

I walked into the kitchen to find my mother crying. We'd just moved into a new house post divorce and she discovered that a pipe was already leaking. She fumbled with wrenches and jiggled bolts, but her endeavors were in vain. Her hands, shaking with frustration, wiped away unsuspected tears. And as I knelt down and took her into my arms, her body crumpled into mine, adding the pipe onto a lengthy list of things in her life that were broken.

Although only thirteen years old, I thought of this as my role in the family. My father threw himself into work, ensuring we were financially secure. My mom threw herself into our lives and offered advice, ensuring we were physically secure. I, however, watched my family unfold and at a moment's notice, threw myself into their arms. Perhaps if I could hold their broken pieces together just a bit longer, my family could start to heal.

The moment my parents separated and they saw the damage their ongoing war had caused, the bigger issue came to light - my sister's mental health.

When I was in 8th grade, my sister and I were home alone. I noticed the shower had been running for an unusually long time. My sister [REDACTED] who was in 10th grade, regularly took long showers, so I wasn't alarmed. Yet when my mom came home, she discovered my sister covered in blood on the shower floor, unconscious from a suicide attempt. I will never forget my mother's frantic yelling, or the way she shielded me from looking, the bright ambulance lights illuminating my living room as our world stopped dead in its tracks. This wasn't her first attempt and it wouldn't be her last.

My teen-aged years have been characterized by my sister in and out of mental institutions. There was a three-week stay here, then a two month stay there and gradually the hospitalizations grew longer - six months, then even two years. When they allowed siblings to visit, the girl I saw in the hospital wasn't [REDACTED]. She was stripped of all the things that made her the sister I'd grown up with, both physically and mentally, from the shoelaces they took away to the emotional baring that she was forced to do in therapy. We would leave these visitations in silence, the radio off, never vocalizing how the sickly molasses-like guilt thickened our chests every time she begged us to let her come home.

Between visits, I would protect my brother and parents the only ways an 8th grader can. I'd memorize sad songs on the radio and turn them off as the intro came on, pick up extra chores, and stay out of the way as much as I could. But being the smallest and most vulnerable, I often took the brunt of my parents' stress, getting unjust amounts of vocal punishment for miniscule mistakes. Yet I took my place as the Omega in the family with pride, thinking of it as another way I could alleviate their pain.

We dealt with earth-shattering problems in solitude, growing without the strong support system that most families take for granted. Simple things, like being able to live with your family intact, seem like a luxury to me. When my family does take a break from our own lives to come together, I know I appreciate it far more than many.

[REDACTED] is healthier today. She has discovered what makes her happiest, and how to put it first in her life. Her constant radiation of love and support inspires me to exist boldly. And seeing her working, independent and thriving has allowed each family member to continue on our paths to find our own purpose and happiness.