

# *Finding Your Moon*

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*Adapted from an AFSP article by Julia M Tilley, 1/24/2020*

Ann, my therapist, smiled gently at me as hot tears ran down my cheek and waited for me to speak. I felt so hopeless. I told Ann I did not know how I would make it through the moments I felt this way, and I was keenly aware we were surrounded by hospital walls.

"I know you like metaphors," Ann interjected. "Could I offer you a visual idea of how I think you might feel during these moments, and we can explore that together?"

I said yes.

"Close your eyes and picture you're in a dark forest. Are you there?"

"I'm there," I said.

"Okay," she said. "Great. Now I want you to picture the forest as so dark that you can't even see the trees in front of you."

I thought to myself, that's exactly where I am. I could picture a place so dark I could not see my own hand in front of my face. "That's easy for me to picture," I said.

She told me to look up and asked if I could see the moon. Keeping my eyes closed, I looked up and above me saw a bright full moon.

"I can see it," I said.

"Now I want to ask you a question," she continued. "When you're feeling this way, will you let me be your moon? Are you willing to imagine me as your moon in this picture, and know that even though you can't see anything in front of or behind you right then, I can?" She went on to explain that not only could the moon see me, but it could see beyond the forest I was in.

In that moment, I felt a sense of relief. My tears stopped as I recognized a flicker of hope spark inside. My forest didn't seem so lonely, anymore. I felt like someone understood me.

This metaphor became an anchor in my mental health journey. I began to realize that not only did I have a moon – my therapist – but I also had stars, which were my outside support system. Friends, family members, spiritual guides, support groups, even my online friends could all be considered stars in my life.

I have shared this story with many people since that day, and after getting out of the hospital. Mental illness can feel a lot like a forest of uncertainty. There are days, weeks, months, and seasons for those who are struggling in which the forest feels dark, and we cannot even see

ourselves, much less the next step we need to take. The darkness can feel heavy, isolating, and scary.

I know all too well how hopeless being inside this forest can feel. It is easy to want to give up right there. That's exactly where I was that day while having this conversation with Ann. Thanks to that talk, I now know that in those darkest moments, as hard as it may seem, I need to look up, find the moon or even a star, and know I am not alone.

The reality is that for those managing depressed and defeated thoughts, there will be more than one forest. We can have hope because if we've gotten through one of these forests, we can get through another.

It takes time – and I have walked through other forests – but eventually, I discovered an amazing surprise... that I could also be a moon for myself. When I get into situations in which I feel there is no choice but to give up, I imagine myself as my own moon, looking down and shining a light beyond the forest. Visualizing this helps to calm me, and often enables me to see the bigger picture, and identify more options around whatever I am going through.

Eventually, I also learned that while it's no substitute for therapy, anyone can be a moon in someone else's life. You do not need a degree, or to be eloquent with words, or have any formal training. Being a moon for someone can be as simple as having a #RealConvo with them. Sometimes that means sharing your own story. More often it means listening to someone about how they are feeling. It can simply mean sitting with someone in their dark place, not trying to fix or rescue them.

A few things I say to myself or another person are:

"Can you say what you're feeling right now?"

"Can you think of an image to describe how you're feeling?"

"I am here with myself (or you), just me, myself and I. I am (you are) not alone in this."

"I am FOR myself and I care about myself (or you). I am glad to have (or be) a Moon in my (your) life."

Having a person just be there is so powerful. You can be there physically, over the phone, or over the internet. For the times you're not with them physically, you can let them know you're there with them in spirit. People can often feel uneasy about talking to someone who is having a hard time, usually because they don't know what to say. Most often, the person who is struggling just wants to feel heard, and know they are not alone.

If you are in your own forest of uncertainty right now, I urge you to look up. Find your moon, or take a moon perspective. Do not give up. I know you're in your own dark forest. But I also know from experience that it will not last forever. You are not alone and you have a purpose.