

Anne R.

Crisis of Meaning Interview

When my sister, Sara, was a senior in high school she was diagnosed with depression. She lost all sense of meaning associated with her life and stopped caring about school and her future. Sara is now 28 years old. She currently lives in Dallas, TX with her husband and two children, a girl and a boy. She speaks Mandarin and has a love for Asian culture. In the near future she is planning to finish her final semester of undergrad at the University of Hawaii and attend law school.

Q: You were diagnosed with depression when you were at a crucial stage of early adulthood. Could you describe your first memories of being depressed or losing a sense of meaning?

A: I remember being on a trip with my school. We went over the summer to visit a few countries in Europe. I had been fighting with my friends and felt distant from everything. I just wanted to withdraw from everyone and everything we were doing. Everything felt exaggerated and seemed to make me unhappy. I distinctly remember wanting to go home. Not because I was homesick, but because I just wanted to escape from everything. I remember being on the bus in Ireland, by the Cliffs of Moher. It was cloudy and rainy, as usual, and I felt so hopeless and overwhelmed, like someone tremendously important in my life had died.

Q: Senior year is a big time for young adults. How did your depression affect your schoolwork and plans for college?

A: I totally withdrew from all activities, sports, friendships, etc. Earlier in the year I would find myself in class and would have the urge to start crying, for no reason at all. I would just feel sad all the time and could burst into tears at any moment. I seemed to find a reason to quit all that I was involved in. After a while, I wouldn't get up in the mornings and would just stay in bed all day. I wouldn't even leave the house. I felt as though it didn't matter and I could hide from all my responsibilities as a student.

Q: What did it feel like being depressed everyday? How did you perceive what was happening?

A: It totally consumed me. I didn't care about anything, literally nothing. I started to consider suicide because it felt like that was the only option. I used to think everything I did was meaningless and that I would fail no matter what. I'd spend my days thinking about how I could escape from everything and that if I was gone, nobody would even notice. After a time of staying in bed every day, doing nothing, I started to almost

accept that I was depressed. It became who I was. I was a depressed person, with no way out and that was how I lived. It completely defined how I saw myself.

Q: Did you try anything to cope with your depression (medical help, counseling, etc.?)

A: I went to my family doctor, who prescribed anti-depressants and recommended that I see a therapist. It took me a long time to actually consider taking medication or speaking to anyone. I didn't see a purpose to it.

Q: How long were you depressed? When did you realize you wanted to change things?

A: I went to my first semester of college at Dartmouth and by the end of it I had to leave. I couldn't handle the pressures of college. I transferred to the University of Hawaii with a major in Asian Studies. I thought that switching my major and location of schools would change things for me. By my sophomore year at UH I knew I needed to fix things in my life and stop letting my depression overtake me.

Q: What types of things did you notice it changed in you? Could you describe how it overtook you?

A: Like I mentioned, it became who I was. I saw myself as depressed and it limited what I could do. I didn't like multi-tasking and talking to people, or even looking them in the eye. I had created such self-defeating habits for myself. After almost a year of not doing anything, barely leaving the house, everything I did seemed so complicated. Just getting up and dressed was a big deal. So when I was in school and had to multi-task with assignments and classes, it was really hard. I would find myself spending more time planning out how to do something than it actually took to do it. I would fret about every situation, getting anxious about what may or may not happen. In that way, my depression took on a serious physical role too. I would cry so hard I would get headaches. I would literally wail for hours. I wouldn't eat and lost around 10 lbs. I developed TMJ, a disorder in which you clench your teeth at night.

Q: I know that around sophomore and junior years at UH you realized you wanted to change. Can you describe how that happened?

A: I distinctly remember laying in bed, which had become a usual habit for me. The sun was coming in through the windows and had lit up the room. I was staring at my nightstand of books that I had put there to read, but hadn't started. I used to like thinking about doing things but had trouble actually doing them. I remember laying there thinking about how I liked to identify myself as depressed. I started crying, thinking about how useless it was. This was the true turning point for me. I started crying not because I was sick of doing things or because they were meaningless. For the first time I realized that I was sad because I was missing out on so many opportunities

to be happy. I was so sick and tired of limiting myself by thinking about all the reasons things could go wrong and working myself into a frenzy.

Q: How did your thinking change after this happened?

A: I started to actually look ahead. It was really a hard few years. I had to change not only my mental status, but also habits that I had developed. For the first time in years, though, I was actually looking forward to things again. I had to spend a lot of time in recovery mode, though. I had to make up for problems I had made for myself in school and in my relationships. I had to start making amends. Everyday was a huge struggle because I was constantly in a state between the new and old me.

Q: When did you finally consider yourself depression-free?

A: When I met my husband, Jim, I was still recovering. After we got married and our first child, Shirlyn, was born, I really considered myself to be stable again. Things had definitely started looking up, and I felt as though I understood myself much better. Being a mother is extremely difficult, but it's rewarding at the same time.

Q: Looking back on your experiences with depression, how do you think it changed you?

