

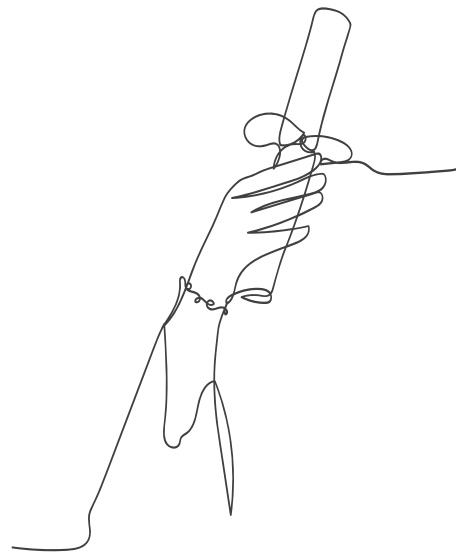
When Can It Feel Like It's About Me?

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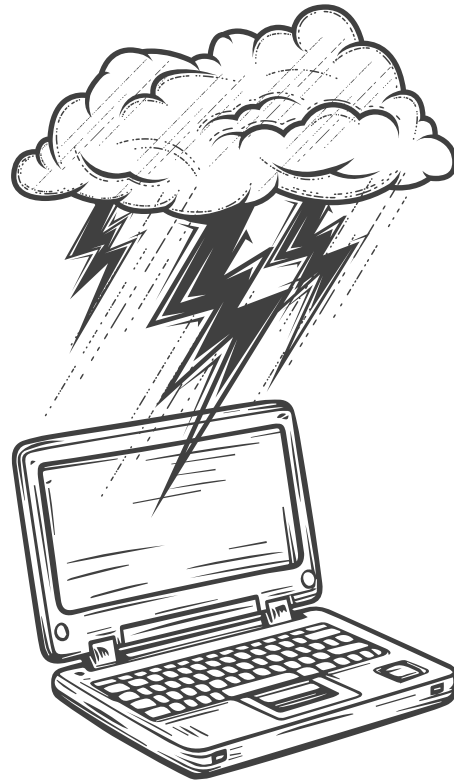
College is never going to be what one expects it to look like in the movies—a fun move-in day where your parents are nervous to let you go but excited! You seemingly have all this free time and can go on random side adventures. From the start of my college career, it never felt that I was going to be working towards a major accomplishment but something that I had to get out of the way in order to apply to the secondary education I was looking more forward to. Perhaps other premedical students feel the same way towards their undergraduate degree, but I have always felt guilty that the major reason I was trying to do well in a particular course was to be able to run out of the room instead of forgetting time was flying by in it.

The opportunity for a bachelor's degree seemed like a fair shot, given my family's circumstances, but one thing I completely omitted was the importance of the environment and culture that surrounds you. All throughout my high school years I stayed at home, never went out, as that was what I knew my parents would accept and would take less energy to combat. I was able to fall so much easier into the void that was leading a school club, taking charge and leading groups when I didn't have as much control at home.

College finally seemed like an excuse for my parents to have to let me be my own person—I could work late shifts now without a parent having to wait up for me to come home, or for once, finally get some peace and quiet without having to generate my own background noise that would not be as constant.



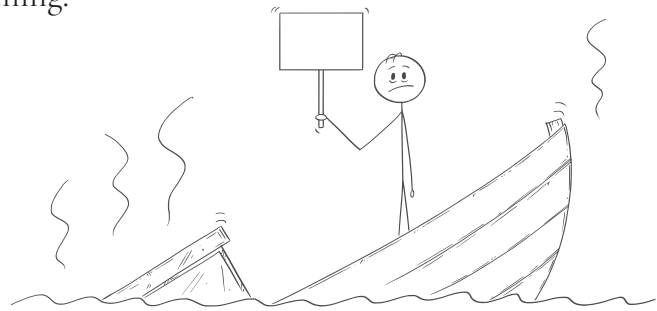
Unfortunately, like many students in the Fall of 2020, I was coming out of my shell of a room that had grown stale with me completing my senior year and the subsequent months in the same spot to coursework that was, for the most part, still online. I didn't dare tell my parents this—it had felt like so much had been taken from me already in my senior year that I selfishly wanted the start of college to be for myself, no matter what that cost. After finally prying off my parents, with the help of an unintended argument over small matters, I was gazing at my kitchen stove from my bed in my studio. I naively thought that this year was going to be like any other successful academic year that I had in the past.



Despite the distance that was placed between me and my home, the problems never seemed to stay there. Constant phone calls came in the mornings to say hello but quickly turned into one sided venting sessions—Dad complaining about money, sisters complaining about my old workload falling onto them when they have their own school work, and how anxious, sick, or ill my mother had felt. Cultural pressures of acting as a collective have no bounds, but somehow managed to condense me to feeling smaller than I was in my body. I had tried various ways to be of help—I picked up every call, or texted back, even if I knew it was just going to lead to a bombardment of problems.

