



Don't
Tell
Me To
Relax!

ONE TEEN'S JOURNEY
TO SURVIVE ANXIETY
(AND HOW YOU CAN TOO)

Sophie Riegel

Copyright © 2019 by Sophie Riegel
All rights reserved.
Printed in the United States of America.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without the prior permission of the publisher. Requests for permission should be directed to permissions@indiebooksintl.com, or mailed to Permissions, Indie Books International, 2424 Vista Way, Suite 316, Oceanside, CA 92054.

The views and opinions in this book are those of the author at the time of writing this book, and do not reflect the opinions of Indie Books International or its editors.

Neither the publisher nor the author is engaged in rendering legal, tax or other professional services through this book. The information is for business education purposes only. If expert assistance is required, the services of appropriate professionals should be sought. The publisher and the author shall have neither liability nor responsibility to any person or entity with respect to any loss or damage caused directly or indirectly by the information in this publication.

Jello[®] is a registered trademark of Kraft Foods.
Prozac[®] is a registered trademark of Eli Lilly and Company.
Rubik's Cube[®] is a registered trademark of Rubik's Brand Ltd.
Xanax[®] is a registered trademark of The Upjohn Company.

ISBN-10: 1-947480-46-4
ISBN-13: 978-1-947480-46-9
Library of Congress Control Number: 2019931433

Designed by Joni McPherson, mcpersongraphics.com
INDIE BOOKS INTERNATIONAL, LLC
2424 VISTA WAY, SUITE 316
OCEANSIDE, CA 92054

www.indiebooksintl.com

Table of Contents

Preface	vii
Part I. Me	1
Chapter One: Problem	3
Chapter Two: Getting Help.	13
Chapter Three: Diagnosis	19
Chapter Four: Backlash And Coming Out	31
Chapter Five: Anxiety and Death	45
Chapter Six: The Demons in my Colon	61
Chapter Seven: Second Diagnosis and Medication.	79
Chapter Eight: Effects Of Medication.	91
Chapter Nine: Hitting Rock Bottom	107
Chapter Ten: A New Beginning	121
Chapter Eleven: Journal Entries	135
Part 2: You	149
Chapter Twelve: Facts vs. Myths about Anxiety	151
Chapter Thirteen: For Parents	161
Chapter Fourteen: For Teens	171
Chapter Fifteen: Resources	177
Appendix.	183
Acknowledgments	185
About the Author	187

Chapter One

Problem

It's the middle of fifth grade. I'm ten years old. And I have no idea what I am doing at Rachel's house. We're not friends. I know she has Mr. R for math, but that's it. When she invited me for a sleepover at her house with five other girls, I said yes reflexively, desperately wanting to be someone I wasn't, someone who didn't get nervous around her peers, someone who didn't sit home alone on the weekends.

Within minutes of arriving, we're sprawled out on the basement carpet, eating pizza and playing Truth or Dare.

I feel my stomach tighten. I do not want to play. I want to go home.

"Truth or Dare?" Rachel asks Carly.

"Dare," Carly says with a mischievous grin.

"I dare you to text Mark and tell him you like him."

Carly doesn't hesitate and texts away.

Carly then turns to me. "Truth or Dare?"

I want to say, "Pass," but I'm nervous that she and the other girls will give me a hard time, so I say, "Truth," too afraid of "Dare."

"What's your biggest fear?" she asks me.

"Glitter."

She looks at me like I have three heads. The other girls start to giggle.

"What?" I ask, feeling my face turn red.

DON'T TELL ME TO RELAX

“You’re scared of glitter? That’s ridiculous!” Carly says, and bursts out laughing.

I wish I could call my mom and have her pick me up now, but I don’t want them to make more fun of me, so I laugh along with them and pretend to be OK. Even though I’m surrounded by other girls, I feel completely alone.

A few hours pass, and it’s time for bed. I go to the bathroom and put on my pj’s because I don’t like changing in front of other people. I find my way to the hot pink and purple room where everyone has set up their sleeping bags. I crawl into my sleeping bag and face away from the girls so they can’t watch me sleep.

When I wake up in the morning, the girls are staring at me, hysterical.

“What’s so funny?” I ask, sitting up, confused.

“Nothing,” Carly says, stifling a guffaw.

