

Alyssa's Letter: A Beautiful Phoenix Rising From Depressing Ashes

First and foremost, I want to thank you for taking the time to read my letter. I did not originally plan to send it on Thanksgiving, but this time of year aptly aligns with my main goal for this letter; togetherness and strengthening my bond with my families. I've felt disconnected from both sides of my family, mainly because no one knows the full extent of abuse and subsequent depression I've had to endure my entire life. This letter attempts to summarize twenty-six years of my life, and with respect to brevity, it has taken me many months to write. Working on this letter has been such a rollercoaster of emotions for me, but I feel it's an important step in my healing journey to be open, vulnerable, and to tell my story to those who are willing to read it. By finishing and sharing this letter it feels like a massive weight has been lifted from my shoulders, and I hope that by sharing my past it will allow me to finally begin forming meaningful connections with my loved ones.

I've suffered from depression and anxiety for as long as I can remember which has made my life extremely difficult. I never felt like I had the opportunity to be a naive, innocent, and happy kid. A kid who believed they could be anything when they grew up. A kid who goes to their parents for solutions because parents are superheroes and always have the answer! Instead I was a kid who has been in survival mode from the start. A kid who never had an innocence to lose because from the very beginning I was surrounded by money problems, addictions, fighting, and a constantly moving, broken home. From very early on, I unknowingly started emotionally numbing myself because I had so much anxiety. To protect myself from the off-the-charts anxiety and bad emotions, I also unknowingly blocked out good emotions too. I was numb and didn't know it. I always felt there was just something inherently wrong with me, and that 'not enjoying anything' was just the 'way I was'. Because of the numbness it took me about twenty years to realize I was severely depressed. I didn't know how to even begin to express myself. I could only hope one day I would feel differently. Unfortunately, this was always my 'normal'. I was completely miserable and the fog of depression made learning feel a hundred times tougher than it needed to be, but I didn't know how to talk about my suffering, or even identify I was suffering because I didn't know or believe life could be different. I built a fortress of emotion-blocking walls that prevented me from truly connecting with anyone around me from an early age.

I engulfed myself with school work as a coping mechanism for everything I was dealing with; oftentimes paradoxically hating school work because my depressive fog made everything so difficult to understand, yet also wanting more homework to distract myself from drowning in the realization of how hopeless I felt about my future. I would get so anxious at school that I

would frequently go to the nurse's office because I just couldn't physically or mentally handle being in class. All throughout the school year waking up to my morning alarm was hell because it so poignantly signified the start to a day I had no hopes for; a day I wasn't or couldn't even dream of being prepared for. Summer vacation for most kids is a time of excitement, sleepovers, adventures, and rejuvenation. Something that gives you stories to tell the rest of your friends and classmates once you return to school!

Summer vacation for me meant that an anxiety timer had been started for when school began again, and when the countdown's up there's no prize or relief, just the beginning of the even worse step in the cycle; school. My depression and lack of friends due to the constant moving meant that I had all the time in the world to stress about the next school year. There was no way I could enjoy a hobby or get into something that sparked my interests. I tried so many things but with my numbness nothing felt enjoyable or fulfilling. I had no idea what depression was or that I was suffering from it. For eleventh and twelfth grade I decided to do PSEO (Post Secondary Enrollment Options). I did PSEO not because I wanted something more like college, but because it was anything but high school. Despite my severe depression, I maintained a 4.0 GPA all throughout K-12, even with taking advanced and honors classes. I am very proud of this; it's one of the few accolades I could cling to while I was really suffering. High school graduation finally arrived and later that fall I continued where I left off with my college career. This is when I really started to struggle.

Suicidal thoughts started manifesting in my head repeatedly and every day I wished I wouldn't wake up for the next. I dropped out of college because I was at a breaking point and I knew I had to drop out or I wasn't going to survive another semester. As soon as I announced I was dropping out (with no current plans on returning) many family members immediately started asking when I was re-enrolling, when is the cutoff for deadlines, etc. I was pressured into re-enrolling and I wasn't doing well enough to push back. I'm bringing this up not to point fingers or cause guilt, but to highlight the idea that if someone is making a big decision you don't agree with or understand, the best next step you can do in that situation is to try and figure out the reasoning behind the decision. No one questioned why I dropped out, but many potentially expressed their opinion that I should re-enroll. College can be an amazing tool that is vital for some professions, but there are also many careers where college is unnecessary or even a flat out waste of time and money.

