

BEFORE

Life can change in an instant. Mine did, and prior to that first club meeting, no one in the room knew my secret, nor would anyone have suspected the outgoing guy with the tendency to swing between the conversational pillars of football and music had not only been traumatized by witnessing a close family member's struggle with mental illness, but also had channeled the event into a catalyst for action. That tuesday afternoon, as I stood before ten uneasy peers, I began. "Welcome, Everyone. Welcome to the first meeting of the Mind Matters Club." I looked at the people my pitch for the newest extracurricular group at school had brought together which included a wide variety of the student body from varying grades. There sat the quarterback of the football player, an artist, a baseball player, the best student, the math whiz. Despite these seemingly polarizing differences, all of these students joined together in this room with the one connection that to some extent they had experienced or witnessed mental illness.

I, myself, had witnessed catatonia and hopelessness, vacant eyes that had incited raw fear so profound that others, who did not share similar experiences, I thought would never understand. But here, in that room, all of us shared the mantle of turmoil, isolation, and stigma. And now, within the confines of those four walls, we would find belonging, acceptance, and empathetic understanding. What began as avenue for mental health education, morphed into a symbol and face of this issue. Simply by standing by this issue, I had a tremendous amount of people share their experience with mental illness and commend me for the job that I am doing. Despite not having formal story telling sessions, many of the club members, students and faculty alike, opened up to me and other members about their personal experiences. These stories and experiences only inspired me to reach and impact more people.

Along my journey, I was inspired to meet Dr. Jeremy Richman, a neurologist who lost his daughter in the Sandy Hook shooting. After the unspeakable tragedy, Jeremy and his wife started an organization in an effort to use their backgrounds in science to prevent such a tragedy from reoccurring by better understanding mental health. When I first met him, my immediate response after hearing his story was to say, "I can't even imagine what you have gone through." However, Jeremy pointed out that in saying that, I am internalizing and sharing his experience for the quickest

AFTER

Life can change in an instant. Mine did, and prior to that afternoon, no one in the room knew I not only had survived a traumatic event, but also that I had transitioned from childhood into adulthood in less than twenty critical minutes. Standing before them, I surveyed the faces of the peers who had responded to my pitch for a somewhat unconventional extracurricular group. In all likelihood, the popular football player; the burgeoning artist; the school's baseball star; the acknowledged best student, and the math whiz also had a secret. Like me, they either had experienced, or witnessed how mental illness can affect a family touched by its uncompromising presence. No doubt they also knew how to keep the mantle of turmoil, isolation, and stigma hidden beneath their outer garments and public facade. Finally, within the confines of a classroom's four walls, I hoped we all would find belonging, acceptance, and empathetic understanding. Welcome, everyone," I began. "Welcome to the first meeting of the Mind Matters club."

As a survivor of almost insurmountable fear that accompanied my inability to comprehend the crisis I witnessed, I knew that only those who shared similar experiences would understand what I had overcome. Because of an unanticipated side effect to a newly prescribed medication, someone I love dearly could not move her body. Thrust into an unexpected emergency, I had no choice but to take charge. Secure in the knowledge that help would arrive shortly, I carried her to a safe place but had to leave her alone so that I could catch my school bus. The sense of security I had always taken for granted shattered in moments, and during the half-hour ride to school, I wondered whether I would ever recapture my former innocence. Haunted by the scene, shame overcame me, but I believed I could not tell anyone what had happened because no one would understand.

During the following months, as I processed my experience, I thought about my classmates and whether anyone might relate to my situation. Soon the idea to form Mind Matters began to take shape, and one of my family's guiding principles prompted me to take action. "Being aware is halfway there," resonated inside me, and I knew I wanted to provide awareness to my peers.

As founder and leader of the group, I search for speakers who epitomize the truth that no one needs to suffer in silence. When I

experience. So while in fact, I CAN imagine and since I can, I was inspired to help the cause for good. (empathetic understanding leading to action) Jeremy embodied the polar opposite of one of the main effects of mental illness: that it takes away one's vitality, the human response that keeps us going when we reach the bottom. While Jeremy stood on the edge of defeat, he stared down the barrel of the gun and ran towards it full speed. In the process, he has touched so many through both his story and his commitment to make a difference in this field.

After one of Jeremy's presentation about a wide variety of mental illnesses, he recommended that we find a relative stranger in that room of 30 and go to a quiet place to discuss our thoughts. I spoke with a college student named Akeel from College Park, MD. Early on in our conversation, not knowing my involvement in the field, he admitted that he has struggled personally with mental illness. Along with the condition, he experienced personal upheaval in that he felt that no one understood his plight. Even his mother told him that he did not need any medication - which he considered a life saver - to help him fight his condition. She rationed that if he became a more pious christian, the lord would reward him with better mental health. Akeel explained, also, that he was personally moved by Jeremy's presentation in that not only he heard the words but he was listening to sentiments behind them. He felt that Jeremy understands mental illness, the feelings of isolation, the stigma, its faceless nature. In that moment, I had an even deeper clarity of why my self-help groups works. For the case of the club, all the individuals involved were always listening in addition to hearing to the articulate words, deep sentiments, distressed feelings in the stories of the other members. The bond created from this sacred process of sharing stories and reciprocating by truly listening created a community unity that brought everyone together. Not only does everyone in my club understand have some experience with mental illness, big or small, but they have experienced for a split second, the experience of others. While such experiences never go away, community unity significantly makes it easier to continue on, even when we are at our lowest. Even I still feel the effects of my experience, but I have created an environment of support to keep trudging along/ fighting on. No matter where I go in my life, including a college campus, I will remember this event in my life and my subsequent response as proof that I can have the attitude to come back from adversity that comes my way.

learned about Dr. Jeremy Richman, a neurologist whose daughter died in the Sandy Hook shooting, I and the members of my committee invited him to share his story at a school-wide assembly. His tragedy did not rob him of his vitality, for in response to his grief, Dr. Richman established the Avielle Foundation, an organization that reports scientific research and spreads awareness not only about mental illness, but also about its corollary: brain health. I know all too well how the faceless nature of mental illness can destroy a person, and like Dr. Richman, when confronted with the need to heal from personal trauma, I did not remain passive.

Unexpectedly, the club I once envisioned as an educational forum for teaching people about mental health soon evolved into both a symbol and face of the issue at school. At the same time, I gained clarity into the reasons my unintended self-help group continues to attract new members. While listening and responding to others' suffering, we also learn about their coping mechanisms, and the bonds among us strengthen. Although the horror of our worst scenes never goes away, the unity created within our community dissipates their power.

Although personal experience precipitated the founding of Mind Matters, I learned I respond fervently to a perceived need. Now, and at college, I plan to continue as an advocate for mental health and hope to earn and maintain a reputation on and off campus as a knowledgeable and approachable resource.