



## ***Treading Water:*** **Self-Reflections on** **Generalized Anxiety** **Disorder**

**Megan Murray**

It has taken me twenty two years to face the fact that I am suffering needlessly from a debilitating problem, Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD). I suffered silently in fear that my peers, teachers, family, friends, and my boyfriend would discover my secret. I found it hard to hide my emotions and phobias in front of those I loved. I felt like I was a prisoner of my own emotions and fears. I managed to conceal my inner thoughts until recently, when I decided it was time to own up to what has plagued me for a lifetime. I decided it was time to free myself. The day I admitted I had an anxiety disorder was the first day of a new life for me. I am ready to free the emotions that lay trapped in my mind and have haunted me to this day as an adult.

In his essay titled "Why Is P Afraid to Love a Woman" (2002), Peter Dai reflects on a personal dilemma he faced while growing up. He describes how if no one knew he had anxiety they would think he was self-confident and self-assured. I also was able to conceal my fears and anxiety. Peter spoke of the surge of tension that went through his body when he was around girls. Similarly, there would be times when I would black out because situations be-

came so difficult to handle. I just turned off. I would sweat in class dreading that a teacher might call on me and I would not be able to answer. I had a choking feeling when I took a test, and my grades reflected that stress. How can a person effectively take a test when they can not hold a pencil, can not breathe, and can not focus their eyes? It was impossible. All of these symptoms had become normal to me.

My anxiety peaked when I arrived at SUNY Oneonta. I felt the pressure of success and began to realize I strive to please others, not myself. I felt the need to fit into some niche on campus. There were sororities and fraternities all around campus. I felt uneasy when I walked around campus. The bar scene was an uncomfortable experience for me as well. I soon became afraid to go out to the bars for the fear something bad would happen. This led to my Agoraphobia which has lasted almost two years. My mother thought that it was awkward that a twenty-year old college student would stay home on Friday and Saturday nights.

I was terrified to leave my home or dorm room for the fear that something horrible would happen. I missed out of a lot of great experiences in college because I was afraid to tell anyone that I had anxiety attacks. I did a great job of hiding my anxiety in front of my friends. I always had an excuse for not going out; "I have a lot of work to do" or "I do not feel well" were most common. When I did agree to go out I would get excited thinking that everything was going to be great. But the excitement did not last long. I would become very agitated and soon a choking feeling would surround me. I was unable to swallow and I felt short of breath. The problem continued to the point where I dreaded going out to eat for the fear that I would have an anxiety attack in the middle of my dinner.

I have lived two lives. One is the confident Megan Murray who can handle anything that is thrown her way. The second is

the Megan Murray who was afraid of the world and broke down at the onset of stress. This has caused a chronic **front stage** and **back stage** behavioral dualism in my personality. When I was on the **front stage** I was a good student, friend, girlfriend, and daughter. I acted confidently and in control at all times, never allowing my true emotions to emerge. **Back stage** I was angry inside, always thinking of who I could blame for the latest crisis I was facing. I felt that my **identity** was missing. I was never confident of myself and who I was. Identity is the one thing that makes each of us unique and I was unable to establish that. I connected with the movie we watched in class on **Multiple Personalities** in that I felt like I was two different people. I was a child at heart who was afraid to be alone and make decisions; and yet, I had another self who could take over when things became difficult.

I was denied entrance to the Block Program for the spring semester. I was obsessed with proving myself to my family and SUNY Oneonta. I spent my week-ends working on projects and papers leaving no time for friends or family. I distanced myself from those I loved so I would have no distractions. I slowly pushed away the ones who meant the most to me. I knew I was different from my peers in that I was constantly stressed and anxious. I felt like I was on a treadmill running on the fastest speed. I was unable to accept what I had.

I had been able to disguise my anxiety until I received an email stating I got a C- in Economics, meaning that I was not eligible for the block program. I was overcome with emotion and collapsed on my dorm floor. I did not want to speak to anyone for days and I trembled so badly that I could barely hold a glass. I went to the doctor on Christmas Eve and I was told that I was having a nervous breakdown and I was suffering from Generalized Anxiety Disorder. I was put on anti-depressants and Xanax until my body could cope with the situation.

My doctor felt it was important that I begin taking Anti-depressants to get back to ground zero where I could cope with the situation at hand. In other words, they chose the route of **medicalization** to define and cure my problem. However, I was against any kind of intervention with medication. People who suffer from anxiety and depression are given drugs and then sent on their way. Anxiety is a deep-rooted emotional issue that stems from inner personal troubles but in a social context. Until I was able to take on the task of sociological self-exploration I could not combat my anxiety.

