Studying and Experiencing Mental Illness

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Key Points

Take care of yourself first and foremost

You are not alone

Mariam Aly is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology at Columbia University. She studies the human mind and brain with a focus on the interplay between attention, perception, and memory. She is passionate about helping students navigate school and life beyond it, with a particular goal of de-stigmatizing mental illness. The story was edited by Emily Sherman.

Can one pinpoint the experiences that ignited a lifelong passion? I can think of several. The earliest was when my mom bought me a book of visual illusions. I was around 6 years old, and I thought it was the most amazing thing in the world. Even if you knew something was an illusion, you couldn't un-see it, no matter how hard you tried. How and why did that happen? Although I didn't know it had a word at the time, that was the start of my passion for psychology.

I continued to explore this interest through middle and high school. In middle school, I did a science project on whether handedness could be predicted from whether someone was more 'right-brained' or 'left-brained'. The answer was no, and since then I've learned that the notion of left-brain/logical and right-brain/creative is misguided anyway. In high school, I took a class called Sociology, Anthropology, and Psychology — but we skipped Psychology. When it was time to apply for college, I was a bit lost: I knew what I was interested in, but had no idea what it was called. 'Psychology' to me, then, was just psychotherapy, and I didn't even bother to read more about the field because of this misconception. So, what did I want? Biology, cognitive science, and neuroscience seemed close enough, and I ended up applying to universities for enrollment in those programs.

I ended up going to the University of Toronto, and enrolled in a psychology class – not because I wanted to, but because it was a requirement for my then-major. After the first class, I was hooked. *This* was what I had been looking for since those early days of gaping at visual illusions. I was confident that psychology was what I wanted to study. I promptly changed my major. My family was quite alarmed at my impulsiveness, and I don't think they recovered until 9 years later, after I had my Ph.D. in psychology. To be fair, most of my family are engineers (including my mom and brother), mathematicians, or medical doctors, so psychology was a bit unexpected.

I am very grateful that my 17-year-old self-made that decision. It was absolutely the right one. I love psychology, and particularly my sub-discipline of cognitive neuroscience. I feel very lucky that I can spend my days thinking about how people think, and studying the most fascinating thing in the universe — the brain. But I say that knowing that things have turned out quite well for me. After a Ph.D. from UC Davis, I conducted postdoctoral work at Princeton University, and am now an Assistant Professor at Columbia University.

I feel very grateful to have found this path. But it hasn't been easy. Academia is incredibly stressful, and I am an anxiety-prone perfectionist who tends to over-work. My work habits were intense in college, and were not sustainable. I was warned repeatedly by family, colleagues, and mentors that I needed to take care of my physical and mental health, but I didn't listen. The result was ever-increasing work, alongside a complete neglect of my physical health and degeneration of my mental well-being. I was perpetually anxious, engaged in very few social activities, and my physical health deteriorated severely. In my first year of graduate school, concerned colleagues anonymously reported me to university health services, and I was required to seek medical attention or be kicked out of graduate school. I finally relented — how could I give up what I was most passionate about? — and sought care. That meant being hospitalized for 6 weeks, and continuing checkups with physicians and therapists for a year after. If I had not gone to the hospital then, I am confident I would have died before my 22nd birthday.

By the way, the irony is not lost on me: despite studying psychology and being very aware of what maladaptive thought patterns and habits can do to people, I let maladaptive thought patterns and habits nearly kill me. That's one lesson: you can't control your mental health. You can't just think yourself out of anxiety, depression, eating disorders, or anything else. People should not be blamed for their mental illnesses.

So, yes, things are good for me now. But it was a hard road to get here. Those 6 weeks in the hospital, and the years that led up to that hospitalization, were the most difficult times of my life. Even now, 10 years after my hospitalization, I am not able to share the full story — only with my best friends and my partner.

After I left the hospital, I developed a renewed focus on my mental and physical well-being. I formed a close social group for the first time in many years — friends who are still some of my closest all these years later. I developed a passion for biking and hiking, and rediscovered my interests in novels and movies. I enforced a no-working-on-weekends rule that I've largely been able to keep with the exception of impending deadlines. Doing all this is not easy: it's easier for me to overwork than to take care of myself, but I'm very grateful to have the attention and encouragement of friends, family, mentors, and my very loving partner, who keep me sane and happy.

Given all this, I have some advice. Take care of yourself first and foremost. When people encourage you to seek help, listen to them. And return the favor: make sure your friends, family, and colleagues are doing ok. Share your struggles: you're not alone, and being open about ups and downs is helpful for

everyone. If you're in a position of power, this is doubly important. Many students struggle with anxiety, depression, or other mental health challenges. Being open about the challenges you have faced will help destigmatize mental illness, and will encourage others to be open about, and seek treatment for, their struggles.

This story wasn't easy for me to share and I'm leaving out the more painful details, but my hope is that sharing it will be helpful to those who are struggling, were struggling, or might struggle in the future. You are not alone. People care about you and want you to do well. Remember that when times get hard. And when times are easy, remember that they might not be easy for other people. Be kind, be patient, and remember that everyone, everywhere is struggling with something.