

A PERSONAL NOTE

In September 2021, I sent messages in a mental health support group on social platform Discord, to search for people who wanted to share their stories. Ashley was the first to respond.

The 22-year-old was diagnosed with depression and anxiety in 2019. Since then, Ashley's been passionate about destigmatising mental health issues and the Republic Polytechnic student volunteers regularly to raise awareness about it. When I asked about why she was willing to share so much of her life, she said she wanted to help others understand what it's like to deal with mental disorders and it helped her recovery by encouraging her to open up about her struggles.

When we first met, she struck me as a bubbly person but I soon realised that she was constantly fighting her demons. She would tell me out of nowhere that she'd tried to overdose the day before, with the air of someone commenting on the weather. I was never quite sure about how to respond but I tried to be a good friend.

There were times when I was caught entirely off guard. But I learned and consulted experts. In most situations, I would snap a photo quickly and then intervene. Because I couldn't watch her struggle to put bandages on her arm or eat the pills she'd just bought. I still wonder if I should've taken those photographs.

During my many visits to her home, I grew closer to her parents too. Gregory and I would talk about gardening and art. Dorothy knew more about my family than most of my friends. I could see a difference in them when Ashley was home. They would light up. Their sincerest hope is that their daughter shares her pain with them and I hope Ashley does too.

As I worked on this project, my mentors advised me to manage my own emotions and distance myself. But it was tough. They asked: "If something bad happens, would you be able to handle it?" I don't have an answer and I pray I never need one because Ashley has so much love for life and adventure when she isn't battling her depression.

I believe in her.

YONG LI XUAN