

SANDHU SURVIVES

Senior Ethan Sandhu overcomes mental health challenges

photo illustration by | GRACE HENSLEY & RHEA PATNEY

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Soft, fluffy, silky and brown. Senior Ethan Sandhu focuses on the clothes in his hands, concentrating on the textures and colors. He brings his attention to the physical sensation of the fabric touching his skin in an attempt to ground himself. His heart rate begins dropping to standard levels, his body temperature comes back to normal and his arms no longer tingle. His thoughts begin to slow down and he feels less overwhelmed with irrational ideas. He is no longer trapped in his own mind. Sandhu has made it through a panic attack.

Sandhu started to struggle with his mental health at an early age. He began to experience depression when he was 7 years old, and he became suicidal when he was 9. Sandhu has attempted suicide around seven times throughout his life.

"I didn't commit suicide because of fear I was making the wrong choice," Sandhu said. "It was pretty obvious I was, so I'm kind of glad I had that. I kind of just put it off in a way; when I was younger, that's how I dealt with it."

Sandhu was not officially diagnosed with depression, anxiety and panic disorder until his sophomore year. His depression usually comes in waves, starting off as anxiety and then building into lack of motivation and feelings of hopelessness. Sandhu also experiences panic attacks.

"There are steps to a panic attack," Sandhu said. "It starts with regular alertness and stress, but you then start to feel your heartbeat and your

Senior Ethan Sandhu has faced mental health challenges for the majority of his life. His mental health has improved over time, but he still has struggles. After transferring to Ladue, he has become more open to sharing about his mental health. In the future, he hopes to continue to spread mental health awareness.

face gets hot. I have tingling in my hands and my arms, and it becomes hard to catch your breath. It differs from person to person, but for me, I'll feel a very heavy pressure on my forehead and I'll need to press my forehead against something. I'll feel like my brain is really rushing and feel really irrational. The panic is mainly thoughts."

Currently, Sandhu receives treatment in the forms of medication and professional counseling. He takes Cymbalta, a serotonin norepinephrine reuptake inhibitor, and also sees a psychiatrist. In the past, he has also participated in talk therapy with a psychologist. When trying to combat his panic attacks, he utilizes a common strategy called grounding.

"If I'm starting to feel panic, I'll feel something with my hands and focus on the texture," Sandhu said. "Or I'll look at myself in the mirror and understand the reflection that's happening. I separate myself from my ideas for a second and kind of look at my ideas as if another person is having them. I just try to ground myself in the real world for a second, and then I normally calm down."

During Sandhu's sophomore year, he was hospitalized due to high risk of suicide. Attending Eureka High School in the Rockwood School District at the time, this hospitalization occurred after a series of events that took a toll on his mental health. He eventually told his mother, Mary Sandhu, that there was a possibility of him killing himself.

"When he said 'I am going to kill myself,' I decided to take him to the hospital and have him assessed," Mary Sandhu said. "We went to the ER and they brought a doctor to evaluate him. The doctor said 'I feel like he is very impulsive and very high risk for suicide so I would suggest that he stay for further evaluation.' However, [bringing him to the hospital] was a

very hard decision to make."

Ethan's hospitalization was his first experience with mental health treatment. After undergoing a suicide risk evaluation and a general psychiatric evaluation, he was deemed at risk for suicide and remained in the adolescent psychiatric ward of the hospital for three days.

"I didn't have a plan [to commit suicide], but apparently it doesn't matter if you have a plan," Ethan said. "Some people need a plan, but some people can do without one, and they deemed that I wouldn't necessarily need one. When I was hospitalized, I

remember feeling very trapped, feeling like the world was going to keep going and I was going to end up behind just from missing three days. I remem-

ber being irrationally afraid of what was going on outside while I was in the hospital."

After Ethan's hospitalization, he and his family decided that transferring to a new school would be best for Ethan's mental health. After evaluating many options, they chose the Ladue School District because of its high level of academics, band program, diversity, Quiz Bowl team and overall welcoming atmosphere.

"He can't pick that back up; the friendships from kindergarten, being known, all those things he gained from having been at the same school his whole life — that's of course gone," Ethan's father Gopi Sandhu said. "But at the same time, I couldn't imagine landing in a better environment under these circumstances. We don't know if he would still be with us had we stayed [at Eureka]. It sounds dramatic, but it truly was for us a life or death decision."

Since transferring to Ladue, Ethan has gotten involved with the Student Action for a Greener Earth Club. This club, along with his teachers, friends and other extracurriculars, has allowed Ethan to feel a sense of be-

longing. This community has helped Ethan feel more open to sharing about his mental health.

"I think there's a lot to say about change of scene and what it can do for you," Ethan said. "If your surroundings make you feel unhappy, you're going to be unhappy. Specifically moving to Ladue has been beneficial because Ladue doesn't really have as much stigma around mental health as Eureka did. I've felt more comfortable talking about it; I didn't feel like an outsider."

At Ladue, Ethan consistently works with guidance counselor Susan Ashby to ensure his health and safety at school. During the shift to online school last semester, Ethan felt overwhelmed by the change in learning style. Ashby helped him stay organized in the virtual school environment and showed him how to utilize the distance learning hub.

"[Mental health] is a personal journey that you have to reach through trial and error because no one is the same," Ashby said. "We all have our own lens and our own way of reacting to things. There is no magic solution for anxiety or depression, it is a combination of finding what works for you and not being afraid to try something different if it doesn't work."

Ethan feels that in society, the mental health stigma is beginning to lessen. He believes that if people continue to spread love, be more reassuring to their friends and family and encourage others to remain hopeful, society will continue to move forward in terms of mental health acceptance and care. In his personal future, he hopes to eventually be able to treat his own mental health with little to no medication and to continue to understand his feelings.

"It's not so much that my mental health itself has improved, it's that I've gotten better at dealing with it," Ethan said. "I know when to think what, when to stop a thought versus keep thinking about it, stuff like that. It's obviously a learning process — I'm still figuring it out. It's more about learning who you are and how your feelings work." □

Mental health is treatable; it's definitely possible to be helped. There's always someone willing to help you.

ETHAN SANDHU | senior