

What To Do When It's Hard To Walk

He knows the signs now. The first thought of killing himself and he knows he's got to get help. It's a paradox. He knows how worthless he is. How people loathe him and resent him. How pointless life is. He knows he should probably be dead. Yet he doesn't want to die. He doesn't want to abandon those people who say they still care.

He can see the dangers in the way he's thinking, the way everything goes around in spirals; he hates himself and then hates himself more for hating himself. It cripples him because he thinks it's an indulgence and an imposition to voice his feelings. Still, it's better than it used to be. The panic attacks and the screaming come less frequently now.

When it first hit him, he was a student: thirteen years old. It showed up as panic attacks – hyperventilation, crying, the whole bit – but it was always there, eating away. He just didn't know it.

At seventeen, he started to think about killing himself. The thoughts would creep up on him, silent and unstoppable. He knew it was bad. He looked for help, tried to resolve his problems. Some things helped. Nothing was lasting. No one could really say what the problem was. Least of all him.

He was twenty-one when he started teaching.

Now he's twenty-three. Most of the time he thinks the kids like him. It's the parents that he worries about. They're the needy ones; the ones who insist. Parent-teacher nights invariably leave him in a daze. Some parents seem thrilled their child has him as their teacher. Others see him as a boy pretending to be a man. (One even says this to another teacher: "Who's that boy pretending to be a man?") A few weeks ago he went to a lecture about coping with adolescents in the classroom. The speaker told him that adolescence lasts until age twenty-five. He's still got two years to go.

It's Sunday night and he knows he has to face the kids tomorrow. He tells his mum he's been thinking of killing himself. She tells him to take the week off but he says he can't because no one at that school has ever taken a week off for anything. And even if he took the time off, he'd still have to set work for his classes. She tells him it's *always* possible to take time off. He wakes up the next morning and starts screaming. The screams rise from the pit of his stomach, like bees freed from a jar.

He calls the school and tells them he won't be in, then sits down and types up plans for his classes so he can email them in. He breathes in shallow, silent gasps. His hands are trembling. The slightest thing could set him off crying.

He listens to music. It's the only thing that has ever been able to capture how he feels. His mum always says it's no wonder he gets depressed with the music he listens to.

He cries, and turns it off. He sits in silence.

The walk to the doctor is difficult. It's only about five hundred metres from his front door, but each step threatens to dislodge the tears welling behind his eyes. He passes an old woman loading a huge cardboard box into her car. She wears a blue tracksuit and slip-on shoes. He wonders how she can do what she does with such apparent ease, how she keeps going even though she doesn't know

what purpose anything has. The doctor convinces him that he needs to get back on medication and go back into therapy. It's been nearly a year since he last went. He thought he'd dealt with everything. He thought he'd shaken off the burden of responsibility for every little bad thing that ever happened. Apparently not.

The doctor orders him to take as much time off school as he wants, to not think about school at all. *Easy*, he thinks. *A day or two at the most*. So he stays home, keeps it simple. He tries to switch off, not to think about the work he has to do and the work he'll have to catch up on when he gets back. Or to worry about what reason he'll give for his absence. (Even if he tells them he was sick, they'll wonder. He's young. He's a guy. What could possibly be wrong?)

Switching off is harder than it should be. He can't stop shaking. His muscles are starting to ache because they're constantly clenched; neck, arms, legs, all over. A warm bath helps, but the effect is short-lived. When he watches TV all he can do is wonder why the people he sees aren't in constant breakdown. He sees them getting on with their lives, making a difference to other people. And here he is, wasting away in self-imposed exile. Useless.

He tells Andrew the therapist that he wants to start weekly sessions again. Andrew doesn't seem surprised, as if he had known there'd be more work to do. He's so lucky to have found Andrew. He knows that. He's tried a handful of others and none of them has changed his perspective the way Andrew has.

By Thursday, the medication has eased the anxiety. He goes back to school. Almost instantly he knows it's a mistake. He spends the day in a haze, doing what he can to hide his pain from the kids but knowing they probably see it better than anyone. He treads carefully, desperate to keep the tears safely walled up. Always, there is a voice at the back of his mind telling him not to bother, telling him he's only going to lose. He spends Friday at home.

On the weekend he leaves the house to visit his family. He knows he's better when he's got a distraction. They sense the deep sadness in him because his mum and his sister know exactly what it feels like. His sister tells him funny stories, like she always does, and even makes him laugh. When he leaves, the sadness returns. He's frustrated because all he really wanted to do was tell them how much he loves them. But all he could do was be there. He's insufficient. He knows that. He's an inadequate human being. They tell him he's not, but he is.

Monday hurts. He has to send off more instructions for his classes but he can barely concentrate long enough to type. He cobbles something together and emails it off. Even thinking about school makes his heart race and his neck ache. He's beginning to see why his doctor told him not to think about school. He asks his boss if she could maybe get someone else to take over his classes. Perhaps if he'd said this earlier, he would be better than he is now. She agrees to help in any way she can. He's lucky to have her.

He takes the rest of the week off. It's a peaceful time. He lets himself genuinely switch off. Not having to worry about his classes means he can let his mind sift through all the other junk that's clouding his brain.

On Tuesday he goes to see Andrew. He tells Andrew about how he's been feeling. He tells him about the thoughts that bubble and gurgle in his mind. He tells him all the things, good and bad, that he's been longing to say to people. He talks about love and joy. He talks about anger and frustration.

He talks.

When the fifty minutes are up, he ventures back into the world outside his head. There's a cool breeze and a radiant pink sky. These things strengthen him. He walks home and puts on some music. He sings along this time, and puts his heart into it. He doesn't worry about whether or not anyone can hear him. The words force their way out onto the air, each one carrying a tiny crumb of pain.

He knows that sometimes people just have to get on with things. But he knows that people are sometimes so busy getting on with things they forget to take care of themselves. He knows this is what he has done. If only someone had told him he had to make himself fully functional before he could be of use to anyone else.

Later that year, he gives a speech to a big group of students. He tells them honestly about what he experienced and how he hopes none of them ever have to go through it. He tells them that if they do have to deal with pain, that it's important they don't see it as the end, but rather as a step towards being a better human. By telling his story, by sharing his pain, and seeing it for what it is – *depression* – he takes control.