The one job I managed to nail only paid nine dollars an hour at the time, and given COVID, no one was hiring or at least hiring for more that I could get close to from campus. Those 15 hours a week I could barely get were draining enough, as it was working retail, but by the end of the night I'd stare at the fridge thinking that pay day wouldn't be enough to cover my own groceries, let alone to save for the tuition I was going to be expected to pay on my own the following year.

As the eldest sister in my Mexican American household, I will never be just that. For years I have always been the school advisor, babysitter, therapist, handy man, emotional or financial support, tutor, and whatever else would come up on demand followed with a flat thank you. It has never made a difference that I had an exam that day, the next, or anything else going on because no matter what, those jobs would be waiting on me as soon as I finished. This took a toll on me more than it ever had at my time at home when it was constant, and I was so frustrated when I couldn't figure out why all of a sudden my normal way of life was not working. As I began to spiral out on my own, I began to loathe everything that tied me to that identity as it kept me up at night despite my exhaustion. The gag was that now, it was the pure silence that I found to be deafening.



Part of the toxicity that I feel comes with being a premed student is the notion that everything has to be perfect—you can't possibly fail any prereqs and god forbid you don't join every club or lead some. I will say I fell into that during my first semester, with the added difficulty of having come in with credits to the point I had mostly junior and senior classes left with a dash of sophomore courses to start the base of my GPA. Again naively thinking that somehow I had cheated the system, I came to realize that keeping my half-ride was going to present an even more steep hill for me to climb. The spiraling continued, and my grades dropped to the most deplorable state I had ever achieved in my life.

By the end of my first semester in college, I truly wondered if I was going to have what it would take to get to where I wanted to be someday if I couldn't even admit to myself when I needed to find a way to help myself. I just couldn't understand where the once confident and very sure sense of self I had had gone—I felt reduced to a shell that was watching time go by. The ultimate turn around came when the semester finished and I realized that if my parents would be out of reach in terms of emotional support, I was going to have to find ways to make my own peace and bring back who I was.



I started to get into house plants, finding joy in a new leaf that had sprouted or how happy they looked sitting in the sun. I ultimately quit the retail job as I realized that money would have to be second to my education, as impossible as it seems, and get my GPA up to a more survivable value. Don't get me wrong—things were still looking rather destitute. I had to get through one of my more difficult subjects again, which meant retaking the class; to try and combat this, I had to take fewer classes, which meant having to find a way to pay for summer classes.

I've always had the mentality that when opportunities present themselves to you, that is the best time to take them—I decided to sit back and see what fell in my lap instead of trying to do so much. I can't forcibly just be the best premed student; those skills come with time for some, and that's just the boat I'm in. It's been difficult to not forcibly put things on my plate since that was what I have always been used to, but part of my growth as a person is realizing I too have limits. With time, those limits may or may not change, but you can't exactly force them to be what you want them to be. What they don't tell you about college that I will say is that it's not a sprint and that its more like a marathon. A slow start doesn't mean that you won't wind up at the finish line at some point.

My grades made an incline over that next semester and summer after lots of work, late nights, and family hurdles. With the help of emergency grants that were offered at the time and a loan from a friend, I was able to go from a 2.3 to the 3.0 that I needed. Over the span of two years, I was able to accrue stable jobs that worked better with my schedule and worked my way back to taking the 16–17 credits I thought that I needed to take every semester, but with a better work load balance. I began to find ways to take time for myself and realized that when certain things are out of my control I can only do so much.



Today, I find myself to be a triple employed senior, and undergraduate research student, working towards MCAT prep despite my busy 30 hour work weeks. I find ways to take up space for myself so that I don't get overwhelmed, which is a job in and of itself. I've slowly gained traction and have worked back to being more immersed in my school, but again it takes time to find a sense of self after you feel it's taken a sabbatical.

To this day I still feel guilt in the sense that I know how much my parents put into raising me and are even still financially supporting me, but still wonder at what point their trauma or rough upbringing excuse the way they maintain their relationship with me. Do I even get to feel that they have done anything bad? Being parentified as a kid has led me to be a relatively responsible and decent human, depending on your morals. I just have yet to figure out if there are parts of my personality or interests that I have never fully allowed myself to indulge in. Moving back home due to living costs has made it very hard in the sense that my parents have to learn to live with their daughter, who doesn't make herself as accessible to them. I have to relearn to block out noise, arguments, and create a space that I relate more to or can be a better student in. Not everything about my family is bad—there are parts that are enjoyable and wholesome. I've just learned to stop trying to do everything.

Looking back, I wish I could have provided my freshman self some more piece of mind that things will work out and to take it a day at a time. It's not healthy to have so much pressure to be perfect, and besides, the whole point of college is to learn. Mistakes are inevitable. Who you used to be in high school academically may change when you get to college, but that's okay! What matters more is that you go on the journey to figure out all the aspects to how you learn through an unfortunate but necessary means of trial and error. You can't change your family, and everyone's going to have their own perspective on how they view you in those dynamics. All you can do is offer your best and draw your boundaries for your peace. It's okay to take up space for yourself and find whatever means to feel like a person and less like an extra walking around on campus.