

THE BRIDGE

By: Bailee Leonard

INTRO/BACKGROUND

If you picked up this book it is probably because you yourself, or someone you love and know, suffers from a form of mental illness. In that case, let my first words be that you are loved and that you are not defined by your illness. If you are merely interested in knowing more about mental illness or reading this is a random act, I am so excited that you picked up this book, because this book is written for you. You may have not known you needed this book, but I hope at the end of this journey together you are more sensitive to people with mental illness and maybe even grow a passion for it. Let me introduce myself, my name is Bailee Leonard. I am a Southern California native who absolutely loves and runs off of coffee and of course Jesus. Really the only two reasons I can even finish this book. I am no psychologist, therapist, doctor, or even an English major. I am simply a college dropout who has a mental illness, a heart for ministry, and is on a mission to see change. For those who seek insight on mental illness, I hope my words give you a perspective that changes how you love others. To the ones who feel consumed, I hope my experiences and my thoughts give you some peace and hope. I also know that mental illnesses are so bigger and complex than this book, so there are a list of amazing resources I personally trust on the first page of this book. Please do not be afraid to reach out, it's the first step to living your life in the fullness God intended you to have.

Growing up, I never really heard people speak up about mental illness, it was as if it didn't really exist. Although, I was completely surrounded and consumed by it from the inside out. The church steered away from hard conversations with topics like mental illness, mental health, suicide, and depression. Family members would throw things under the rug when an "incident" happened and act as if life was perfect. Intaking this perspective of life from a very young age ended up being extremely toxic for me, especially because from that young age I felt like I, myself was fighting an inner battle that was unknown to me. I felt trapped in my own young body. Have you ever had that feeling? The feeling of being completely out of control of your own mental state & even your body. These emotions I was feeling didn't make sense to me as a child, I didn't know how to balance or even handle them. So, I did what I thought I was supposed to do. I threw them under the rug and acted as if life was perfect. Even though I knew life was very, very far from perfect. That rug quickly grew very dusty and worn out. By the age of ten I already suffered from suicidal thoughts, anxiety, and bipolar tendencies. Of course, as a ten year old you don't necessarily think that this is a mental illness you're dealing with, you just think your life sucks. I grew up in a broken home like many, my mother left my life at the age of two and I was raised by a single father who I love so much but has dealt with his own demons. A family I love to death but I have always felt lightyears away from. I felt isolated and alone for as long as I can remember. Speaking up about emotions and how you felt was looked as weakness. My siblings, for most of their lives, were in the foster care system. They built everything they have now from the ground up. With statistics and the world against them, they each made a beautiful life for themselves; great marriages, good kids, outstanding careers and

accomplishments. For that, I am extremely proud of them. But with this as your “standard” growing up, you didn’t complain about what you were going through- because “if they could do it so can you.” Shame quickly crept in and took hold of my thoughts. I was fearful to speak up about what I was feeling inside because I knew the people I loved would see it as an excuse, as my weakness. Silence soon became my darkest and closest friend. Growing up, multiple people I knew died from suicide, including family members. The term *died from suicide* may seem a little different or even wrong to some people but that’s what it is- a killer. You wouldn’t say someone took their life from cancer, you would say they died from cancer- same with suicide. This term helps remove culpability from the person who has lost their life and allows for a discussion about the disease or disorder from which they were suffering from. Mental illness is an inner battle, & more importantly a spiritual battle. One that the enemy tries to take us out with. And unfortunately does to too many people. Suicide isn’t an act of selfishness, and if that is your perspective, I think it’s time to gain some more perspective. Suicide is an act of warfar that the person effected, sadly couldn’t handle. Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the United states. This includes many Christ followers and even pastors and leaders in the Church. I won’t get into the statistics because well, that isn’t what this book is about. This book is hopefully a small part of the beginning of helping bridge the gap between mental illness and ministry. And it starts with you and I.