I believe that the **sick role** assigned to people with depression is misconstrued. Critics of anxiety and depression think that we stay in bed all day and do not function in our daily lives. However, many of us sufferers go about our daily routine disguising how we are truly feeling inside. I did not feel I was entitled to rest when I had my breakdown. I felt I had failed as a daughter and a student. I thought I should not be allowed to lay down and be pampered because I was a failure to my family. My mother told me she was proud of how I did under the pressure I was enduring. I was so relieved to hear that I had not been a disappointment and that in fact she was proud of me. It was difficult to understand how she could be proud of me for failing in such a huge way. I called my mother the day I found out I had failed Economics and I was hysterical. I thought for sure that she was going to be furious with me. Instead, she was understanding and supportive and convinced me that I had to see a doctor. I felt a love for my mother that day that I never felt before. It was the first time I ever felt the need to lean on my mother in my adult age. I never wanted to see or hug my mother as much as I did that day I came home. I had a new found respect and love for her that I never felt before.

Although my mother and I have become close in my college years I have battled with my relationship with her for

years. All I ever wanted as a child was to appease her and make her happy. My childhood was happy but I was always seeking approval from those around me. I had a close **nuclear family** growing up despite that fact that I come from a divorced family in which I had minimal contact with my father.

I was raised by my grandmother and mother. I spent the majority of my childhood with my grandmother learning how to cook and do crafts. I was not an easy child to take care of; therefore, my mother was constantly stressed. She was a single mother of two small children and a full-time nurse. As I look back at my childhood I realize that my mother's stress was contagious. I often blame her for my anxiety today but I realize that she made do with a bad hand she was given. She played the role of mother, father, nurse, chauffeur, friend, and cook for twenty-two years. She raised two wonderful children and I would not be where I am today without her. For that I am eternally grateful!

As a child I was surrounded by a variety of social groups and organizations. We were involved in our church, girl scouts, and Irish Step Dancing. My mother felt it was important for us to be involved in a variety of organizations when we were in high school. I was involved in a variety of clubs. I was also a cheerleader. I never realized how all of this affected me until my therapy sessions began a month ago. I am still afraid to say that I suffered from depression at times. Depression still has a **stigma** attached to it nowadays; supposedly, those who are depressed do not go far in life. I already had a hard time facing the fact that I had anxiety; to add to the list my being depressed became overwhelming. I felt I would be an embarrassment to my family if I did not perform the expected student role task of going into the block program as scheduled this spring. I feared that I would fail at the one thing I love the most, teaching. I estimated my self-worth according to

my grades and when I did not meet the grade I shut down.

The movie *Patch Adams* made me realize how depression can change a person's life in a positive way. Patch used his depression to help others. I have also often found myself reaching out to others who have admitted having anxiety. I want to make a difference in this world. I believe that teaching will help me with my goal to make a difference in someone's life.

While preparing my presentation in class on the first chapter of our textbook, *Sociology: Exploring the Architecture of Everyday Life* by David Newman, I learned about the **Sociological Imagination**. This concept is key to understanding my condition in that I realized that other forces have influenced me throughout my life. I alone am not the cause of my anxiety and phobias. Through therapy I have realized that anxiety is a culmination of diverse events and thoughts. The world around me influences my everyday behavior.

My not getting into block last semester led to my nervous breakdown. But looking at the big picture there were twenty-two years of emotions behind that breakdown. There were other forces that were working to decide that decision. My life involves millions of intersections with others I encounter each day. I feel that breakdown was the breaking of a barrier that existed in my family for years. The lines of communication opened and were filled with wonderful talks about what my life has been like the last two years. I felt comfort in each person in my family for they offered support and guidance.

I realize now that I need to change not just my personal characteristics but also the social institutions/roles I am involved in. My focus in life was always to live up to the expectations of my aspired **achieved status**. My social role in society has caused stress in my life. I have always wanted to be accepted by my peers and loved ones. My parents stressed the importance of educa-

tion and being successful in life. It was an **institutional norm** for my sister and I to go to school and get good jobs. I worked diligently to ensure I received satisfactory grades for which I would be praised. When I did not receive the grade that would ensure me the spot in the block program I felt I had not lived up to my achieved status as a student and I felt like I had disappointed my family. I was a failure and a disappointment to my family. Although they reassured me that I made them proud in every way, deep in my heart I felt ashamed. It would now have taken me six years to finish a Bachelor's degree. I have often wondered why this has happened to me. All of my dreams seemed to fall to pieces over two grade points.

I can see how the person I am today has been shaped through a **looking glass self** process. I worry needlessly about what others perceive me to be. I look to others for encouragement and validation. I determine my self-worth according to what others think of me. For my whole life I looked to my mother for that comfort. I wanted to be praised by her and to please her with my accomplishments. In her article "Good Mother/Daughter Hunting: A Process of Self-Healing" (2002), L. Mlecz states that her mother picked her favorite color and eventually after a period of time she grew to love pink. This is how our gender and other identity features are often shaped. My mother is very controlling and has controlled almost every aspect of my life for twenty-two years. In the last two months I have realized I need to free myself from her and from the feeling that I need to please her. Ultimately, I can only do what is best for my future.

