

Wake up. Go to the bathroom. Wash my face. Brush my teeth. Sit at my desk. Turn my mirror to my face. Stare at myself. Stare at the bottle in front of me containing the small white pills that help me get through the day. Open the bottle. Throw the pill back with some water. Look back in the mirror. Give myself a pep talk. Start to conquer the day.

What I just described was my daily morning routine. Every single day I have to take medicine I truly despise and give myself a pep talk, in hopes that on this regular day, my anxiety does not defeat me.

Anxiety has always gripped me by my neck and controlled me in some of the worst ways possible. While my journey with controlling my anxiety has tremendously improved, entering college was a speed bump that I saw coming, but did not know how to slow down for. How college was going to affect my anxiety was only something I could deal with when it came. And boy, did it come.

Anxiety is an umbrella term for the disorder which claims many different forms. There is general anxiety, obsessive compulsive, post-traumatic stress, panic, and social anxiety disorder. While I am diagnosed and treated for general anxiety disorder, I experience social anxiety disorder as well. Social anxiety disorder is a social phobia, which encompasses feelings of inability to interact in social settings-- with people, jobs, and simple everyday tasks such as going to the grocery store-- due to the feeling of being constantly judged, evaluated negatively, or rejected in whatever social setting one encounters.

If it is difficult to even find the ability to go grocery shopping, imagine how strenuous of a task it is to go to the dining hall for food, interact with a roommate, become engaged with extracurricular clubs, attending sporting events, going to office hours to converse with a professor over necessary questions for a final project, going out with friends on the weekend, or even doing the most important task in college: going to class.

All of these events contribute to what makes a college student, a college student. Being a college student with social anxiety can seemingly rip away all what one defines themselves as in an instant, due to their inability to shake the feeling that they will be judged for every small step taken, every miniscule hair out of place, every word mumbled out, or simply just being. Once this identity of a college student is stripped away, it leaves one asking: What even am I?

Social anxiety can cause bridges to be burned between friends, colleagues, and peers. For example, at the beginning of the second semester of my freshman year, I found myself locked away in my room for weekends on end. I avoided any chance that was given to me to go out with friends as I both physically and mentally could not find the strength to leave my room in fear of someone forming a negative opinion of me the first time they saw me, or trying to hold a conversation with me and noticing my nervous ticks of biting my nails, shaky and clammy hands, rocking back and forth, and my biggest insecurity: stuttering. During this time period, I would wake up with nausea and the strong desire to go back to bed with the consequences being missed classes and calling off of work (which only gave more anxiety).

Missed classes means falling behind on content, which means struggling to earn a good grade-- which is especially difficult in an awful state of mental health-- which means possibly failing a class. The failure of a class is not only costly fiscally, but again, mentally as well. This domino effect is so commonly seen with students who struggle with social anxiety.

While my support system was and is extremely strong and understanding, some students do not have the same support I do during these times. Those who do not understand social anxiety do not know how to react to these times of darkness which their loved ones go through, and in turn find themselves giving up on the person, burning bridges that were built over years that seemed to be made of steel.

The inability to show up to work will ultimately and indefinitely lead to being released from the job, leaving one in a financial state of despair. An already broke college student with no more steady source of income? A recipe for added stress and anxiety.

Tackling social anxiety is a task that takes resilience, support, and patience.

I am lucky in the fact that the college I attend has placed a large emphasis on mental health, and offers an amazing counseling center. Many academic institutions do not have this resource, and therefore it is difficult for students to find a support system that will help them. However, there are counseling centers almost everywhere that are willing to be of support to someone. While counseling does not work for everyone, it is a great place to start.

In a world of technology-- especially in college-- I actually found my phone to be a large factor which influenced some of my social anxiety. I took a technology break, which seemed to help my mental health a substantial amount.

Do not be afraid to reach out. Reaching out and social anxiety do not go hand-in-hand. Quite honestly, doing so is the last action one with social anxiety wants to take. However, once the first step of reaching out is taken and conquered, the rest becomes a bit more simple. Whether it be to a doctor, friends, or family, take the first step. As much as the little voice in one's head denies it, people are there to help.

And finally, have faith in oneself and all one can do. Anxiety is only one defining factor of who one is, not who they are.

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