

The Invisible Pandemic

All rectangles are squares but not all squares are rectangles. Usually, people associate mental illness/health and suicide (or suicidal thoughts) together as if they go hand in hand in all aspects of each other. But it's just like squares and rectangles. Suicide and suicidal thoughts are all results from poor mental health and mental illness. However, not all mental illness or poor mental health results in suicide. This is why I believe that amongst the many negative impacts COVID-19 has had on our society, the one positive outcome to shine through it all is the rapid growth of widespread awareness for mental health.

When the COVID-19 pandemic started its spread in early 2020, a worldwide pandemic had already been in full swing for decades. Mental illness plagues over half of the US population. The CDC tells us that, "More than 50% will be diagnosed with mental illness or disorder at some point in their lifetime" (2007). This statistic was released 15 years ago, which probably means the percentage is even higher now. Half of the time, we don't even know we have it. Depression, Anxiety, OCD, ADHD, etc. manifests itself differently in every person who has it, due to the fact that we are all created uniquely. A majority of mental illness presents itself as small habits and random muscle memory that seem normal. I thought that everyone picked at the skin around their fingernails and shook their feet. I thought it was normal to have difficulty breathing deeply, or breathe in general, at specific times in the day. It's a normal everyday occurrence and I had no idea that it was actually ADHD and Anxiety.

Mental Illness according to the *American Psychiatric Association* is "health conditions involving changes in emotion, thinking or behavior"(Parekh, 2018).

Mental Health according to *Oxford Languages* is "a person's condition with regard to their psychological and emotional well-being".

Whether or not you have a mental illness, mental health is incredibly important for every person, no matter who they are. Prince et al. (2007) state "there can be no health without mental health" . With bad mental health, even bare minimum self-care becomes difficult. When

getting out of bed, eating, and taking showers become hard to complete, physical health starts to decline. Therefore, mental health is vital for each individual's physical health. Since mental illness and health are practically invisible to the eye, it's hard to recognize poor mental health and/or even mental illness. It's even harder to find healthy coping mechanisms for either of the two. Prior to the ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic, mental health in general was very "hush hush" in a sense. Since lockdown and isolation, mental health has come out of its little box. More and more mental health advocates have come out of hiding due to the fact that everyone in general was struggling. Introverts were stuck inside. Those who live off of physical touch were kept away from human touch. Overthinkers and already anxious people were thrown into a growingly skeptical and unprecedented society. Due to all of these circumstances and more, everyone came together, virtually, to show tricks and affirmations they use when "things get bad," so to say. Daily affirmation instagram pages began to pop up. Meditation and breathing apps began to show up as well. All of a sudden mental health was not only talked about, but celebrated.

While the pandemic produced a mental health/illness-safe environment, the isolation created toxic environments for many people. Panchal et al. (2021) share, "during the pandemic, about 4 in 10 adults in the U.S. have reported symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder, a share that has been largely consistent, up from one in ten adults who reported these symptoms from January to June 2019" Later on in the article they compare young adult-reported suicidal thoughts from 2019 with 2020 and the percentage goes from 11% in 2019 to 26% in 2020. However, strangely enough, this does not mean suicide rates went up. According to a vital statistics rapid release from the CDC, "By month, the provisional number of suicides was higher in 2020 than in 2019 in January, February, and November, and lower for all other months" (Curton, Hedegaard, Ahmad, 2021, pg. 2). The pandemic didn't even fully hit until after February, when the rates were higher than the previous year. Therefore, the pandemic caused a rise in mental illness and poor mental health, but suicide rates went down. Now, mental health/illness rapidly gains awareness everyday, even in 2022.

In my introductory paragraph I explained that while all suicides come from mental illness and bad mental health, not all mental illness and bad mental health end in suicide. Here is the proof! The rise in mental illness only raised awareness for those already struggling. A common misconception about mental health and mental illness is that it is not “normal” to feel *that way* or *think* those things. For decades, society has done so well at masking the feelings that everyone feels. So when you think *I'm not enough* or *I'm not worth it*, you think no one feels the way you do. That's what I thought. But it's not true. Your intrusive thoughts are lying.

At the beginning of my sophomore year (2019) I started noticing a difficulty in breathing during my 2nd hour class. It was hard to take in deep breaths. My lungs hurt when I tried to focus on breathing. It suddenly felt like there was no space in my lungs to take in anything. I tried to pinpoint it to something that made me nervous or something that scared me, but nothing was happening at that specific time of the day consistently. It was just history class. I mentioned it to my mom and she said that I was probably just overthinking it and that I was fine. Fast forward to Spring semester 2020, right before Spring Break (AKA when the world shut down), I had my breathing difficulty in a later class and finally realized, with the help of friends that I had confided in, that they were panic attacks. I had undiagnosed anxiety and I had no idea. It wasn't until two or three months later that I finally figured out how to stop my panic attacks. That's the thing; it's different for everyone since we are all created differently. Mental health/illness is difficult. I found that lying on a hard floor, crossing my legs, and holding myself while I focus on lifting my chest up from the ground and then back down helps my breathing return to normal. However, my healthy anxiety coping mechanism turned into an unhealthy depression coping mechanism.

My boyfriend during the pandemic, who was two years older than me, left for college in August and I started my Junior year of highschool. Just like most long distance couples, we broke up soon after he moved. I fell into the deepest depression I had ever been in in my life. I'd never been depressed before and I'd never experienced something that low. The hardest thing I

did all day was get out of bed. I laid on my bathroom floor, where I always calmed my anxiety, and instead refused to move. Everything around me moved slowly and so did I. I was alone with my thoughts every single night and that resulted in self-harm. I couldn't feel. I had always been a very expressive and emotional person, so being numb was new to me. I cut myself every night for a whole week. It was just so easy to do because in all honesty, it didn't even hurt that bad. And if that didn't hurt too much, how bad could ending my life be? I spent that whole week alone in my room thinking about it. As the days went on, the idea seemed to make more and more sense. By the end of that week the weather was getting warmer and I couldn't hide my cuts so I had to force myself to stop. I thought it ended there, but once you start it doesn't go away. Coming back up from depression and self-harm takes time. I gradually started to wake up easier. I slowly learned to be content with myself. I eased myself into being mentally stable. But every time something bad happened or I struggled with something, the urge was there. Everytime I hit a little bit of a low point, the option popped into my head.

Today, life is a joy to live everyday. I have found instagram accounts, apps, and friends who help me when I need it. I use the app "CalmHarm" when I have a hard time breathing and can't lay down, or when I spiral out into overthinking and need to write it out. I have friends who know my triggers and my coping mechanisms and they help me to use them. I am three months free of self-harm as of today and I couldn't be prouder of myself. Mental health is hard to maintain and it's confusing to navigate, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, my resources were readily available to me and I'm so thankful for it. **If I had experienced my low before the pandemic, I firmly believe I would not have been able to pull myself out.** The awareness raised, due to COVID-19, saved my life.

Mental health and mental illness are not something to be quiet about. Mental illness takes lives everyday. It deserves the same attention COVID-19 receives. I believe that amongst the many negative impacts COVID-19 has had on our world, the one positive outcome to shine through it all is the widespread increase of mental health awareness.

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