

# tough talk

LAUREN CHAPMAN'S STORY

The conversation always seems to start out the same way.

*Him: "I think I have a problem."*

He doesn't name the problem, but I know why he has come to me with questions.

I understand.

I understand not being able to identify what's wrong. My first panic attack occurred at the age of five, but I didn't realize it was due to anxiety. It wasn't until my sophomore year in college that I really addressed my mental illness. My grades started to plummet, and I couldn't walk to class without having a panic attack. Not to mention that another cousin had died by suicide that summer. I had tried dealing with these things on my own, and sophomore year showed me that I needed help. Now, I try to be that voice for others. Mental illness has affected my family in so many different ways — most of the women seem to have depression while the men have anxiety — I can't help but want to talk about it.

*Me: "All right, tell me about this problem. Can you describe it for me?"*

I wait for him to explain, knowing what he will probably say. I've done this before. Since I am so open about my own mental illness and how depression affects my family, it's not uncommon for my friends to recommend to other people that they come talk to me. I've helped around 15 people, men and women, since my cousin's death in 2009. I'd say the ratio is about 50-50, with most of the women coming to me with anxiety questions and the men with depression.

*Him: "I feel like I'm suffocating. I feel like there's just this black hole and I'm never going to get out of it."*

Immediately, I think of my mother. She's always been open about her depression, and she's described feeling this way before. It wasn't until I was about 13 that I witnessed my mother in a depressive state, though.

It was junior high. I was in Girl Scouts for 12 years, and my mom had been my troop leader for 11 of those years. She'd also been the cookie chair of Indiana. At this time, there were only four or five people left in my troop, and we were preparing to leave from one of our troop meetings. I didn't realize it at the time, but my mother had been talking to other troop leaders while we were heading to the car. When she got back in the car, she said, "I can't do this. I'm not good at this. I'm stupid. I'm not good enough. I'm not your dad. I'm not you or your dad. I'm not good enough."

It was the first time I'd heard my mom address her feelings in that way. She'd always been open about her depression, but I'd never heard her say things like that before.

*Me: "You know. It sounds like what you have is depression. This is exactly the way my mom has described this before. And it's okay. There's nothing wrong with it. But you need to get help. What you go through on the everyday basis is not abnormal, but you need help. You can't just do this by yourself. You can't just suck it up and deal with it. You can't just rub dirt on it. You have to confront it."*

We continue to discuss his feelings and what it means to have depression. I try to explain it in more relatable terms. "Depression is nothing more than like a cold for your brain, for your emotional-wellbeing. And it's not something we can ignore anymore."

I ask him about his life and his feelings. As he talks about the difficulty of his home life, I have to ask the question.

*Me: "Have you ever attempted, or have you thought about, committing suicide?"*

It's always hard to ask, but I can't avoid it. I can't lose another person to suicide. Not after the two deaths in my family. Losing two cousins to suicide forced me to face the consequences of depression early on. It opened up the conversation of mental illness in my family. I know what can happen when people don't get the help they need. I don't want to see someone else die by suicide ever again.

I feel like I'm supposed to be really happy that people come to me with these problems. I get to be the support that my family hasn't always had. I should feel special. But, sometimes it makes me mad. It's confusing, really, because I'm not mad at the person for coming to me. I'm not mad about the person having depression either; he or she can't help it. But sometimes I don't get it. With everything people know about suicide, how can they still want to do it? Then I get mad at myself. How can I go thinking things like that? My mom has depression; I know these thoughts aren't their fault. I just wish there was more I could do.

There's a lull in the conversation after he answers my question. I wrack my brain for something to say to lighten the mood a bit. It's not that I don't think the conversation is serious — far from it — but depression is a heavy topic. Sometimes the person needs the mood lightened in order to continue on with his explanation. I can't think of anything in particular, so I blurt out the first thing that comes to my mind.

*Me: "Boobies."*

He gives me a quizzical look, but laughs anyway. The looming intensity dissipates. I smile and apologize for the random outburst.

He waves it off, grateful for the break in seriousness. As our giggles calm, I go back to our previous conversation.

*Me: "Have you thought about getting help?"*

The idea of getting help always scares people. The stigma of therapists and medication deter them from going to a professional. I understand. I've been there. It comes in handy when talking to people since I can relate. I try to coax them into it, explaining that the Ball State Health Center has amazing services. I try to lighten the mood by listing the medications I've been on and how they affect me. I figure the more I am able to relate to them, the more comfortable they will be. I hope that my experience will show them that it's okay to seek help.

I'm not a saint by any means. I forget to take my own medication. I prefer the tough love approach. I don't like physical contact. But I'm grateful to be able to help others confront their mental illnesses. My cousins, who both died by suicide within a few years of one another, didn't have that. And knowing that I can be the support system for someone else is a blessing.

Even if I do throw in a few too many inappropriate jokes.

**Sophie Gordon** is freshman journalism news major from St. Charles, Missouri, who has dreamed about becoming a journalist since the seventh grade. This is her first Facing Project.

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*Lauren Chapman*

