



The Teacher

A MENTAL HEALTH JOURNEY



INSTRUCTIONS

Read the page on the right about the Teacher. Then pause. As you move throughout the Mental Health Journey exhibit, you'll see her “apple” icon. This will show you her unique experience with each barrier in the exhibit. When instructed, flip to a tab in your booklet to read more.

This narrative is based on the real stories of Wisconsin residents with mental illness.

All names have been changed to protect privacy.

My name is Alyssa.

I'm 24 years old. I just started my job as an elementary school teacher, and I'm living on my own for the first time. I was born in Wisconsin and have lived here all my life. My parents, two older siblings and my Newfoundland dogs are very involved in my life.

In high school I was involved in extracurricular activities like tutoring and volunteering. I always knew that I wanted to translate my desire to help others into being a teacher. I was also class valedictorian—my parents still brag about it at holidays.

My favorite thing about being a teacher is the kids. They're amazing! When my students are excited about what they are learning and show off their work, it makes me feel so proud. I even display my kiddos' projects on my fridge. My apartment is covered with teaching stuff as I try to lesson plan, grade and work to engage our school community on nights and weekends.

I feel like being an educator is my calling. If I can help my students grow and have them be eager to learn, I feel like I've done my job as their teacher.



At Work

Despite being a normally bubbly person, I remember having feelings of depression since I was in high school. I struggled with an eating disorder, was bullied by other students, and never felt like I fit in. Sometimes I felt like I couldn't get out of bed in the morning because I didn't want people to have to see me.

A few weeks after starting my full-time teaching job, I felt my world getting darker again. I had a constant weight on my shoulders and couldn't keep my emotions under control. Despite loving my students, I questioned my decisions in the classroom and felt like I couldn't keep up. I was exhausted all the time.

I had experience trying to see a therapist in college, but it had been a while since I had seen a counselor regularly. With this newest bout of depression, I called my doctor and asked about making an appointment for a therapy session.

I was told that I first needed a referral from my primary care physician before I could see a therapist or a psychiatrist. It took three weeks until I got an appointment with my doctor.

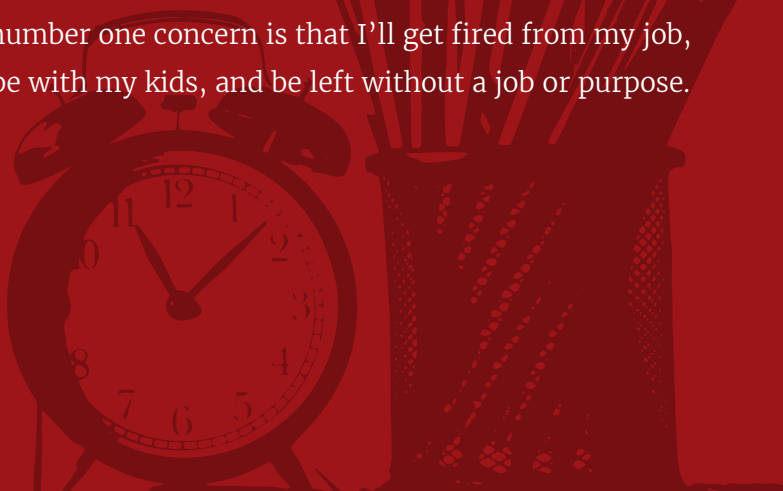
After receiving a referral, the next available appointment with a psychiatrist was over two months away. This process was too familiar.

I felt lost and hopeless. I couldn't bear to live inside my head for another day. After weeks of waiting and knowing I needed help now, I checked myself into an inpatient mental health facility.

My stay at the inpatient facility was two weeks. As a new employee with limited time off, I worked it out with the Human Resources department to use all of my paid time off for the entire year for my treatment.

