

## Joking about our problems gives us power over them

by Anna in Virginia

What strikes me most about mental illness is that so much of it begins at a young age. I first had symptoms of panic disorder and depression in sixth grade. I didn't ask for help until 11th grade, and I regret spending those five years in fear. My psychiatrist diagnosed me and I began taking an anti-anxiety medication. The only side effects I experienced were tremors.

Every so often I got the urge to stop taking my medication. My panic symptoms would be the first to return, followed by a persistent feeling of enraged irritation. For my sophomore and junior years of college, I didn't take medication, but my symptoms became so aggravated that I began skipping classes. Walking down hallways, going running on trails, being outside of my room were all terrifying and energy-zapping. A therapist put me back on that medication, but my panic attacks persisted. I was then switched to another medication last year and I feel remarkably better. I also used to have an intense phobia of airplanes and have been on two additional medications. They helped greatly and the phobia has gradually decreased.

One of the best things a person can do for their mental health is to laugh. Joking about our problems gives us power over them; not only are we unafraid to speak of them, we recognize that they're not what defines us. In college I joined an improv comedy troupe and I'm only exaggerating a little when I say it saved my life. My two friends and I started a mental health awareness group at our college senior year called Changing Minds. We focused on prevention, recognition, and understanding. Having that exposure to our community did great things for us and the student body. We also published a newsletter that dealt with specific topics such as stress, depression, and signs of illness. Our club president frequently got emails from students thanking her for being brave enough to confront the problems many of us had.

Having mental health issues has made me a different person. Not all of my experiences are negative. I feel much more observant and aware of others now, and also more creative. I'd like to think I'm more interesting than I would be if everything had been easy. When days seem to fly by, I remember how agonizing and lengthy they used to be. With the capacity to feel great pain is also an equal appreciation of joy. Working with your own mental illness will not be easy, but when you reach the point of feeling normal you won't regret it.