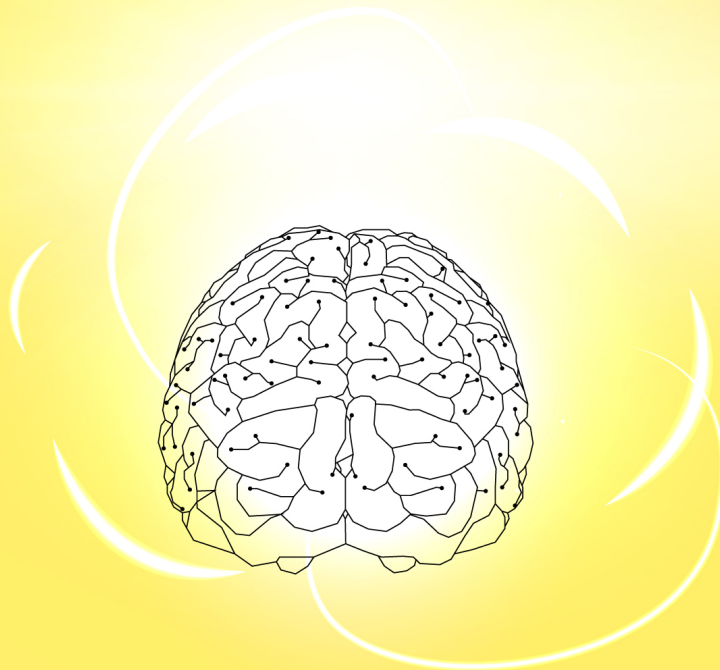


Summary

THE VALEDICTORIAN OF BEING DEAD

Heather B. Armstrong



Summary of «The Valedictorian of Being Dead» by Heather Armstrong

Written by Lea Schullery

Learn about a mother's journey in curing her depression by going to the extreme and dying ten times.



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Introduction

After eighteen months of full-blown depression, mommy-blogger Heather Anderson found herself crying every night on the phone to her mother wishing that she was no longer on this earth. She felt that her family, friends, and children would be better off without her. She could hardly get out of bed in the morning and fell into a downward spiral of negative thoughts. After opening up to her psychiatrist about her struggles, Dr. Bushnell offered Heather a radical treatment to help cure her depression. A treatment that involved dying. Ten times to be exact. Putting Heather into a medically-induced coma ten times over the course of a few weeks might just be the answer that Heather was looking for. After feeling extreme sadness once again that evening, Heather called up her doctor and accepted the offer for this extreme treatment.

Throughout the next few weeks, Heather experiences a change within herself. She begins to feel emotions she hadn't experienced in a long time, she hears music clearer and sees colors brighter, she begins to feel alive. Keep reading to see Heather's journey in changing her valedictorian mindset through dying and digging into the root of her mental illness.

I Wish I was Dead

Heather Anderson fell into an eighteen-month depression. Recently divorced and now a single mother of two, Heather felt that her life was never going to get better. Her bouts of anxiety began the moment her alarm went off, immediately thinking about all of the things she had to get done that day, stressing about being the perfect mom for her two kids. As a perfectionist, anything less seemed like a total failure and only exacerbated the anxiety of not being good enough.

Navigating life as a newly-single mom, anytime something seemingly small would happen, like forgetting a lunchbox or forgetting to do homework, would spark constant negative thoughts of not being good enough. Life isn't perfect, but for someone struggling with severe depression, even the smallest mistake can seem like a life-altering mistake that only leads to a downward spiral. That downward spiral would eventually lead to destructive thoughts of Heather wishing she was dead.

Not only did Heather struggle with making sure the household ran smoothly, she quickly became overwhelmed with childcare and work, and would spend the evening crying to her mother on the phone. Crying in her closet to protect her children, crying in the shower when the mere thought of living was just too overwhelming. She became so overwhelmed that getting up in the morning was excruciatingly painful, she was drained. Drained of all her energy. She would spend days at a time in the same clothes, covered in food, but the act of simply changing clothes was just too much.