I started taking a high dose of an antidepressant in 2016 because I figured I had nothing to lose. For the four years I was taking them I'm unsure how big of a role they played in my healing process, but I know I didn't get worse as a result of taking them. After four years though, whatever benefits I was receiving from the medicine began to get outshadowed by the

negative side effects I was experiencing, namely the inability to get restful sleep. Once I started tapering off my antidepressant I began sleeping better, and I have continued healing without antidepressants since. That being said I am not ashamed of taking an antidepressant, and I know that for many people antidepressants are a key milestone in their healing journeys.

For those who don't know, Ryan and I own and operate a gaming lounge in Minneapolis called Left Click Lounge. The COVID-19 pandemic screeched our business' progress and momentum to a halt. Ignoring the misfortune of a pandemic combined with the temporary closure of our business, the downtime I had during the pandemic offered me a fast track for my recovery, and allowed me some much needed time to reflect on my trauma and heal as my numbness wore off. December 2020 is when I started to feel like I was just waking up, like there was a big switch from numbness to feeling. I feel like I'm finally here with everyone, like life makes sense now, I "get it", I'm here. I feel I've only started living these past two years. I took advantage of the pandemic lockdowns and for the first time in my life I started to genuinely love life!! I did yoga, I watched movies and shows I was never able to enjoy in the past, I learned how to play video games and got very good at some! I started taking care of houseplants as one of my many new hobbies, I started hula hooping and later on made my own hoops! I was able to spend quality time with Ryan and even our friends, while still being conscientious of proper pandemic precautions (using home testing kits before attending family gatherings, etc). It was right around when I started improving that I began to contemplate getting a cat. I've always loved animals but my mindset at the time left me with so much doubt that I wouldn't love my new cat, and that I wouldn't be able to give it the life it deserves. In hindsight this sounds like such a benign thing to stress about, but this is just another example of how depression can warp your mind in ways that simply don't make sense at the time. With Ryan's encouragement, I finally adopted our cat, Binky "Baby Boy" Busa, who is the healthiest, goofiest lil nugget and has helped with my healing immensely!

During the past many years, I suffered from daily headaches, arm/shoulder/neck pain, and TMJ disorder (including having my jaw lock up with extremely limited opening and excruciating pain for 8 months). I think I was so numb mentally that I was unable to feel or begin to focus on solving my physical pain until after I had started making progress with my depression. As I improved mentally I began also tackling the aforementioned long term physical pains I had been dealing with as well. I can actually get quality sleep now and I mainly attribute this to solving the misalignments in my back, specifically my neck, with a combination of some chiropractic work along with persistent home stretching and exercise. I thankfully have none of those pains or conditions anymore!

I now want to talk about my mom, who I believe is the cause for most of my trauma and who prevented me from starting and maintaining so many positive relationships throughout my life, including with my dad.

Some examples, but certainly not a complete list, of traumatic events from my past:

Childhood

- Our apartment caught fire when I was eight, which started the chain reaction of us moving constantly.
- I moved countless times and changed schools several times.
- I could never maintain friendships because I moved so often.
- My mom frequently talked about moving to Florida since I was very young which further fueled my stress and anxiety towards moving and stable long term housing.
- I grieved for many years every time I lost friends due to moving.
- I had to experience and deal with both of my parents' mental health issues.
- My extreme social anxiety made school and social events feel like hell.
- Depression made learning a hundred times harder.
- I always felt like I wasn't able to spend enough time with my dad. He would do his best to talk with me and make sure I was doing OK but I was doing so bad that I walled up and would just cry because I didn't know how to properly express myself, especially in very emotional situations.
- I worried about my dad's worsening mental health but I wasn't doing well enough myself to have an impact, which made me feel even worse.
- My dad died when I was twelve, which brought me to new lows I didn't realize could be reached. On top of that, my social anxiety made going to school after my dad's death that much harder because I didn't want to talk to anyone about it nor did I want anyone to ask me about it.
- My mom kept getting more controlling and adding more irrational rules to my life as I became a young adult.
- I didn't feel like I had an emotional or mental support system throughout my life; I felt completely alone.
- My mom stole my money all throughout my childhood which forced me to get a lockable safe when I got my first job so I could withdraw and hide my money from her. I helped my brother get his own bank account years later because she was stealing from him as well. I still have anxiety about spending money, and money in general, because of the trauma caused by her.

