

The Year of the Therapist: Unsung Heroes of 2021

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Have you ever looked at yourself in the mirror and thought ‘Huh, I could really use a therapist?’ After two gruelling years in a pandemic, many of us need therapy more than ever.

According to Mental Health America, in 2021, anxiety disorders were the highest reported mental health issues, with 42.5 million Americans suffering from this type of mental health disorder.¹ In July 2020, I was diagnosed with Generalized Anxiety Disorder, and my doctor recommended I attend therapy. I laughed, thanked him for his time, and left.

Over the next six months, my mental health declined significantly. I could not perform the most basic tasks I had always been able to do. My motivation and excitement to do anything slowly vanished. It got so bad that I could not even do hobbies I actually enjoyed, such as singing. I am sure most of you can relate after what we all went through over the last two years, but my life changed when I met one of the millions of unsung heroes of 2021: my therapist, Suzanne. To me, 2021 was the year of the therapist, and I am thankful to have this opportunity to honor therapists who work tirelessly behind closed doors, and to highlight their value and importance on an individual, community, and global level in influencing our perspectives, awareness, and growth.

A therapist is essentially someone who walks around your brain, takes notes of all the things they see—good, bad, and weird—and then fit these puzzle pieces together to understand the picture that is you. Suzanne is a short woman with dark-framed glasses, bright blonde hair, and a smile that made you feel at ease. Despite being in her 60s, she looks 45 years old and always wore her leather Harley-Davidson jacket to our sessions. She did not look like a therapist at all. In my first session with her, I told her I was terrified to go to therapy because it made me admit that something was actually wrong with me, but Suzanne said, “We’re all a bit messed up. It’s not a bad thing, it just makes us human.”

This one line changed my entire perspective on my anxiety. For a long time, I did not want to believe I had a mental illness and I had hated myself for not being strong enough to fight it, but Suzanne helped me understand how to co-exist with and accept my anxiety. However, Suzanne is just one of many. Throughout 2021, the invisible labor of therapists went unrecognised by most, but they

continued to change the lives and perspectives of many within their communities, taking care of others whilst struggling themselves in the most challenging years we have seen in the 21st century.

In addition to our own personal pressing problems, global events affect us all, stretching us to our limits, and creating divisions between us. Therapy is a tool we can utilize to help bridge those divides, deal with global events, and understand the perspectives of others. When you learn to understand yourself, why you are the way you are and how you came to be that way, you not only become more gracious, understanding, and kinder to yourself, but also to others.

Suzanne increased my awareness of my anxiety, how to recognize it, and to understand what anxiety actually is. That little voice in your head that tells you that you cannot do something or you are not good enough—that is anxiety. Everyone has anxiety, some just have it more than others. When you have an anxiety disorder, that little voice in your head is constantly talking, and you have to spend the majority of your day asking that voice to be quiet. Over the coming months, Suzanne would teach me coping mechanisms, such as grounding techniques. She would encourage me to do the things that terrified me, such as going to the US to study abroad for a year, to make my anxiety aware that I could do anything.

By becoming more aware of my mental illness and how it affected me, I began to recognize the same signs in others. I noticed when a friend was about to have a panic attack, or I could tell when a colleague was becoming overwhelmed. I was able to utilize the tools I had learned from Suzanne to help those in my community. That is the ripple effect therapists have on their clients, and that is just one way awareness of mental health issues can change a community in a positive way.

Finally, Suzanne had the most profound impact on my personal growth during 2021. One of the things we spent the most work on was decreasing my shame around my anxiety. Suzanne encouraged me to tell my friends, colleagues, and family about what I was going through. After telling my singing teacher about my anxiety, we managed to make accommodations so I could try to get back into singing. In August 2021, I got up in front of two hundred people in Juniata College's dining hall and sang in a talent show. Six months earlier, I could not sing a note. That was one of my proudest moments--I could see how much Suzanne had helped me grow, and that all the hard work that I had put in had paid off.

Therapists like Suzanne work in every community in the world to help people grow and become the best version of themselves. When people are the best version of themselves, they are their best selves to others. Communities become healthier, working together to create a better world little by little. Through destigmatizing a topic like mental health, and normalizing therapy as a legitimate recovery plan, we can all grow stronger together.

At the start of 2021, I truly believed that nothing would ever get better, and I would never be the person I was before, especially after the effects of the pandemic. I ended 2021 with the best friends I have ever had, tools to manage my anxiety, a clearer sense of myself, and memories I hope to carry with me forever. None of this would be possible without Suzanne. She taught me that the

person you were in the past does not have to determine the person you can become in the future. You decide who you are and who you will be. She is an example of the power and influence a great therapist can have not just on individuals, but on a community.

Pandemic aside, life is tough. Whilst I have been lucky enough to have a therapist like Suzanne, and I got the help that I needed, not everyone is as fortunate. According to “Our World in Data”, 10.7% of the world suffers from some form of mental illness.² If there are two hundred of us in this room tonight, twenty of us are suffering, and I would argue that in reality, this figure is much higher. This data highlights the necessity for easily accessible therapy to become a global priority. Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic propelled avenues like teletherapy forwards, there is still a lot more work to be done.

If you find yourself overwhelmed with stress, anxiety, depression, or even just life, why go through it alone? We are all a bit messed up. It is not a bad thing, it just makes us human. When you do get a therapist, I hope you will realize how valuable they are for our local, community, and global health, and you too will want them on the cover of TIME magazine.

NOTES

1. “Anxiety,” Mental Health America, accessed 17 February 2022, <https://mhanational.org/conditions/anxiety>
2. Saloni Dattani, Hannah Ritchie and Max Roser, “Mental Health,” Our World in Data, published April 2018, revised August 2021, <https://ourworldindata.org/mental-health>