

# Finding BTS gave me back myself

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In the year and a half before I stumbled upon BTS, I experienced some of the biggest life changes that typically affect most young twentysomethings. Two weeks after graduating from college in early May 2013, I found myself transplanted to a new city with my first real job. The whirlwind of graduation, packing up and moving, and starting work at a university much larger than the tiny private college I attended pushed me in several directions. Hadn't I been waiting four years, hoping to put school behind me, obtain that diploma, and start a career? Wasn't I worried, just a few months prior, that I'd be unable to find work, remain financially dependent, and fall behind on student loan payments? The answer to all those musings is yes, but I was also leaving home for the first time, gaining a plethora of responsibilities, and making that first foray into the professional world.

Though my summer of change coincided with BTS' debut, my K-pop maiden voyage was much earlier. In 2007, a high school friend sent me a list of music in different languages to check out, and I remember listening to DBSK and a few assorted groups until early

2008, when I began following newly debuted groups more closely. Korean music shows, music videos, and variety shows were all fun discoveries, and I quickly taught myself to read the Korean script, even though I didn't know what the words meant at the time. Subtitles were infinitely harder to come by back then; forget the high definition videos, concert streams, and endless merchandise releases of today. Regardless, I spent hours watching videos, listening to songs, and memorising lyrics. My mother thought it was a phase.

But it wasn't a phase. I had found something that intrigued me, and my longstanding interest in foreign languages and cultures only bolstered my interest in Korean media. By the time 2013 came around, I was much more knowledgeable about the contemporary Korean entertainment landscape than I had ever been about the Western scene.

Even so, when BTS debuted in June 2013, I can't say I was fully aware. Though I kept up with Korean entertainment after college, I had specific groups I focused on, and it was hard to broaden that spectrum. And frankly, I had bigger concerns at the time than what was going on in K-pop, with graduation and taking a new job happening just a month before. I grew up in the suburbs of a small city and lived my entire life, twenty-two years at the time, in the same small home my parents bought before I was born. We never moved, we rarely travelled, and all of my schools, including my undergraduate school, were about ten minutes down the road. A homebody with deep roots, moving to a new city felt like I was being ripped out of my planter and thrust into a wide forest full of unfamiliar trees and potentially threatening wildlife.

Mental health, specifically anxiety, has been a lifelong struggle for me, so needless to say, experiencing so much change so quickly was a mountain of a challenge. As I stumbled through my first year of work, I tried to get my bearings, aiming to do what I could to switch

jobs into my chosen field of writing and editing. I soon decided I would benefit from getting a second degree, which I could obtain with some financial assistance from the university I worked for after my first year on the job. During that first year, I found a distance learning programme I could attend while keeping my full-time job and set out to get my application in order while taking on some freelance work to gain further experience. I got pretty good at distracting myself from the fallout of being uprooted by focusing on studying for the GRE (a standardised test required by most graduate schools in the US), playing video games, and sleeping, though those avoidance techniques could not be effective forever.

Of course, because the only constant is change, my life did not suddenly become static after that first year. Before I had a chance to fully adjust and accept my new life, the second whirlwind came. By the spring of 2014, I knew I had been accepted into my chosen graduate programme, and that I'd also been granted permission to enrol in the Korean language courses offered by my workplace. In June, I moved into my first rental—a small townhouse that would require I become a 'real adult'—and in August, both my graduate programme and my Korean language courses began.

As I attempted to learn how to balance real life, work, and two educational programmes, the weight of all the change I had experienced in such a short time, after an entire lifetime of so little change, began to weigh heavy. I spent a couple of months mostly shut down. Every day was a similar routine: I'd get up in the morning, get ready and go to work at a job I was quickly learning to hate, come home and cook dinner, and then end up on the couch in front of the television as one (or both) of my new kittens napped on me. Somehow, I managed to get my schoolwork done, probably due to years of conditioning to meet academic deadlines and requirements (a B was a cause for concern to me after all), but beyond that, I wasn't doing much. Rather

than participating in life, I was merely existing. Each day was the same drudgery, and I couldn't motivate myself to do anything. What was there to do, besides work to live and go to school? I felt stuck in a mundane cycle, directionless with only vague goals of 'make more money' and 'get another degree' to guide me. There was neither joy nor fulfilment, and I didn't understand why. Was this really how I was supposed to live for the rest of my life?

