

By E.A.D.

Out of the fog

The tile floor was cold and hard against my knees, but I couldn't move from my spot in front of the toilet. It was the third morning that week I had spent violently throwing up because of anxiety at the prospect of going into the lab. So far, I had been able to stay home without consequence. But that day I was scheduled to meet other lab members to work on an experiment essential for my Ph.D. project. At 5:45 a.m. I let them know I wouldn't be coming in, feeling a wave of guilt. "How did I get here?" I wondered.

I entered grad school in July 2019. The first semester went smoothly—I did well in my classes, met interesting people, and found an adviser after a series of lab rotations. But everything changed during my second semester, as COVID-19 spread.

With our lab shut down and bench work impossible, I tried to focus on my classes, which had gone virtual. Eventually, though, I experienced Zoom burnout and began to pay less attention. As in-person interactions waned, so did my mental health.

When the semester finished, I moved to doing research full time, and my days had even less structure and social connection. My university lifted restrictions on lab work in July 2020, but I couldn't find the will to go in. The only person I saw for the next few months was my husband. Friends and family reached out, but as I sank deeper into depression, I stopped responding.

Throughout my life I had dealt with more minor mental health issues, but what I experienced during the pandemic was unlike anything before. My depression was so bad I was essentially bed-bound. I barely managed to shower once a week, could not sleep, and had zero motivation to work—a problem I never imagined I would have. Yet there I was, doing nothing day after day. The inertia was insurmountable.

I noticed that many of my peers were publishing papers and winning awards. I felt certain I didn't belong in my program and would be asked to leave as soon as my lack of progress was brought to light. I canceled meetings with my adviser for 2 months straight, hoping she wouldn't notice.

But by April, I felt I couldn't keep it up much longer. My qualifying exam was coming up and I feared I would fail. I was also scheduled to meet with my adviser to complete a progress report. I decided to use the report as a chance to disclose why I wasn't productive—depression. This was my first time revealing a personal issue to a mentor. The other labs I had worked in all seemed to treat personal life as completely



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private, so I had as well. It took a major downturn in my mental health to find the courage to open up.

I expected disappointment, but instead my adviser expressed sympathy and support. I wished I'd spoken to her sooner. She told me she was concerned about my lack of progress, and her feedback motivated me to get back to the lab and prepare for my exam, which I passed. But my mouse colonies could only reproduce at a certain pace, so I still felt stymied and unproductive. Slowly, I slipped back into depression.

Through it all, my husband had been urging me to see a psychiatrist, and in July, I finally went. I was put on medication to try and get my life back on track. Shortly before taking that step, I also got involved in my program's graduate organization. I volunteered to serve as chair of the

social committee, hoping to give my social side a stimulus.

My role on the committee was key, helping me more than the meds. It forced me to get out of bed, shower, and socialize, even when I didn't want to. At first, my body rebelled. I'd become so accustomed to inactivity that simply leaving the apartment left me sore. But I liked coordinating events, interacting with peers, and having structure and purpose to my days. I began to come out of the fog that had enveloped me.

Gradually, I started to go into the lab more often. I still go through periods where I struggle. But I have experiments lined up and data to analyze, and I'm eager to move my projects forward again. I'm thankful for the understanding my husband and my adviser showed me during one of the darkest chapters of my life. If you're going through something similar, I'd recommend reaching out for support. It's not easy finding your way out of a mental health crisis, but it's less daunting when you have an empathetic shoulder to lean on. ■

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