

December 24th, 2021

Birthdays are unique days. In a practical sense, they signify the completion of another year of one's life. Another 365 days around the sun. Another 365 days of highs and lows, opportunities and obstacles, relationships with others and with ourselves. It's amazing though - we are only given that one day to reflect on the prior 364 days. That day goes by in the blink of an eye, and yet again we begin the journey of another 365 days around the sun. This birthday in particular - my 28th - has given me quite the moment of pause. Perhaps it's because I'm catching up on five years of missed birthdays (in the traditional sense that is). Five years of missed reflections. Five years of a missing me.

For those of you that have interacted with me in the past five years, you have likely noticed I have seemed different from my childhood self growing up. I wish I could attribute these changes to becoming a grown, working, married woman, but unfortunately that would be quite the simple explanation in this case (and would certainly not explain even a fraction of what the past five years has entailed for me and my family).

It has taken me quite some time, perhaps even too long quite honestly, in sharing a truth with my dear ones that has now become a large reality of my life. One that not only I struggle with, but millions of others do as well. But finally today, as I reflect on the past five years of my life, I have come to realize there is more value to others in me sharing this than not. In November 2016 (perhaps even slightly earlier), my mind and body started experiencing the onset of clinical depression and generalized anxiety disorder. Unfortunately, I didn't get diagnosed till October 2018, and quite candidly I didn't accept it until December 2020. And perhaps most sadly of all, I opposed taking any medication for these conditions until April 2021 - when the reality was I needed medication from day one.

Mental health illnesses like depression and anxiety are quite daunting. You can concretely diagnose almost any other condition in the human body - cholesterol, diabetes, broken bones, cancer, etc. But with mental health illnesses, there are really no diagnostic tests. Combine that with the fact that these illnesses vary so greatly by individual and fall on such a vast spectrum (based on longevity, severity, frequency, and variations in mind-body symptoms), it feels nearly impossible to identify for oneself. In my particular situation, I by no means experienced a severe case of depression or anxiety. In fact, I likely had a case of low-grade, chronic anxiety and depression for years before my symptoms began to escalate to a point where they could no longer be ignored - likely morphing into a more moderate case of these conditions. Regardless of how these illnesses manifest - sometimes subtly and sometimes quite the opposite, one thing I've learned is that these conditions tend to make you feel that you are slowly losing your sense of self. Unfortunately, I suffered similarly for two years before even becoming aware of what was happening to me.

In mid-2016, I started noticing changes in my body, my mood, my behavior, my perspective, and my relationships. On paper, I was one of the luckiest and happiest collegiate graduates - starting my first job out of Georgia Tech at McKinsey & Company (the top management consulting firm

in the world), recently engaged to the man of my dreams during a surprise proposal in front of the Eiffel Tower, in the process of purchasing my first home (a beautiful condominium in Midtown Atlanta) with my soon-to-be husband, and on track to apply to Ivy League MBA Programs within 3-5 years. Everything was perfect. Everything was on track. Everything was just the way I had always imagined it would be. But my reality was perplexingly far from this.

Day after day, I found myself losing interest in my hobbies, not wanting to socialize, not wanting to eat, feeling unhappy for weeks on end, experiencing extreme fatigue from basic daily activities, increased irritability over trivial matters, and much more. I had never felt more lost, more unhappy, more confused, more unsure of myself than ever before. And for someone that always had an answer and a plan for everything, I was becoming increasingly frustrated with myself because of the cognitive dissonance that was developing in my mind - I had every reason to be the happiest person in the world, but why was I feeling so far from that?

Having no knowledge of or exposure to mental health illnesses growing up, I attributed my symptoms to a myriad of potential factors - burnout from Georgia Tech, dissatisfaction with the intensity of my job at McKinsey, stress from planning a big Indian wedding, lack of time to devote to my hobbies, and so on. I simply had no frame of reference for what I was experiencing and silently endured until I felt I couldn't carry the burden of these symptoms on my own.