Though I didn't know it at the time, I was in the midst of an adjustment disorder—a stress-response syndrome. People with adjustment disorders develop a 'maladaptive reaction' to ordinary life events that become stressors (or in some cases, it's a reaction to chronic illness).<sup>1</sup> It's not uncommon for people with adjustment disorders to also experience anxiety and depression at the same time, or to develop behavioural changes. Most respond to their stressors with 'disengagement strategies,' rather than utilising healthy coping mechanisms.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, I was not coping well, but I didn't realise something was off.

The upside to adjustment disorders is that they're typically transient—they can be resolved within six months. I ended up snapping out of that listless state, at least to some degree, within a couple of months and was starting to feel more normal by the winter. However, struggling to adjust to change and managing my anxiety would continue to affect both myself and others in my life. Sometimes the episodes were brief, sometimes extended, but I was beginning to learn that maybe this was just something I'd have to learn to live with.

As I continued on through my first semester of graduate school, and despite my awkwardness at being five years older than everyone in Korean class, I made a few friends who were also interested in Korean culture, K-pop, and K-dramas. It was the first time I had more

than one friend (besides online friends) who were also interested in these hobbies. Making these connections with others who shared my interests also helped pull me back to reality, and it was good for me to have some new social interactions.

Adjusting to my new life, pursuing further education, and making new friends all helped me cope and feel more at peace, but something else would come along to really redeem me from some of my trials. That something, of course, was BTS.

Although I had effectively missed BTS' debut era, after the release of *상남자* (*Boy in Luv*) in 2014, I came across the song randomly while on Pandora Radio. During my YouTube sessions, I eventually saw the music video as well, but at the time, I wasn't motivated to investigate further—I already had my focus on a few other groups, and I didn't need to fall down the hole for another. I listened to that title track throughout the year, but I didn't continue my pursuit.

That changed, however, in early 2015. Some of the groups I followed had disbanded, gone on hiatus, or no longer appealed to me as they once had. In March, BTS announced their *Red Bullet* tour for North America—I remember seeing the announcements posted on K-pop Facebook pages and other social media. I knew I didn't know them well, but I became interested in going to their show, especially after finding out my friends from school wanted to go. Somehow during those four short months between the show announcement and the actual concert, I went from a casual observer to well on my way to becoming a dedicated fan.

To be honest, I don't really remember how it happened. I don't remember exactly when or what content I came into contact with that convinced me to become a fan. Many fans can remember the exact moment they joined the ARMY, but for me, it's vague, perhaps because I was slowly descending and didn't expect a casual interest

to capture my full attention. I saw some Bangtan Bomb videos on YouTube, watched some previous music shows and music videos, and came across some of BTS' variety show appearances. As I was becoming more intrigued by the group, teasers for their April 2015 comeback with *HwaYangYeonHwa Pt. 1* came out—I had a comeback to look forward to so soon after solidifying my interest as a fan, which no doubt would help speed up that process.

Familiar with how the comeback circuit worked, I waited for concept photos and additional teasers to release while entertaining myself with the plethora of content I had already missed. Compared to other groups I had followed, BTS released so much content—I only had roughly two-and-a-half years of catch up to do, but to this day, I'm sure there's content from that time that I still haven't seen.

