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# How to Fix a Broken Heart

Jennifer Morrow

You're eleven years old when it happens for the first time.

You're at soccer practice. The August sun burns the tips of your ears where you forgot to apply sunscreen, your hair is tied in the messiest ponytail imaginable, and you've strategically layered your brightly-colored socks over your shin-guards, as you've learned is the proper technique.

Your coach gathers your team together and instructs you all to run laps around the periphery of the park to warm up. You sprint as fast as you can, but you're never able to keep up with the other girls. Red pigment crawls up your skin, a mixture of exhaustion, heat, and the embarrassment of coming in last, yet again.

You notice it once you finally slow down and grab water. Your heart is beating, pounding, screaming in your chest. It doesn't slow down throughout the entirety of practice. When you get

home, you plant yourself on the couch immediately, taking up the entirety of the space and dangling your limbs over the arms dramatically. You don't budge for an hour. Your heart still hasn't stopped racing. You fold your arms over your chest, feeling the violent vibrations as they persist.

Eventually, like the rhythmic cadence of an epic symphony, your heart thumps three slow, hard drumbeats, and then everything is back to normal. Your pulse has returned to a gentle buh bum, buh bum, buh bum. You get up, pour yourself a glass of cherry Kool-Aid, and turn on Disney Channel.

The Weird Heart Thing, as you call it in your head, happens countless times after soccer practice and games until it becomes just another fact of life, like spelling tests on Fridays or church on Sundays. You don't think about it. You just wait out every episode silently, like sitting patiently indoors during a thunderstorm.

It's not a big deal, right?

You're twelve when things get a little more complicated.

Your mom realizes something's up when she comes to watch you play basketball. When the long, grueling game ends, she makes her way to you through the swarm of spectators and leads you to the parking lot, commenting that your face looks "almost gray." She takes your pulse. Well, attempts to take your pulse. It's going so fast she can't even count the beats.

When you get home, she pulls out her blood pressure cuff from work and straps it to your arm. You feel the pressure build and build until it finally releases in a huff.

"230? That can't be right. Maybe the machine's broken," your mom ponders, sharing a worried glance with your dad. The same reading appears on the screen the second time your mom fastens the Velcro band around your arm. She's about to rush you to the ER when you suddenly feel three slow, hard beats, and then everything is back to normal. You don't go to the

ER that night, but your mom calls the doctor, and you have an appointment with the local cardiologist within a week. The cardiologist's office is very gray and very cold. You're instructed to take off your shirt and put on a hospital gown. A nurse wearing strong perfume wheels in a bulky machine with lots of wires and monitors. She tells you she's going to do something called an EKG.

You lie flat on your back as she quickly places little square stickers all over your chest and stomach. She attaches wires to each sticker and instructs you to stay very still. The machine prints out a sheet of squiggly lines that you know have something to do with your heart, but you have no idea what they mean. The nurse tells you that the doctor will be in shortly after he analyzes your results.

Your cardiologist enters the room within mere minutes. Apparently, your charts showed exactly what he was looking for. He shows you your cardiogram, pointing out the way the wave slurs slightly to the right, and announces his diagnosis: "Wolff-Parkinson White Syndrome," he tells you.

Syndrome. It's a terrible word. It echoes in your brain as your doctor continues to relay information. Your eyes well up with tears. You're not listening anymore. All you hear is that you're broken.

It's a lot to process. You're going to need surgery. You'll have to quit the basketball team. Apparently, if that full-court press basketball game from a few weeks back had lasted any longer, your heart could have sped up so much that your ventricles wouldn't be able to pump blood to your other organs.

Translation: you could have died. Your parents and doctors leave out that part, but you have the internet.

You hold on as best you can. Mostly through a combination of avoidance and escapism (you speed your way through an impressive amount of dystopian YA novels). Things get a little scary sometimes, like when your friend has a sleepover for her Twilight-themed birthday party at the Holiday Inn and the elevator jump startles you and sets off your tachycardia. You end up lying down on a couch the entire first hour of the party while a full-sized poster of Taylor Lautner stares you down

from the other side of the room.

Your friends don't really get it, but you don't expect them to. You end up playing the role of the comforter, reassuring everyone that you're fine. You get told how brave you are repeatedly, which makes you feel weird and slightly guilty. You aren't being brave, you just have no idea how to process any of this, so your brain has decided to turn to mush and leave you emotionally numb.