Finally when I did get diagnosed in 2018 (thanks to extremely supportive parents that sat with me in front of a psychiatrist as I listed out my symptoms in a very stoic manner), I was in complete disbelief that someone in my shoes could have clinical depression. Clearly at that point I hadn't understood the biochemical nature of these illnesses (i.e. a majority of these illnesses are related to neurotransmitter imbalances in the brain), so I blamed my diagnosis on my inability to cope with the changes occurring in my life. Really what I felt it meant was that I was not cut out for all that I had set my horizons on to achieve. I was so upset and frustrated with myself that my depression spiraled even more out of control. I nearly stopped eating, I couldn't get myself up in the mornings to go to work, I couldn't stop crying every day, my husband and I had to move back in with my parents for a period of time for them to help take care of me. I had completely hit rock bottom. I was unrecognizable to my family, but even worse - I was unrecognizable to myself.

The next two years from 2018 to 2020, I saw my symptoms go back and forth between those of clinical depression and generalized anxiety disorder. I had elected to try cognitive behavioral therapy before entertaining the need for any type of psychiatric medication, largely because I still wanted to believe that I was not suffering from depression but rather a very severe case of burnout. While therapy did help me cognitively to quite a large extent, I had not at that point understood that mental health illnesses are psychosomatic, meaning they are mind-body illnesses. Therapy was certainly working on the mind component, but my body was far beyond the point where it could naturally heal itself and return to homeostasis.

My body had started experiencing severe pain - pain I still shudder to think about till this day. In my case, the pain was localized in the digestive system, particularly the lower right quadrant of my abdomen. Naturally being persistent and wanting to overcome these conditions, I went to one gut specialist after another - some gastrointestinal doctors, some functional medicine practitioners. One quarter it was Small Intestinal Bacterial Overgrowth (SIBO). The next it was Leaky Gut. The next it was low stomach acid and deficient digestive enzymes. The next it was H. Pylori and Candida. I probably tried over 100 different supplements and at least 4-5 modified treatment diets to rid myself of the gut dysbiosis that I thought was causing my pain and exacerbating my anxiety. My most intensive treatment plan included taking ~62 pills daily and eating only vegetables and egg/chicken/fish on a daily basis (especially difficult since I had been a vegetarian my whole life before then). No fruits, no grains, no processed foods, no sugar, no carbs, no dairy. Call me naive for believing a treatment plan like this made sense for my body, all I can tell you is I was beyond desperate. I had spent so many days rolled up on the floor in pain, holding my stomach and crying for anyone or anything to make the pain stop, that I would do anything - literally anything - to get better. But just not a psychiatric medication because I hadn't understood at that time that these were not isolated somatic symptoms - they were manifestations of my depression and anxiety.

As none of these treatments worked, I started losing faith that getting better was even an option for me. I couldn't get myself out of bed in the mornings until my husband or Mom would come wake me. Doing small tasks like carrying a laundry basket up a flight of stairs felt nearly impossible. I could rarely leave the house because my abdominal pain would flare up at any point in time. My anxiety about my pain was so high that I couldn't eat meals without my husband talking me through almost every bite. I had taken medical leave from work and had no intention or desire to return back. I could at most step out for a 10-15 minute walk in the neighborhood before I felt my legs were going to give way. I was losing weight rapidly due to my constantly changing treatment diets - none of which was calorically sufficient or nutrient dense enough to sustain my body. I was seeing the life I had envisioned for myself slipping farther and farther away out of sight.

The toll this took on my family, especially my Mom and my husband, was nothing short of draining and extreme. My Mom has likely shed as many tears, if not more, than I have in the past five years. She has spent countless hours in our mandir (temple) at home praying for me to recover, even more hours researching every possible variation of supplements that could alleviate some of my abdominal pain, days on end at doctors' offices and medical facilities with me getting bloodwork and other diagnostic tests done, phone call after phone call with nutritionists and specialists, and hours at a time in the kitchen making me meals that would maybe entice me enough to eat a little bit.

My husband, Romeen, similarly experienced a side of me that was far from the bright-eyed, enthusiastic, and ambitious girl he had fallen in love with. Having been just recently married (less than a year) before my symptoms became a hindrance in our day-to-day lives, Romeen tried his level best to do whatever was in his power to help me recover and get back to normalcy. Some days it was attending my therapy sessions with me, others it was leaving his

meetings at work midway to come be by my side when even my parents couldn't console me. Some days it was sitting with me 2-3 hours at a time just to help me get through eating one meal, others it was letting me lie on him when my abdominal pain was far beyond pain that a human body should be able to experience. Some days it was pushing me outside for a brief walk to get some fresh air, others it was being my biggest cheerleader telling me that the world better watch out when I'm back in action because I'd be a force to contend with. Not once did my husband let me feel unloved or unwanted. In fact, it was quite the opposite - he continuously boosted my self-esteem, continuously challenged me to do things that I felt my mind and body could not do, and most importantly continuously told me that he loved me. But the reality was I was far from normalcy.

