My Mental Health: An Update

After attending Mental Health America 2019, I took a good look at my own mental health.

July 11, 2019 By Justin Birckbichler

While a clear focus of ABSOT revolves around raising awareness about men's health and testicular cancer, I'm also very passionate about discussing mental health. I've said time and time again how I've experienced depression twice in my life: once in high school and still ongoing since after remission from cancer.

I know I'm not the only cancer survivor experiencing mental health challenges. Since realizing my struggles, I've been pretty open about my mental health journey, writing about asking for help, medication adjustments, and more.

On June 15th, I was able to attend and speak at the Mental Health America 2019 Annual Conference. The theme for this year was "Dueling Diagnoses," and I had the privilege of speaking with Al Levin and Dr. Dakota Rosenfelt, two fellow advocates I met at HealtheVoices.

Al's main area of advocacy is men and depression, while Dr. Dakota and I mainly advocate for other conditions (hemophilia and cancer, respectively). All three of us have gone through depression, with Dr. Dakota and I experiencing it after our primary diagnoses. With this fact in mind, we titled our session "An Indiscriminate Foe: Three Stories of How Depression Can Exist Among Many Different Conditions." Full transparency: Al and Dakota did most of the work and I just sort of looked pretty and made bad ball puns.

Each of us took time to share our personal stories, how it affects our larger health communities, and how we want to break down the stigma surrounding mental health.

Our session seemed well-received but I was more impressed with four other presenters.

During breakfast, motorsports and automotive journalist, Steven Cole Smith, interviewed off-road racer and mental health advocate, Justin Peck. Peck shared his story of attempting suicide, only to be saved by a rare misfire of his gun.

Beyond our shared name and affinity for facial hair, I drew a parallel to our stories as he shared about being mistreated throughout his schooling. I was bullied mercilessly in middle school, but chose not to speak about it for many years. Looking back, I always wonder how it impacted my mental health.

There's another connection between the two Justins. We both see our health challenges as blessings and how the struggles helped us to become the people we are today. Peck summed it up nicely by saying, "The struggle brings character. Without character you're nobody."

Another session led by a brother and sister team was awe-inspiring.

When Hannah Lucas was diagnosed with POTS, a fainting condition, at age 15, she also fell into a deep depression and self-harm. She came up with the idea of an app where she could press a single button on her phone to alert someone that she was in need of assistance.

Her brother, Charlie, took her idea and built the notOK app. They ended up launching the app in January 2018, with over 70,000 users and over 45,000 alerts sent to date. The app is relatively simple to use, but also genius. From the website:

- Register and confirm your email address and cellular number.
- Add up to 5 trusted contacts, using your native address book or manually.
- Your trusted contacts will then either accept or decline the invitation.
- Once your trusted contacts are confirmed, you're all set!
- When you need to reach out for help, simply open the app and tap the large, red notOK Button.
- A message along with your current GPS location will be sent to your contacts that reads: "Hey, I'm not OK! Please call, text, or come find me."
- Update your support crew when you're feeling better by pressing the green button.

While that's amazing, I was more impressed with their transparency "with the people who you are around every single day – including yourself." When asked how she manages to keep going, even at her lowest moments, Hannah eloquently stated, "It's the choices you make in spite of what you're going through."

Finally, over lunch, we listened to one final talk.

Katelyn Ohashi, a world-class gymnast, was interviewed by ESPN's Holly Rowe. While Ohashi is quite literally a perfect ten, she experienced cyber-bullying and weight shaming, which led to mental health struggles. Over time, with the proper level of help and support from her mother, she eventually moved past it. She shares her story, even the embarrassing parts, so that others do not feel alone.

A few of her tips to find self-love include learning "how to be enough by questioning why you would be so terrible to yourself" and "learning to love everything that you think isn't normal." Luckily, those were tips I could reflect on and she didn't insist on me trying to learn to do a split.

As I drove home, I thought about my own mental health.

Sharing my story and being surrounded by mental health advocates made me take a critical look at my own emotional well-being.

While I've been on antidepressants for just over a year and a half, I haven't resumed any sort of therapy, since giving it a half-assed (or half-sacked) shot in April-June 2017. I managed to convince myself that I didn't really need it, but upon reflection I realized I do.

As I shared in late June, I've been experiencing some weird symptoms lately, including excessive sweating, unintended weight loss, and difficulty sleeping. My thyroid and testosterone levels have come back as normal. now I get stuck in that limbo of trying to figure out the reason.

Is it just a side effect of the antidepressants? Caused by stress? A new cancer forming?

While I don't know those answers yet, what I do know is that I don't have the ability to handle my feelings by myself. Paired with some other challenges in my personal life, I've decided to start going to therapy again in mid-July.

Why didn't I start immediately? My biggest complaint with my last therapist was that I couldn't connect with her. This time, I looked a male therapist who specializes in men's issues, anxiety, and depression. When I gave him a call a few days after the conference, he said he was going to be out town until July 8th.

I decided I was not in an immediate crisis and called him back a few days later to leave a message. I said I wanted to begin regular mental health sessions to unpack a lot of feelings about cancer, life, and other topics that I've just never fully worked through.

So this entire post is a very roundabout way of saying I can do better.

While I've been publicly open about my mental health challenges, I need to start taking better care of myself on a personal level. As a cancer survivor, someone who has gone through depression twice, and as a human, I know my mental health and overall mood is going to ebb and flow, but I want to do what I can to make sure I'm heading in the right direction.

By writing down a concrete timeframe (my first appointment is next week), I'm hoping that it holds me accountable to the world… aka the three people who read this blog. Hi mom!

To the conference organizers, speakers, and audience members of Mental Health America 2019, thank you. Though this reflection is about a month overdue, it needed to be said. Not only was it a great conference, but it was also exactly the day I needed to realize what I truly need to support myself.

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