

Mental illnesses weren't strangers to me before I started experiencing them. In hindsight, they permeated much of my existence. Irrational anger over the slightest mess, disproportionate anxiety caused by being 10 minutes late, and other small occurrences that, when put together, led to only one conclusion. All of this to say, my genetics were against me. It was almost a question of when mental illness would make its unwanted entrance into my life rather than if.

I was acutely aware that I didn't look like my peers from a young age because they made me aware of it. Surprisingly, being asked why your skin is the colour of dirt by your classmates has an impact on your self-esteem (who'd've thought!). Being a second-generation immigrant, I felt I didn't belong among my classmates, but when going back to my parents' home country, I felt like an alien there too. Adding mental illness to that, I felt I had a neon sign floating above me announcing to the world, "She doesn't belong here!" My peers reflected that sentiment.

The first time I experienced depression was when I was eight years old. There was a new girl at school, and we became friends! After a little, she was asked by the "popular girls" whether she wanted to play with them. She asked me whether that was okay, and while I was silently hurt, I didn't feel I was allowed ownership over a person. So I said yes, it was one day after all! But soon, I no longer had a friend in my class.

Why these girls were popular confounds me to this day because, fundamentally, they SUUUCKED. What started as snide comments about my oiled hair became telling me to bleach my skin, which then escalated to physical violence and gave me claustrophobia. I was figuratively (and sometimes literally) trapped, in a cycle of being bullied for not conforming, trying to conform, and then being bullied for said attempts to conform.

I hated life because of this, nothing gave me joy. But no matter who asked me, I couldn't say what was happening. These girls had threatened to kill me (I know now this is silly, but I was terrified at 8).

I eventually told the principal what was happening. But what ended up happening was that I was forced to sit in the principal's office for hours on end with these girls, with said principal telling me that these girls "couldn't be bullying me, they're so nice!"

My depression was a sadness so visceral that my body ached, my soul was tired, and I wanted to die, which is a scary thing to contend with when your age is still in the single digits.

In high school, it didn't end. It surprised me so much that despite going to such a multicultural school, my skin colour was such an issue for my classmates. I was so angry! I began to take it out in damaging, visible ways. No one noticed for a while, so I continued. After a while, I ran out of room, but that didn't bother me. If anyone saw, I promised I wouldn't do it again, but that was a bald-faced lie.

Addiction can manifest in many ways, and I was addicted.

In March of 2017, I went too far. Someone found me; I don't know who. I don't remember much from this, but I was admitted to the hospital for my mental health and eating disorders. Statistically, I was 2.5 times more likely to do this than my white peers¹.

For some, diagnoses are stifling, but for me, it was liberating. Someone finally listened to me after years of screaming into a vantablack abyss, not knowing when (or if) someone would listen before it was too late.

As confronting as it may be to read/hear/see, I believe it had something to do with my melanin. In pop culture, mentally ill women are white. I can't name a single brown girl in a movie or TV show with a mental illness. In South Asian culture, mental illness/health is a topic avoided. Being mentally ill brings forth the notion that the person is fundamentally flawed, that they

¹ Kamran Ahmed, Rajesh A. Mohan, and Dinesh Bhugra, "Self-Harm in South Asian Women: A Literature Review Informed Approach to Assessment and Formulation," *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 61, no. 1 (January 2007): 71–81, <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.psychotherapy.2007.61.1.71>.

must have committed some awful crime to have this fate thrust upon them. Perfection is expected, anything other than that is something to scoff at.

My parents didn't want to acknowledge my mental illnesses, chalking them up to my vivid imagination or heightened empathy. Thankfully, they were able to hear me before it was too late, and I no longer had to suffer alone, self-soothing in harmful ways. I was given space to rebuild my mental health, understand my life choices, and find healthy ways to cope with my emotions.

Finally, in 2018, after a few more 72-hour psych holds where my shoelaces and drawstrings were abducted (rude), my diagnoses were amended to include Bipolar 2. For those in the class who don't know, Bipolar 2 is classified by major depressive episodes and less severe episodes known as hypomania. During some—what I see now as—hypomanic episodes, I cut off all my hair, and I also gave myself a tattoo (how it didn't get infected is one of life's greatest mysteries). Often Bipolar 2 is misdiagnosed, as hypomania can often just look like bouts of extreme happiness or irrational anger, which in the right contexts are normal for a human to experience.

Medication is a godsend. Creatives with bipolar fear medication as they have the incorrect notion it may stifle their creativity, but this isn't true—at least it isn't for me. My mental illness isn't my fault, it's not something I should be ashamed of, and it's just as real as a physical illness that people can see. And just like paracetamol can help a headache, my medications help me. They just help me have normal human emotions, rather than the big scary emotions that would often get away from me, like when you push someone on a swing and end up swinging with them.

Melanin shouldn't change the way someone perceives your mental illness, but from personal experience, I can say it does. I would like to think that as the society-wide discussion of mental health becomes less like hushed whispers in the corner and more like a normal conversation, this sentiment can also change the way South Asians view their loved one's mental illness, or

maybe even their own. I'm not happy that I'm mentally ill because (with peace and love), that's never going to be my sentiment, but I can say that I'd like to be involved in the conversation that changes the way melanated folks view mental illness and helps others see that mental illness can affect everyone, regardless of their skin colour.