Your fear doesn't really manifest until the car ride to Stanford on the morning of your procedure. Years from now, you'll be able to recall this day in startling detail. The foggy sky, the lack of conversation, Taylor Swift playing on the radio. You will remember feeling overwhelmed with the sudden awareness that you are about to place your own life in the hands of strangers. You'll remember that distinct sensation that exists outside of time and space, the indescribable melancholy of realizing your lack of agency, your fragility in the face of an entirely apathetic universe.

But then it's all over. And you're okay.

A lot happens in the next six years. You graduate from middle school and high school. You meet your best friends. You learn how to play guitar. You start college as an optimistic humanities major, ready to take on the world, refusing to let anything get in the way of your dreams!

You're eighteen when history decides to repeat itself.

You bound up the stairs to your college dorm room wearing a crown of little gold stars and holding a basket of glittery goodies. You're still bursting with energy from the day's activities. You never thought you'd join Greek life, but you made a promise to yourself when you returned to campus for spring semester that you would say yes to more things, even if they seem a little daunting and out of your comfort zone.

And you're doing pretty well so far! You've said yes to a lot of things in the past few weeks. A bid to join a sisterhood. A role in a musical theater production. A dinner invitation from the cute

boy in your communications class. Your world feels like it's traveling a million miles a minute, and it's exciting! But then everything comes to a startling halt. That night, at around 9:30, as soon as you walk in the door to your room, you feel an eerily familiar sensation in your chest. You can't breathe.

You look your roommate in the eye and say, very simply: "I think I have to go to the hospital."

The months that follow feel like a dream, an unraveling, a prison. Your world becomes a simulation. You can't focus in class, you can't make small talk with your friends. You cry all the time, but you never know why. It takes all your will-power to pull yourself out of bed in the morning.

The worst part is how utterly lost you feel. You grow angry and frustrated at yourself for not keeping up with your many responsibilities as well as you would like to. You wish you could explain yourself to your friends and family members, but you can't even piece it together in your own head. Your doctor puts you on a medication called Metoprolol, a blood

thinner. It slows down your heart rate, but it also makes you very, very sleepy (a problem for an already sleep-deprived college student with a full course load). It's a specific kind of tired. A drowsy, achy tired. It makes your limbs feel heavy and your head feel foggy. Simple things like walking up stairs and getting to class on the other side of campus are suddenly extremely difficult.

Your brain is on a constant loop, reminding you of one sole fact: your heart isn't functioning properly. You feel it fluttering and somersaulting in your chest, amplifying your already intense anxiety. You feel incompetent and lazy. You hate how difficult school is and how slow you've been processing information. Nothing feels right. You're not sure exactly why. Maybe you're traumatized from your stay in the hospital. Maybe it's because you think about dying too much. Maybe it's because it feels like you've been transported back to 2011. You're a scared little girl again. And you're just so tired.

Maybe it's divine intervention, maybe it's a friendly push from your roommate, maybe it's just your intuition, but eventually, you decide it's time for a change. You schedule a therapy

appointment. You start going weekly, making your way across the bridge every Monday morning to meet with your counselor. Somehow, you manage to match words with your worries. You feel like the giant load you've been carrying is slowly but surely easing its way off your shoulders.

Therapy also helps you make other changes. You leave your dorm room every once in a while. You keep a journal to help untangle the knots in your brain. You wait out the anxiety attacks, the bouts of insomnia, the days you can't make it to class. You read poems. You listen to music. You start eating better. You allow your body the sleep it needs.

Most of all, you forgive yourself. And somehow, you make it all the way to June, when you undergo your second heart surgery at Stanford. And finally, once again, it's all over. And you're okay. You're nineteen when you finally process all of this and write it down.

You place two fingers against the inside of your wrist, feeling the soft, yet strong pulse. The heart is an incredible instrument. It's complicated. It's resilient. It's beautiful. Each beat against your

fingertips reminds you of what you've overcome.

You know there's still a lot to work through. You still panic a little every time you have to walk up a flight of stairs or go to the doctor's office. You also know this isn't the most difficult thing you'll have to go through in your life. But you've finally reached a point where you aren't dreading the days ahead. You might not have the ability to control what happens to you, but you do have the power to face whatever comes your way with strength and grace.

You've learned to reconcile the joy and the pain. You want to bathe yourself in this life; in all its beautiful, broken, torturous glory.

You're nineteen years old when you stop in the middle of your walk to class, suddenly overwhelmed with the vibrancy of the world around you. It engulfs you, overwhelming your eyes, your ears, your nose, your soul. You send out a silent prayer to the sky, thanking whomever might be able to hear you. You smile, take your pulse once more, and carry on.