My mother enforced **impression management**. On weekends my sister Erin, my mother, and I would have a party or event to attend. On our way to the party we would fight and yell at each other. As soon as the house came in sight it was time to act as though we were the happy family. I be-

came a better actor through each fight. No matter how bad the fight was no one ever knew how much pain was inside all of us. We looked great on the outside but inside I think we were all falling apart. We acted like we had a perfect family with no problems.

I often found myself in a **role conflict** with my family. I am an independent student at school. When I return home, though, I feel like I am a child. My mother tells me to pick up my room and make my bed. I feel like I still have to ask permission for what to wear to church. I forget that I am grown up and I don't need to be told what to do. This summer I taught seventh grade special education at the school next to my house. I again experienced a role conflict when I came home. I was the teacher in charge of 15 students, but when I returned home I was a six-year-old child being told what to do. I often found myself using the students' bathroom because I forgot I was an adult.

In her article "I only Thought I Knew It All: Society and the Individual" (2002), Samara Cohen asks two seemingly simple questions that made me stop reading to reflect critically on my own life. Samara asks:

How do I affect society? And how does society affect me?

How can I affect society? If I bring a positive outlook to life will someone take my lead and continue that trend? How is my anxiety affecting those around me? Can I be harming them without even knowing it, or helping them through dealing with my anxiety? These are all questions that still have to be answered. School is **resocializing** me to deal with society at large; through education, I want to set a new standard for myself in which I determine my self worth. But I can also make a difference through other institutions. I found refuge in the Catholic Church as a teenager. Church was one place I could be myself

and I knew I would never be judged. I never felt anxiety when I was there. I became very involved in the youth ministry at our parish and went on a variety of religious retreats.

I have had the opportunity to join a new group this semester. I joined this therapy group for people with anxiety and I have learned a great deal about my disorder and myself. I have learned where my anxiety stems from and how I can help myself to overcome it. I believe that my **birth cohort** has experienced more pressure than those of other generations. My generation has faced new challenges and hurdles. College is now no longer an option but a way of life. College is now a requirement to get a job that will pay a decent salary. The State of New York has placed stiffer regulations on teachers than they have ever done before. For my profession, teaching, the standards have been raised and more is expected of us as professionals. The constant pressure on teachers, legislatures, colleges, and parents has led to a rise in anxiety for my generation in this profession. My do not live in an agricultural society where we would stay at home with our families on the farm. We live in a **post-industrial society**. As college graduates we are expected to be out in the work force using the technologies of today. The students that I have become friends with at SUNY Oneonta fall into the same cohort as I. I have been exposed to many **cohort effects** with my friends and fellow classmates. The War in Iraq and September 11<sup>th</sup> have caused many of us to bond together in a way that I don't think many generations have in the past. This is a result of a **period effect** our generation went through. We were all about the same age when the attacks happened in New York City. Many of us are now thinking differently about life, we take one day at a time and cherish what we have. On September 11<sup>th</sup> I had panic attacks just thinking about what it must have been like to be in those buildings. I knew I

was not alone as many of my peers expressed their fears and anxiety.

I have come to realize through therapy that I worry too much about my **social status** in life. Reading our textbook by David Newman helped me realize that this is common. In high school **social class** determines how your four years would be. I was lucky to have friends who were in the higher social class. I was not made fun of as many of my fellow classmates were. I wanted to have nice clothes and be accepted by my peers. This did not seem to be a destructive way of life until I entered college. I realized that in life you are judged by who you are not what you wear. I met a great group of friends who taught me how to live without the fear of pleasing others.

In high school I was a cheerleader and secretary of our senate and a member of my class committee. I enjoyed school and was very involved. I was a "normal" student to others but inside I was different. I was diagnosed with a learning disability when I was in third grade. I did not want any of my fellow classmates to know where I was going when I went to the resource room. I was afraid that I would encounter the usual **stereotype** associated with learning disabled children. I learned from a young age that learning disabled students were frowned upon in the learning environment. I encountered **discrimination** in high school for being learning disabled. I was asked to leave the Regents Program for the fear that I would endanger the learning process of my fellow peers. I never told any of my teachers that I was learning disabled until testing approached and I asked for extended timing. I had one teacher tell me that my team of teachers were **prejudiced** against learning disabled students because they took up too much of their planning time for tutoring.

I thought that my battles were over when I entered college. Recently I found myself in a situation with a dean of a department on campus. This person said that

learning disabled students do not always do well in the teaching curriculum. Another student and myself were asked to do tasks that were not asked of other students. I became defensive because I felt that I was being discriminated against simply for my disability. In our textbook Newman wrote about **symbolic racism**, which involves efforts to undermine institutions set up to deal with **institutional racism**. I feel now that I was also encountering a similar symbolic discrimination against those intended to benefit from learning disability programs. I firmly stood up for my rights and explained why I felt I would make an effective teacher.