- My mom took out a credit card in both our names, maxed it out, and didn't pay it off. Thankfully I was a minor when this happened so I was able to have it removed from my credit report and prevent it from negatively affecting my future.
- I constantly felt poor growing up because of my mom's addictions to cigarettes, wine, gambling, buying material goods like purses, getting her nails done, etc. She made me feel guilty asking for lunch money despite the fact that I was already on the low income lunch program which made my lunches super inexpensive. Feeling like my school lunches were a lesser priority than everything listed above really hurt me.
- Around the time I was in 6th grade I started crying myself to sleep because my mom would yell at me before bed.
- I learned that whenever my mom lashed out at me or had a meltdown, the best thing I could do was to stay quiet and wait for her to finish or run out of steam because there was absolutely no way I would win an argument regardless if I was right or wrong.

Adulthood

- Due to my mom's plans of moving to Florida, I had to find a place to live once I graduated high school. Thankfully Ryan chose to move with me to Minneapolis so I could attend the U of MN, which was not at all convenient for him or his job at the time.
- My mom once forced me to drive to the gas station to buy her cigarettes or else she threatened that she would drive there drunk.
- My mom would randomly turn my phone service off which is not only extremely dangerous but also toxic and an abusive tactic to try and maintain control over me. Thankfully Ryan's Mom not only added me to their phone plan but also got me a new phone because my old phone was not compatible with their carrier.
- Under the influence of at least alcohol, my mom called all the hospitals in the state because she texted me during the middle of the night and I didn't reply immediately. Ryan talked with her on the phone for 45 minutes because she wouldn't stop calling and I absolutely did not want to talk with her. The entire time Ryan was calm and trying to defuse the situation. I was right next to Ryan during the phone call, and I will never forget the disgustingly wretched and toxic things she said to him. Never in my life have I heard such unspeakably mean and hurtful things said to someone, let alone someone who was only trying to protect me. Matt, my mom's husband, also talked to Ryan, siding with my mom

despite the insanity of the situation, trying to explain to Ryan how calling all the hospitals in the state is a normal, rational thing to do.

- My mom publicly posted and tagged Ryan on Facebook saying that Ryan had kidnapped me and I was being held against my will. We had to reach out to Facebook to get the post removed.

Countless other things have happened throughout the years, these are just some examples that stick out in my head.

In 2018, I got a restraining order against my mom. Up until the restraining order, she was showing up to Left Click to try and corner me into talking about our relationship (I'm the problem in her opinion) when I explicitly told her not to, which made every single day we were open incredibly stressful. The restraining order process was extremely draining and depressing, especially given the fact we were already stretched thin from working so hard and putting so much time towards our business. We had to go downtown twice; the first time to talk with a judicial officer to explain the situation and start the process (thankfully we were able to waive the cost), and the second time to go to our court date. The month leading up to the court date wrecked our job efficiency and productivity because I was so stressed about the entire situation. When our court date arrived we went downtown, found the proper courtroom, and waited for our case to be called. The court room was filled with many restraining order cases, so you can imagine the types of people we had to sit around and the atmosphere in the room during the long process. When they called our case I went up and sat in front of everyone, but my mom was not there. The judge asked me if I was surprised my mom had not shown up, to which I replied, "I'm not surprised at all". The best thing she could've done was leave me alone after receiving the restraining order, but instead she added many weeks of additional hell into my life with the court date and the subsequent no-show. Without Ryan, I would not have had the awareness to realize the severity of her abuse nor the courage to do what was necessary for my mental health and safety. Like she's done with many others, she had broken me down to where I didn't feel safe standing up for myself.