I think it's fair to say that with the release of *I Need U* and its accompanying music videos, as well as the discography of *HYYH pt. 1*, I was firmly a fan. Though the sound was a departure from much of BTS' previous work, I appreciated the experimentation, not knowing at the time BTS would go on to experiment with sound on every album. The contrast between the lyrics of *I Need U* and its music videos interested me the most. Having watched and enjoyed plenty of K-pop previously, I was on board for the typical theatrical music video, even if it lacked a storyline. But *I Need U* seemed to play with more story than I had seen in many previous videos, and it didn't feature any choreography or shots of the members singing. I remember analyzing the story in blog posts even back then, a habit which continues to this day, despite there being no other related content at that time and the Bangtan Universe didn't exist yet.

I soon became singularly focused on BTS as I processed the comeback, watched the music show lives, and followed them on Twitter. In May 2015, I joined the BTS Trans/Bangtan Subs video subtitling team and considered myself a full-fledged ARMY. Of course, I didn't

know what I was getting into.

Perhaps my mental state when I really discovered BTS was fertile ground for their content at the time. Though I mentioned having adjusted somewhat to my new life, no longer spending every evening on the couch, it was still a struggle. And much of the time, I didn't even realise I was struggling. Anxiety has been fused into the fabric of who I am since a young age, so it's easy to just expect it to be there. Depression comes and goes, sometimes in seemingly random cycles and other times based on the seasons. I don't think I regressed to the lower points of the adjustment disorder phase, but it was all too easy to sink back into a mindset of directionless wandering. My routine of work, school, housework, and homework hadn't changed, so even though I was participating more actively in some hobbies, overall life felt pretty meaningless. I was making progress towards some educational goals, sure, but would that even change anything? It sounds insignificant, but feelings of hopelessness like that are a hallmark of depression.<sup>3</sup>

But sometime during those early days of my ARMY journey, a few things clicked into place. I had been contemplating the most recent release that bore the title of *화양연화 (HwaYangYeonHwa)*, which I had to further research to learn the meaning of. Though it was mistranslated as "in the mood for love" in several places due to a popular film by the same name, I learned how the Korean phrase is an idiom borrowed from the original Chinese characters and carries a meaning more akin to "the most beautiful moment in life." In the behind-the-scenes interviews of BTS' *Kayounenka On Stage*, the Japanese version of the *HYYH* concerts, RM says, "HYYH literally means the beautiful moment of a flower. We thought that HYYH could mean youth, and that's how we started with HYYH in the sense of youth."<sup>4</sup> Their albums in this series are an exploration of youth, and one of the

biggest themes I got from that first instalment of the *I Need U* music video was wandering, restless youth. It seemed BTS was hinting at the restless, lost nature of the years of one's youth, and implied that although those moments should be life's most beautiful, they're also fleeting. Later, an ending screen on the *Run* music video would read 'HYYH, 2015.04.29 ~ Forever',<sup>5</sup> suggesting that although these beautiful moments were meant to be short-lived, they didn't have to be. To this day, BTS and Big Hit are still releasing content relevant to the theme of *HYYH*, so it truly never ends.

This may seem like a simple revelation now, given all the content BTS has released since *I Need U* and *Run*, but at the time, we didn't have much of BTS' deeper concepts. So for me, realising all of this, and subsequently realising just how much I was letting my life slip by as I existed instead of lived, was an epiphany. Engaging with BTS' content, as both music and story, was actively changing my worldview. Research has shown that music can heavily influence our minds and moods, as well as what we perceive around us,<sup>6</sup> and stories can help us better understand others and ourselves.<sup>7</sup> It's true that not every song or story can affect every person, but BTS' work certainly reached me. I decided I needed to live more consciously and actively, and part of that meant trying to better manage my mental health. It was okay for me to feel lost and restless, but I needed to ensure I was present, lest the years pass me by.

I'd like to say that after this epiphany, I was successful at living more consciously and not getting stuck in a rut. I was, to an extent, but I'm continually reminded that this is an ongoing process—living in the present, living with intention, takes a lot of effort, and it's easy to fall back into old habits. For those who also battle mental illnesses daily, it requires even more effort and focus, something we don't always have in abundance.<sup>8</sup> But each time I engage with BTS' content, and I mean really consciously engage with it, I'm reminded of that time in



2015 and remember that I need to continue to *live* rather than exist.