I cannot take off any more time from work for my continued therapy sessions. The stress I feel related to my depression and my job is hard to handle. I felt uncomfortable taking two weeks off and was worried my coworkers would think I'm not capable of doing my job. I'm embarrassed to talk to my principal about any of this, but with limited flexibility, I don't know how I'll be able to continue my treatment.

My number one concern is that I'll get fired from my job, not be with my kids, and be left without a job or purpose.



Stigma

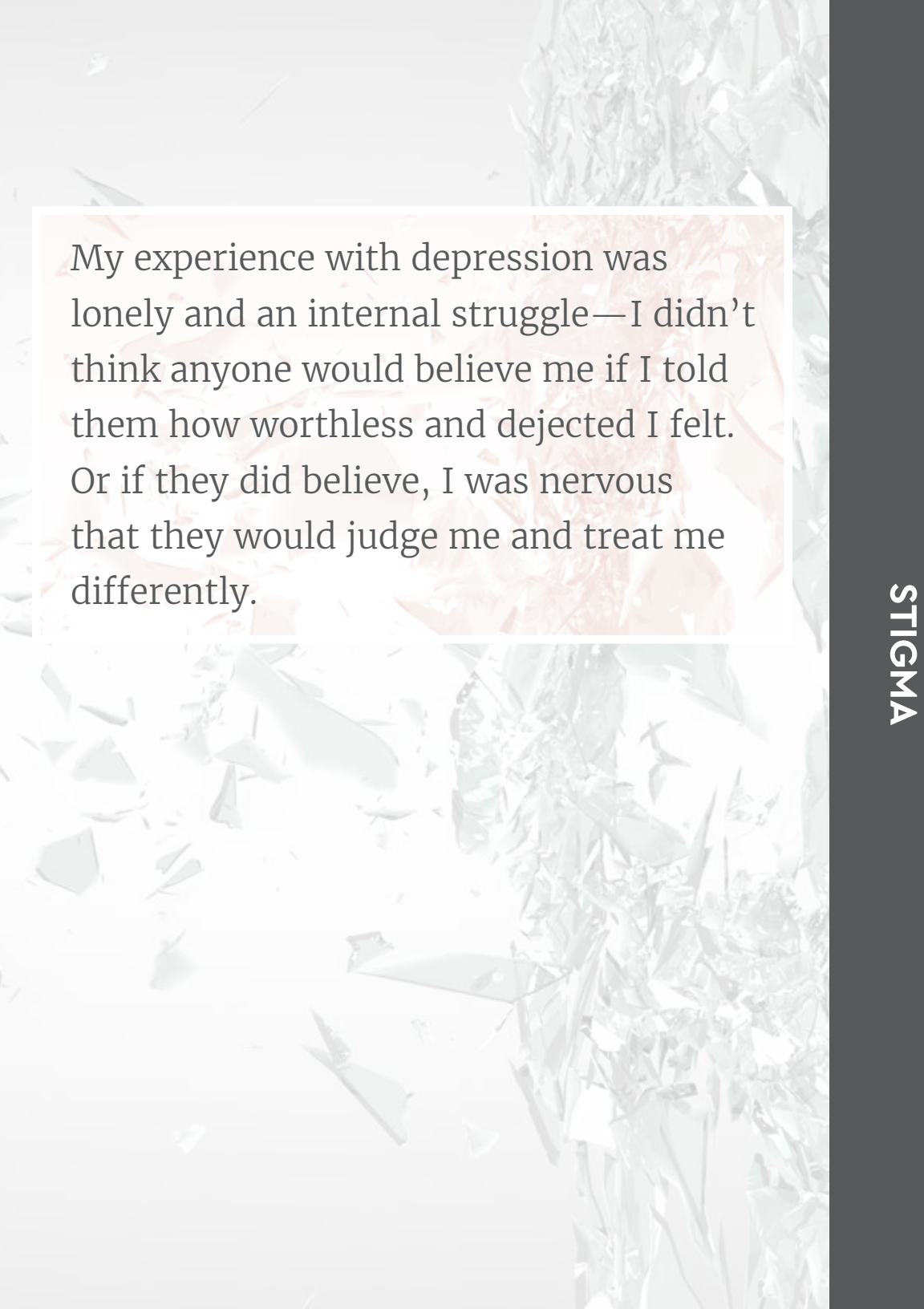
From an outside view, you'd think my family is the perfect, stereotypical Wisconsin family. My dad is a small business owner and my mom is a nurse. But sometimes in our small town, your image and perception seems more important than addressing what's really going on.

