

## “How I Stopped Hating Myself”

I don't quite know when it began. My hating myself, I mean. I only know when I realized that something was wrong. It was a beautiful July day. I was enjoying one of my favorite pastimes, watching television — then like a bolt of lightning — strong, intense sensations of sadness and hopelessness, accompanied by a painful, nauseating feeling in the pit of my stomach, spread through my body like red through a ripening tomato. There was no preamble or introduction. There were no traumatic events or abrupt changes in my life. In fact, I started that summer with a free trip to California, sponsored by one of my university's alumni. Things were great, or so I thought.

I went through the rest of the month on autopilot, but the days did not pass smoothly. I was a zombie, sullenly and aimlessly skulking about the house, going through the motions. There was a storm of negative thoughts always looming over me. Sometimes the clouds would part a little to let tiny fractions of my normal, happy self shine through. But by the time I felt the sunlight, the clouds had snuffed out the light. I would wake up and try my best to continue as normal, hoping to snap myself out of the funk I was in. I tried watching television, nothing serious or “heavy,” mostly comedy; however, the jokes were no longer funny. I tried listening to music, but the intricate, light melody was monotonous, and the dynamic, heart-pounding bass was just a hollow thud. I hoped to blot out the darkness by letting in the glorious summer sunlight, but no matter how many blinds I opened, the room was never bright enough. I tried to sleep the days away, only to be awakened every few minutes later by a gnawing in my stomach. Nothing worked. I would often lie awake in the dark and pray for the days to pass swiftly, so that I could go back to school. Maybe it would help being around people or keeping busy. I would also pray to God to give me an answer, and I would wait until I was alone or in darkness to cry because then no one could see me cry. Men, after all, shouldn't cry.

During this time, I did not venture far from home. But when I did, I made sure to conjure up some semblance of a smile and say all the typical things people say when they are supposedly happy. Surprisingly, people didn't need much convincing. I wonder now if they didn't even notice my melancholy since I naturally have a sad face. Or was I wearing my mask so convincingly? I don't know which answer I would prefer. It was easy to fool those outside my home, but it would be hard to fool those closer to me, like my mother. Luckily, my mom was out and about most of the day, so I only had to pretend for short periods of time. She was the last person I wanted to find out about whatever this was that I was experiencing. Not because I feared her reaction or anything, but because I feared for her. That's the funny thing about young black men and their single mothers. Each feels the need to protect the other. My mom has often called me her “rock,” so I needed to be strong for her.

For three months I suffered in silence. I didn't quite know what to make of my current state, and I didn't know what to call it. Was it simply sadness? I needed an answer, so I called a friend who works as a counselor to ask her what she thought the problem could be. She told me that I would need to see a counselor, but it sounded like I could have a form of depression. I ignorantly thought: depression, that's a white people's disease. We both laughed a little, and she explained that it's more common in the African American community than I think, but many African Americans like me don't seek help because they believe help doesn't exist except for white people. I told her that I don't know where the feeling came from; I have always been “happy.” My friend told me that I was not addressing

an issue, which was just now bubbling to the surface. If I truly wanted to heal, she said, I would have to figure out the problem and discover its roots.

I began to sift through my life. The more I dug, the more I uncovered. Then it became so clear to me why I hate taking pictures, why I avoid mirrors, why I don't talk to people. I hated myself. I didn't have to think much about where my fears had come from. I knew the answer. In middle and high school, I was taunted for being different. I was told that I was ugly, that I was nerdy, that I didn't act black, that I sounded like Steve Urkel, and that my younger brother was more handsome than I. Long before I could interpret my own reflection, an interpretation had been given to me by others. I wish I could say that the taunting did not affect me because I would love for that to be true. However, I spent much of high school in isolation, and the more taunting I received, the smaller I shrank, and the more I started to "shy" away from group interaction.

I did as I have always done in stressful situations; I turned to television as an escape. I became so absorbed in fiction that my family worried about me. My great aunt would often say, "You too young to be in the house all day watching television." As much as I wanted to explain to her why I was the way I was, I could not bring myself to say that I hated so much that I feared others would reject me. Besides, I didn't know that it was a fear of rejection that left me more comfortable alone than around others. I never thought I was intentionally wasting my life away because I was afraid of living. Looking back, I wish someone would have intervened and offered me some sort of help.