In their subsequent releases, BTS continued to examine themes related to youth and expanded their conceptual narrative to include themes such as darkness and temptation (*WINGS*), self-love (*Love Yourself*), and self-reflection and self-development (*Map of the Soul*). Each step in their conceptual story arc was the next logical step in the process of their growth narrative. As I continued to move through my twenties, their themes resonated with me, and I appreciated that I could always use their work to go deeper. Separately from BTS, I was interested in self-help books, especially ones that focused on psychology and emotional intelligence. I pursued some titles on my own and began to make connections between these topics and the topics BTS discussed through their work. Even now, I work with topics that come up in BTS' body of content both as a way to perform self-examinations and to tap into inspiration to create my own related content surrounding their work and our fandom.

But the themes and stories BTS tells through their music, concepts, and fictional Bangtan Universe didn't just resonate with me. Thousands of fans were having similar responses, similar but unique to each individual and their circumstances. One doesn't have to look hard to find hundreds of posts describing how BTS impacted someone's life, mental health, and more. In one post on the BTS subreddit, there's over 190 comments detailing and discussing how BTS' music helped fans through tough times. One fan's comment reads: "As someone who's been struggling with mental health problems and absolutely despised myself for most of their life, I had a really strong connection with [*Answer: Love Myself*]. I would play it every single morning to motivate me."<sup>9</sup> Fans are all affected differently, but it's easy to see a steady pattern of hope, help, and healing when it comes to BTS.

As it became clearer to me just how much BTS' content both appealed to and affected me, and as I noticed how many others reacted similarly, I began to ask myself why. Why did this affect me so much when nothing else in my encounters with K-pop had? How was I able to sustain my attention on one group when previously I'd get bored easily and move on? Why were so many people experiencing comfort, improved mental health, or gaining inspiration and a drive to better themselves? It's certainly true not all fans have this experience: there are casual fans, fans who don't struggle with mental illnesses, and there are certainly toxic fans, as any large fandom must possess. But the consistency of fans expressing BTS' effect on them cannot be brushed off as mere coincidence.

I've pondered these questions a hundred times over, and I've made several attempts to answer them. I don't know that we'll ever get a complete answer, as our experiences vary widely, but it's necessary to grapple with these big-picture questions to gain a better understanding of this phenomenon. If nothing else, I selfishly wanted to know why I was so affected and why BTS seems to have an impact on mental health like no other pop star.

BTS' music and lyrics are perhaps the most commonly cited reason as to why a fan's mental health may improve. This, of course, comes as no surprise. In his book on BTS, music critic Kim Youngdae writes, "BTS is a group of musicians, and the biggest appeal and the secret to success are in their music and performances."<sup>10</sup> It's certainly true that BTS' performances are a major draw for fans—most humans are affected by music in some way, usually in a positive way. Even those of us living without mental illnesses can notice our mood improving by listening to music, whether we are affected by the sound of the music, its lyrics, or both. Music might not change your life, but it has probably touched you in some way.

In modern times, pop music is infamous for being vapid,<sup>11</sup> for only skittering across the surface of topics (normally surrounding love or the loss thereof) and never delving deeper to anything that actually *means* something. It happens in every genre and type of music out there, but pop music is especially hard hit with this prejudice, and to be fair, it's often true. Plenty of songs in K-pop don't have a deeper meaning (some BTS songs included), and not every track *needs* to be that complex. But overall, BTS' adherence to thematic content and tendency to put together cohesive concepts that follow a growth narrative helps explain why many fans, myself included, are so affected by their lyrics. BTS' lyrics are infused with a wide variety of universally appealing topics, including social criticisms of harsh education systems and societal class structures, realistic love, friendship, and growing pains, just to name a few. With such a wide array of subject matter, it's understandable that so many people can find something to relate to, something that makes them think, or something that offers comfort. Art, no matter the format, can change the world.<sup>12</sup>

