

Thank you for hearing our stories today. I'm Kai Widman. As I was reflecting on my illness for this presentation, I realized that anytime I attempt to recall some of what I've endured in the past, I find myself surprised at how bad it really was. I can sympathize with my past-self, but empathizing is a harder task. I'll be able to share a story that will hopefully be impactful, but assume that this version is censored by my subconscious. And, if any bits sound "overly-descriptive" it's because I'm borrowing from a college application essay I wrote a while back.

Lying flat on the cold tile floor, head sharply angled against the base of the kitchen cupboards, my mind stuck in a limbo between delirium and lucidity, my body spasmed. With each rhythmic convulsion, my head pounded into the cabinets, my neck becoming increasingly kinked with each displacement. After some time, my mother walked into the room, carrying a bag of groceries. Through an immobile jaw, a weak utterance of the word, "Help," began to squeeze through my clenched teeth.

Just minutes before this ordeal, I had been preparing lunch for myself when I reached to remove my kitten from the countertop. As I dropped her onto the floor, her paws reached up to grab my hand, leaving a minor cut across the backs of my fingers. An event that, even then, I admit shouldn't have been too much an issue. Walking over to the sink to clean my hands, I immediately realized I was in trouble. As a wave of adrenaline swept through my veins, my thoughts became erratic as a feeling of aimless rage overwhelmed me. As anger turned to panic, I fell to the cold tile, my head sharply angled against the wooden cupboards.

Things are quite difficult when life consists of explanation after explanation. I am an incredibly ambitious, capable individual. But when mind and body are locked, oscillating between non-function and dysfunction, an explanation is required. Explanations to doctors, counselors, teachers, school administrators, coaches, and bosses. When the explanation isn't understood by anyone, everything is all the more troublesome.

My story began on a spring evening at the age of twelve. As I sat on my deck, overlooking the pond behind my house, thoughts of suicide began to creep into my consciousness. Aware of my thoughts, I began to attempt to identify the reason for my unwanted temptation, to no avail. Shortly after, I talked with my dad, who caringly helped me deliberate my thoughts. Three days later, I was on anti-depressants.

After a collective two years of missed school, many unhelpful psychologists and psychiatrists, and two mental health institution stays later, I spiraled slowly, deeper into all-enveloping darkness. Many times per day, I would have episodes – episodes consisting of any or all of: intense, uncontrollable rage, suicidality, paralysis, convulsions, psychosis, mania, panic attacks, and pure mental anguish. During these episodes, I maintained consciousness, but lacked all control. I sat chained to the passenger seat of the vehicle that was my brain. I spent collective days of my life pinned to the ground by my parents and siblings, for if left unrestrained, I'd sprint to the kitchen to find a knife. The distraught looks on their faces is something I remember now, but at the time, I had no room left in my screaming brain to feel sorrow. But my pain, in a very real way, was their pain too.

During these episodes, I longed for death. A barrage of intrusive thoughts and internal chaos became captor of my conscious mind. In response to the torture, I would scream, I would writhe, I would cry. I would punch. I would pray for death. But, my tribulation would not cease on my own accord. Time served as my only remedy. I was capable only of hunkering down. Wallowing, I desperately waited for the cerebral thunder to subside. Although peace evaded me continuously, the calm between the storms came in the form of deep depression and extreme lethargy. Every waking moment that my mind allowed me to think was spent wishing I wasn't alive. Nothing was interesting, nothing was enjoyable; all I had were mere distractions. Things to attempt to keep my mind at bay while I waited to go back to sleep. This was all I knew, for 5 relentless years.

In the same way that time was the only thing that helped in the short-term, time was also the biggest factor bringing improvement in the long-term. Now, stability and strength are increasingly present. Each day, I find I am farther along the asymptotic curve to normalcy. To give a taste of my current symptoms as an encephalitis patient, I still deal with severe intermittent depression, bouts of intense suicidality, and occasional panic attacks. And let me tell you, as bad as that sounds, my life now is a cake-walk compared to what I've been through. Thankfully however, now these events are isolated enough to allow me to lead a successful, and relatively normal life, at least on the outside. I've completed a software engineering internship and have another lined up for this summer, I play disc golf for the KU sports club, I've made friends through sports, and I even had a 10-month relationship with a girl. This immense but incremental progress over the years is owed entirely to the fervent care and love of my two parents. Without their fight, without their determination to finally find a doctor that had any chance of helping me, like Dr. Cooperstock, I can say without a doubt, I would not be standing here today.