

Eli, you already won.

[Play NF "Leave Me Alone" Fade in @ 50 seconds - Fade out @ 1 min 14 seconds]

This feels like a boxing match and my opponent is myself, so that was my intro song.

For the sake of brevity and the audience's comfort, I have omitted many parts of my story. This is a trigger warning for those who may feel uncomfortable.

I learned in my psychology class that approximately 50% of all people in the US deal with mental health issues at some point in their lives. I am one of those 50%.

Hi, my name is Eli Sandhaus. I'm 22 years old and I live in Miami. I love to read, write, exercise, hang out with friends, and just generally try out new things. I recently just started a podcast (small plug).

Oh, and I have OCD with depressive tendencies.

But that's a spoiler. My story really begins 45 years ago.

Before I begin my story, I want to preface that after you hear this, I will still be me. Please remember that I have not changed over the next several minutes, I have only gotten stronger.

My father grew up in Flatbush. He was a cute, naïve little kid, and he had been sexually abused numerous times, even by a few of his rabbis and therapists.

Now let's skip ahead a few years to where my story begins.

It was seventh grade. I thought I was the coolest kid in the world. I had friends, good grades, and now that it was cool, a girlfriend.

Let's call her Rosie. NOT HER REAL NAME.

She was everything I was looking for. She was smart, funny, beautiful, and we both liked to skateboard. What more could you ask for as a 7th grader?

She and I had our middle school romance where we would text each other 24/7 and we had our inside jokes and we would always try to meet up and it was all fun and scandalous.

One evening, I was sitting on the couch watching a movie with my parents. It was called Tears of the Sun. Only, I wasn't watching- I was secretly texting Rosie. It was 7:04 PM when I received the last text from Rosie telling me that she was skateboarding to her cousin's house.

Then, she stopped answering my texts.

I didn't think much of it until one of her friends texted me later that night in a frenzy.

"When was the last time you heard from Rosie?!" she asked.

I told her: 7:04 PM.

It was now several hours later and nobody had heard from Rosie since she texted me. We were all freaking out, our minds conjuring up terrible scenarios until-

The worst-case scenario.

Right after she texted me, Rosie was struck by a car and killed.

At first, I was in a state of disbelief. I thought this was some sort of weird prank where Rosie's friend was trying to get me to profess my love for her and then everyone would laugh and joke about it later.

I had texted her the minute she died. To my adolescent mind, I was responsible.

I couldn't sleep that night. I stayed up that whole night- and many, many subsequent nights- going over and over and over the scenario, growing more and more confident that it was my fault.

When my mom came in the next morning to wake me up, she found me wide awake.

"You heard?" she said.

I didn't need to respond.

Several days later, my parents felt it would be best to have me speak with a therapist. I agreed- and thus began my journey concerning mental health.

For the remainder of 7th and all of 8th grade, I saw Jack the therapist. Jack was a godsend.

We worked for a while on various things- I started getting bullied in school, I started distancing myself from my parents, and so on- but we avoided the elephant in the room: Rosie.

This went on for many sessions, until one day Jack asked me to write Rosie a letter.

To anyone who has ever lost someone dear to them, they'll understand. When someone you love dies, a piece of you dies as well. You literally feel hollow, like a piece of you is missing.

I wrote her a letter, read it aloud to her, and buried it in my backyard.

I felt a certain sense of closure, but I still felt sad. Like, all the time.

The obstacles kept piling up until they were a looming mountainous barrier:

I was sad all the time
I wasn't getting along with my parents
I lost a lot of my friends because I had become so reclusive

This period was fraught with inexplicable crying, lots of isolation, and dark thoughts.
I wasn't hanging out with friends; I just wasn't happy.

This all directed me towards something radical, something crazy, something so wild that it just might've worked: I was going to go away for highschool.

So I decided to go to Yeshiva Sha'ar HaTorah, a highschool in Queens for gifted children. Yeah, I'm smart. Many smart people have mental illnesses. Deal with it.