For me, even when I couldn't necessarily relate to the specifics, I found themes and topics that spoke to me or made me think. Watching *I Need U* was the first time I was interested enough in a music video to want to deconstruct it, as I had been taught to do with literature. It was the first time a music video felt like part of something larger, and I couldn't have known it at the time, but it really was—it was part of the overarching narrative that would evolve into the Bangtan Universe (BU). As I listened to more and more of BTS' work, I could see how both the music itself and their lyrics helped me *feel* again. I knew I had to live rather than exist, but I was also beginning to realise that I needed to actively feel, not just react. Many studies have touted the potential healing benefits of music, and studies on lyrics have reached similar conclusions. One study found that lyrics

can help “reveal emotions” as well as “express feelings individuals are not able to convey in another way”.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, lyrics that focus on negative emotions and pain can allow us to mourn or grieve something in our own lives, while happier lyrics (especially ones that are “focused on restoration, recovery, or healing”) can help people “see possibilities and recognise they have more choices than they may have first surmised.”<sup>13</sup> When I was stuck and dealing with the ups and downs of depression, sentimental BTS songs like *I Need U* stirred emotions inside me, regardless of the actual content of the lyrics. I felt this same stirring much later with 전하지 못한 진심 (*The Truth Untold*). I needed to grieve—not in the same way the songs grieved, but over the lost, frozen existence I had fallen into.

Beyond BTS’ music and lyrical content, their ability to provide fans with stories can both draw fans in and potentially influence their mental health. With both their narrative concepts for albums and the BU, they use storytelling (fictional or not) that engages fans. This is where I was particularly drawn in—not all fans care about this additional content, but for those who do, it’s one of the bigger reasons to like BTS. My initial interest in deconstructing the music video for *I Need U* was bolstered by a steady stream of new content from the BU and BTS’ conceptual timeline, giving me plenty of material to work with. I appreciated having something to analyse—sure, I had done that enough in school, and continued to do so during graduate school, but I liked that my hobbies could also provide intellectual stimulation. Sometimes I needed a break that didn’t require me to think, but when I was ready to feed my need for research and analysis, BTS’ content met me on that level too, and I could spend hours entertaining my mind.

With the development and continuation of the BU and BTS’ concepts in the form of a timeline, I also questioned why this was so

effective—why did I enjoy this? What effect was it having on me? Was it helpful to me? To others? From all the fan-generated content related to BTS’ storylines, I knew it wasn’t just me. I wondered if this content also impacted mental health, and if so, why.

In his book *The Emotional Craft of Fiction*, author Donald Maass discusses how narratives engage readers. He writes, “To entertain, a story must present novelty, challenge, and/or aesthetic value” and he notes that authors would do well to give their readers something to figure out.<sup>14</sup> In an article I wrote,<sup>15</sup> I noted how the BU meets all three of these requirements: the BU was a new aspect of K-pop, its challenges resided in its fractured and incomplete nature, and it presented aesthetic value (both in its video components and its fictional narrative). This is one reason I was hooked, and I suspect it’s true for many other fans.

Going even further, BU content and the conceptual timeline offered additional subject matter that I believe aided my mental health. Just as I initially felt freed from my rut, shaken into action by my encounter with *I Need U* and the subsequent *HYYH* materials, I continued to experience a form of catharsis as well as growth through BTS’ storylines. To be clear, this content will not affect everyone the same way; it’s entirely possible to experience *negative* effects from stories (see Chapter Three). However, in a survey I conducted as part of a conference presentation, a majority of fans who participated indicated both BU content and BTS’ narrative concepts positively affected their mental health.<sup>16</sup>

Some research has suggested the ability of stories to improve mental health and help people heal. In a book on psychology and fiction, Keith Oatley presents research that supports the idea that fiction “can potentially prompt self-improvement” by assisting us with “understandings of the self” as well as understandings of others.<sup>7</sup> I believe this is why BU content is effective, as well as BTS’ other

concepts, even though their concepts and lyrics are in the realm of non-fiction. They're still presenting us with material we can use to examine and understand ourselves, others, and the world around us. I'm a writer, but that means I'm also a reader, so it really shouldn't have surprised me at first that storytelling, especially when combined with music and relatable lyrics, had such an effect on me.