My parents, my husband, and my sister - no one quite understood what was going on in my mind or how to best help, but they sure as hell never let me think I was battling this on my own. They sat by me on the days I was in pain, they always gave me a shoulder to cry on, they encouraged me to keep trying to get better, and most importantly - they helped me live on the days I felt I didn't have it in me to continue.

While my parents had encouraged me to take psychiatric medication early on to help with my depression and anxiety, they respected my decision that I did not want to. The rationale for my decision? Frankly, I don't know. As I mentioned earlier, part of me didn't want to believe that I was suffering from mental health illnesses, but perhaps I was also afraid these medications would take away the little bit of me that was left. And that was all I had to hold on to for the time being to motivate me to keep moving forward. Top that with all the information you can read on Google about the side-effects of this class of medications, it was a sure bet I wasn't going to take any risk to put my body in any worse condition than it already was. What if the medications didn't suit me? What if I was cognitively altered forever? What if it made my depression and anxiety worse?

Early this year (2021), however, there came a point where I realized I was starting to accept my fate of being unwell, likely forever. I had no personality, no ambition, no motivation, no desire. Even the pain had started feeling numb to a certain extent. There was no "me" left - it had all been sucked out of my body. Call it destiny, a mother's intuition, or pure luck in this case - one afternoon my Mom very casually mentioned she had come across a psychiatrist that seemed like a doctor I would like and trust. Out of fear of me getting upset with her again for bringing up the topic, she asked in a very low voice, "Would you like me to set up an appointment?" And without thinking, I replied with a lump in my throat while holding back tears, "Yes, I think I need help now."

Since April of this year, I have been extremely fortunate to have been under the care and supervision of a very proficient psychiatrist. He has helped me understand the nature of the mental illnesses that I have been suffering from and catered my treatment accordingly. Yes, I am finally taking medication - an SSRI (Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitor, more commonly referred to as an antidepressant) that has quite literally changed my life (for the better that is). However, the SSRI is simply one component of my treatment that is being greatly augmented by

other practices recommended by my psychiatrist - proper nutrition, exercise (specifically yoga), breathwork, meditation, cognitive behavioral therapy, myofascial release massages, and circadian rhythm training. Does this mean I no longer have depression or anxiety? I really can't answer this question just yet. We define these concepts in such a "black and white" manner in society, when the reality is they are incredibly gray. What I can say assuredly is rather than these illnesses controlling me, I am now able to control and manage them.

Since starting the SSRI, I have experienced profound changes in my life. Quite candidly, it has been nothing short of a miracle for me:

- After 8 months on the medication, I can finally say I no longer experience chronic abdominal pain, and my god - what a relief and blessing it is to be pain-free after literally years. I no longer fear waking up in the mornings because I can be confident that my body now knows that the pain was simply a signal for me to take action. Action has been taken, so now I no longer require that signal.
- Today, my diet is not restricted to particular food groups in any way, form, or fashion. I can eat anything my heart desires (without digestive symptoms)! While this sounds so simple and basic, it was actually quite a complex process. I spent months reintroducing foods back very methodically one at a time - similar to a baby starting to eat new foods. I thoroughly enjoyed and savored my Grandma's sooji halwa on my birthday morning this year - a tradition I have missed dearly.
- The only check-up I've had to go in for this year has been my annual physical - that's it. Not gut specialists, no nutritionists, no functional medicine doctors, nothing. Oh, and no supplements!

However, it would be remiss of me if I didn't mention my overall health plan since starting the SSRI has been meticulously researched, planned, and managed by my dearest Aditi Bua (Aunt) - an Epidemiologist at MD Anderson Cancer Center. Any single nutritional or supplementation change I have made this past year has been done under her care and guidance, along with close monitoring of my SSRI dose modifications. Thanks to Aditi Bua and my psychiatrist - a killer team I must admit - I have been able to achieve so much in what feels like such little time.

