

The hardest moment of my life was asking for help when I needed it most. On October 19th, 2018, I was hospitalized for three days due to a psychiatric emergency. Those three days were the most difficult three days of my life. I showered with dish soap, had to give daily blood samples at four in the morning, and was only allowed to talk to my family once a day. However as bad as my time was there, I don't think I would be standing here today if I hadn't asked to be held in a hospital that day. I remember being visited by my father while in the psychiatric ward.

"We're fighters," he said through his heavy accent. "Our family has always fought and fought and fought. You are an Oliveira, so you'll have to fight too." However what he didn't understand was that I was fighting. I hadn't given up, I hadn't chosen to overdose. I was fighting just like he had fought to have a better life for himself. My father left home, university, and a family behind when he moved to America. For twelve years, he dealt with homesickness, depression, severe anxiety of deportation, and poor living conditions. The fear of us going through the same harsh trials led him to push me and my siblings to be nothing less than perfect, and if we we couldn't do that we weren't working hard enough.

I pushed myself to be perfect and for years I felt like I was. I was a 4.0 student throughout middle school, was the top of my class, and had swam competitively for years. I applied to Gretchen Whitney High School, the number one high school in California, and was accepted. Then everything began to crash. I was surrounded by students who prided themselves on being perfect. I couldn't keep up with the curriculum and stopped swimming. Above all, the standard of perfect that my father and I held myself to began to slip through my fingers like sand.

I felt like a disappointment and incompetent compared to my peers. Within two years of high school I was diagnosed with depression and anxiety. That summer, while my peers were out doing internships and preparing for the SAT, I lived in my bedroom and lost a considerable amount of weight. I soon found myself without friends because they had decided I was “too pathetic” to be friends with anymore. I sunk deeper into my depression and truly believed that by ending my life, the world would be better off.

Being in the hospital taught me lessons that I would never be able to learn anywhere else. In those three days I attended every group lesson, participated in every activity, and even managed to swallow down some of the hospital food. I was eventually given the honor of being “the most responsible patient” they had ever had. Before I left, the nurses had me promise them that I wouldn’t be back, a promise I’ve kept. I came out of the hospital with a positive outlook on life and a desire to live again.

It’s been six months since I was hospitalized, but I’m still on the road to getting better. I started taking my medications regularly, began attending therapy sessions, and was even homeschooled for a bit in hopes that I would be able to recover if I had some time away from school. Although I’m not in the same place I was six months ago, I still have a long way to go. I feel that we could always do something to help and improve our mental health, myself included. I’m in a place where I can attend school and be productive. I can push myself to finish assignments without the pressure of every assignment needing to be totally perfect. Most importantly, I’m okay with who I am. I don’t have to be the perfect 4.0 student-athlete. I can just be me; all I want to be is me.

As hard and frustrating as my quest to find happiness has been, I'm thankful for every moment of it. As I've encountered others going through the same struggles as me, I've realized that I can use my voice and my story to empower others. If I break away from the stigma that surrounds mental health, I can help others break away and realize that not everyone is okay 24 hours of the day. If I can help just one person realize their importance to the world, maybe they'll go on to help someone else.

However, I want to spread this ability to empower others through story to other parts of life. I want to empower women to fight for equality. As president of my Girl Up Club, I have the chance to do that. This year I have already planned women's marches, feminists conferences, and donation events for domestic violence victims. There's still so much to do before we're equal, but I'm ready for that challenge. All that's left is motivating and empowering others to be ready for that challenge as well.