



Finding a path to mental wellness

by Jasmine Fisher

Destructive coping mechanisms became an endless and vicious cycle

Mental health has been a long and complicated road for me since the death of my brother, Micheal, in January of 2006. When I was growing up, mental health wasn't something that was talked about openly or discussed with children, and so when I lost my brother at age 13 I wasn't equipped with the coping mechanisms or tools that might have helped me avoid a lot of pain and confusion.

I was going through puberty, transitioning into high school, and dealing both with the grief of losing Micheal and a developing case of generalized anxiety. I was told over and over again to be strong, to keep my chin up, and to take care of my mother. All this experience within the first few months of living without my brother showed me one thing – to a lot of people, strength is associated with stoicism. Putting on a brave face and not outwardly showing emotions were applauded, and being vulnerable meant being weak. If I had felt comfortable venting my emotions and hadn't been expected to take care of others while still intensely grieving, things might have been different for me. Instead, I turned any grief and sadness into anger and frustration, most often directed at myself and only expressed while alone. I felt constant anxiety that I was going to lose someone else. My emotions were pent up to a boiling point, until I was overcome with feelings that I didn't know how to sort through. This, of course, was on top of the turmoil of just being a teenager.

I felt overwhelmed during these years, and I turned to unhealthy methods just to feel in control again. I tried to control my weight through unhealthy eating habits, and I practiced frequent self-harm.

For a few years, it was the only way that I felt I could keep things “under control” – when I felt unmanageable emotional pain or anxiety, I would cut or burn myself in inconspicuous areas and the physical pain would distract me. Having something concrete and physical to focus on took my mind away from thinking about Micheal, or from how I felt sidelined and horribly alone in the face of my mother's grief for her child. It came to a point where any time I felt a negative emotion, I had the overwhelming urge to cause myself physical pain, and felt instant relief when I did so. It kept me from turning to the more common addiction of substance abuse in my teen years, but it was still a destructive and dangerous coping mechanism. I tried different methods for more and more pain to block out the anger and sadness that I felt at myself for feeling weak due to grief, and it became an endless and vicious cycle that left me with many physical and emotional scars.

What finally broke this cycle was the pain that it caused others in my life. Eventually my close friends and family realized how much pain I was in, and they encouraged me (and sometimes pushed me) to find other methods. I went to group therapy with other teenagers who had been through similar experiences, with whom I could share my thoughts without feeling weak. I learned ways to cope both with the urges to self-harm and the feelings that drove me to do it in the first place. I spent more time with people who were patient with me and understood that grieving openly is natural and healthy. I try to talk openly about my experience and destigmatize mental health, and I work with Threads of Life as a volunteer family guide and speaker to try to help young people dealing with loss avoid the same mistakes that I made. I still struggle daily with my mental health and coping methods to manage my grief and generalized anxiety, but now I have the knowledge that soldiering through alone isn't the strong thing to do. In my experience, the strong thing to do is to grieve fully, be mindful of the mental health of yourself and the people around you, acknowledge any need for outside help, and surround yourself with people who feel the same way.