BTS' more recent work with the *Love Yourself* series and the *Map of the Soul* series moved into the realms of self-love, self-reflection, and self-development. I continued to be intrigued with these concepts, having moved into the stage of life where I was more interested in this type of development. I can pursue that development on my own, but I've been grateful to find additional content to explore in BTS' creations. It was this content that would help me continue to climb each mountain of challenge that appeared in life.

Since 2015, when I first tried to alter some negative mental patterns and live more consciously, I've had several bouts of anxiety and depression. Anxiety is something I live with daily, but there are times where it's more pronounced. Alternatively, there are seasons of depression. Not only does it like to appear in wintertime as seasonal affective disorder, but it likes to come and go a couple times a year.

I remember when I decided to begin seeing a therapist regularly—I had moved on to my second job at the university, but I quickly became uninterested in my work. It was once again a job, not a career. I knew going into it that it wasn't quite right, but I desperately needed out of the toxic environment and poor management of my first job. When I wasn't receiving interviews for jobs I knew I was either qualified or overqualified for, it began to bog me down. I was both upset and disenchanted, feeling like I had worked so hard to get two degrees, gain experience while in school, and work on extracurricular projects to further boost my resume. For the first time in my life, I was con-

sumed by self-doubt over my own qualifications and abilities. I had a few minor run-ins with impostor syndrome before, that nagging feeling that you don't actually know anything, that any success or accomplishments you had in the past were just pure luck. But now, it was back with a vengeance. I questioned nearly every aspect of my training and education up to that point. I reasoned, illogically of course, that the only possible explanation for my struggles was that I was a fraud. It seemed like as good a time as any to seek help, lest I be dragged down by depression again.

Therapy was, as expected, a good choice. As I went to sessions every few weeks, I focused on trying to reframe my thoughts. Sometimes, the self-doubt and depression would eat away at me, and it felt like I was the only one who felt like this. But in reality, so many people, especially women and minorities, have these same exact thoughts. Impostor syndrome is a nasty phenomenon, and getting stuck in this headspace will only breed more negativity, making it that much harder to break free.<sup>17</sup> It helps to learn that it's really not just you, that it's beyond normal to feel this way. In the end, it was really nothing more than my own mind telling me I wasn't good enough, wasn't skilled enough, didn't have the right experience, and a myriad of other whispers, but your own mind can be a powerful force that's hard to combat.

As I continued to work on myself to better manage anxiety, depression, and the periods of impostor syndrome, BTS began launching the *Love Yourself* series. After this launch, Big Hit put several books related to BTS' concepts up for sale on the official shop. One of the books, *The Art of Loving* by Erich Fromm, mentions self-love. Fromm writes, "If it is a virtue to love my neighbour as a human being, it must be a virtue—and not a vice—to love myself, since I am a human being too. There is no concept of man in which I myself am not included."<sup>18</sup>

He counters the idea that self-love is akin to selfishness, and while the phrase ‘love yourself’ is common and we’ve all heard it before, too many of us don’t *really* listen to it. This was great timing for me, as it’s what I, and so many others, needed to hear.

