

The first day of spring term 2011, I left the university and rode on a standing-room-only bus wearing uncomfortable shoes and feeling overheated. With one hand I managed to text my friend Sarah, telling her I might need to get off the bus and have her pick me up. My chest felt wrapped with a large band being tightened by a vice. Air would not enter my lungs and I wondered if I would pass out. It seemed a large object was sitting on me, crushing me, and the longer I felt that way, the more worried I became. Sarah told me I would be okay and to take slow breaths and focus on everything being fine. She'd walked me through this before. I wasn't ill, I wasn't having a heart or asthma problem—I was having a panic attack.

Anxiety is the most prevalent mental illness in the United States, affecting more than 40 million people and costing upwards of \$42 billion a year in medical costs. There are many variations of anxiety disorders: generalized anxiety, social anxiety, post-traumatic stress, obsessive-compulsive disorder, panic disorders and phobias. Most affect women more than men, with the exception of social anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorders, which affect both genders equally.

I have general anxiety and occasional panic disorder when under a tremendous amount of stress. I experience muscle tension, fatigue, restlessness, difficulty sleeping, irritability, edginess and gastrointestinal discomfort. These symptoms may come and go or contin-

Driven By Anxiety



living out loud

BY KATHRYN MARTINI

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ue for long periods of time. My anxiety is like an annoying relative—part of my life but not someone I'm ever happy to see. I frequently wake up in the middle of the night, plagued by fear or situations real or imagined. I worry about money, deadlines and homework assignments. I obsess over my current annoyance or what I would do if my partner were killed in a car accident or left me for another woman. A tape in my head loops around and around, adding increasingly dreadful details and images until I get out of bed and do something to redirect my thoughts. As much as I would like to make the tape stop on my own, I can't. I try to tell myself to relax, but

my body continues to tense to the point where I'm clenching my jaw and digging my nails into my palms. I change positions and try to comfort myself but I can't stop the thoughts, however irrational.

It took me many years to realize that I had a physical condition, and I often turned to unhealthy ways to cope with my symptoms. After my third baby, I suffered from postpartum depression and went on medication—the first time I coped effectively. Looking back, I realize that anxiety has been a part of my life for a very long time. Although there is no known cause, I believe I come by it naturally; both of my parents suffer from forms of anxiety, as did both of their mothers, and I've already noticed symptoms in my daughters.

Anxiety is not something a mere blood test or scan can diagnose—it's something that is difficult to understand and even more difficult to recognize without insight and help from a medical professional. A diabetic can't control his blood sugar simply by willing it; a person with a heart condition can't talk herself through lowering her blood pressure; and I can't just stop my thoughts. I can't "snap out

of it" or choose not to be this way. It's no different than any other chronic malady—mine is just in my brain.

My anxiety has both negative and positive consequences and, in order to cope with this chaos in my life, I have to focus on its positive aspects and give it credit for helping me to achieve. Sometimes I capitalize on my periods of anxiety and use them to complete tasks, taking on projects or making long mental lists of things to do, allowing my anxiety to drive me. I fear that without something tangible to focus on, my anxiety will consume me. I know that in many ways it has shaped my personality and who I am in the world. I must believe it has brought me closer to my goals and let me experience life in ways I otherwise would not have been driven to. There must be something good about it.

I don't know if I will ever have the calm life I wonder about. It's possible that when my children are grown, I'll have much less going on and fewer episodes of panic and sleepless nights. It's also possible they will get worse. At this point, I can only accept the condition as a part of me and continue to use the tools I have to deal with it. I must push through the difficult times and pause to appreciate the quiet and beautiful moments. It is drawing on that peace that helps me along. ☐

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