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#### The Soul Beneath the Suffering: Forgiving Anxiety

My worst enemy is myself. As crazy as that fact might sound to some, I know for a fact that I am not alone in it. Several years ago, I had the privilege of seeing Eva Kor speak at a school assembly. I was a Jewish teenager living freely and proudly, eating 3 nutritious meals a day, and going to school and learning amongst people of all other ethnicities. Neither myself nor anyone my age had ever had to endure anything close to what Eva and so many millions of others had to. Yet, I empathized with Eva at a deep level. Of all the horrors and triumphs she described when recounting her life, what stood out to me the most about her story then and continues to now, is her final choice to forgive Dr. Mengele. Because even though no one my age has suffered like Eva, an increasingly large number of people my age, including myself, have been a part of a growing pandemic of suffering, one whose villain lies not in an ideology or a nation, but in the way we treat ourselves: a lack of self-compassion.

When I was 14 years old, I was diagnosed with OCD and depression. While many factors contributed to my condition, the most significant was how I treated myself. For me, OCD

manifested in the form of perfectionism—perfectionism in social interactions, in schoolwork, and in wellness, a paradoxical perfectionism that tore apart my notion of success and left me constantly feeling like a failure as I struggled in vain to meet my inflated standards for success. After calling myself a disappointment and so many other names for long enough, I started to believe them and was left hating myself. Even after my diagnosis and initial recovery, in which I came to understand that OCD mindset's flaws, I continued to despise the part of myself responsible for it. In turn, I continued to fuel my shame and self-hatred, making my anxieties self-fulfilling prophecies. As I grew older, that shame continued festering under the surface and soon began to once again manifest as perfectionism. Only this time, it seemed immune to the skills I had learned to manage it in the past. Once again, I was left nearly unable to function, torn apart by my feelings of inadequacy and shame for not living a lifestyle of near-impossible disciplinary standards.

It was during this time that I finally came to understand self-compassion. I had known about it before, but I had never truly embodied it. For years, I practiced compassion for the part of my brain that I appreciated while continuing to deprive my anxious mind of anything of the sort. However, in my defeated state, I finally allowed myself to embrace compassion for my entire mind, to recognize the part of myself that caused me so much pain as human—as a part of me simply trying to protect me from my fears but doing so in the wrong way. After years spent despising my compulsions and despising myself for having them, I finally let my hatred go and forgave them. Unlike Eva's, my tormentor had no physical form; it was a part of myself, a nebulous concept of compulsion and pain. But just like for Eva, forgiving my tormentor did so much more than recognize his humanity. Choosing to forgive that part of myself, not to condone or accept him, but to simply acknowledge him and move beyond the pain he caused, finally freed

me from his grip on my mind. Forgiving myself allowed me to move forward as a truly complete person, to run toward my passions rather than away from my fears.

So when I think of Eva Kor, I think of the sheer strength and courage it took her to confront her worst enemy with forgiveness. Moreover, I think of my own struggle with OCD, the courage it takes for me to continually confront my anxiety with forgiveness, and the freedom and strength that forgiveness gives me. As the generation with the highest rates of depression and anxiety in global history, millions of people my age can learn from Eva—not just to forgive those who have wronged us externally, but to forgive ourselves for our flaws and embrace every part of ourselves as deserving of compassion.