

How to Be Your Own Shitty Therapist

By Lindsey Miga

Reach prodigy status in kindergarten. Or maybe not a prodigy. Somewhere between smarty-pants, and gifted. Earn a gold star for the lists and lists of vocab you master. Learn multiplication before learning to tie your shoe. Read at a fourth-grade level. Be appointed line leader.

When you reach fourth-grade math gets harder. Long division? Who's she? After a day you have it down. Get placed in Ratigan's room. The accelerated room. You're special, they tell you. You're smarter than the other kids. The class reads *The World According to Humphrey*. They go chapter by chapter, always making predictions. You read the whole series in kindergarten.

"Just pretend you haven't read it." the teacher tells you. "Just pretend you don't know." You write down your "prediction". You know it's correct. You're rewarded with a smiley-face sticker. *You're special* she writes. You believe her. Get invited to the Thursday lunchtime book club. Take your lunchbox up to the library. Read Percy Jackson. Read Harry Potter. Fall in love with words. You never liked math anyway.

Coast through school. No studying. No effort. Get put on the honors track. Find a home in 218. Avoid the math wing as much as possible. Drift away from your old friends, and fall in line with new ones. They're all smart, just like you. Coast through freshman year, coast through sophomore. Hit the brakes Junior year. Watch your friends continue to coast, while you get a fifty-five on your math test.

Remember kindergarten, fourth grade, every year up to junior. You're special, they had said. You're smarter. Realize you're average. Your friends all earn A's and special awards. You earn disappointment and swings of depression. The anxiety reaches a new high. Even as you love all your friends so deeply, you question everything.

Did he ever actually care for me? Does she actually want to know? Do they just tolerate me because they don't know how to get rid of me? They tell you you're wrong. That they love you all the

same. They don't know how you feel the cold. They don't know how you feel their absence. They don't know how aware you are that your phone no longer lights up with their name every five minutes.

Try to control it. Make jokes, bake cookies, maybe try to reach out. Try to tell them you're sad. Empty. Unmotivated to do anything. Watch as they struggle to respond. Watch as one questions if you really are sad, as another tells you it's going to be okay, as a third simply ignores it.

Return the next day with smiles, hugs, and good mornings. Try not to cry as they all think you're fine. Try not to show that you're so desperate for them to stay, so desperate for warmth, that you just buried it deeper. Don't reach out again.

Try your hand at self-therapy. Recognize that you like spontaneity. Living in the moment. Start taking mental snapchats to save next time you feel like shit. Remember the mischievous grin he gives you. The utmost joy on your best friends' faces as they dance to the Wizards of Waverly Place hat song.

Try going back to something you love. Pick up a pen and start writing. Create an entire novel, but don't share it with anyone. Take a moment and be proud that you wrote all three hundred pages. Be proud of the way you write, and the way the words wrap around you and fill your emptiness with warmth. Remember that writing is not a stable career. Remember that you're nothing special at it. Just average.

Go back to class. Your grades are dropping. You don't do anything about it. Dodge your mother's eyes when she asks you about the missing Physics assignments. Decide to try. Put aside the mass amounts of pride and shame and call a friend. Explain the situation. Ask for help. You've never done that before. Hear him chuckle to the phone. He suggests you sign up for a tutor if you have so many questions. Silently wish he knew that your pride won't allow that.

Listen to him laugh again, and tell you that you should've just done the work on time. Tell him you tried to. When he then says you clearly didn't try hard enough, respond that you really did. Try not to hope that he'll understand how hard this is for you. How hard it is to do anything but sleep. When he rolls his eyes and laughs again, let your hair drop over your eyes and hope it blocks the tears threatening to spill.

Feel more alone than ever. You're friends barely make plans anymore. When they do half the time you don't feel like going, but at the same time you can't stay away. Sit off in the corner during movienight. Steal glances at the boy sat halfway across the room. Avoid remembering the way he used to play with your hair, or wind his fingers through yours as you both pretended to be focused on the movie.

On nights back home pretend not to notice your mother's concern as you fall asleep at seven and wake constantly in the night. Nod as she warns you about burning on all ends. Tell her it's just been a long week every time she comments you look exhausted. Hope that she doesn't see the way you cry into your pillow, as you stare at a wall, when the world is asleep,

Have no way to explain the unmotivation you feel. No way to express how sometimes you just can't get yourself to do it. No way to make someone understand how everything feels upside down. How everyone seems to think you're smarter than you are. How lonely you feel even surrounded by the friends you love so deeply. How empty you feel when shadows claim the sky.

Take one of those Stress-Anxiety-Depression tests. Score severe, severe, and extremely severe. Realize how desperate you are for someone to *see* you. Recognize the fact that if you want people to realize how void you are you have to *act* sad. Hate the manipulation of it. So instead just sit quietly.

Try to remember your self therapy tools. How did you used to make it through pain? Recall the snapshots. Rachel smiling brighter than anything you've ever seen. Bella laughing until she couldn't breathe. The look of scandal on Sami's face every time you made a bad pun.

Feel the emptiness recede. Crave more.

Keegan attempting to dance. Jonny and Connor starting a snowball fight in the parking lot. Andrew laughing way too hard at that damn broccoli-filtered snapchat, then quietly sending you the unfiltered picture.

Feel it fill you with happiness. Grin as you add it into an English paper. Struggle to describe the relief that smile allows you. Then remember where life is now. Headed to another lockdown. A quarantined Christmas.

Try to hold onto the snapshots. The beauty of those moments. The weightlessness. Feel it go away again. Pick up a book. Sit down to write. The words fill the space. The emptiness. The void. Feel the weight of the world fall away. Words will never leave you. The time however is fleeting. You have to work on college applications.

“Creative Writing is not a career.” guidance tells you. You nod.

“You don’t want to be a starving artist.” she insists. You nod.

“You should major in something else.” You nod again, and wonder if she’s even looking at you.

You start applying. Your grades have gone to shit. Your senior project hasn’t really been started. You’re about three weeks behind on work. You see an instagram post claiming all ‘prodigy children’ are now depressed and illiterate. You laugh. Kind of a mood.

In kindergarten you reached prodigy status. In elementary and middle school you were above average. In high school you’re confronted by the fact you are not naturally a genius, you don’t have the best work ethic, and you are averagely above average. Smart enough to be in AP, not smart enough to ace the class. Just average.

Something funny happens in the hall, you take a mental photo. Smile at the moment of happiness it gives you. When the world comes crashing down again. Remember, smile, forget. Just try to get through it. Shoulder it alone until the dam breaks. Then paint on a smile, comfort someone else, and keep moving.