

How “Depression” Shapes Me

I grew up in a middle-class family in Amoy, a coastal city in China across the sea from Taiwan. My father is an engineer on a marine research team where he spends most of his time out to sea. My mother is a retired teacher. When I was in middle school, my once strong and optimistic mother was diagnosed with Bipolar-depression. With my father spending most of his time away, the burden of caring for her, and myself, fell on me. The experience and challenges of caring for someone I love who has a mental health disorder has greatly influenced my decision to become a more effective and impactful communicator.

After her diagnosis, I began fervently studying psychology as I wanted to learn how to fight this mental illness alongside my mom. I read masterpieces from Freud and David G. Myers. Eventually, I initiated the first “Psychology Club” in my middle school, gathering peers to discuss mental health issues and to provide each other with support in overcoming life difficulties. In the society I live in, mental health situations are rarely discussed with family or friends, not to mention in public. At my middle school it turned into an outlet needed by many students and it continues to benefit the students to this day. Once in high school, I decided to study liberal arts while still leading the club. Although I didn’t become a psychology major student in college, I gained a better understanding of mental health issues, created a tighter bond with my mom, and developed my interest in science communication.

As an English Business Journalism major at UIBE in Beijing, I found people tend to pay much more attention to economy and business-related news than to science, health, and environmental ones. That inspired me to accept a position as an intern journalist in CBN Weekly, a top business magazine in China which covers science and environmental technology stories. During my sophomore year, my mom’s depression relapsed. I traveled between Amoy and Beijing frequently for over one year. Taking care of my mom, keeping up with

my academics, and interning at CBN Weekly at the same time left me exhausted and feeling depressed. However, I felt renewed when I was chosen as one of the thirty visiting scholars of UIBE to the United Nation Geneva Office where I met Ms. Bettina Luescher, a previous senior journalist covering international news in CNN and present chief spokesperson in Word Food Program. Her straightforward, journalistic style and passion in “Zero Hunger Campaign” by reporting and speaking for those who are food insecure and starving. Her approach to educating people via videos, twitter and other communication technologies was very impressive and made me proud of being a journalist. I was inspired by how I could use technical tools like this to highlight other issues, like mental health.

In addition to my mom, I also witnessed many friends suffering from depression. While making much needed strides, Chinese society is still struggling to adequately address the growing problem of depression. When I exchanged in the States and lived in LA for three months, I felt a huge difference about how people with so-called “mental disease” were treated. In China, many of them are “captured” in mental hospitals or their homes. I noticed an entirely different approach in California, where people were respectful and treated with respect. During my time there, I found many homeless people with mental health problems, but they were kind people. I still remember, one day a homeless man helped me with my heavy suitcase on the bus. When I said “thank you” to him, he smiled back to me! You don’t experience simple positive exchanges like that in China too often.

My mom is now retired from her teaching career and gradually stepping out of her depression under the company of my dad and me. But I still feel an inner urge to pursue a higher degree in digital journalism to acquire more advanced knowledge and hands on practice so that I can tell stories about scientific communication and human-interest issues, like mental health, more efficiently and effectively, thus improving audience’s attention to and understanding.