

## The Regrets, Realizations, and Repercussions of Cancer

Cancer is never a problem until it is. For normal families, the word “cancer” is never spoken unless a diagnosis is made. But my family was, and is, far from normal. The crushing word, for our household, was first spoken in December of 2019. And two years later, in December of 2021, that *unnatural* word still haunts us. Last year, for this contest, I wrote an essay detailing my experiences with my dad’s cancer and my family’s journey through it. This year, I write about my growth from it.

I remember every detail about the day my dad told me he was going to die, from the way we were sitting, to the devastated look in his eyes, to barely eating and crying every drop of moisture out of my body. In the little over two months I had with him after this announcement, every simple, little aspect of life became difficult. Having to put on a fake smile and pretend to be unbothered every day was part of it; having to fight my growing depression, anxiety, and loss of appetite while my beliefs reshaped themselves around me was the other part. Cancer, I’ve learned, creates difficulties and realizations that a person like myself or other teenagers would not normally come to without an event like it.

Out of all of them, the most important is mental health should not be disregarded. Mental health should not be what people believe to be a passing discussion to later be forgotten. Mental health should not be something to be afraid of. Every student, at some point, has overlooked their school’s talks about mental health. Even I remember laughing with my friends about the long talks and PowerPoints, but when I became someone who needed the help, I regretted it. An adult, whom I confided in, told me my suicidal and self-harm thoughts were merely “grief,” which only added fuel to the fire. In these long months fighting against my own mental health, I’ve realized

that I and other students should cease to throw away the help and mental health education that schools provide.

Likewise, friends of struggling students in these schools should not forget about them after checking up once or twice. As my anxiety, depression, and obsessive-compulsive tendencies grew, my friends forgot. Months afterward, they had completely forgotten. Just because the tragedy happened and passed did not mean there was a switch flipped that automatically cured my mental health. Whenever I mentioned it, they seemed to stop caring. These actions create an atmosphere of fear surrounding mental health. When people feel like what they say is disregarded, they stop talking about it because they are afraid no one will listen.

Mental health should not be something that makes teenagers scared to talk about. It should not be something that incites fear to speak up about. For months, I remember being hesitant to talk about my mental health because of those words that trusted adult said to me. I was afraid to ask to see a doctor about my fluctuating emotions because I feared it would be judged, shunned, dismissed, or misunderstood. Looking back at this, I believe the problem with mental health is that it is simply not understood. People will smile and nod along when a person confides in them, but unless they have done research, had experiences with it, or conversations about it, they will not understand. As much as this topic applies to mental health, it also applies to many other aspects of life and beliefs.

What is a person to do when their god is not there? Every night for a year, I prayed to a God that didn't answer. Time after time, I was ignored. My dad's diagnosis was the push I needed to see that God isn't there for me and never has been. Living with cancer changes a person, from the way they act and feel to the fundamentals they're taught to believe. Whereas I grew away from Catholicism, my dad grew towards it. His final beliefs were valid, but so were

mine. Yet his beliefs were accepted with open arms, not mine. But what of the evidence I shared for my newfound beliefs; what of the truths I told that Christians refused to believe? Christians are taught to accept other Abrahamic religions, as well as other polytheistic religions, before Atheism. They are taught that atheists go to hell, but to pretend to respect other religions while harboring silent judgement. My family's journey through my dad's cancer has taught me to accept, without judgement, the beliefs of other individuals. Throughout the past year, I've learned the concept of individuality instead of blind believing. Individuality is expressed in many ways, from the way people think and what they believe, to how they react.

The first reaction I had when I was told the news was to sit down and write. I wrote for months, sitting down for long periods of time, through the late hours of the night into the early hours of the morning. Writing became my comfort and my outlet, my coping mechanism and my escape. Writing out my feelings was a channel for the words I kept locked inside my brain, for the anger and sorrow and sadness I refused to let anyone else see. Writing kept me in a clear mindset, a *distracted* mindset, and allowed me to forget what was occurring in the outside world.

Writing has helped me grow as an individual and as a person. It has helped me set dreams and reach goals I'd never imagined. Through writing, I've realized I can affect and help more people by bringing awareness to topics that I couldn't when keeping my words inside. Growth, I've noticed, can happen not only from aging and experience, but also through trauma and the realizations and knowledge that are gained from it. Judgement is something reserved only for those who make it a career, not the common public or people of any religion, regardless of what they may think. And finally, cancer is not a problem for only those with it, but for everyone. Everyone knows someone who is either struggling with their own diagnosis or someone else's. Cancer is not a topic that should be shrugged off until it can't be.