- I have slowly built up my physical strength and stamina by practicing yoga 2-3x per week. The same body that could not walk for more than 10-15 minutes at a time can now hold Bakasana (crow pose) and complete a full hour of yoga flows.
- I have learned the value of incorporating self-care practices in my day-to-day routine. Different practices have worked for me at different points in my recovery, but meditation, therapy, journaling, breathing, walks outdoors, and a nice chat with a family member have always helped me incorporate some form of mental hygiene that I have found to be an integral part of my journey to self betterment.

- My personality has started craving hobbies and activities I once loved - listening to music, watching Bollywood movies, dancing to my favorite songs, decorating the Christmas tree, baking delicious desserts, meeting up with friends, bonding with my sister, playing with my nieces and nephews. The things that used to fuel me have once again started making their way into my days. Unfortunately to my Grandmother's dismay, cooking has still not made the list yet, but I think that's soon to come also!
- Once mentally and physically strong enough (about 5 months after starting the SSRI), Romeen and I made a big move to our new home this year! Quite candidly, this was a change I wasn't anticipating being able to make so quickly. Having lived with my parents since late 2018, I had grown accustomed to my Mom being my primary caregiver for almost over three years. I jokingly told her one day that she would likely have to move in with me and Romeen, but I think I surprised us all when I was able to seamlessly transition to living in our new home. And what a beautiful and refreshing change it has been for both me and Romeen - we absolutely love our home and neighbors, being close to both sets of parents, and having the lively backdrop of Avalon near us!
- I surprised myself a second time this past year when I managed to pull off traveling to Mexico for a cousin's wedding (following all COVID-19 precautions of course). The likelihood that I could have attended this wedding at the beginning of 2021 was close to 0%. For years now, trips like these were completely out of the question - managing my pain, fear of flights, modified diet plans, supplements, drastic mood changes, fatigue and weakness, crying episodes, etc. was nearly impossible. In fact, I think the last trip I made out of Atlanta was back in the summer of 2018. Three years later, I had major doubts whether or not I'd be able to travel internationally ever again. But after months of therapy and weeks of intense preparation and packing before the trip, I found myself on a plane to Mexico. And for the first time ever in my life, I was so excited to be sitting on a plane. In a sense, I felt like I had finally broken the shackles that had been holding me down for years. And to top it all off, the wedding festivities in Mexico were a total blast - I can't remember the last time I genuinely enjoyed myself as much as I did during this trip!
- As if the trip to Mexico was some sort of catalyst, the festivities that followed towards the end of the year pushed me to new levels of reintegration back into social life. Diwali, Karva Chauth, Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's - I don't think there was a single occasion the past three months that was not celebrated in some form or fashion in the Sheth-Gauba households. What I learned through these social gatherings and celebrations (all COVID-19 safe) was how much I had missed connecting with people the past five years of my life. I had forgotten what it felt like to experience the little joys of life - Sujaan (Romeen's nephew) opening his Diwali gifts with such excitement, waking up at 5am on Karva Chauth day to eat Sargi with my Mom and Grandma, celebrating Thanksgiving with friends that I have grown up with the past two decades, the smell of hot chocolate on Christmas morning while opening gifts with family from out of town, watching holiday movies for two weeks on end with Ashima and Romeen. So much I had

missed out on for years, but so much I was fortunate to experience in its full form this past year (including my birthday on Christmas Eve)!

- As with rebuilding myself physically/mentally and reintegrating myself back into social life, I have come to realize recently that I am now craving to rebuild myself in a professional sense. After going on medical leave from work back in 2018, my life continued to deviate so far from normal that I was forced to live in survival mode - simply fighting to satisfy the lowest rungs of Maslow's Hierarchy on a daily basis (Physiological and Safety). The higher rungs - those related to Love & Belonging, Esteem, Self-Actualization - never even crossed my mind. Today, I am finally not in survival mode, and I feel within me the urge to do, to be productive, to contribute, to be creative, to experiment. What exactly that means for me professionally or for my career, I'm not quite sure just yet. But I can certainly tell you this letter is my start, and I hope to continue building on this start in the months to come.
- And lastly but most importantly, I finally know what it feels like to be happy again - smiling, laughing, enjoying, and being at peace in my own skin. I've noticed the colors of the leaves more lately, I've laughed more at my Dad's jokes, I've felt the warmth from hugs I've received, I've felt emotions of empathy and compassion towards others, I've called more friends and family the past few months, I've enjoyed my Grandmother's food, I've craved quality time with my family. I've felt like me again - Ayshali. The Ayshali I've always known and trusted and been proud to be.

