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Working With What is There

In the novel, *Turtles All the Way Down* by John Green is a compelling look at mental illness and a debilitating obsessive-compulsive disorder with the main character, Aza. Aza Holmes is a sixteen-year-old girl who is simply trying to gain control over her life. Ever since she was young, Aza struggles with mental illness and OCD. However, throughout the book, she slowly got better with her relationships with her mother, her fears and thoughts, and learning to love herself for who she is.

Aza's relationship with her mother is not the best at the beginning of the book because, like any parent, her mom wants to take away Aza's pain which she cannot. There were several points where Aza's mom becomes overbearing and not understanding, "'Just be honest with Dr. Singh, okay? There's no need to suffer.' Which I'd argue is just a fundamental misunderstanding of the human predicament, but okay" (70). Her mom is similar to any other parent when their child is hurting and that can cloud their judgment and understanding of what their child is wanting them to know. Since Aza's father is gone and it is only her mother and her, the pressure of being cared for is greater. It can be seen that Aza does care and love her mother but knows that her mother does not understand her mental illness. Aza believes that it is best to not open up to her mother due to that, "'You've been taking your meds,' she said. Again, not a direct question. 'Yeah,' I said, which was broadly true" (11). It was not until Aza got into a car crash when their relationship started to get closer. Something clicked inside of Aza's mom because, after the car crash incident, her mom started to accept the fact that she has to let Aza deal with

her pain and she cannot take it away. Her mom simply showed support and truly tried to understand what Aza was going through, “I keep saying I can’t lose you, but I will. I am. And that’s a hard thought. That’s a hard, hard thought. But you’re right. You’re not me, You make your own choices” (247). This made Aza open up more to her and share how she is.

When Aza was young, her father died right in front of her and her mom. This impacted Aza for the rest of her life and how she treats everyone. It is especially bad when she gets surrounded by her thoughts and doubts. Aza has several fears but the one that is the worse is all of the micro bacteria. She believes that they are everywhere and will eventually kill her. Anything dealing with health problems scares Aza and leads to her spiral of thoughts, “*What if your finger is infected? Why not just check? The cafeteria wasn’t exactly the most sanitary place to reopen the wound. And then you were in the river.* Now you’re nervous, because you’ve previously attended this exact rodeo on thousands of occasions, and also because you want to choose the thoughts that are called yours” (48). Although this phobia never gets any better and she still has to deal with OCD, Aza does learn how to tell people what it is like and that helps her. She uses metaphors to help describe her fears and thoughts, ““You often try to understand your experience through metaphor, Aza: It’s like a demon inside of you; you’ll call your consciousness a bus, or a prison cell, or a spiral [...]””(88). With each situation she faces, she slowly gets ahold of her thoughts and reassures herself and others that she is taking it too seriously.

Throughout the book, it can be seen that Aza doubts herself. After every situation that does not turn to her favor, meaning she either felt super uncomfortable and awkward, her thoughts start to gain control over her. Since Aza is aware of what causes this is, her OCD and

her mental illness, she hates it about herself and struggles to see the good in her. This is where her best friend, Daisy, and her therapist come into reassuring her that it is okay to be like this. Although what really got her to change was Daisy pointing out how much she has taken for granted, “You got a car and a laptop and all that shit, and you think it’s *natural*. You think it’s just normal to have a house with your own room and a mom who helps you with your homework. You don’t think you’re privileged, but you have everything” (216). Similar to many other people in society, Aza does not think much of what she has and what she had taken advantage of. She realized that focusing simply on her worst part of herself is detrimental to the people around her because it can be seen as selfish and pessimistic. Although at the end of the book she did not completely learn to love herself for who she is, Aza did become aware and started to focus more on keeping positive and loving. In the end, Aza became more accepting of herself and to other people’s opinions of her.

Aza’s growth throughout the whole book was heartfelt because of the progress she made to cope with mental illness and OCD. Her relationship with her mother solidifies into a deeper connection, she knows what to do if her thoughts and fears become too much, and started learning to appreciate herself more. Even though she has a mental illness and OCD, her journey can be related to because everyone faces similar internal problems and can understand to a certain level of what she is going through. It also helps that John Green is a great writer at describing her thoughts and portraying her several characteristics.