I've always felt like my parents expected perfection from me and my siblings. This seemed to come easy for my brothers, but following in their footsteps felt like I was running a race with no finish line.

When I began to have feelings of depression in high school, I felt unsupported by my family. It was clear that my dad didn't understand mental health and that my mom didn't want our neighbors to know anything was wrong. When I tried to talk about what I was feeling, they acted like I was going through a phase. My dad thought I was being lazy. My mom told me I was being dramatic.

I wondered if they were right and if I should just keep everything to myself. The worst part about my parents making my depression feel insignificant was that it made me feel like I wasn't valued as a person. If they couldn't accept me, how could anyone else?

Throughout high school and college, I remember friends talking about me, constantly asking one another what was wrong with me. Everything was a secret, and no one knew how to talk about it with me. I felt isolated from my friends and from my family.

The background of the page is a composite image. The top half features a close-up of crumpled, reflective silver foil. The bottom half shows a light-colored surface covered with numerous sharp, translucent shards of broken glass. A semi-transparent orange rectangular box is positioned in the upper left, containing the text.

My experience with depression was lonely and an internal struggle—I didn't think anyone would believe me if I told them how worthless and dejected I felt. Or if they did believe, I was nervous that they would judge me and treat me differently.

Access

My worst experience with accessing mental health care was during my senior year of college. My boyfriend of two years broke up with me the weekend before Thanksgiving. I was struggling with feelings of depression before, but this was more than I could handle. I wanted to see someone about my mental health condition, but I felt paralyzed. I was exhausted and couldn't bring myself to make the call.

After my mom finally saw what I was going through, she made some calls and found a doctor that would work with her on making an appointment for me to see a mental health counselor. The first available appointment wasn't until mid-December—more than three weeks away.

I attended my first therapy session and for the first time in a while, I felt excitement. I was eager for my second appointment the following week. But my counselor canceled the appointment due to a personal emergency and no one else was available to see me that day. I felt so lost and upset.

That same night, my family and I went out to eat and drink to celebrate the holidays and my siblings being home. I think my parents wanted to make me feel better, so they started talking about how I had been valedictorian and held so much promise. I felt like all eyes were on me...and I was failing miserably.

Towards the end of dinner, after we all had a few drinks, a voice came into my head and I couldn't make it stop. I kept thinking, "what's the point?" and how little my absence would phase anyone at the table.

I left the restaurant and ran outside in the 20-degree weather. Not knowing what I'd do, my family called the police. The police eventually found me roaming around and arrested me for resisting help.

Without any availability in a psychiatric unit, I was immediately placed on suicide watch—in jail. I never saw a physician or psychiatrist and was there for over 36 hours.