She knew she needed a change, she knew she was struggling, and she knew that she needed something drastic to become a better mother to her kids. Knowing about the struggles of the past eighteen months, Heather's psychiatrist, Dr. Bushnell, knew she needed drastic help, so after a simple phone call, Heather would soon receive one of the most extreme treatments for depression, which meant dying. Ten times.

Getting Offered a Radical New Treatment

Would you die to save your life? It's extreme, it's radical, but Heather was the perfect candidate for a new cure for depression. Dr. Bushnell knew doctors who were researching this new radical treatment that allowed patients to start dying to save their lives and make life worth living once again.

Imagine being on your smartphone mindlessly scrolling through social media when all of a sudden, a picture won't load. You try to comment on your friend's vacation post. You try to like that photo of the cute puppies. But nothing happens. What do you do? You kill the app and restart it. And guess what? Nine times out of ten, the app works again. Heather was going to go through the same process. She was going to die. Ten times.

Okay, so Dr. Bushnell hastily explained that she wasn't going to necessarily die. Instead, her death would only be temporary. She was going to receive an anesthetic called Propofol which would put her into a deep coma, causing the electrical activity of her brain to be slowed down to the point of becoming nearly brain-dead. This treatment was groundbreaking and Heather had the opportunity to change her life. Just like when an app starts working again, Heather's brain could start working again through starting over.

This treatment isn't necessarily brand new. In fact, it's similar to Electroconvulsive Therapy or ECT in which patients go through a similar process of brain suppression while an electrical current is administered. However, the side effects of going through ECT can be devastating, including debilitating migraines or even complete memory loss. Doctors were hopeful that Propofol would not only cure mental illnesses like depression but do so without the awful side effects.

Heather had to think about it. Dying ten times over didn't quite seem worth it. She had children to care for, but that evening during her nightly crying session, she realized that radical treatment might be the only way to be-

come a better mother to her girls. She called Dr. Bushnell the next day and agreed to participate.

A Harrowing First Treatment

If you've ever had surgery, you know that fasting is part of the process when going under anesthesia. You feel uncomfortable, irritable...you become hangry! That lack of nourishment only exacerbates the typical pre-surgery anxieties wondering if everything is going to go smoothly, wondering if the anesthesia will work, thinking of the countless ideas and scenarios that you make up in your head. This is all normal. But how normal is it to know that the anesthesia will put you into a near brain-dead coma?

This all happens to Heather throughout her first treatment. Anxiety-ridden and incredibly scared, Heather's experience only becomes worse when she experiences awful hallucinations of people melting around her, she tries to scream but the anesthesia has already taken over and she is trapped inside her own mind until the coma sets her free.

Of course, before all of this happens, Dr. Mickey, the lead researcher, explains to Heather how the process works and how they will monitor her brain activity using the bispectral index. Typical anesthesia reduces brain activity to about 40 on this index, but Heather was going to be taken down to right above zero, taking her dangerously close to brain death. In addition to the anesthesia, Heather would also be receiving Fentanyl, an opioid that will reduce the risk of debilitating headaches upon waking up.

While the experience was frightening in more ways than one, she awoke to realize Fentanyl hadn't worked and she experienced painful headaches causing her to sleep for the rest of the day. And those hallucinations before unconsciousness? Heather discovered she was one of just four percent of people in the world who experienced hallucinations when administered Fentanyl.

Throwing Away the Valedictorian Mindset

While Heather's first treatment was both debilitating and frightening, she pushed on through her second and third treatments during that same week. With Fentanyl out of her treatment regimen, the hallucinations stopped but the exhaustion didn't. After each treatment, she seemed drained and could do nothing else but sleep. However, she knew she had to work hard to help cure her depression. Yes, the treatment was working hard for her, but she needed to get to the root of her illness to truly see results.

Heather remembers feeling anxiety at just sixteen years old, she had her ups and downs throughout her high school years and distinctly remembers a teacher telling her to relax, that she was doing too much and would burn out from the pressure she was putting on herself. But, therein lies the real issue. Heather could never relax. Similar to the feelings she had of being a single mom, of never being good enough, she felt that way in school as well. Those moments now seem like small glimpses into what would eventually turn into full-blown depression.