My mom is a narcissist. She's a pro manipulator and good at getting what she wants; it pains me to know people in my family enable her in any way. I don't know if she and I will ever have a relationship again, but I will not even attempt to start a new relationship with her until she gets help through rehab and/or therapy, and is able to admit to the pain she has caused me. I wish the people around her and the people still in communication with her would voice the same sentiment. I still have love for my mom, and I want her to get help for the sake of her health and so we can have a chance at a healthy relationship.

The pandemic lockdowns were a uniquely healing time for me, but transitioning from a life of numbness into a life bursting at the seams with emotions can even still at times be very tough and draining. I've been completely reprocessing my dad's death, the problems with my mom, how I feel robbed of a childhood, growing up with instability, uncertainty, a lack of friendships, and how lonely I felt as a kid. To say it's been hard, is the biggest understatement. I've been thinking about my dad more than ever and how no matter how much I think about him, wish he was here, or how close I think we would be now, nothing will bring him back. Now that I'm doing so much better and can actually retain information, I'd love to talk with my family members about my dad; I have questions, I want to hear stories, and I'm sure all of you would love to talk about him and celebrate his lasting impact on our family.

Being Co-Owner of Left Click Lounge with Ryan has been one of the greatest things to ever happen to me. I've grown the confidence required to conquer the countless challenges that come with running a business, like helping customers in a wide variety of situations, being the tournament organizer and lead announcer for large tournaments, keeping our twenty six gaming computers serviced, business phone calls and meetings with large companies like Red Bull, along with countless other responsibilities. Because of Left Click I've gained so much life experience and grown immense confidence I would have never dreamed of having. We've produced and hosted many gaming events and tournaments across the years which have been extremely rewarding including working with the U of MN gaming clubs; I love seeing people making new friends and bonding over their shared love of their favorite games! We still consistently host official U of MN events and have only continued to ramp up our event schedule. We've had many setbacks for our business including me attending college during Left Click's early stages and my poor mental health throughout the years. Through a resourceful combination of a pandemic grant, help from Ryan's mom and brother, and Ryan's life savings from his previous job, we were able to survive during the COVID-19 lockdowns and subsequently make necessary upgrades to reopen our business. I'm certain that despite the insane amount of hours we have put into our business, Ryan has put more time towards my mental health than he has towards Left Click. This is the first time in our business' history that I've been doing well enough and stable enough to help with important tasks, and I'm so excited to take on even more responsibility! Left Click has become a staple in many people's weekly schedules, and it's so touching to hear that we're positively contributing to our guests' mental health, especially post-lockdowns.

This letter is important to me because I'm proud to say I consider myself to finally be doing well mentally. Just this past year, for the first time in my life that I can recall, I woke up without any overarching cloud of depression or anxiety about my day. I thank The Universe/God for Ryan, as I think we all should. Ryan is my light and I genuinely don't think I'd

be alive today without his unconditional love and unwavering help. I'm eternally grateful to Ryan for continuously boosting me with love and positivity despite my depression's best efforts to convince him helping me was pointless and a waste of energy. From the very beginning Ryan's amazing mother and family have treated me as an equal; with the same levels of sincere warmth and acceptance that they show everyone in their family regardless of how long they've been a part of it. They've played a vital role in the growth and flourishing of my self-worth and self-esteem.

Thank you again for taking the time to read my letter. My hopes are that by sharing my past, I can become closer with my family and encourage others to reach out if they're dealing with pain or struggles of their own. I don't have a clear ending to this letter because, well, this isn't the end. This letter marks a checkpoint in my life where I can begin to properly grieve while still moving forward with my head up. This letter marks the first winter in my life where it doesn't feel like my world is ending. This letter marks a time in my life where I don't have anxiety about going to family events because I believe I am loved and wanted.

Most importantly, this letter marks the beginning of what is hopefully a life filled with love and happiness; friends and family. I deserve that. We all deserve that.

Sincerely,
Alyssa Marie Shoultz