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# INSIDE MY HEAD AND SPOKEN OUT LOUD: A RECKONING WITH SOCIAL ANXIETY

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My social anxiety played me like a deceitful little game, except I spent the last 15 years pretending like I wasn't on the court. The painful shyness I faced as a child, my inability to smile at any adults except my parents until the age of eight, the meeting with my fourth-grade teacher that my concerned mother sat through, afraid her daughter wasn't voicing her needs; it's always been you, dear social anxiety. Conviction in middle school that my friends didn't care about having me around; that was you, too, wasn't it? And you pushed it. You pushed and pushed with such excruciating force until that stupid conviction became my reality; as did tears, insecurity, and the lack of reassurance I desperately needed. In high school you hid behind black skinny jeans, punk rock band t-shirts, and an eating disorder that wasn't glamorous like they show in the movies. You danced around obsession, meticulous numbers, and crippling self-judgment. This is the reality for millions more, and they are being ignored.

What if our society ignored the number of people who suffered from cancer each year? What if we claimed that cancer wasn't real and its effect on lives was simply a conjugation of one's imagination? If we stigmatized any form of this illness, how would it impact those 15 million Americans who live with it? How would it make them feel? We don't ignore those battling a physical illness because it's easy to see how the disorder manifests itself, yet mental health poses a more complicated threat.

The number of people who live with cancer every year is equivalent to the number of North Americans who live with social anxiety. That's roughly 7 percent of our continent's population. The disorder possesses even more prevalence among teenagers and college students. It is estimated that roughly 10 percent of college students suffer from significant social anxiety disorder, while anxiety as a whole affects an astounding 25 percent of teenagers. So why is it that the second most commonly diagnosed form of anxiety disorder is also so commonly overlooked? It's challenging enough to live with a mental illness, but overcoming the reputation thrown on top of that struggle is an entirely new obstacle to overcome.

The reputation American society has so carelessly placed upon those struggling with mental illness, in particular social anxiety, is rooted in insensitivity and continuous judgment. The ignorance that drives this stigma not only discourages people from seeking help but attempts to convince them they have no problem to begin with. The pressure to break out of the shyness and nervousness becomes debilitating. When someone is repeatedly told their struggles don't exist or their social awkwardness is just something they need to suck up and get over, we begin to believe it. I know I did.

People encourage teenagers to question, except my social anxiety made me question all the wrong things. I questioned the value of my curvy physique. I questioned my ability to be alone for hours at a time and not crave any verbal exchange. I questioned why people assumed I was so shy when I didn't raise my hand in class, even though I always knew I had something to offer. At the time, I didn't know what kept restricting me. I had the audacity to question why everyone I knew was making friends at college, and why mine kicked me out of their roommate pool instead.

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My first semester drained me. The pressure of constant socialization and having to present my best, bubbly, and agreeable self to everyone I confronted took a toll on my mental health. If I were anything but outgoing and always eager to go out on a weeknight, I was afraid my worst internal fear would come true—people would only pretend to be my friend because they felt a sense of pity towards me. I spend an exorbitant amount of energy and time rehearsing what tone I would use to respond to my name during attendance or considering which shoes would make the least noise when I walked into a 300-student lecture. One night my roommate asked me to make a phone call to the residence hall janitor because our window was jammed. I knew exactly the look I shot her, the one brimming with such nerves and astonishment that makes someone wonder if they've suddenly sprouted a second head. She stared back at me quizzically and within seconds quickly muttered, "Never mind, I'll do it." The conversation ended abruptly. Why couldn't I do it? Social anxiety, my conclusion was you.

Now you've wrapped yourself around my mind and have chosen to stay. Things make sense now: why I overthink the most basic social interactions, why I can't present a decently accurate first impression no matter how hard I try, and why making friends is a hurdle I never fail to trip over. I need constant reassurance from the people in my life that I matter to them, that they want me to be there, and I haven't just shoved my way in. I understand now that you are the driving force behind that heavy weight of insecurity, and, don't worry, you haven't fallen short of making it known to me throughout my first year of college. But in case you interpret this differently, I want you to know that I am not afraid of you. Coming to college has given me the courage to speak openly about the daily challenges you so lovingly provide. Because of you, I have discovered my passion of advocating for mental health awareness. I have overcome that eating disorder. I have made a friend or two, and I'm working on making some more. Thank you for being a constant in my life, my dear social anxiety. Yes, you might be a piece of me, but a definition of me? You are so painfully mistaken.