With the pressure of being the best, she felt anything less than being the Valedictorian of her school was a failure. Thinking she would lose everything, she ignored her teacher's remarks of taking the time to relax and pushed herself to be number one, and it worked. She was Valedictorian and she was on top of the world. She had accomplished being the top student of her high school, but even at the height of her success, she felt sadness. In fact, the years following in college she put so much pressure on herself to be perfect that she dropped out of college after only two years.

Imagine thinking that weren't good enough if you weren't valedictorian of your school, that you were a failure. If your kids forgot their lunch, if you made a small mistake at work, if everything didn't go smoothly in your life that you would lose it all. That somehow because you weren't the best, you would wind up on the streets, homeless. Depression has a weird way of conjuring up these worst-case scenarios, and Heather wasn't immune to these thoughts. It was because of these thoughts that she decided to get to the

bottom of her depression, what caused her brain to become sick? When did these valedictorian thoughts begin?

She traced her roots to her childhood, Heather grew up in a strict Mormon household where her father put an immense amount of pressure on her. Combined with the pressure to be perfect, she experienced fear when she made small mistakes. While her mother was kind and loving, her father was intimidating and had fits of anger that turned into physical harm at times. Heather remembers him storming into her room, pushing her against a wall and screaming that she needed to learn how to respect adults. She explained her mistake in responding to her mom with “what” instead of “yes Ma’am.” Naturally, a response like Heather’s shouldn’t result in such anger and aggression, but this was her normal. She tried to appease her father and felt failure was never an option, eventually leading to what she calls her valedictorian mindset.

With radical treatment and digging into the root of her depression, Heather begins to realize that being valedictorian isn’t important and that she must throw away that mindset to find happiness and heal her brain.

Seeing Results of a Healing Brain

When you kill that app on your phone, and you click on it to reopen, it goes through the process of restarting. It might not load as quickly, it might take a few seconds (a long time in technology time). Similar to turning your computer off and back on. Or when you reconnect your WiFi after turning it off because it wasn't working. All these devices have to restart, maybe electricity has to run through the wires, maybe connections have to be made for the devices to work again. And results might not happen immediately, but when they do work again, they are faster or better than before you disconnected them. Heather's brain is going through a similar process. Results won't be immediate, they will take time. But when she begins to see those results, she knows her brain is beginning to work again...it's healing.

After her third treatment, Heather was still experiencing the typical tiredness and lack of energy that she usually gets post-treatment. But, she made a wonderful discovery that day after her third treatment. When looking at her reflection, she realized she had put on make-up that morning. To the average person, this is a seemingly normal event, but to Heather this was everything. This was progress.

The previous eighteen months had been the longest, most severe bout of depression that Heather had experienced. She constantly wished that she were dead, that everyone would be better off, her family and friends, would be better off without her there. She was a failure, she couldn't accomplish anything. She was so drained and exhausted that she couldn't even get dressed in the morning. So, that make-up? That was progress. That showed that she cared, she had some motivation to wake up and become presentable again.

However, it wasn't until after her fifth treatment that Heather really experienced a break-through in her treatments. Her mother offered to take the girls for the evening, so Heather would have the evening to herself. And guess what she did? She even surprised herself and called up an old friend to catch up. She made plans and she went and enjoyed beer and dinner at a

friend's house. You see, she hadn't been out with friends in quite some time. She made the typical excuses for not having time, and she was just too exhausted to put forth the effort of going out of the house. But, she did it. She went out and had dinner with a friend.

Her brain was healing and this became evident when her friend played some music that night. While leaving the house was a major accomplishment, another one was actually feeling something when the music played. She allowed the music to be played and she felt the music inside her, making her feel emotions as she listened. She drove home that night feeling more accomplished than ever, and more importantly, more alive. When she showed up for her sixth treatment, she not only put on make-up as she had for her third treatment, but she completed a full morning routine. She showered, got dressed, and even cared to spritz perfume on before heading to the hospital. She walked the halls remembering the feeling of sadness she felt walking to all those previous treatments, but this time, a weight seemed lifted. She found herself wondering what it was like to feel sad.

