

I am not a smiler. This is due to the fact that I cannot express what I don't feel. Not that I'm not happy with myself but that I'm quite mellow. In the past, people would often ask whether I'm feeling alright. As much as these are good intentions, it was annoying. Being called an emo was one of many negative traits that people identified me with. During these years, this was a common descriptor – a stereotypical image of a person in dark clothing, cropped hair and slashed forearms.

Occasionally, even now, this still occurs. People feel a great sadness about me.

I had once believed that my teen years would be an era of fun and peace. This was what I thought would be so accurately portrayed by music videos, romantic comedies and dramas. However, at twelve years old and onwards, life was not what I had hoped.

Domestic violence and negative appraisal were family heirlooms; harshly ingrained, familiar but unpredictable. My father was a violent, aggressive man whose actions would spur turmoil and fear within us all. The pleading, the screaming and the bruises were somehow seen as appropriate punishment for his outcast eldest daughter who wanted very much to belong amongst her peers and wanted to know what was out there. Paired with alcoholism, my mother would also fall under his iron fist.

Being a first generation Australian of a migrant family has had its challenges. Over the years, I had learnt what secrets, broken dreams and scandals lie within my parents as well as the ever-increasing pressure for me to have such an extraordinary life. For me, it has always been and will continue to be this way.

The very few friends I had, my grades, what I wore, my refusal to do chores, or any minor detail, would become grossly exaggerated with scrutiny. Deviance was punished. Apparently, there was a strict coherence to maintain cultural customs and associations. This usually led to arguments and soon after, violence. All I wanted was to be able to join in and to know how other people lived – just to have this extraordinary life.

There had been many times where I had thought about running away, delved in drug use and contemplated suicide because I no longer thought there was a place for me. Along with these many problems, there were the failed missions to find help.

I had looked through the Yellow Pages and rang shelters, finding out they catered for married women and children only and browsed through my hometown's 48 page services directory, which the majority of services were for older people. There were nights where I had rang Kids Helpline, wondering if anyone would answer. I was also reluctant to call triple zero because I had thought that no one would believe me and even if anyone did, I was more afraid to be put into foster care than sudden death from my injuries. Then, of course, there was the ever untrustworthy social workers, school chaplains and counsellors.

A middle-aged social worker told me that "it's just culture" and that there was nothing more she and her colleague could do for me. And such punishment would begin again, behind closed doors. Having spent enough time in a partisan-affiliated school, I was not willing to put my faith in the school chaplain. In a secular school that prided itself on open-minded progression, I encountered a particular school counsellor who broke confidentiality to the point where every member of teaching staff knew things that they should never have known. This counsellor's generic saying for all students, regardless of what they were experiencing, was "fake it 'til you make it". It was horrible.

The help that I sought turned out to be unhelpful. No one could understand my predicaments as a minority. Unfortunately, I thought the only way I could receive such aid was to conform. At that time, it seemed that was all these services could do for me – to cater for the very broad, vague issues of the masses. I had visited other counsellors who glorified the legal age of

eighteen, pointing out how "you can do what you want". This was nothing more than a slippery bandaid that they put on anyone from a culturally and linguistically diverse background having familial problems.

There were more details. I found myself incredulously simplifying my issues because these counsellors could not grasp that running off when you reach a certain age is not a solution. But even then, these mundane yet violent details may have been easily figured out on my own. I believed that I had more of an understanding of them, than they did of me.

I harmed myself and then, I gave up. For the longest time.

My end result was general anxiety disorder and depression.

But, I had friends with suicidal intentions. This was troubling, to say the least. This was a struggle because now, whose problems were the worst? It became an unnecessary comparison about who had it bad. How could I support anyone, when I couldn't even find support for myself?

I was shocked but not surprised. Sometimes, I wondered whether our friendships were built on our poor mental health. Many nights, I'd be woken by a night visitor; a friend, who had walked five kilometres or had driven to my house, in later years – just to talk and to cry. And for these nights, I didn't know what to do but to feel this great sadness – this same sadness that people feel about me.

It has been a few years since then, and fortunately, these events no longer occur. It has been enlightening to have encountered compassionate people and wonderful services that have enable me to slowly grow. Hopefully, I would now know better to help myself and to help others.

But I was wrong.

Not too long ago, one of my friends was diagnosed with severe depression and had intended on ending their life. It wasn't until I helped them complete an application to re-enrol into university that I learnt the true extent of how they felt and what had happened. I told them that I was here to support them and told them information that they may have wanted to know. That was all. Even if it was all that I could do, I felt that I had failed.

We both shared a similar cultural background, in which we both knew what attitudes people had towards general mental health. If you were found to be somewhat "mentally disturbed", you became a central point of gossip. "Feeling depressed" is seen as a dubious claim of disability but also, a potential contagion as if caused by supposedly bad genes. The one cure-for-all is to frown upon you, declaring that you should just get over it, move on and stop being a nuisance. To learn about mental illness and health is usually ignored. There is a collectivistic attitude that you should be invincible; not for your own sake but for other people. Martyrdom is key.

As years gone by, I've encountered and heard of new services that cater for just about anyone. But I am yet to find one that could be a good fit for people like me – a first generation Australian from a migrant background which have archaic views on mental health. Cultural awareness is a dogged term. The impression that I get from the current service spectrum is that there are some that specifically support migrants and some that support locals. However, there is little to nothing for anyone caught in between.

How can we be prepared to support a proud multicultural generation of young Australian people?

This not about social exclusion or a cultural divide, but more about finding out why there is a lack of drive to address this issue.

When I find these answers, perhaps, I will smile.