

Her message: don't panic | The London Free Press

Paige Lawson, who suffers anxiety, will be speaking to high school students about mental health through United Way Youth in Action programs sponsored by London Life. She hopes to reduce the stigma attached to anxiety and panic disorders. (SUSAN BRADNAM, The London Free Press)

Paige Lawson was 12 when she started getting overwhelmed at school.

She couldn't concentrate on what the teacher was saying. It didn't matter what course or teacher, her breathing would come in short bursts.

She'd lose focus. Then came the dizziness and lightheadedness. By Grade 11, she was passing out regularly in class and unable to continue in a regular classroom.

"There was no calming myself," Lawson says.

Now 19, Lawson has learned to control her panic disorder and has graduated -- by doing online courses -- with her high school diploma. She volunteers at Rogers television, has applied to broadcasting school and would eventually like to work as a producer on a show.

"Something like one-third of teens have some kind of anxiety and there's really no way to deal with it," Lawson says.

She was one of the first students in London allowed to complete her diploma by doing online courses. She's paved the way for others who might come after her -- and she's doing more still.

Lawson's proposal to go into Grade 9 classes and talk about panic and anxiety -- her success story, and what students can do about their own issues -- was accepted as one of 15 United Way Youth in Action projects, each sponsored by London Life. Her workshops are called DREAM: Direct Resources for Education Alternatives and Mental Health.

"For a while, I was embarrassed, because kids are staring at you and you're passing out in class. It's embarrassing," Lawson says.

"But as I've gotten older, I've grown out of it so it's not as bad and I've gained a lot of control. I have to talk about it, because I can't promote talking about it and be embarrassed anymore. I have to be out there and willing to talk about it."

Her family has been supportive, Lawson says. She admits she "hit the jackpot" in the parent department, and her friends have stuck by her. But it wasn't always easy not being able to go to school with her peers, and she wants to make sure others know they're not alone.

"My case might have been really intense, but so many kids have anxiety and it's so understudied," Lawson says. "I think I'm really fortunate to come out of it how I have, but I don't want to leave other kids behind."

With support and resources from mindyourmind.ca and the Canadian Mental Health Association of London and



Middlesex, Lawson wants to get young high school students talking about mental health in their lives.

"I definitely want to reduce the stigma so students aren't afraid to say that they may have anxiety because so many of them do."

Teachers, principals and parents also have to be able to support students, Lawson adds.

She's also been learning a little bit about herself and how to cope with her struggles as she prepares to talk to her younger peers about anxiety and panic disorders.

"A lot of people ask me how I'm going to go to college and have a job if I couldn't even go to high school classes," Lawson says.

"I think I'm ready to take that leap."