

For as long as I can remember, I have felt isolated. As a child, I got along better with adults than I ever did with my peers. Before I could name what I was feeling as anxiety, I knew only that I felt uncomfortable and out of step with what was happening around me. I saw and felt things that other children didn't, and I didn't understand how to be more like them.

I was convinced that I must be from another world, because it didn't seem possible that I was meant to live amongst people who navigated the smallest of social interactions with the utmost dishonesty – their words told one story, but their guarded eyes, forced smiles, and awkward body language told another.

I was labelled shy, introverted, and sensitive. My mother delivered these words with kindness, turning them into precious gifts that made me special, but the rest of the world seemed to deride them as excuses, even weaknesses. It was beyond my understanding why everyone couldn't see what I saw. What value could there possibly be in maintaining and indeed, contributing to a culture that was indifferent at best, and hostile at worst?

As a teenager, I continued to struggle to understand the behaviour of those around me and my own inability to fit in. I was lonely and withdrawn. I struggled with an eating disorder, insomnia, and a mounting sense of resentment towards my own existence.

My anxiety was at times so profound I was unable to cross the street or stand on a crowded sidewalk without having a panic attack. My depression drowned out all colour and music in my life; all I wanted to do was sleep, to wake up and look forward to anything. Days and weeks of my life disappeared into a dingy grey haze because I was so paralyzed by my own mind that I couldn't get out of bed.

I spent years seeing various mental health professionals. I experienced moderate success managing my symptoms on medication, but felt a fundamental loss of self. I grew cautious and guarded, and taught myself to turn every day into a command performance, hiding my fears and insecurities under a veneer of cheerful, carefully constructed confidence. I watched my more vivacious, extroverted friends; I learned what made them witty and charming, and armed myself in kind. Each day, I rehearsed all possible conversations, mapped out every encounter like a good general.

For most of my life, there was no community of like-minded people; it felt like my parents and I against the world. As I got older, I began to meet people – teachers, mentors, and friends that I trusted enough to reveal my secret struggle to. Something in their kind, knowing smiles told me *I feel it too*, and I knew that they were fighting the same war I was. My community was one of silent understanding and compassion.

Until I was hired into government by the Work-Able internship program, I hadn't really given a career in the B.C. Public Service any serious thought. I had plans to become a university professor, and at the end of my final year as an undergraduate, I was struggling to choose between graduate school offers. It was everything I had worked for, yet I was no longer sure it was what I wanted.

I loved the intellectualism, the rigour, and the collaborative discourse of academia, but I found myself yearning to engage in work that had a more tangible impact than my area of study was likely to generate. I took a chance and turned down my offers.

When I learned that I had been hired at the Ministry of Advanced Education, I was thrilled. I was off on a new adventure, and I would be serving the sector that was still so close to my heart. It felt like the perfect fit, and for the past eighteen months, it has been.

I have doubted, struggled, grown, and triumphed. I have faced challenges that forced me to confront my own vulnerabilities, and in so doing, found my strength. I have found unexpected freedom in questioning my perceived limitations and discovering that I am far more capable than I ever would have believed. It has been the most overwhelmingly positive and validating experience of my life to date.

I consider it my profound privilege to work with a team of the most brilliant, driven, talented, and kind people I know, and the success I have achieved is as much their victory as it is mine. There are times when it still feels very difficult to manage my disability, but having the unwavering support, encouragement, and respect of those who have become my second family has made me come to regard it not as a burden, but simply as another part of myself, no better or worse than any other.

Work-Able was the catalyst for achieving a kind of clarity and peace about my disability that I didn't realize I needed. Over the past eighteen months, I have found the self-acceptance I spent most of my young adult life searching for, and through the eyes of my amazing mentors and colleagues I have been able to see that I am not marked or diminished by my disability, as I once believed. I am worthy and cherished because of who I am and because of the quiet gifts that living with a disability has given me: kindness, empathy, awareness.

For the first time in my life, I feel safe to fully be myself, and in return, I am seen truly as I am and *valued* for it. There could be no gift as precious as this fundamental loss of fear and the unexpected gaining of a community of understanding and acceptance.

I cannot, and will not, speak on behalf of "people with disabilities" because I don't know what it's like to live with other mental illnesses, or to face physical challenges. I can only speak to my experience, and how having an invisible disability has shaped my worldview and my sense of self.

However an individual characterizes or internalizes their experience, no one should have to feel like they are fighting alone. Needing, and indeed demanding, self-awareness, respect, and compassion does not make you sensitive, strange, or broken; it makes you a *human being*. It is tough, but you are tougher, and know that you are good enough, you are brave enough, and *you are not alone*.