“Look in the mirror,” Rachel says, prompting the other girls to howl, the kind of uncontrollable laughter that’s so loud and contagious it gets you in trouble in a library.

I jump up and run to the bathroom, holding back tears. I can barely breathe. *Did they draw a mustache on me with a Sharpie? Did they shave my head? What is so hilarious?* I shut the door behind me and look at myself in the mirror. I scan my body, hair, and then face. That’s when I notice it. A shiny green speck. I try to rub it off, but it won’t budge.

OMG. OMG. OMG. Please come off. Please come off.

I move closer to the mirror to get a better look and to see if I can pick it off with my fingernails surgically, like playing the game Operation. I manage to get it off, only to realize it’s one of millions.

CHAPTER 1

My entire scalp is covered in green glitter. I let out the biggest scream of my life and don't stop yelling. My heart feels like it's exploding out of my throat. I want to punch the mirror. I try to scratch the glitter out of my hair and off of my skin, but it won't come off. I dig my nails so deep into my skin, I start to bleed.

(Fifth grade Sophie didn't know about OCD. She didn't know about panic attacks. She also didn't know that people could be so mean.)

I storm back into the room, hyperventilating and sobbing at the same time. The girls are pointing at me and clutching their stomachs from laughing so hard.

"Why would you do this?" I yell. "It's not funny!"

I want to kick myself for playing Truth or Dare the night before.

"It's just glitter. Chill," Carly says, rolling her eyes.

I'm crying so hard I can barely breathe.

"Relax," Rachel says.

"Don't tell me to relax," I say through tears.

Just then, my dad pulls into the driveway. I grab my sleeping bag and leave without saying goodbye. I get in the car, put on my seatbelt, and try to catch my breath.

My dad takes one look at my face and asks what happened. After all, I am bleeding from my head.

"They. Put. Glitter. In. My. Hair," I say, barely able to get the words out, feeling the tiny sparkles creep and crawl on my skin.

"OK," he says, not really understanding, but caring. "When we get home, I'll help you get it out. I'm so sorry they did this. Try not to let this ruin the rest of the day, OK?"

DON'T TELL ME TO RELAX

"Thanks, Dad," I say, taking the first real deep breath I've had since I woke up.

"Let's go home. I'm sure Jacob will give you a big hug when you get home," he says.

Jacob, my twin brother, is waiting for me when I get home. He wraps his arms around me and lets me wipe my snotty nose on his sweatshirt.

"Thanks, Jake," I say.

"No problem," he says, smiling at me.

That night, I lie awake in bed, crying, thinking about all the reasons these girls would do something so cruel. *Did Rachel invite me over just to have someone to make fun of? Did they all hate me? Did they think I was weird? Were they jealous of me because I got 100 on that really hard test? Were they getting back at me? Did they think I was a bitch because I mostly keep to myself? Were they trying to teach me a lesson? Were they sending me a message? What did I do to deserve this?* I feel silly and stupid and can't understand why I, captain of the basketball team and star student, am in this situation in the first place, all because of my fear of glitter. I don't understand. Or maybe I do and I just don't want to admit that I am being bullied. *It has to be my fault. What is wrong with me?* It's 2:00 a.m. and my pillowcase is soaked. I lift my red fleece blanket off of my body, get up, tuck my stuffed animal, Lammy, back into bed, and make my way to the top of the stairs, praying for my mom to help me.

Please come, Mom. Please. I don't know what's wrong with me. Help me.

Holding on to the banister, I clench my fist, hoping she will hear me crying and come.

CHAPTER 1

I wait fifteen minutes, staring into the darkness, feeling completely lost and alone.

Just as I decide to go downstairs to get my mom, I see a shadow moving.

Oh no. Is someone there?

The shadow stops moving.

Is it a man? A robber? Is he going to shoot me? What is happening?

I reach for the light switch and stop.

If I turn on the lights, I'm an easier target.

I reach around in the dark and grab the closest thing to me to protect myself: a towel. I turn on the lights and run back into my room. I turn around to see if someone is chasing me, but the shadow I thought was a man is . . . *a freaking plant.*

By now I have completely forgotten why I wanted to go downstairs in the first place. I untuck Lammy, close my eyes, and become one with the dark.

