

I remember the first time I was abducted by aliens. In early 2019, when I was in my first year of college, I went to bed at my dad's house at 11:00pm. When I was falling asleep, a flying saucer came flying above my house. A penetrating and piercing white light emerged out of the lower part of the spacecraft until it reached my whole body, and my body rose towards the origin of that light. Suddenly, I was in a purple room, tied to a chair in which I couldn't move. Fear was taking over me. A bunch of dark creatures approached me and as soon as they were about to touch me, I was able to move and those images vanished. I became aware of my surroundings and realized I was completely drenched with sweat. On this and many other nights, the aliens appeared over my house and abducted me. When I tried to tell people about what I was experiencing, they had a hard time believing it. I needed to know what was wrong with me, so as a great 19-year-old, I googled "alien abduction." You'd be surprised at the search results! This was the first time I ever came across the word "narcolepsy."

These horrifying experiences during the night made it difficult for me to feel productive during the day. Sometimes I didn't feel like I was safe. Being a college student studying pharmaceutical sciences, there was already a lot of pressure on me in school. I always tried to act as normal as possible so I could fit in with the people around me. My generation is heavily influenced by social media, and the fact that I grew up surrounded by all these perfect pictures, publications and videos of how we should look or how we should act just made it more difficult. I put a lot of effort into having the same amount of energy as the other students, but I was having these terrifying experiences at night, as well as feeling irresistibly sleepy during the day. I'd always been somewhat sleepy and my parents thought that was usual for a kid. While growing up, I began comparing myself to other people of the same age and started wondering why I always felt so tired and sleepy, or why I couldn't get through the day without taking at least one nap. I have always loved hanging out with friends, but in college I had to choose between getting my homework done or going out with my friends. I began having trouble staying awake while driving to class. Sometimes, I even parked my car for a few minutes because my eyes were so heavy and I needed a few minutes' nap. One day I even felt asleep while I was stopped at a red light. These feelings and experiences did not match the definition of a "normal girl."

Shortly after the abductions started happening, I decided to talk to my parents about how bad I was feeling and how much my nighttime hallucinations and daytime sleepiness were affecting my life. I told them about my Google search, and that I thought I had something called narcolepsy, but they truly believed I was exaggerating. The same week I talked to my parents, I was driving home from college and felt a terrible blow to the head followed by an extreme jerk to the neck. I woke up behind the wheel realizing that I had caused not one but two serious car crashes. Even though everyone involved was fine, I remembered feeling completely shattered. My accident made my parents take my concerns seriously, and they took me to my first neurology appointment just before I turned 20. After a bunch of tests, the specialist told me I have a condition called narcolepsy type 1, one of the two types of narcolepsy.

Looking back, I realized I had been experiencing narcolepsy symptoms for years before getting a diagnosis. While getting my diagnosis seemed like the end of a long road, my journey of learning about my condition and understanding my symptoms was just beginning. I found out that narcolepsy is a neurological condition that affects how the brain regulates the sleep-wake cycle. The excessive daytime sleepiness I had

been experiencing, like when I got in the car accident, is the primary symptom, but there are lesser-known symptoms that can affect people with narcolepsy's quality of life. As a person with narcolepsy type 1, I also experience a symptom called cataplexy, which is a sudden muscle weakness caused by strong emotions. The first time I was aware of my cataplexy was when I was in a college class. I remember being stood up when something made me laugh so hard that my knees fully buckled. I couldn't stop laughing and I couldn't stand up either. People with narcolepsy type 2 do not have cataplexy. I finally had a name for the alien abductions, too: they were hypnagogic and hypnopompic hallucinations, which can be visual, auditory, or tactile and are often accompanied by sleep paralysis, which would also happen to me when I would wake up in the middle of the night unable to move.

Around the time I received my narcolepsy diagnosis, I started separating from my friends and feeling worse. There is a huge lack of awareness around sleep disorders in Mexico, so my friends, teachers, and family did not believe me when I talked about my symptoms. I think they sometimes still have trouble believing it. Some of them told me they were also "sleepy people" and others insisted I was making up all those sensations or that I was dreaming. I understood their skepticism; how could they believe me? We are used to seeing stories of perfect lives on Instagram or TikTok. These kinds of stereotypes of how young women live made even me question myself. I felt like I needed to look a certain way, act a certain way and meet certain goals in a certain time. I wondered, Could I ever be "enough" despite having narcolepsy? Could I ever have a job? I knew there were three million people worldwide affected by narcolepsy, but I didn't know any of them, and I felt so lonely. Clearly, a diagnosis was just the beginning of my journey.

I started treatment with stimulants that did not work the way the neurologist and I expected. We tried mixing different stimulants with antidepressants which also did not work. I began looking for other specialists who could help me, which is very difficult and expensive in Mexico. During this time I could not play sports, go to school, and study for an exam all in the same day like seemingly everyone around me could. I could not go to all of the parties my friends went to. I saw so many Instagram stories of a bunch of 21-year-olds hanging out, and I couldn't be with them without feeling like I'd been awake for 72 hours. The despair of loneliness and the constant changes of medication were messing with my body and mind. Honestly, I thought I would never feel better and I didn't see a way out. Through this time, I seldom spoke out about my narcolepsy diagnosis. People around me tended to stigmatize it because it had to do with sleep. They often thought I was exaggerating about my need for sleep, which made me feel embarrassed by it.

A year had gone by when, a few days before turning 21, I met my current neurologist. He achieved what no one else had in a year, and prescribed me the right medication. He also gave me a couple of life lessons. He told me I should never compare myself to anyone and most important, I should never feel bad for having narcolepsy. I started deciding what things I see and believe on social media. I started to get involved with organizations and accounts related to narcolepsy awareness. I even created a narcolepsy awareness account on Instagram. I joined an amazing community of people with narcolepsy that support each other.

Now I know that every day is one step further in my progress. I can't avoid being constantly worried about my future, though. My head fills with doubts and thoughts about how I will face working or having children, which makes me feel very scared. Sometimes I can't avoid still feeling at a disadvantage compared with everybody else. Sometimes I think about all the things I have missed during my youth. I'm 21-years-old and people say I am living in "the best time of my life," but, honestly, that puts a lot of pressure on how I should be living. Having an amazing support network makes everything easier. It reminds me of all the great things I've gained from living with narcolepsy. Having the opportunity of connecting, speaking and empathizing with other people living with narcolepsy makes me feel part of something. Hearing the stories of all those brave moms, dads, sisters, brothers, teachers gives me hope for what is coming next. I deeply thank my parents, brother, grandparents, uncles, cousins, friends and my neurologist for having my back throughout this journey. I am truly blessed for having all of you.

I know I am a powerful woman with my own qualities and strengths. Despite all those social media images, I know it is okay not to be okay. It is okay to be different and to not have the seemingly perfect life an online influencer shows. I have learned it is fine if I am not the stereotypical girl society or Instagram says I should be. For me, the greatest encouragement is knowing that telling my story is one step in the spread of narcolepsy awareness. I did not choose to have narcolepsy, but I choose how to live with it.

I am sharing my story today as part of Rising Voices of Narcolepsy, a program of the nonprofit organization Project Sleep, which empowers patient-advocates to share their stories and improve public understanding of narcolepsy.