Recognizing her Relationship with her Father

As mentioned previously, Heather's father was strict and quick to anger, he put an immense amount of pressure on her and her brother and as a result, they both suffered from depression. But, to understand why her father acted the way he did, she needed to understand how he grew up. He grew up in Kentucky, where he and his family had very little. Despite coming from a poor family, her father was able to successfully become a manager at IBM, a well-known computer firm. He worked hard for what he had. He didn't have much to begin with, but he was able to make something of himself. He felt that if he could overcome obstacles, then why couldn't his children?

When Heather dropped out of college, her father expressed how he didn't believe in depression. He couldn't understand that the mind could become sick similar to that of the body, but he couldn't accept that. Depression is a sign of weakness, and Heather and her brother should be able to just stop feeling sad, they should get over it. Easy. Just like that.

Of course, that's not how depression works but her father was adamant that mental illness was just an excuse for something else, similar to that of laziness. Despite her father's feelings on Heather's depression, he showed up to the hospital for one of her treatments. He watched with her mother as they carefully sedated Heather and put her into a near-death state of mind. She awoke to find both of her parents there, her expressionless father never speaking a word of encouragement or sympathy. She found out later that while her father couldn't express his emotions through words, he spent an hour by her side stroking her forehead. Heather realized that everyone is different, and while she didn't feel validated by her father for having depression, she knew that he cared for and loved her.

Raising Awareness

Eighteen months after treatment, Heather has experienced miraculous results. From thinking that her family would be better off without her, to now having a new outlook on life, she credits her success with overcoming depression through the treatment provided by Dr. Mickey. She now has a zest for life that she hasn't felt in a long time and felt compelled to share her story with the world.

Heather especially knows what it's like for single parents. It can be so difficult raising children without the support of a significant other. Add to that the stigma of mental illness means others might find you unworthy or unfit to be a parent, so single parents often hide their illness for fear of losing their children. Heather ignored her psychiatrist for longer than she should have for fear of seeming like an unfit mother and being judged. Depression causes people to go to the worst-case scenario, so Heather's worst-case scenario? Losing her children in a custody battle because she admitted that she suffered from depression.

But Heather wants other single parents, and everyone else, to know that life gets better. There is nothing wrong with asking for help, in fact, that's the first step in healing your brain. And while Heather believes much of her success comes from the treatments she received, Dr. Mickey introduces other possible scenarios for why Heather may have received so much success. According to Dr. Mickey, you might not need a breakthrough, radical treatment to heal your mental illness.

Dr. Mickey reminds us that depression can come fast and hard. There can be no clouds in the sky and all of a sudden a storm comes along and knocks you down hard. But, like those storms, they can go away just as quickly. Depression goes through stages and each person experiences their unique ups and downs throughout their journey. So, Heather could have experienced a bad storm and her mind naturally healed itself during the time of her treatments.

The second reason Heather could have experienced immense success is through the support she received from her family and doctors. Throughout her treatment, her family was there for her, and she received extra attention which could have made her feel special during that time. That feeling of being needed and wanted could have caused Heather's depression to lift away during that period as well. Lastly, Heather changed her diet throughout this period as well by having to fast before undergoing anesthesia treatments. This change in routine could have also been a factor in healing Heather's brain throughout her treatment period.

So, while Heather credits her brain healing to the treatments that she received, Dr. Mickey wants us to know that depression looks different for everyone. There could've been several factors that helped Heather, and the first step to healing is seeking out help. A psychiatrist can help you, there are better days ahead. Heather wants you to know that you can get help, your brain can heal just like your body. You just have to take that first step, but you can do it.

Final Summary

It's hard. It's hard to ask for help. It's hard to open up about having a mental illness. But Heather is here to remind you that it's doable. She didn't want to live anymore, so she experienced near-death to spark her will to live again. All it takes is the first step to begin your journey of healing, and that is by seeking help. Admitting that you have a mental illness is tough, but the benefits of opening up are liberating and can ultimately heal you for good.



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