

My Pandemic: What I've Learned So Far

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Before the pandemic, I honestly thought I was doing fine. I was doing better in school than I had been before, though I still wasn't where I wanted to be. My interpersonal relationships seemed amazing; I finally had a solid friend group and my very own best friend – something I had never had before. But the pandemic made me realize that everything is not what it seems. While I was doing ok, it wasn't something that could last. The pandemic forced me into many uncomfortable situations, and I had to come to the realization that I was really slacking in terms of what I needed to do for my success, happiness, and overall wellbeing. My physical and mental journey from moving into my mom's house, to a new apartment with who I believed to be my close friends, and finally into an intensive mental health program illuminated first my naivety towards my state of wellbeing, and then my power and ability to take care of myself. Overall, the pandemic taught me that I need to put myself and my mental and physical health before anything or anyone, and that I am truly capable of doing that.

At the advent of the pandemic, my boyfriend and I moved into my mom's house. Though comforting, I began to relax into a lazy and careless mindset. And while this circumstance somewhat justified it, I didn't actively think about the fact that living with mental illness and truly beating it at its own game is a full-time job. Being at my mom's, I didn't focus on taking care of myself. My mom doing all the cooking and my boyfriend doing all the cleaning was nice, but left me with no real responsibilities. This allowed me to regress into my shell and stop thinking about the things I needed to be doing for both my mental and physical health. I was drinking more often than I should – just because I could. I wasn't really exercising or even getting outside much, made easier by the stay-at-home order. I even stopped scheduling regular therapy appointments because I didn't feel like I had enough going on to really have anything to talk about. Though I may not have realized it at the time, I had really let myself go.

When I moved into a new apartment in July of 2020, it seemed like the pages had flipped. I was finally out of my mom's house and felt independent, not to mention excited as all hell to be living with two of my closest friends. But this, too, was just a mirage; the people I thought were my friends were only looking out for their own interests, and any semblance of care or respect was for selfish intentions. This quickly escalated into a home not of friendship and care but of intimidation and bullying that mimicked more of a middle school environment than that of true adults. While it all started off well, everything changed when two significant, traumatic experiences happened to me later that summer. I fell into one of the worst depressive episodes of my life, and while I thought my friends/roommates who struggle with mental illness too would have been more compassionate and understanding, my inability to help around the house as much as I would have liked to drove a wedge and caused them to start isolating, and later bullying, me. I still really don't even know what the turning point was when they stopped viewing me as a friend and started viewing me as an enemy. When chastising me for not doing

dishes turned into screaming at me for having one friend over, I stopped leaving my room when I was home.

In 2019, I was admitted to Compass Health Center's partial hospitalization program due to growing concerns for my mental health. What I learned there both changed and saved my life, and I never thought I would have to return to this program or this level of care. However, in August of 2020 I decided rejoining was an essential step to take for my mental health and survival. I knew I was struggling, but only when I returned to the program mid-pandemic did I truly begin to understand the effort and work I needed to take to support myself. Initially, I wasn't sure how much it could benefit me since I had already done it before, but I went in with an open mind. I was able to learn new "skills" (Compass terminology) such as distress tolerance and breathing techniques and refresh the old ones, all while applying them to current situations. The staff and my peers validated my feelings, especially towards my roommates. They made me feel legitimate in my complaints towards my living situation despite my roommates attempting to make me think it was all my fault. I was prescribed a few new medications and then actually started to do better in school than I ever had. I graduated from the program feeling confident in my ability to not only take care of myself but recognize detrimental patterns in others and myself. Despite initial apprehension, returning to Compass proved to be the most valuable action I took throughout the pandemic.

Though it was uncomfortable and at times, devastating, the pandemic forced me to forge a new relationship with myself, my friends, and my mental health that will benefit me indefinitely in all aspects of my life. I learned that hiding away does more harm than good, even when it feels like the safest option. Most importantly, I realized that believing the best in others is not always the best policy but believing the best in myself is.