

Reflection

Anxiety The Hidden Disease

STEVE TAPPE, MTS and LAURA TAPPE

On the surface our family seems pretty typical. My wife and I love each other and our four children. We are stable. We live in a safe community and our kids attend good schools. But between three of our four children, there are six diseases. Our 16-year-old daughter, Laura, has three of those: Crohn's disease, rheumatoid arthritis and anxiety.

There are obvious populations of children who are vulnerable and at risk. We see them in our communities and recognize them as such. There are others, less obvious, who are also at risk. Laura is one of those. She's already had an operation to

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remove a section of her small intestine because of her Crohn's. The arthritis causes her pain every day. These aren't the things we worry about with Laura. It's the anxiety that causes us to lose our breath.

Laura is a beautiful kid. Her smile is like a sunrise. One of my favorite things in life is to see her smile. She has a great sense of humor and is very smart, as kids with anxiety often are. Yet she suffers every day. She has to think hard to remember

what she calls a "good day." A day when she felt normal.

Anxiety is a terrible disease. It is also largely a hidden one. It does not disfigure its victims. They don't have races run in their honor. They don't ring a bell when they finish treatment. We don't wear T-shirts to support them. Instead we look the other way. We question their mental toughness. We accuse them of being dramatic and craving attention. And so they suffer alone. There has been little room for joy and anxiety to coexist in Laura.

I asked if she would write this with me, if she wanted the chance to teach people about her disease. She said yes. She wants people to know what this disease is like. What follows are her words:

MY BRAIN FEELS like a roller coaster most days. My mind races through every up and down of a situation. It dodges past logic or evidence and will plummet down toward the bad and scary thoughts. I could be sitting in my bed, the morning of a school day, and tell myself that everything will be OK, that I finished all my homework, and that no one is there to critique me, but I will lie there paralyzed and unable to push the negative thoughts away.

Anxiety can be impossible to notice or understand. There was no way for me



to show my parents what was wrong, nor could I explain to them the pain I was going through. I thought it was my fault, that I was a burden for missing so much school and never being able to do anything on my own. It took a long time to understand that the people I surrounded myself with loved me through my hardships and struggles. I am very thankful for my family and friends and the support group I have. Even though they don't always understand, they never stop trying to make me feel important and loved. I know they will be there when I need them.

Many kids don't have such luck, they are pushed to the side or told they are being dramatic. When someone you look up to says your thoughts are wrong or not important, it feels like it's you that isn't important. The smallest chance of a bad thing happening can be the cause of a million crippling thoughts or a terrible panic attack. I know it's hard to understand why someone can be fixated on a situation that is 99% impossible, even and especially after you have explained why it isn't valid, but this is what the disease does to you.

Every person who struggles with an anxiety disorder is different and unique; nobody has the same thoughts or fears as the person who might be sitting next to them. I am thankful that I'm allowed to talk about my own experiences and have a

platform to do so. Some days I still struggle to get out of bed, and I still fight with the thoughts in my own brain and lose, but I understand so much more about myself and have learned not to be so angry at myself for the way I think. I recommend you reach out to someone if you have the slightest suspicion they are struggling. They might not even be aware themselves that they don't have to suffer alone.

She turned 16 in the hospital. We shook our heads at the irony. It wasn't her Crohn's disease that brought her there. It wasn't the arthritis that causes her so much pain. It wasn't her crippling anxiety. It was a double-whammy virus and infection. She doesn't catch many breaks.

When she woke up as a new 16-year-old, she was greeted by purple, pink and white streamers and printed-out happy birthday messages. Overnight the nurses did the best they could to make our daughter's day a shade brighter. They got her a bouquet of flowers and pooled their money to get her a gift card. They recognized her vulnerability and they responded with love. Sometimes all you can do is love. Laura's hope, my hope, is that you do the same.

STEVE TAPPE is vice president of mission for the Avera Medical Group in Sioux Falls, S.D. He co-wrote this article with his daughter, **LAURA TAPPE**, who is an aspiring writer.

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— LAURA TAPPE

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