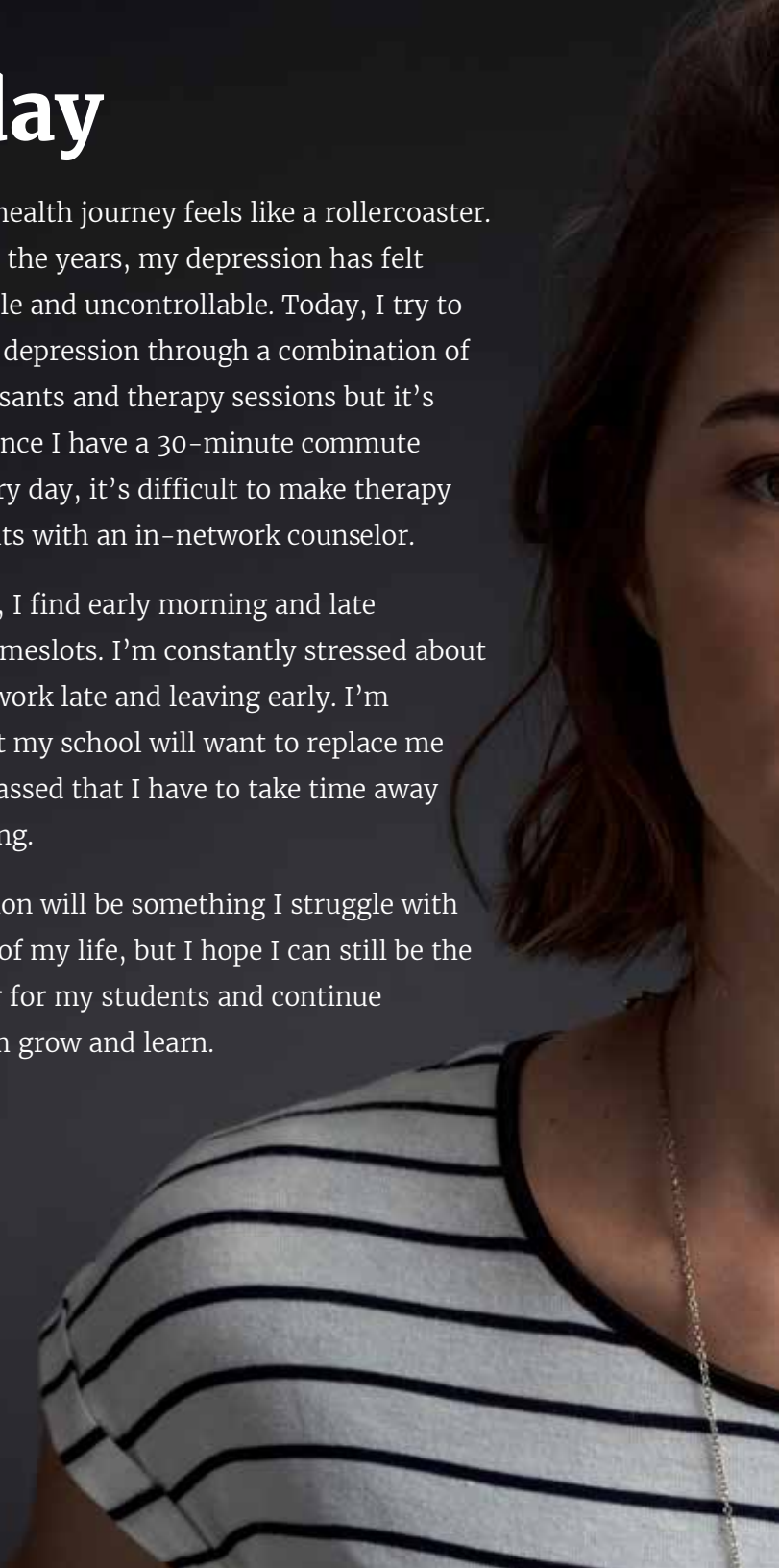
After everything I've been through, this was the most traumatic experience of my life.

Today

My mental health journey feels like a rollercoaster. Throughout the years, my depression has felt unpredictable and uncontrollable. Today, I try to manage my depression through a combination of anti-depressants and therapy sessions but it's still hard. Since I have a 30-minute commute to work every day, it's difficult to make therapy appointments with an in-network counselor.

If I'm lucky, I find early morning and late afternoon timeslots. I'm constantly stressed about arriving to work late and leaving early. I'm worried that my school will want to replace me and embarrassed that I have to take time away from teaching.

My depression will be something I struggle with for the rest of my life, but I hope I can still be the best teacher for my students and continue to help them grow and learn.







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