A: After years of struggling, I finally have come to terms with it. I try to think of it as a good thing, as a challenge. I feel as though I got a lot out of it and it taught me a great deal. I think the biggest reason I became depressed in the first place is because of my own insecurity and lack of understanding for who I was. I think senior year of high school and the first few years of college are difficult times for individuals. It's a time in when you are finding out a great deal about yourself and what you value, what you want or don't want in your life. My depression helped me see that I have a tendency, as do all, to try and escape things we are unsure of or don't understand. We try to hide from things, thinking that it will make things easier. But in the long run, I've realized that it's better to just do something and get it over with. It may not always go as we plan. It may go better than we expected. Or it may go poorly and then we have the opportunity to learn from it. Either way, we always have the opportunity to learn and grow from our experiences, even if we can't see it at that very moment.

Q: You mentioned that you see yourself as the new and old you. Could you describe what you mean?

A: Over the years, what I choose to surround myself with has changed a lot, and I think my years being depressed contributed to it. The old me was always concerned with others' opinions and I feel as though I would do or say anything just to appease whoever I was speaking to. I would constantly let others influence me and I didn't

really have a good sense of who I was. I was definitely highly self-conscious. I now like to do things differently and am obsessed with bettering myself, especially through self-acceptance. I practice yoga and meditate daily, both of which have really helped my anxiety. I try to take things in stride and not anticipate what could happen. I actually try to encourage myself to try new things and do things that I think are out of my comfort zone. I am a huge believer in spontaneity now. I try to breathe. Whenever I feel myself getting overwhelmed or anxious or frustrated, I breathe. I've feel as though I wasted too much time in my life getting worked up and missed out on so many great moments. So now, I try to embrace everything by enjoying the present and not letting my mind get clouded with my worries. I've really switched how I deal with my problems and how I heal my body and mind. When something wouldn't go my way before, I would throw up my hands and hide. I was encouraged by countless doctors and psychiatrists to start medication, as if it were the answer to my problems. I feel as though the biggest change for me was when I really looked inside myself and considered what I wanted – to be happy. The change of perspective I've had wasn't anything medication could provide. It was a totally experiential.

Q: How do your future plans demonstrate your new self?

A: This summer I'm moving back to Hawaii to finish up my last semester at UH. Due to my years of struggling with depression I wasn't able to finish. It's been something I've had to live with, but I've always known that I have the ability to graduate. I try to look at it as a blessing. Taking a few years off has made me realize what I want to do with my degree and where I go next. I've been working in a law office for a year now and am definitely going to attend law school in the next few years.

Q: Wow, you really have an inspiring story. I don't think I've ever heard you tell it so eloquently. Thanks for the help, Sara. Love you.

A: No problem. It always gives me the chills to talk about it, but when I do it makes me proud.

Comments:

Sara's story illustrates the way in which human nature has a tendency to be consumed by suffering, to the point of self-defeat. It brings to mind the saying that "We are our own worst enemy." Her depression was a reaction to the anxiety of upcoming college years. It stimulated her own insecurities about herself and made her re-consider everything around her, including her friendships and what she valued as important. After she and others whom she respected, such as the family doctor, labeled her as "depressed", she began to consider herself as such. In doing so, she avoided facing the root of her depression and became overwhelmed with suffering, letting it become her identity. Daoism brings to light the idea that human nature's incessant need to define

ourselves and categories things with labels is actually counterproductive and does more harm than good:

“When he is beyond form and semblance,
Beyond “this” and “that,”
Where is the comparison
With another object?
Where is there conflict?
What can stand in his way?
(Excerpt from The Way of Chuang Tzu)

Additionally, Sara’s path of recovery portrays the idea that individuals are the keys to their own happiness, regardless of circumstances that surround them. Both Aristotle and Viktor Frankl’s Man’s Search for Meaning convey this concept. Aristotle considers the individual as dominant in creating one’s own happiness, or *eudaimonia*. It is each human’s responsibility to look toward the future and happiness as the ultimate goal. Perhaps, for Sara, going to law school will lead her toward her ultimate “*telos*”, or goal. Frankl also incorporates the idea that individuals make their own sense of meaning through the attitude they take toward ultimate suffering. Sara’s steps toward recovering of meaning illustrate this in that she ultimately decided she needed to change herself and her attitude regarding her suffering.

Frankl also touches upon this with his discussion of “Pan Determinism,” stating “Man is capable of changing the world for the better if possible, and of changing himself for the better if necessary” (pg. 131). To consider oneself a happy individual and create meaning in existence, one needs to accept the responsibility of making one’s own sense of happiness. Once Sara was able to see what was stopping her from progressing, she created a much more defined sense of meaning in her life. Moreover, Sara realized that constant worrying about the future was only preventing her from enjoying and experiencing life in the present. Through the experience of suffering and the realization of its ability to consume us, she has a much better perspective of it. Sara is now able to look at past suffering with a much more optimistic, productive attitude, accepting it as a reality without constantly hiding from it in fear.