

Graduation Delayed, Not Denied

I often second guess myself, overlooking accomplishments in favor of spending hours contemplating times in my life when I might have done things differently. When I could have done better or somehow tried harder. If I try hard enough maybe I can pinpoint when I began to fail at living up to expectations? I notice when this happens, I have to force my brain to stop. Ruminating like this is always counterproductive for me. Instead, I remind myself to acknowledge the obstacles I overcame, obstacles that helped make me stronger.

I started my freshman year of college at the University of Delaware the first fall after I graduated from high school. It took me ten years before I finally completed my bachelor's degree. In those ten years, I tried out four different higher education institutions and a wide variety of majors (including fashion merchandising!). I felt an underlying uncertainty of not having a clear (or even blurry!) vision of the career I'd find most fulfilling. Less than two years later, I found myself in the ER for the first what would be three psychiatric hospitalizations in a year. Barely an adult, I now had a psychiatric diagnosis and zero desire to accept it. My mind went on haunting me, mocking my efforts, causing me to doubt my ability to do anything at all. Because of my inability to deal with severe symptoms, I behaved in ways that I am now embarrassed to even think about. All the while, I pushed the people closest to me away. It was never intentional, but I was struggling inside and out, to the point that I was impossible to be around.

Looking back, signs that something was wrong started showing up around the time I finished high school. At that time, I had a great group of friends who I had not yet pushed out of my life and still lived at home: I managed to avert any major crises. I graduated at the top of my class, oblivious to the impending breakdown waiting for me just around the corner.

After my initial hospitalization, I struggled to accept the reality that my life had drastically changed. It took me several years to fully accept that this was not going to go away – and that despite the challenges I'd face moving forward, I was still the same person inside. While I was coming to terms with this, I moved back home. Only then did I begin to realize the extent to which my parents were my strongest advocates. On my worst days, they never gave up on me, and I am sure that I was *not* pleasant to be around. I continued struggling with symptoms, and the medications that were designed to help me often came with intolerable side effects. Together, my parents supported me unconditionally, and because of them, I began to believe in myself again.

I re-enrolled in school, this time trying out the criminal justice program at Delaware Technical Community College. I took smaller classes where there was more interaction between the students and the instructors. We discussed issues that impacted society as a whole, and my passion for learning reemerged. Then slowly, so did the confidence that I'd be able to graduate.

At home, my parents committed to their own learning as I worked through Del Tech's program. I graduated with highest honors in December 2011 and continued on to my bachelor's after that. Meanwhile, they dove into anything and everything that could help them understand my illness and how to help me manage it.

Life doesn't always give you what you want: it gives you what you need to survive. The

path I'd envisioned - finishing school in four years, getting a steady job, finding a relationship – didn't happen. I went off the beaten path, and at first, found it difficult to navigate. Now that I've found my way, I appreciate the beauty around me. I learned to find my own way and go at my own pace, thanks to my amazing support system. I look back and realize what I learned on my journey to a degree were valuable lessons, both inside and out of the classroom. Some of my favorite life lessons from that time are listed here:

What are the greatest lessons learned? Make health a non-negotiable priority – this includes both mind and my body. People who want the best for you are a treasure. Find the opportunity to learn from frustrations or setbacks, grieve when you need to, and then try again.

What advice would you share with a Freshman? Doing your best doesn't mean you need to be the best. Don't put undue pressure on yourself, and give yourself credit when credit is due. When you want to give up, don't.

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