Sixth grade: I start cracking my neck. All the time. My mom is concerned (it's the overprotective Jewish mother in her) because she has a tic disorder and gets a shot in her neck every three months to control the involuntary movements. She doesn't tell me this, of course. She just watches and waits. When she sees it's a habit I can't break, she drags me with her to her own neurologist appointment under the guise of "running a few errands."

We sit in the waiting room and listen to a random guest on *The Ellen Show* talking about sloths until the nurse finally calls my mom's name.

DON'T TELL ME TO RELAX

My mom is perched up high on the big, scary patient's chair as Dr. T enters the room. He shakes my hand, and all I can think is, *I hope he washed his hands.*

"Your mom is going to get a shot in her neck," he tells me, as if to say, "You might want to close your eyes."

I start to cringe at the thought of a long needle going into my mom's body.

What if the needle is infected? What if the doctor puts the needle into the wrong spot and my mom becomes paralyzed?

"If you don't want to see it, you can go into the waiting room," he says.

"Yeah, I'll wait outside," I say.

"Wait. Could you take a look at my daughter's neck?" my mom asks Dr. T, afraid I will leave the room and never come back.

Ha! "Errands"? Very sneaky.

"Sophie has been cracking her neck a lot, and I'm worried. Honey, can you show the doctor what you have been doing?"

I tilt my head to the right, feel and hear a solid crack, lift my head back up, tilt it to the left, feel two deep cracks, lift my head back up, and feel satisfied.

The doctor looks down at his clipboard as if it's magic and has every answer to every question ever posed written on it.

"Are you able to stop doing it?" he asks.

"No."

"Then you have a tic, a compulsive movement."

CHAPTER 1

“Just like me,” my mom says, with a sad sort of smile. “Is this tic bad for her neck?” she asks.

“If it doesn’t hurt her, it’s not bad for her,” he says.

I don’t like having a tic even if it’s not bad for me. I hate not being able to stop cracking my neck even though it feels good. And I wonder if there is more that I can’t control. I hate that there is so much wrong with me.

In seventh grade, I start having intrusive and violent thoughts about my favorite teacher, Ms. X. She’s in the middle of the ocean surrounded by sharks. They’re attacking her, ripping her apart. I see her dismembered, bloody body float in the water. I try to shake this image from my mind, but another awful scenario pops up. I see Ms. X running away from an active shooter. I picture her lying on her classroom floor, blood spilling out of her chest, no one there to help her.

During every class, I raise my hand and ask if I can go to the bathroom. I need to make sure she is OK. Standing on my tippy-toes, looking through the window of her door, I see her in front of the chalkboard, teaching, moving, breathing. She’s alive. I wait for a few seconds until my heart rate slows back down to normal and return to class. This doesn’t just happen one day; it happens every day. And I can’t stop it.

My close friend, Jessica, a tenth-grader who is also very close with Ms. X, tells me about her anxiety one day and says that she has OCD—obsessive-compulsive disorder. I’ve heard of it before, but only from some TV shows where there is a character who is a neat freak. As Jessica

DON'T TELL ME TO RELAX

is speaking, telling me about herself and her fears and compulsions, it's as if she's describing me. Our specifics are different, but I feel some relief. Maybe there is a name for what I have, and maybe, just maybe, someone can help me.

I go home that day and Google: "Signs of having OCD."

The first link I click on tells me that having OCD is *very* serious. "If you wash your hands too much, you can strip them of the healthy bacteria and your body won't be able to fight illnesses."

I wash my hands a lot. What if I get sick and then kill my entire family from the sickness? Am I sick right now? I'm going to die and kill everyone!

"One sign of having OCD is worrying constantly about catching a deadly disease and/or that you will contaminate others with your germs."

Uh-oh. Is Google reading my mind?

"An intense fear that something horrible will happen to a loved one."

Like Ms. X.

"Irrational fears."

Glitter.

"Many people with OCD are self-harming."

I Google: "Self-harming."

"Self-harming can lead to institutionalization. Many people in mental health institutions have attempted to commit suicide."

My heart is racing so fast I fear I might take flight and smash into the ceiling.

I type "OCD and suicide" into the search bar.

The first line I see is: "People with OCD are ten times more likely to commit suicide than the general population. Actively thinking about

CHAPTER 1

suicide (sometimes called suicidal ideation) also appears to be relatively common among people affected by OCD.”

I don't want to be institutionalized and commit suicide. I'm just a kid. I just want to be “normal”—whatever that is.