The Other Side: This is Thirteen

When I was 6, I dedicated an hour of playtime for myself each day. My sister and I used to run down to our building's garden to meet our friends that came from different schools and were of different ages. But we didn't care who we talked to, as long as they had a wild imagination! We spent the whole hour building imaginary territories, completing obstacle courses, and relaxing our feet in the pool. And no dark forces (people above the age of 21) were allowed to enter our kingdom. Dancing and singing were a requirement, and if you didn't know how to do both, you would be kicked out of the palace (which was the jungle gym and monkey bars). It was lots of exercise running around and hopping from place to place. But it was paradise!

So, what changed? I am 13 now, and I try to avoid going to the garden because I care who I talk to and what I say to them. I forgot how to sing, and stopped dancing. At some point in time, all I did was care for other people's thoughts: *Are they looking at me? Do they like my shirt? Should I ignore them? Do they think I am weird?* These questions kept circling like little flies that would annoy me and bring my self-motivation down.

I always tried to please people and give them the image *they* wanted. And pleasing people really restricted me from doing what I wanted. I felt like I couldn't wear certain clothes, say certain things, or take risks and enjoy opportunities because people would think I was uncool. Over time, the 6-year-old I knew disappeared, leaving me with a person who tried to hide from society with a perfect image.

Changing schools, grades, body image, all these problems kept burdening me. I tried to keep all this in the dark, on top of making everyone else happy, which left no room for my happiness. And hiding all these problems was a big mistake that really affected my personality. For months, I had a difficult attitude, and I loved talking badly about people. My sister and I got into more fights than ever, which drove a wedge through our close relationship. All this happened because being a bad person was so much easier than being a good person in my opinion. But things didn't turn out so well, and as a result of being irresponsible, I ended up embarrassing myself since I was pretty much known to be smart and disciplined before this behavioural change.

So I started to freak out because there was too much on my shoulders to handle. One of my friends saw what was happening and suggested I go to the school counselor. At first, I thought it was a stupid idea. I thought showing my weakness would make me vulnerable. But I was completely wrong! I ended up going to the counselor, and I poured my heart out to her. She just listened and acknowledged me, which made me feel special and supported. From that day, I decided to change and decided that if I was going to live my life, I should accept and express myself truly. It took a few months to get back on track

and to rebuild all the things I had managed to break. Sometimes I still struggle with opening up, but I can say it has become easier.

I am sharing this personal story because there are so many teenagers and kids going through the same phase. They try to hide their personal issues ranging from health care to being bullied and much more. This can really have a negative effect on everything – their moods, schoolwork, relationships, and even their future. To all of you kids out there, don't be afraid to express yourself truly, because it can do so much good for you. We are all unique and we all need to accept that; only then can we work to build a better world for ourselves. And I was wrong: weaknesses don't make us vulnerable; they make us human.

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