So anyways, I started dorming. This 14 year old sad kid looking for a friend just shuffling around different people's houses looking for a home.

And I made a lot of friends, but none of them like this one kid we'll call Joe.

Joe's parents were super cool, letting him do whatever he wanted, and because I was away from home, vicariously whatever I wanted to do as well.

His family LOVED me. They thought I was the best kid ever. They even said they wanted to support me through college.

So Joe's house became my home.

Every single Sunday, Tuesday, and Friday, Joe and I would take the train to his house and map out our adventures on the train.

One week we went silent clubbing. We saw a lot of movies. We saw this one movie called A Monster Calls and oh my goodness it had me BAWLING- but like excessively crying. We went horseback riding on. The. Beach! We went silent clubbing again. And again.

This went on for 9th and 10th grade.

Externally, I was doing really well. I had straight A's, a thriving social life, and was maintaining my physical health.

Internally, I was going through a rollercoaster of emotions. As evidenced in my journal- you know what, I'm confident enough to call it a diary- as evidenced in my diary, I was at times on top of the world and at times at the bottom of the heap.

What I couldn't understand was why my internals and externals were so incongruent.

Then came the summer of 11th grade.

Joe showed up on my doorstep with a suitcase in hand and informed me that he would be staying at my house for a few days.

But then, my best friend from another city, let's call him Jay, called me and told me his parents were going out of town, so he asked if he could also stay at my house.

This was shaping up to be the best vacation ever.

My two best friends, who didn't know each other beforehand met, and lo and behold, they were instantly best friends.

Over those few days, I noticed some- strange- occurrences.

For the audience's sake, I will skip over some of the following details, but let's just say that unbeknownst to me, Joe and Jay entered a romantic relationship.

It's a strange sensation when you find out that your two best friends are- together.

You wanna know what's even stranger than that? When your two best friends then subsequently break up and you're just this awkward third wheel that doesn't know what to do.

Yeah.

It was at this point that I embraced the fact that my life resembled a soap opera.

Fast forward to 11th grade.

Joe was heartbroken. And still in the closet.

He told me he was suicidal. The scary part was that he was so matter of fact about it.

I felt awful, and for some reason, responsible. I had introduced them, hadn't I?

And so I was thrust back into 8th grade where I would ruminate and go over and over the whole situation in my mind- and my diary- and the entire time I would slowly convince myself that it was more and more my fault.

So 11th grade continued much like 9th and 10th grade, where every Sunday, Tuesday and Friday I would go to Joe's house. Only these days, we weren't off galivanting. We were sitting in his room in the dark. Ruminating.

Dark things.

I have my journal here for posterity, and what it shows next is... well, you'll see.

September 26, 2016

This past weekend by Joe was freaking awesome. Serious Friday night DMCs went down. Turns out Joe thinks I look like Brooklyn Beckham who he thinks is super hot. So I guess the transitive property of equality would dictate, that if Joe thinks that he's super hot and that I look just like him, that makes me-?

October 8

Joe was snuggling a bit too much for my liking when we were watching TV. I know he said he doesn't like me like that, but...

December 3

Joe is such a nerd. He made up his own trading card game with like cards and pictures and stats and special abilities. I mean, I guess I'm also pretty nerdy. Is he rubbing off on me? I mean metaphorically. But also, literally. He's been rubbing on me whenever we watch TV. I'm probably reading too much into it. It's probably nothing.

December 28

I wanted to go home for Channukah but flights were too expensive, so I'm spending it by Joe. His family is taking me snowboarding! I'm so excited.

January 17

So I broke both of my wrists while snowboarding. I was going to fly home but apparently the air pressure would be excruciating on my wrists or something, so I've been spending all this time at Joe's house. He and his family have been taking such good care of me.

February 22

Friday night, Joe and I had another DMC and he got a bit too touchy; should I say something? Anyways, he laid out everything I need to work on. I'm not gonna lie, it hurt quite a bit to hear from your best friend that you're really messed up.

June 12

There are nice people in this world.

