





NOT OKAY

**Shahaddah Jack
Youth Poet Laureate**













**At 10 years old.
I didn't know the power
that my brain could hold over me**

**Drowning me
Taunting me.
Torturing me**

**I was looking for an escape helplessly
I could no longer find me
In my sea of anxiety
Resiliency was at a loss with me
Fear the only thought in me
As I didn't know
If anyone would find a way to save me
Free me from the expectations of society
Free me from my disdain of imperfection
Afraid a lack of perfection would somehow
Reveal the human in me
As if somehow it would make me less worthy
Of what I didn't know, but I knew
That failure was never an option for me**





**It felt like
The world kept telling me
That excellence would never announce its
presence
In the Destiny of a young girl like me
It was played out in movies
And printed out in magazines
That I would have to work twice as hard
Just to avoid poverty
And it took an unwanted toll on me
My self-esteem became a battleground
Of self-doubt that was inevitably
self stifling
My imagination that manifested the most beautiful
creations
Morphed into a prison of self-deprecation
And 10-year-old me had no explanation for how her
whimsical songs of poetry now held the heaviest of
melancholy
Her tongue built a barricade of “I’m OK”
Until one day, it became her reality
one that everyone learned to believe
That I learned to believe**

1.25 million of Canada's youth require mental health support each year

57% of youth have needs that go unmet with disparities for black and brown bodies

And one in five are sliding down a mental health decline and go unrecognized

And yet there are some that choose to believe that everything's fine

That choose to believe

that today's youth are overreacting

To the crimes that the 1% are enacting

Who choose to believe

That there aren't youth skipping sleep to be in their classrooms

Skipping meals to afford sports teams and spirit wear

And no matter how much they cry out for help

In the tone of their voice

Or the lack there of

That nobody seems to care

**So,
the story of 10-year-old me
Isn't a rarity
It's much closer to an unnoticed normality
Where the most ignored of young minds
Become an avoidable casualty
Who become blamed or shamed for their silence
that shackled them
The isolation that suffocated them
Or the exhaustion that imprisoned them**

**Who are exposed to trauma at the swipe of a finger
A scroll away from being a part of global change
More connected than our ancestors could envision
or imagine
Carrying more weight than their minds can take**

**I belong to a generation forced behind a façade of
disregard
A generation waiting
For someone to hear us
To see us
And no matter how hard we try
Or no matter how good we are at pretending
To know that
We are
Not OK**