

It Can Only Get Better

Andrew Maggs

“Andrew, could you please pay attention long enough to complete the pass?” Coach Lenard yelled for what seemed like the 15th time, although we had only been at practice for all of 12 minutes. This was the way my life went. Andrew, could you please finish eating? Andrew, could you please turn in your paper? Andrew, how many times do I have to ask you to clean your room? Andrew, are you even listening to me?

I would love to answer them honestly. To tell them that it's impossible to listen to them with all the other thoughts running through my head at times, while at others, there is a vast emptiness that still cannot choose to do the simple task laid out in front of me, no matter how loud they yell.

My name is Andrew Maggs, and in my sophomore year of high school I enjoy lacrosse, although I never play as well as I feel I could. I love to run and I'm really very good at this, until race time. I enjoy music and reading, although my math teacher doesn't feel my love of reading is an appropriate choice of activities during math lessons. It really seems as though I never make an appropriate choice of activities. My brain has all sorts of to do lists and things that need to be completed, I just never seem to complete anything. I have mastered the art of telling everyone what they want to hear, it quiets them enough to let me forget about my overdue tasks and silences the overwhelming stress and anxiety that grows inside me, every minute of every day.

Back at the ripe old age of 8, I remember sitting at the kitchen table, being scolded for not completing my “rainbow words”, all I had to do was write 3 sets of 3 words in 3 different colors

and how could one possibly do such a monotonous task when literally anything else in the entire world is more interesting. This world seemed to soothe my mind. I was free to think and explore, similar to the science fiction world I read about. It was this young that the yelling started. I know my mom was only trying to help, but the yelling only seemed to point out that I was unable to accomplish any task that I was supposed to be accomplishing.

“Andrew, what time is your next driving lesson and when is your next pre calc test?”, Mom asked, waking me from my daydreams. I love driving. It's a time when there seems to be enough noise going on around me that my brain seems to focus well on the task at hand. A few short months and I will have freedom to drive me and my friends wherever we might want to go. Nothing about my friends and I climbing out of the back of my mom's minivan says “cool”.

“ANDREW! Seriously child, do you even hear what I'm saying?” That is what happens. My brain disappears, following the next shiny thing and I'm off. No clue what I was doing or where I needed to be going. Off on a new thought, not looking back or even caring what I was supposed to be doing or thinking about, until I wake up at 2 am in a panic because I have forgotten to do my work, project, clean my room, study for a test etc, etc, etc. “FOR THE LOVE OF GOD WHEN WILL YOU BE HOME AND WHEN IS YOUR TEST” “6:30 tonight and the test is Friday” I shout as I jump from the car, not waiting for it to come to a complete stop, doing my damndest to avoid another lecture of not paying attention. It's always the same questions and I figure out unique answers to them every time. I feel like answering honestly wouldn't go over well, “I will be home the same time as always unless something interesting happens in which case I will forget you even need to know when I will be home”, and “The test will be sometime within a week, and we'll burn that bridge when we get to it”. I hardly ever know the actual answers to these questions and I can't be bothered enough to find out.

Chaos, the best way to describe the hallways of the typical overcrowded American high school. Sure, there are teachers and administrators patrolling, but half of them seem to be surviving off too much coffee and one too many angry emails from parents. My first period is pre AP chemistry with, notably, the hardest teacher known to mankind. I understand that everyone claims to have that teacher, but this one is the real deal. Parents have tried to have her fired for years, moved their little darlings out of her class and into regular chemistry. I kind of like her though, she doesn't assign too much homework that I would inevitably forget about. People complain that her tests are the hardest they've ever had, though I have an incredible ability to ace multiple choice tests, I mean it's probably my most unique and potent talent. So in the end that teacher was great for me. She saw my test grades and knows that I understand the concepts being taught but just can't get out of my own way enough to turn in assignments. She seems to understand when my brain starts to wander, and she calls me right back. She has stayed on top of me and I have in turn, shone in her class. This is one of the few instances where I don't feel people have given up on me

I divulge this background as an insight into my day to day, my brain and my struggle. While we are in a world where mental health is the topic du jour, people don't really understand what goes on inside anyone's head. Mental health talk really equates to the crazies that shoot up large groups of people. Us normal, although not entirely normal brains get left by the wayside. Mom, thinking she was doing her best, would quiz me on my to do lists and tasks I needed to complete. She moved into micromanagement role, and I was her new pet project. This is where I learned the art of lying. I created elaborate schemes that even shocked me as they were escaping my lips. Great stories of books I had read and the reports that I had written. Most of these were thoughts rummaging through my head while I sat, blank eyed, pretending to be reading. Why

would I work at concocting these tales of greatness rather than simply doing the work? Why would I have every intention of changing my actions, yet time after time forget? How could I possibly get A's on all my tests without doing the work?

I wake in a panic of sweat, breathless and unsure of what happened. Its Thursday, I surmise staring at the clock, trying to figure out what is happening. It is a dread that has become quite common. A feeling of horror so deep that I cannot catch my breath. I feel like I haven't slept and slept for hours all at the same time. Pre-calc! I have done it again. I am taken back to the conversation with my mom that happened just days earlier as she was bringing me to school. Shortly before saying goodnight, Ms. Micromanagement even went through my day, asking what work was due, what needed to be done and what tests were coming up. I answered her, what I thought was honestly and was steadfast in my reply. "Nothing, I'm good", I swore and I believed it. Yet, here I was, in familiar territory, knowing what would come next.

Anxiety, which Oxford says is a "feeling of worry, nervousness or unease, typically about an imminent event or something with an uncertain outcome". I feel that instead of words, a picture of Andrew Maggs could sum all that up quite concisely. My throat tightens as I reach for the water that has been sitting on my bedside table for days and gulp, hoping this loosens the grip and allow me to breath. I'm a failure. I cannot get my shit together. What the hell is wrong with me? The words echo through my brain as I scream loudly although no one can hear me. I bury my head under the pillow, willing the situation away.

I meet with my pediatrician, a sweet older woman of French origin with a different view on life. She once had me help grow a garden saying that this would spark my interest in vegetables. That only taught me to pull weeds. I still don't eat vegetables. My mother has excused herself from the room, allowing me some privacy and reminding me to be honest about

what goes on in my head and my life. I try my best to be honest but find that honesty really leads to a sadness in my soul. I'm not like my family, my friends. I don't have strong desires or motivations that push me to excel. I don't have hopes and dreams for the future. "Why?" she asks, with a caring look on her face that I feel safe with and know she is truly concerned about me. "I mean, I like my friends, for a bit and then just want to go back home to be alone in my room. I like hanging out at cross country practice and running with the guys. I can hang with the top group and know that I'm a good runner." I add that most races end up with pain in my back, an inability to get my breathing under control and an awful performance that keeps me from wanting to participate. We discuss my grades, my forgetfulness, and my inability to keep focus. She asks if running or lacrosse practice seem to help, and I deny that they do. She asks if I feel accomplished by completing these tasks and I state that I do not, I'm only glad they are done. Accomplishment is another emotion that I don't seem to feel. I am neither proud or disappointed in my accomplishments just as I am neither excited nor fearful of the future, just indifferent. She listens and questions, taking my brain to uncomfortable places. I am honest with her. I am hopeful. Hopeful that someone understands me, hopeful that she will help me figure out why I am not like everyone else. Hopeful that she can assist me in improving my bad habits and hopeful there is nothing wrong with me. Though there would be many more tiring ups and downs before I would even get a hint of how to fix myself, and maybe I never will figure out exactly what that looks like, but in the end, I tell myself it can only get better.