

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 feels less 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 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 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 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 involving another student 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 was like, ‘maybe I should have him assessed,’” Mary Sandhu said. “So that’s when we went to the hospital. 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 Sandhu’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 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 Sandhu 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 remember being irrationally afraid of what was going on outside while I was

in the hospital.”

After the events of Ethan Sandhu’s sophomore year, he and his family engaged in lawsuit procedures with the Rockwood School

District. They also decided to transfer Ethan Sandhu to a new school. They chose Ladue because of its high level of academics, band program, diversity 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 Sandhu’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 Sandhu has gotten involved with the Student Action for a Greener Earth Club. This club, along with his teachers, friends and other activities, has helped Ethan Sandhu feel a sense of belonging. This community has helped Ethan Sandhu 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 Sandhu 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 Sandhu has a 504 plan, which is a plan that protects him from discrimination based on his mental health conditions. Guidance counselor Susan Ashby regularly works with Ethan Sandhu to ensure his health and safety at school.

“A team of experts gets together and determines whether a student has something that impacts their life in a significant way,” Ashby said. “In terms of eligibility [for a 504 plan], the team would say yes or no and then they determine whether or not accommodations are needed. It’s not necessarily making things easier, but it’s leveling the playing field so that a student can truly perform at his or her full potential.”

Ethan Sandhu feels that in society, the mental health stigma is beginning to lessen. He believes that if people continue to spread love 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 Sandhu 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. The mental health, I’m sure it gets better, but 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



Scan to read more about Ethan Sandhu’s lawsuit against the Rockwood School District