The next step in this phase includes choosing select letters and posting them to my blog every Sunday with a response from me relating to the specific struggles. My hope is that the people who write letters will see my responses and realize that they aren't alone in their struggles, and that it's okay to not be okay.

So far, I haven't received any letters but hope to change the world, one StruggLetter at a time.