

How my Anxiety Disorder Saved my Life

By Shalaine Rowe

Growing up in rural Jamaica during the late 1990s and early 2000s, mental health was never given proper attention. Most people outside the medical community were unfamiliar with conditions like schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. Those who suffered from mental illnesses were often labeled as “mad” and frequently ostracized. In extreme cases, individuals were sent to the island’s most well-known psychiatric hospital, Bellevue, where they became little more than urban myths.

It’s fair to say that the disregard for mental health throughout human history isn’t unique to my home island. Although the mental hygiene movement, pioneered by French physician Philippe Pinel, began in the early 20th century, it wasn’t until the early 1990s that countries at the forefront of medicine, such as the United States, began to raise proper awareness about mental health.

Given my strong Christian upbringing, it came as no surprise that when I first began experiencing what were clearly panic and anxiety symptoms after moving to the States, my concerns were somewhat dismissed by family members. I was encouraged to trust God to make me better.

My relationship with anxiety has been long and arduous. I can recall experiencing symptoms sporadically while living in Jamaica as a teenager, but at the time, I lacked the knowledge to understand what was happening to me.

I migrated to America in 2008 at the age of 16. I enrolled in high school and was required to complete two years (junior and senior year) before going to college. During my junior year, also known as 11th grade, I tried out for—and made—the girls' varsity soccer team. Unfortunately, my time on the team was short-lived.

It was a typical day at practice, and we had just finished some cone drills. As I walked across the field to help retrieve the cones, I felt my heart perform a few somersaults in my chest. I remember freezing in my tracks and gripping my left breast. I looked around, expecting to collapse at any moment. The collapse never came. Instead, my breathing became shallow, my skin tingled, and I felt out of control, while simultaneously being completely paralyzed by fear. I recall crying uncontrollably that day, and for many days afterward, because I believed I was

dying from heart issues. This feeling of impending doom didn't subside, even after a checkup where medical professionals assured me that I was a healthy 17-year-old.

Palpitations, I would later learn, are a common symptom of anxiety. They are usually triggered by stressful situations, though sometimes they can occur without any provocation. I would also learn, many years later in therapy, that my triggers were a combination of factors: a traumatizing Pentecostal upbringing, divorced parents, migrating and leaving behind friends and family, and adjusting to a new household and country.

Several weeks passed during my junior year, and the palpitations subsided. I was able to maintain a fairly normal senior year of high school. I graduated and began my college career at a local state school.

Shortly after matriculating, the symptoms returned. I found myself struggling to drive daily, frequently having to pull over to catch my breath. I started avoiding public places, still burdened by the fear of suddenly dropping dead. I spent most nights crying myself to sleep, trying to find ways to relax and calm down.

My stepmother provided some respite when she researched and purchased a DVD (yes, DVD) set on anxiety by self-help author Lucinda Bassett. This became a huge first step toward understanding the disorder, its causes, and how it manifested physically in the body.

This newfound understanding also empowered me to educate those around me. Although there was some resistance, and I was still discouraged from seeking modern medical help, at least this affliction now had a name and an explanation.

I completed my associate degree and transferred to a state university to continue my education. My third and fourth years of college were much better than the first two. I was able to complete my bachelor's degree and graduated in 2014 with honors (cum laude).

Unfortunately, post-college life would not be as kind. After graduating, I lived with roommates during my first two years as a working adult. In 2016, my roommate decided to move back home with her family, so I had to find an affordable apartment for myself.

This would be my first time ever living on my own. The apartment was affordable, at a whopping \$675 per month, but it was in a very undesirable part of town. The buildings were dilapidated, occupied by many unscrupulous characters, and law enforcement frequently visited the property to perform drug raids.

A few months into living alone in my less-than-ideal new home and unsafe community, familiar and unwelcome symptoms began to resurface. I became so fixated on the health of my heart that I completely overlooked the absence of my menstrual cycle, which had stopped showing up for several months, despite having been very regular since it first began.

My anxiety symptoms worsened, and the panic attacks became more frequent. I was in a mentally dilapidated state, much like my external surroundings. One weekend in May of 2017, I packed a bag and drove to my dad's place. My family could see that I was deteriorating. I remember telling them I wanted to visit a doctor to seek treatment for my anxiety. This prompted my stepmom to ask if anything had changed in my body recently. I told her nothing major, except that my period had disappeared for almost a year. She advised me to be sure to mention this when I saw the doctor.

Two days later, I made an appointment with a provider, and a week later, I found myself sitting in the office of a Black female gynecologist. I cried as I unburdened myself, sharing my concerns about my anxiety, and pleaded with her to check my hormones, thinking they might be the cause. After listening to my lament, she finally asked if there had been any recent changes in my body. I apathetically informed her that my period was gone, but since I wasn't pregnant, there was no cause for concern. The main issue was my anxiety, and that was what needed fixing.

She ordered a transvaginal ultrasound, which I had done the next day. Less than a week later, I was informed that the ultrasound revealed a mass on my left ovary, and she referred me to another specialist. The new specialist ordered an MRI, and within two days of the scan, I was told I needed surgery.

On June 20th, 2017, I underwent a procedure called an oophorectomy, which is the removal of one ovary and the adjoining fallopian tube.

My mother flew up from Jamaica to assist me with the preparation and recovery. One week after my surgery, we were driven to the doctor's office for a follow-up, where he could relay my progress and perform further tests. It was during this visit that I was informed I had stage 1A ovarian cancer. The tumor was a granulosa cell tumor, characterized by its slow growth and high recurrence rate later in life.

Some might say it would have eventually been caught during a routine checkup, but to be honest, I was a broke young adult who wasn't prioritizing regular checkups. If I hadn't been tortured by my anxiety symptoms, I had no intention of seeing a doctor during that period of my life. Thankfully, that's no longer the case—I now get several checkups a year.

I like to say that my anxiety bullied me into getting a checkup and saved my life as it makes the horrors I've faced at its hands seem less horrific and somewhat purposeful. But that train of thought is easily derailed by the fact that it continued to bully me after surgery and still bullies me today. It dealt some of its hardest blows in 2018 and 2019. I frequented emergency rooms, called 911 multiple times, and somehow saw three different cardiologists within a few months for the "heart condition" the other cardiologist must have missed.

Fortunately, I'm better equipped to fight back these days with a combination of medication, a very supportive and intelligent older sister, therapy, and a little knowledge.

My 4th cardiologist prescribed some beta-blockers and assured me I didn't need a 5th opinion.

And as for the cancer? I'm down one ovary, but I'm still very much cancer-free.