[Pause]

I really don't want to write about this but it's okay Eli, this belongs to you and you alone. Don't be nervous, it's healthy to get it out.

Last night I was by Joe's house studying for regents.

We were talking about how I was frustrated with my rabbi and Joe started hugging me and touching me and I was just so pissed at life and I was grappling with belief in God and I was just so depressed and then he was touching me and I just couldn't move. He saw I was uncomfortable, and he didn't stop. Then I just let myself go. I wasn't participating but I wasn't protesting actively and I just lay there and I put my head down because I couldn't bear to look at him in the face while he just kept touching me. I started to cry a bit and then I somehow mustered up the strength to move and he asked me if I wanted to spend the night in his bed even though he could clearly see how upset I was. I mumbled about how I needed to shower and he said he didn't want to shower because he didn't want to wash the Eli off of him. I started crying and I ran out.

That was at about 1:45 AM.

I spent the next several hours just in a daze. I showered. I tried meditating. I cried. I cursed. I got angry at Joe. I got angry at myself. I watched some 13 Reasons Why. That scene. Where Hannah gets... I couldn't sleep. I've never felt so powerless, paralyzed, hopeless. I couldn't sleep at all.

Then, in the morning, Joe acted as if nothing happened. I couldn't even look at him. I didn't want to ride the train with him back to school. I didn't want him to pay for my ticket. I just closed my eyes and listened to music.

He asked me to use my notes. I could barely even get the words out of my mouth.

I tried to avoid him the rest of the day yet he seemed to have no problem. He kept on addressing me when I just wanted to curl up and die. I seriously considered ditching class because I didn't want to sit in such close proximity to him. We had a final today and he had the audacity to cheat off of me.

June 28

Sorry for skipping a page. I couldn't bear looking at that previous page.

School ended in an interesting way. A lot of anger. A lot of tears. A lot of studying for regents. I did well on my regents.

A fellow student found out what Joe did and hosted a surprise "intervention" between me and Joe. Well screw that. He ended off jokingly saying we should "hug it out". Screw you.

I ended off on a bad note with my 12th grade Rabbi: I missed the last day of school. I got drunk the night before with my roommate. Like wasted. And we stayed up until 5 AM

discussing my life problems. I hardly remember what I said. I should be slightly nervous that I said something about Joe, but he seems to be treating me the same.

I was standing outside class and I was looking in through the window at everyone taking notes and I felt like an outsider. I felt like I didn't belong. Like I don't belong.

[Pause. Close diary.]

I never told my parents. I was too afraid, too ashamed. I was especially afraid to tell my dad because of what happened to him as a kid.
I felt like I failed him. I felt like he would feel that he failed to protect me.

So I never told them.

And thus ended 11th grade.

12th grade was very reminiscent of 8th grade after Rosie, but on a much more extreme level. I literally didn't get out of bed for a year. I nearly got kicked out of school for missing so many classes. (but I still aced the tests because I'm gifted, remember?)

It felt like the whole world was collapsing in on me.
And there I remained, in bed, waiting for the collapse.

12th grade passed by like a bad dream that only got worse. It got to the point that my parents realized something was up so they sent me back to good ol' Jack the Therapist.

I really wanted to switch schools, but Jack and my parents convinced me that it wasn't worth it to switch schools in the middle of senior year. So I just remained there. Suffering. In my dorm room. In my bed. In my head.

After approximately 10 months of hell, 12th grade finally drew to a close.

I was supposed to be valedictorian (I told you, I'm gifted!) but I had too many absences in my senior year.

I can't even begin to describe the sheer relief when graduation finally came. That's it. I was free. I would never have to see Joe again.

I went to Israel, and it felt as if I was being reborn. I went to a yeshiva with barely anyone from my highschool to get a fresh start.

But I still felt like I was carrying a million pounds of baggage with me. I was still staying in bed, in my head.

So I started seeing Tani the Therapist.

After some time, Tani convinced me to go see a psychiatrist.

I was terrified to go see Yakov the psychiatrist. Psychiatrists are for crazy people! They work in asylums and mental institutions! I don't belong going to a psychiatrist! I'm not crazy!