Another student and myself stood against the department and in effect formed a **reform movement**. We formulated an **ideological** framework for how we thought academic matters should be handled. Rules should not be changed when the department is pressed to provide a service. All students should be equal regardless of their disability. The school is a great example of a **bureaucracy**. We went to several different academic offices asking how we could be receiving help with the department and no one was willing to comment. The school works as a **hierarchy of authority**. The pyramid is so large no employee wants to step on another employee's foot. In order to get to the top they have to go along with what the school tells them to do. If they want to advance they must not make any waves in the system.

Six years later I still struggle with being labeled as learning disabled. I don't feel that it has hindered my success but it can be frustrating to work so hard on a project and only receive a "B." My anxiety has hit a peak in the last few years due to an over-compensation for learning disability. I feel that I have to prove myself to others and my family. I want to overcome the label of being a learning disabled child. Although it is all a secret to many, I feel as though people can tell in my writing and performance.

I believe that much of it has to do with **competitive individualism**. I want to make my own way in life and to have a good job to show for it. I do not want to ride on the footsteps of anyone else. I have seen many students ride through the educational system on the tails of their classmates. There is a **free-rider problem** when you get to the college level. Group work in college is a great example of how the free rider problem can spread like a disease. Many students will sit back and watch as another student does all of the work. I tend to be the one who is a nervous wreck about getting the project done.

The movie *Good Will Hunting* reminded me of myself in the sense that Will was afraid to show who he really was. He appeared to have no true emotions when engaged in counseling. Appearances are not always what they seem to be. He was not dressed like a wealthy college student, but inside he was brilliant. I felt a connection to Will because he put up a great front for his friends and even for his counselor. Will was afraid to get close to anyone for the fear of being hurt. I was afraid to get too close to anyone and explain that I had an anxiety disorder. I pushed many of my friends away for the fear they would find out that I was having panic attacks.

I have also learned through therapy that I worry about my future and **Socio-economic status**. I do not want to live check to check when I finish school. The future after college seems so open. There are so many opportunities in life and I want to make the right decisions for my life. I come from a **middle class** family with a college education and I want the same for my children and myself. I feel as though I have so much pressure from society to follow in the footsteps of my parents. I fear social **stratification**. I do not want to be on the low end of the stratification system. I did not grow up in a poor environment yet money is one of my biggest worries.

The movie *The Big One* by Michael

Moore opened my eyes to what is really happening to this county's work force. Many of my worries are embedded in the fear of losing my job when I have a family. This film showed just how this country does not protect families who are in the workforce. The factories **objectify** workers. The workers are objects who come to work and run the machines and go home. They do not think of the families they support and the bills they have to pay. Nike and other companies do not realize that moving their business to other countries forces Americans out of jobs and involves exploitation of foreign workers and children. This has become a **social dilemma**; Nike CEO and managers do not think how their actions impact their employees and their families in this country and in the world as a whole.

The PBS documentary *Affluenza* also hit home with me. I saw myself when I watched that movie. This generation is focused on working to get all of the things that we see in the commercials. People buy compulsively because we want to keep up with the new trends. I have fallen for the commercialization of society and I buy things that I will never use or want in months. But there are useful things one can buy. My sister bought me a book when I was diagnosed with GAD but I never read it until recently. The book is titled *The Things That Really Matter* and is authored by Jackson Brown (1999). This book has given me a new outlook on my anxiety and life. Brown also encourages self-exploration. He writes:

Remember that when you take inventory of the things in life you treasure the most, you'll find that none of them was purchased with money.

I think that this statement really relates to all the movies we watched in class. I stress about having all the luxuries I want

in life, yet I already have all of life's treasures. I have a devoted family, a loving boyfriend, and a great group of friends.

My boyfriend bought me a book titled *The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook* (2002) by Edmund Bourne soon after I was diagnosed with Generalized Anxiety Disorder. The book was recommended by my counselor. This book has proven to be a wonderful tool in overcoming my anxiety. While reading the book the following caught my eye:

The four traits that perpetuate anxiety: perfectionism, excessive need for approval, tendency to ignore signs of stress, excessive need for control. (233)

I was reading these traits and I noticed that I possess all of them. These traits caused my anxiety for years over my performance in school. While writing this paper I realized that much of my anxieties about the future are due to my worries about how others think of me. I need to let go of how others perceive my performance on a daily basis and instead do the best I can. A person can only give so much to society. I have learned through writing this paper that I need also to sit back and let life happen. Life can not be perfectly planned, we will all get to our destination in time but we must go forward in order to get there.

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