

UNVEILED

LIFE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS #1

If you would have walked into my twelfth grade classroom and been told to pick the student most likely to end up with mental illness, I would have been your last choice.

As a child growing up in a small out-of-town Jewish community, I had a relatively pleasant childhood. Externally, I appeared to have it all together—and more. Despite having gone to a more modern school, I managed to catch up with my peers soon after I entered a more *heimishe* high school, picking up the lingo and almost seamlessly fitting into place. In high school, I was a studious, conscientious student, completing my work as soon as it was assigned. By eleventh and twelfth grade, I was getting mostly A's.

From a physiological perspective, I did experience low thyroid function as an adolescent, but nothing alarming. I was tired all the time, but still within the normal range. It's not that easy to find a high school kid who isn't always desperate for a bed, after all.

I went to a seminary in Eretz Yisrael that I felt was custom made for me. Having grown up with a twin sister who was always in my class (and with only four kids in a class that made up for quite a percentage), this was finally my chance to be my own person. I invested myself in the classes and the work, and I was the one whose notes everyone copied before an exam. But my friends turned to me for more than that. I had real friends, the type with whom I'd have deep discussions and exchange advice. We would plan Shabbosim together and revel in each other's company. This was my first opportunity to become an individual, and I excelled at it.

My original plan following the seminary

year was to attend a special education program in Baltimore, but when I gave a model lesson at seminary, the teacher was so impressed that she said, "If you don't become a teacher, you'll be depriving the world of your abilities." And so, I decided to give a model lesson for a teaching job in my hometown.

I was in Tzfas for Shabbos when I got the phone call from the principal. "We want you to teach for us," she said. And I was ecstatic. As a teacher, I had the opportunity to employ my leadership qualities and connect to my students in a real way. I also served as the student counsel advisor, supporting students privately when the need arose, as well as planning events and programs that highlighted the students' strengths. Despite having it all together at school, I was intrigued that small talk and social events outside of my work were so challenging for me.

In my third year of teaching, the brother of two of my students was suggested as a shidduch for me. Soon after, my husband and I got married and started our life together in Eretz Yisrael. I later discovered that my mother-in-law was so impressed with me as her daughters' teacher that she wanted me for her son. Little did she imagine what a roller coaster her son and I would be going through together so soon after our marriage. ♥

In Hindsight

Although, from the outset, I appeared to be cruising through adolescence, my own history can serve as a model for how disassociation in teenagers may appear. I dealt with the inner struggles of my youth that affected my mental, emotional, and physical health by pushing it into my subconscious mind, as if it never took place. I pushed myself hard at school and had a desperate need to excel in all areas. My goal was to live in distraction, consciously ignoring the pain bottled up inside of me. However, looking back, I realize that this coping mechanism only fueled the catastrophe that was waiting to happen.

To be continued...

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