Yakov the psychiatrist thought I probably just had sleep apnea which was causing me to be tired all the time.

But that didn't sound right to me. It didn't account for everything that was going on in my life. Sleep apnea doesn't make you contemplate suicide.

So I got a second opinion. Seeing Aron the Psychiatrist was even harder than seeing Yakov, because this time I was going on my own accord.

I just accepted it. I was crazy.

But then, Aaron the Psychiatrist said two things that suddenly gave the clouds a silver lining. First he said, "Eli, you have OCD with depressive tendencies."

Suddenly everything made sense.

The inexplicable crying. The constant sadness. The loneliness. The ruminating.

Aaron explained that my OCD is more obsessive than compulsive; meaning, I'm not washing my hands incessantly or quadruple checking if I locked my car, but I am constantly bombarded by intrusive thoughts that linger.

My OCD came in the form of rumination. Even though this made no logical sense, I blamed myself for Rosie's death and Joe's suicidality and sexually abusive behavior. The OCD made these thoughts keep coming and coming.

You would think that being diagnosed with OCD is a bad thing, but Aron explained to me the following: imagine a person always feels lethargic, and then they get diagnosed with diabetes. Sure it sucks that they have diabetes, but they already had it before they were diagnosed. Now that they've been diagnosed, they can do something about it. They can take insulin.

Which then brought Aron to the second thing.

"Eli, I'm going to put you on antidepressants."

I started freaking out again. Medication is for crazy people! Not only was he proposing to put me on medication, he wanted to put me on THREE medications. That's half as many as Arthur Fleck takes in the movie Joker! Does that make me half as crazy as the Joker? But Aron explained to me, that the medication is just my insulin.

There's a chemical imbalance in my body and the medication is just there to make it balanced again. The way Aron described it is that life is like swimming. Life with OCD with depressive tendencies is like swimming while attached to a thousand-pound weight. The medication just releases the weight. It doesn't make me a better swimmer; it doesn't make me lighter; it just releases the extra unnecessary weight.

I can't even begin to describe the world of difference that medication makes. It takes a few weeks to kick in, but then you slowly start to feel- happier. Or at least, not as sad. The thoughts don't really fly around your head as much. I found myself less in bed, less in my head.

I then came to YU last semester. Tani advised that I continue seeing a therapist, so I went to the student counseling center and was introduced to Rob.

Rob and I worked together for a relatively short amount of time, but we accomplished so much. Thanks to Rob, I really began to accept myself. Sure, I'm flawed, but that just makes me human.

After several sessions, Rob felt that I had officially "graduated" from therapy.

I felt like a billion dollars.

That was when I received an email. Something called Stomp Out The Stigma.

And I knew what I had to do.

And here I am.

[Pause for applause]

Thank you all so much for listening.

Three final points:

1. 8 in 10 victims of sexual assault know the perpetrator very well. Don't be afraid to say something. IT'S NOT. YOUR. FAULT. But it is your responsibility- to say something, to get help, to prevent future tragedies.
2. Educate & Raise Awareness. Mental health, like my story, is often insidious. Looks are deceiving. Everything may seem fine on the outside, but on the inside- wounds could be festering.

3. My story is far from over. In fact, I'm just getting started. I still can't bring myself to watch Tears of the Sun or A Monster Calls or The Matrix or 13 Reasons Why. I still get a little bit nervous when touching people. So this is by no means an end, but a beginning. The difference is that this time around, I won't be alone.

To Joe, should you somehow hear this: I will never forget, but I will forgive.

I just want to end off by thanking everyone in my life, especially Hashem and my parents for being so supportive of me. And I'd like to thank profusely the following people in particular for literally bringing the dead back to life: Doctors Jack Weitz, Tani Burton, Yakov Freidman, Aron Tandler, and Robert Ogle.

And finally, to Miriam Bluth, thank you so much. This speech would not have been nearly as raw and genuine if not for you. I will be forever indebted to you for aiding me on this journey.

Thank you.