The more my confidence shrank, the more my grades dropped. I told myself that college would be different, but as I am sure you have already guessed, it wasn't. I packed my baggage from high school and brought it with me to college.

For the first two years of college, I tried to "shy" away from anything that required me to get out of my comfort zone. I refused to ask for help, that is, until things got so overwhelming that I had to take a step back and do damage control. The weight of my issues became so burdensome that the mask, which had been so effective at hiding my true feelings, was no longer convincing.

It's kind of strange how my mom became aware of my condition. We were both folding clothes. I tried, with all my might, to go on as usual. But, as my mom droned on, one tear slid down my cheek like that first raindrop falling before a downpour. Soon tears fell so rapidly that I could not hide them or divert her attention. My mom looked at me as only a mother can and said, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I replied, stifling a sob.

"Something's wrong," she retorted, "I've never seen you like this."

Seeing no need to lie anymore, I explained everything. We sat and talked for a minute until she got up and called the entire family over. I didn't know what was going to happen when my family arrived. I thought they would haul the Reverend to the house to perform a séance or an exorcism, but they just sat and talked to me.

For a long time I tried to just power through the depression, not telling anyone what I was going through. I tried to pray it away. I even refused to say the word "depression"

because I didn't want to be labeled. But I realized that it was too much for me to handle alone, so I went to the campus infirmary where I attempted to see a counselor. I completed an intake form and was told I would receive a call. I did not. I made a second attempt to see a counselor when I was at a low point, but I was informed that all counselors had left for the day. After that attempt, I turned to family, friends, mentors, and spiritual leaders. They all gave me great support and helped me deal with the issues that were causing my depression.

While I must admit that I still have some sad days, I am learning to talk about my issues and take it one day at a time. I have also talked to a campus counselor who explained the miscommunication problem that had prevented my follow-up session, and she encouraged me to contact her if I have issues that I need to discuss. I am planning to take her up on that offer, if needed.

Things are slowly beginning to change. I've started to heal. I joined some university clubs to help get me out of my comfort zone. I discovered TRIO Student Support Services, which helped me regain control of my academic life and gave me strategies to help manage future stress and obstacles. With some time and the help of TRIO, I successfully repaired my grades and got myself back on track. The folks at TRIO asked me to be a peer mentor. I was hesitant at first. I did not believe I was the person to help other students. But several of my friends convinced me that I had helped them when they made the kind of mistakes I made academically. According to them I was already a mentor, so I accepted the offer.

Following my success as a peer mentor, I was recommended by my English professor for a job as a writing tutor. She said that I had good oral and written communication skills, and she believed that helping others improve their writing would benefit both me and my peers. I wanted to continue pushing myself, so I decided to join some clubs. Since I have always had an interest in research, I joined the Behavioral Research Group, an organization that gives students the opportunity to conduct and present research. My first year in the group, we replicated the now infamous "doll study" used during school desegregation cases, and I was appointed historian because the advisor of the group thought I had keen abilities in research. I also helped write the research paper that won first place at my university's 35<sup>th</sup> Annual Social Sciences colloquium and 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Research Day. My success conducting research motivated me to take it further, so I came up with my own study, and I again took home top prizes for my research on colorism this year. This summer I also presented at a national conference in Atlanta.

Sometimes I still find those old issues related to my depression creeping up on me. I still cringe at the sight of my reflection. I still sometimes find myself mumbling because, subconsciously, I don't want others to hear my voice. However, I know that I have a wonderful support system around me, and I lean on them in my times of need. Also, I know that suppressing these issues is not the answer. I am now at a point in my healing that I am able to talk about my depression and call it by name, hence, my sharing this memoir. I would encourage anyone who has experienced what I have to not be afraid to get help and talk to someone. No matter how heavy your burdens are, or how insurmountable your obstacles may seem, it is easier when you have loved ones to help shoulder those burdens and clear those obstacles.