PAY ATTENTION…

My Story

I do not clearly remember being present in my body before I was 9; the last time I was not in dissociation mode, I was likely too young to remember.

I only came to this realization in my early twenties, after I burned out from masking for so long, and decided to make changes in my life. To make said changes, however, I had to find out the root issues.
The first time I began to suspect something might be wrong, I was 18, in my final year of high school. I was studying the science trifecta PCB: Physics, Chemistry and Biology, and way further out of my depth than anyone, not even I, could have guessed or imagined. As the family "genius", the only one in a legacy government school, with the ambition of becoming a doctor, I was under a lot of pressure to perform well but I was struggling to get even passably good grades. Most of the time, I was simply going through the motions.

I was also very irritable, extra sensitive and would have lots of crying spells triggered by the smallest things. My roommates and some of my closest classmates would often comment about how moody I was; all behind my back, though, because it was assumed (correctly, I think) that I would not receive their criticism well. In hindsight, I was simply sensitive to criticism and rejection, two things I generally do not have huge problems with.

All told, my 19th year felt like a continuous anxiety attack. I would occasionally have panic attacks and my mind was always wandering into daydreams. I remember trying self-harm to cope, but when my best friend at the time expressed her horror on discovering it, I stopped. I thought I was being dramatic. Often, I felt like asking for help would be

attention seeking. So, I turned to prayer. By the time I sat my final exams, I was probably in the worst mental state I had ever been in, up until that point.

During my S6 vacation, I joined a Programme I enjoyed, The Mentorship Class (TMC). I thought I had left my mental worries behind. But when my results came out, I sunk into an even deeper depression and my anxiety returned in full force. As a result, I barely managed to finish the class, something that I still grieve today. Not knowing what else to do, I turned to church. Now, I know that I was using religion as a coping mechanism more than anything else. And for a time, it brought me the peace I craved... Until it did not.
From early 2021, the environment in my church increasingly grew intense and triggering for me. When my visa to study in Ukraine was denied later that year, another depressive episode was triggered. In early 2022, after two months of intensely functioning through my depression and heavily masking my neurodivergence, I started experiencing chronic pain, which I suspect was psychosomatic. Nothing quite woke me up like that.

So began two years of countless hospital visits during which I was gaslit by many medical professionals. During this time, I embarked on trying to fix my habits and become more aware of my mental health, but my physical health continued to add onto my mental struggles (and still does to this day). During this time, I tried free therapy, but all those sessions were misses, so I stopped trying or even looking for help in that arena. I was unaware that my insurance covered sessions at select hospitals.

In late 2022, I scheduled an appointment to see a psychiatrist at Nakasero hospital. On arrival, I was informed that my insurance did not cover consultations below $200. I was so discouraged, and went on making appointments at various hospitals and never following through

until 2023. In 2023, I went back to school in Ishaka. It was my first time being so far away from my family by myself and I experienced a culture shock like I had never imagined before. The resulting mental struggles and my continual physical challenges made it so I barely made it to all my classes, and even missed some exams.

In early 2024, desperately needing a change of environment and space from my mom, I moved to my cousin's place in Mutundwe temporarily. I had surgery in February and recovered from there. After the end of my romantic relationship, my mental state worried so, I finally went to the psychiatrist. No sooner had I begun sharing my symptoms than he agreed with my self-diagnosis of Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD). The doctor then quizzed me, and finally asked me if I had heard of PMDD (Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder). I had. My friend, Lisa, had received a diagnosis not very long before and not only is she very vocal about her journey, I also occasionally read about it. He told me my symptoms sounded similar to the condition and told me to study it and track my hormonal cycle to see if I agreed with his diagnosis or had any questions. In the meantime, he prescribed SSRIs for the anxiety and therapy.

That was April 2024. As we speak, I am now sure about my PMDD diagnosis and know it is the root of most of my mental challenges. We are also still in the process of finding medication that both helps me handle symptoms and doesn't have side effects that disrupt my normal functioning. My anxiety has severely reduced and I wish I had sought professional help earlier.

In my former church, mental illness was attributed to demons/spirits. I internalized this rhetoric to a certain extent and I delayed seeking help because I thought I was the problem, I thought God would remove the spirits. I started to wonder if I was being punished for being too sensitive, something I now know is out of my control. I remember once,

my leader said to me: “If you want to waste your life, do it away from me.” He said this while I was working for him 7 days a week, with no pay, sleep deprived and running on fumes. I was trying so hard to keep up with everyone and it never felt enough; I thought I was weak and lazy. When the reality is that my body and mind simply work differently from others and that is not a weakness.

I still haven't made it to therapy because of financial constraints at the moment, but I plan to be having regular sessions by the end of the year 2025. I am blessed to have a supportive circle of people who accommodate me and give me space to be “weak” and need help. I feel I would not have gotten this far without the love and support of people around me, including my psychiatrist. I am nowhere near where I want to be but I am taking the small steps to live again and be the person and friend I aspire to be.

A few years ago, I used to carry so much shame. Shame about who I was, shame about how I survived and coped, shame about the choices I was making and the life I was living. But now, I am significantly kinder to myself. I do not feel like the same person. Even when I am severely depressed, I do not have the same internal shame I once had.

Letter to my past self

My love,

I am so proud of you. You will one day find out that you are doing your best with the limits of your knowledge —and your best is pretty damn good. There is a name for the weird person you become close to your period, can you believe? It's not all in your head.
You really need to let all that big emotion out, baby girl. I no longer do it, because it made us sick. Your feelings are valid, and they deserve space — make space for them.
I have run out of things to say to you but I always want you to know that you are enough, you are wonderful just as you are, your experience is valid.
I love you so much.
See you soon.
Bye, my love.