BTS’ messaging of ‘love yourself,’ which continued as they grew in popularity, has reached so many fans, young and old alike, and it does seem that many are listening. I listened. I didn’t think I was someone who needed to hear it, but I was. Self-love isn’t just about being comfortable with your body and not worrying so much about your appearance, it’s about being comfortable and caring for *all* that you are. That meant I needed to stop letting my inner critic tell me I wasn’t good enough, or that I didn’t know anything. I needed to continue pursuing my goals and my interests, and in the event anyone tells me I should stop, I shouldn’t listen. It’s a balancing act and requires that I consciously make an effort to replace negative thoughts with positive ones, but I’ve since gained back some of my self-confidence. I decided I would continue to pursue my writing as well as my career goals, despite the setbacks that sometimes make me feel inadequate. I decided to allow myself to be proud of my accomplishments, and not to let any struggle or failure define me—there will always be opportunities to grow, and I needed to welcome those times instead of worrying about a potential failure. A couple of years ago, I also switched jobs again to a field more closely related to what I actually want to do, but I still have to fight away the dragons of self-doubt regularly. Self-love is not something learned overnight, and I need to ensure I’m patient with myself. All that matters is that I keep trying. It didn’t matter that I heard this simple phrase elsewhere in the world at various times in my life—when BTS said it, I heard it in a way I hadn’t before.

Becoming a member of the ARMY gave me plenty of material to



consider, analyse, and learn from, and I'm grateful for the experiences they've led me to. When I officially considered myself an ARMY, I, like most fans, became active within fandom spaces. Because I had recently moved to a new city, I had left nearly all my friends behind. As a raging introvert, I didn't need a wide social circle, but everyone needs at least a few close friends. When I became active in the fandom, I started to make new ARMY friends online. It didn't matter they lived far away from me—I was still able to cultivate important friendships that have lasted years.

With that first foray into fandom activities by joining the BTS Trans/Bangtan Subs team, I found myself in a group chat of nearly 50 other fans (at the height of the team's activity). I soon had mutuals on Twitter who were interested in what I was interested in, and it was a nice change. Over the years, I've been involved in quite a few projects related to BTS—from heading the editorial section of a K-pop magazine (*The Kraze*), running a project account, and tutoring for ARMY Academy, to participating in the BTS Conference in London in January 2020 and starting my own website for BTS-related writing and research, I've had varied experiences and made many friends. These activities began in May 2015 but have continued consistently up to the present day, and I have to acknowledge that the friendships I've gained and the projects I've been a part of have also positively affected my mental health along the way. It's hard to move somewhere where you know hardly anyone, and it's hard sometimes to have most of your close friends live so far away. But I'm thankful for the people I've met and for those who have been my friend over the years—I don't really know how my mentality would have turned out otherwise.

Overall, I can say the BTS fandom has impacted me and my mental health almost as much as BTS has. To be fair, it hasn't all been positive. I've been on the receiving end of betrayals or other hurtful

behaviour a couple of times, and the general climate of fandom on Twitter has changed a lot since 2017. But thankfully, when I noticed how the toxic fans on Twitter were contributing negatively to my mental health, I was able to stop myself long enough to curate my online experience and refocus my attention back on the friends I cared about and BTS themselves. By taking control of my fandom experience, I've been able to retain the positive benefits and mitigate the negatives of being active on a platform like Twitter. Fandom, too, is a part of this journey, and I'm still here for the ride.

In her book on writing and life, Anne Lamott briefly mentions baseball and active participation in the sports fandom when she writes, "Little by little, in telling [my son] all these details, I got to see the bigger point of baseball, that it can give us back ourselves."<sup>19</sup> I believe BTS does this for the multitudes of ARMY out there—they give us back what we lost, help us find ourselves, or help us live life more easily, even if just a bit. Engaging with art, music, stories—if we choose to listen, this grants us a better understanding of ourselves by expanding our viewpoints, helping us negotiate life, and ultimately saving us from ourselves. For me, mental health is a life-long struggle, and my involvement with BTS, their content, and the fandom has had lasting, mostly positive impacts. I will continue to be shaped by BTS-related content, with the hope that I will also be continually inspired to change and improve both myself and my mental health. BTS gives comfort and hope to so many, especially with the *HYYH* series, and with their consistent messaging and ability to express genuine care for others, maybe our HYYH really can be forever.

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