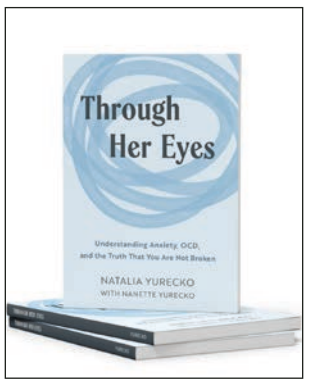
Minnetonka High student, mother publish mental health book

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(SUBMITTED PHOTOS)

Natalia Yurecko



"Through Her Eyes: Understanding Anxiety, OCD, and the Truth That You Are Not Broken," by Natalia and Nanette Yurecko.

Natalia Yurecko was just 4 years old when she began presenting symptoms of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). She was diagnosed with OCD at age 7, after her obsessions around the fear of getting sick grew more debilitating, leading to a psychiatric evaluation.

"I was a huge germaphobe," Yurecko says. "I didn't like going to preschool because of how many germs and other kids were around me and I wouldn't eat breakfast or lunch at school because I was scared that I was going to get sick at school and that was my biggest fear around that."

Now a third-year student at Minnetonka High School, Yurecko takes a deep dive into her experiences living with OCD and Anxiety in her new book "Through Her Eyes: Understanding Anxiety, OCD, and the Truth That You Are Not Broken," published April 14.

Co-authored by her mother Nanette Yurecko — a retired educator and family support group facilitator — the book shares personal anecdotes from the perspectives of both Natalia and Nanette throughout her treatment/recovery and beyond, to help reduce stigma around youth mental health.

OCD can present in a variety of ways. In addition to Natalia's fear of sicknesses, her OCD also presented in perfectionistic habits and tendencies. These behaviors were reflected in her schoolwork, hobbies, and daily activities.

Natalia was 4 years old when she began playing classical piano. She recalls feeling increased frustration with herself if a mistake was made when her obsessive thoughts would peak. Her extreme perfectionism made these minor mistakes, like a wrong note or rhythm, feel unmanageable.

She eventually entered pageantry at 12 years old and met her pageant coach Mary Swanson, who had also been diagnosed with OCD. Swanson helped fuel Natalia's deep passion for mental health advocacy and education.

From time to time, she admits that her perfectionism still creeps into her academic performance.

"I will say, sometimes I still do have trouble with that perfectionism, and now that I'm in high school applying to colleges, taking all these AP courses, that perfectionism is definitely still here," Natalia said. "I just think I've learned to be so in tune with my emotions and to know my brain and to know when my OCD is trying to play tricks with my mind."

Natalia credits her time in childhood OCD treatment for providing her with the necessary tools to help reduce and manage her obsessive thoughts. While difficult to reflect on in detail, she recalls the use of exposure therapy during treatment, starting with photos and comics; then working its way up to videos, books, and movies; and even art projects to help reduce her anxieties.

"That was really helpful because it made getting sick — which was my biggest fear in the entire world — it made it seem so much smaller," Natalia said. "And that was a big part of helping my OCD, so now I'm able to manage it. And yes, I still do have a fear of getting sick, but I know that it's normal and I know that it's not a rational fear to be so, so, afraid of it."

Both Natalia and Nanette felt it was important to include helpful coping strategies at the end of each chapter to provide readers with helpful techniques for calming obsessive thoughts.

Even with its challenges, Natalia has turned her diagnosis into a purpose. She thanks Swanson for helping her add positive meaning to the diagnosis that once made her feel limited.

"It's given me such a purpose to help others with mental health disorders," Natalia said. "And that's, again, what inspired the book is just to help other families and children going through this that feel isolated to show that they're not alone and there are other people out here that will support them and have gone through similar things."

Most importantly, the book relays the message to all people struggling with a mental health disorder that they are not broken.

"The reason we wrote this book is to help others younger kids going through this and parents not feel so isolated and not feel so broken, but I think knowing that piece that your life's not over, everything's going to be OK, and you're going to learn the tools that you need to still be successful and do everything you want in life, even though it didn't feel like that when I was younger," Natalia said.

"Through Her Eyes: Understanding Anxiety, OCD, and the Truth That You Are Not Broken," is available for purchase on Amazon at bit.ly/3RHw0we.

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