

When I was eight years old I was ushered to a fireman's breakfast with my parents. The table was set with toasted waffles, tea for mum and dad, and juice for me and my sister, but I couldn't eat. I couldn't understand why everyone was lighthearted while I was terrified.

In California, fire isn't a mere probability—it's a likelihood. As temperatures soar, fire is becoming more difficult to predict and control. While my parents had brought me to this event to alleviate my fears, it made them worse. One firefighter told us fire doesn't kill, smoke does. "But how do you survive smoke?" I asked him. He told me people survive if they get on the floor or shut their bedroom door. "It's also about controlling the fire," he said.

Upon returning home, I remained irrationally afraid our house would catch fire, but I also became obsessed about how to control it. My anxiety was so potent that I insisted my mother place a fire extinguisher in my room, even though I knew I didn't know how to use it. As long as I had the means to protect myself, my anxiety fell away.

But as I got older, new anxieties emerged in place of fire. I grappled with OCD, episodes of depression, and suffered bouts of anorexia. At the beginning of 2020, my mother enrolled me in ASPIRE. Four days a week I found myself in a basement, surrounded by teenagers who shared my anxieties. Here, we delved into the world of DBT (dialectical behavior therapy), a therapeutic approach designed to help individuals regulate and manage overwhelming emotions. Amidst my peers facing similar battles, ASPIRE became my fire extinguisher.

With each passing session, we discovered a new therapeutic approach rooted in mindfulness and emotional regulation. It wasn't an instant fix; progress was gradual, but I had protection at the ready and felt stronger in the face of uncertainty. TIPP played a crucial role in my progress. TIPP stands for Temperature, Intense Exercise, Paced Breathing, and Paired Muscle Relaxation. This tool regulates overwhelming emotions through activities that alter body chemistry such as cold water exposure, which provides immediate relief.

Through the support of the therapists, my mother, and friends I made along the way, I experienced a shift. The burden of my mental health struggles began to lighten, and I no longer felt imprisoned by my thoughts; I could take responsibility for them and this was empowering.

Only recently have I been able to see the correlation between my anxiety about fire and my ongoing anxieties. My terror of fire was crippling, until I was given the means to control the source of my fear.

For a long time, I shut my bedroom door at night to protect myself from the imagined smoke of a fire that never came. However, with an extinguisher, I was finally able to sleep with the door open. This shift in my nightly ritual symbolized a broader transformation facilitated by therapy, which has become the driving force behind my inspiration to study psychology—an exciting door I am eager to open.

The experience of therapy has provided a crucial realization that I was not alone in my struggles. The ability to connect with others facing similar challenges and offer mutual support was instrumental in my healing journey. Therapy instilled a profound sense of self-awareness in me, fundamentally altering

the way I navigate the world. My empathy as a human being has deepened, making me open and attuned to the diverse experiences and challenges people face. This newfound skill has strengthened my commitment to studying psychology and pursuing a path as a therapist. I believe that everyone deserves compassion and understanding on their journey to mental well-being. Coming to the realization that you don't have to face anxiety alone motivates me to study psychology and become a therapist, ensuring others find support just as I did.