

Accepting vulnerabilities – breaking free of emulated standards that demarcate us

By Sania Zehra

Diminished sense of self, dependency, deteriorating health, and delapidated contact with reality – the overwhelming feeling that came rushing subsequent to when I questioned my life choices. That unwinnable rationalization in my head between internalized stigma and empathy for self.

In February 2020, I got enrolled in a master's program as a young woman in her twenties becoming a psychologist to progress and enhance my expertise in the field, little did I know of the prolonged period of isolation that was going to hit the world and push masses to extreme anxiousness, economic uncertainty and fear of death. Alike millions of other people, sitting at home, I developed nervous-depressive symptoms, which aggravated to panic attacks and frequent acute migraine episodes. I consulted a neurologist and was prescribed citalopram, within couple of days I felt better, better to an extent that the moment an excessive dose of that drug starts to assimilate in my blood, I felt euphoric, experienced true bliss. It gave me a magic fix to self-deprecating chain of thoughts, however, on a cost of sleeping long hours, missing deadlines, dodging concerns of family, poly cystic ovaries, and subsequent weight gain. I should mention that I was unaware of everything that happened above, oblivious, I continued the use.

April 2020, an acquaintance introduced me to a community. A community who took pride in their choices, who took responsibility of their bodies, celebrated being the way they were and siphoned strength from each other as a community. I got affiliated personally and professionally to this group and found courage in being vulnerable to acceptance of who I was. As I progressed, I met with opportunities to learn and grow, as a woman be an advocate, make use of my experience to support and help those struggling like I did. I felt safe, opened up, shared my experience of use. Not long, an unanticipated tension started to build up between the regionally related members of the group, weaponizing a criterion that can make me disappear – illegality of substance and years of use.

Forum to forum when the question of being a user was asked, I'd resist. An unfamiliar yet contagious feeling of not being enough, an imposter & an outcast persisted. Rather than helping me overcome this fear & modelling how to be a fearless fighter, I was labeled as an opportunist. Negating my dedication, endless love and potential to be a young advocate, my own community closed doors on me.

Befuddled, torn, and heartbroken I took some time off only to rejuvenate my inner power. Six months of hyper focus, self-education, dedication and self-mentoring bagged me a key position in my own country that allows me to work closely with policy makers and custodians of government-led programs on reproductive health and rights of women. I am actively serving a critical role in rolling out of self-care interventions for women hailing from all communities in Pakistan.

One of the things we don't generally speak about is we as community don't know how to see each other *as each other* rather we see each other for what we think one another should be. Instilling inclusion for all is what we need to do instead of creating pedestals among the community emulating standards that demarcate on the basis of illegality of substance and years of use. We as community need compassion to acknowledge each other's existence, and defy the need to contour each other to be "fit-ins." Let's limit the seeding ground of the algorithm of someone else thriving as you losing. As community, advocate for acceptance for all.

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#Narcofeminism: 'Our bodies – our choice, our rights, our voice.'

under the category of short stories that depict lived experiences or valuable lessons/key learnings from community