While it seems very obvious that I likely should have taken an SSRI much earlier during the onset of my symptoms, I would like to mention again that mental illnesses can feel quite daunting and overwhelming. There is an uncertainty and confusion about what you are actually experiencing, there is a lack of understanding about who to approach regarding these symptoms, there is a fear that loved ones may be judgemental or worse not be supportive/empathetic to your situation, there are various different ways to treat these conditions (different types of therapy, various classes of psychiatric medications, etc.), and there is still a stigma associated with openly discussing these types of illnesses. Which brings me to the reason why I have written and shared this with you all today.

My narrative is unique to me. But depression, anxiety, and other mental health conditions are not unique. Millions suffer from these conditions on a daily basis, many for a prolonged period of time without getting the help or support they need. I would hate for another Ayshali out there to suffer the way I did simply because he/she had the misconceptions about these illnesses that I had. Which is why I believe it is extremely important to share these narratives in the purest, most raw forms so people understand that depression and anxiety are more than just the 10-12 bulleted symptoms on a website. And if we talk about these things openly and honestly, more people will feel comfortable sharing their experiences - what they've gone through, what's helped them, who they've gone to for treatment and care, how they can be of support to others, etc. And maybe - just maybe - someone will be spared five years of suffering and won't miss five birthdays along the way.

What I have shared through this letter today is simply a starting point. The beginning of a conversation - a conversation that in my opinion is extremely important to have, especially with the mental health crisis that has been brought on by COVID-19 more recently. In the coming months, I hope to share additional details of my mental health journey (including my ongoing efforts to lead a mentally and physically healthy and balanced life) and be of help to those that may find themselves in a similar position to mine five years ago. My hope is the transparency, honesty, and sincerity with which I relay my narrative, frameworks, learnings, etc. will spur constructive conversations around the topic of mental health - first within my most immediate circles and then rippling to larger and larger circles as we continue the dialogue. I would love the next time someone asks me how I am doing, I can give a true response versus one that I have learned to give to avoid discussing my mental health conditions. So with that being said, feel free to reach out to me at community@soarfamily.org if I can ever be of help to anyone reading this - the hardest thing to do is to ask for help, but please know it will always be provided wholeheartedly to those that come my way.

It has taken a long time for this clarity to develop in my mind that this is the right thing to do and what I now **want** to do, and I certainly could not have done it without the constant guidance, love, and support from those who have stood by me during the hardest of these times. To my parents, thank you for never giving up on me and teaching me how to stand on my own two feet all over again. To my husband, thank you for loving me when I couldn't love myself. To my sister, thank you for being my guiding light in what felt like endless darkness. To my Dadi (Grandma), thank you for your unconditional hugs and smiles. To my second set of parents and siblings (Dina Mom, Jayesh Dad, Shemoni, and Jason), thank you for never leaving my side. To my Aditi Bua, thank you for guiding me in the right direction with such love and care. To my psychiatrist - Dr. Bhat, thank you for bringing Ayshali back to life. To my therapists along the way (Susan, Erin, Siddhika), thank you for working with me so diligently and genuinely for years on end. To my meditation instructor and confidant, Namrata Didi - thank you for helping me find the peace within me. To my yoga instructor - Valerie, thank you for easing me back into my own skin. To all my friends and family that didn't quite know what was going on but knew things weren't quite right, thank you for always checking in on me. I will forever be indebted to all of you.

And most importantly - thank you for taking the time to read 5 years worth of birthday reflections. While getting here hasn't been easy, I can assure you the next 365 days are going to be my best yet. Here's to 28!

Caveat: I am by no means a medical professional certified in the fields of psychiatry, psychology, therapy, etc. What I have relayed here is simply my mental health journey - an experience that I have lived through and am able to communicate in my words. Please always work under the care and supervision of medical professionals when making any decisions about treatment, etc. While I may not be able to provide that particular guidance, I can certainly direct anyone that needs help to the qualified medical professionals. Thank you!