

ELIZABETH MACLELLAN SHARES HER COMEBACK STORY

by Elizabeth MacLellan

At seventeen, I could no longer hide the ways in which I was different from everyone else. I became anxious more easily than my peers. After a test, they didn't *still* feel their heart beating out of their chest, and after a bad grade, they didn't hurt themselves. I was diagnosed with Generalized Anxiety Disorder, and while the therapy and medication helped, I still felt like I was less than my peers.

I've been gaining in confidence over the years, but it was a confidence that kept my anxiety an arm's length. I felt as if I could be the person who has panic attacks or I could be the professional I'd wanted to be. Sitting in class, I averted my eyes when we talked about anxiety disorders, and wondered what my classmates would say if they knew someone in the room had the condition they were discussing. I wasn't sure if people would be able to hold these two truths at once; that I am a capable, confident, and insightful student of psychology and I am also a person who has fought for years to stabilize my mental health.

At twenty one, I met people who were like me. A classmate referred me to the Gathering and Inspiring Future Talent (GIFT) training lead by Dr. Kim Bisset. For the first time, I heard someone talk about their diagnosis, and I saw the way that my peers offered advice and support. Everyone sitting around the conference table had overcome challenges and were all the stronger for it. I saw that with some help, they could achieve all the things they wanted to do. Kim explained to us how our experiences could put us in a unique position to help someone else. When I learned that peer mentors are not only allowed, but encouraged, to connect with young adults based on lived experience, I started to see a path for my own success. Through practice, I learned the skills that would help me share my experiences with others. I learned the language I could use to talk about the parts of me I had been so afraid to show.

In less than a year, the way I think about myself has drastically changed. That professional, infallible, persona that never felt anxiety wouldn't be able to connect with others in the way I can today. I've been lucky to come back and teach the class that helped me so much, and I've been even luckier to see the same transformation starting in others.

I graduate in May with my bachelor's degree in psychology. For my minor in psychology, the Women's Gender, and Sexuality studies department chose to recognize me with an award. I'm sure the transition from school to work will challenge me in ways I haven't even thought of yet. I have plenty of goals to look forward to, including more work with the GIFT training and with the Nan Project. I plan to slowly transition off the medication I've been taking since I was seventeen, and write about that process. I am happy, productive, and living with anxiety. All I needed was the right supports.