

breathe

literary and arts magazine



VOL. 01 | DEC 2022

“TRY TO LEARN TO BREATHE DEEPLY, really to taste food when you eat, and when you sleep really to sleep. Try as much as possible to be wholly alive with all your might, and when you laugh, laugh like hell. And when you get angry, get good and angry. Try to be alive. You will be dead soon enough.”

Ernest Hemingway

breathe

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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Keerthana Pasumarthi

CHIEF CREATIVE OFFICER
Isabella Liang

CHIEF MAGAZINE EDITOR
Jim Xie

PUBLICATION DESIGN
Jenny Chan
Lanyi Lin

CONTENT DIRECTOR
Carl Zhou

GRAPHIC DESIGN
Sai Kolla
Priscilla Matthews

EDITORS
Zabra Abdallah
Nika Elmi
Kushal Kshatri
Christopher Li
Winnie Situ

Breathe is a student-led literary and arts magazine focused on mental health and wellness in medicine. Given the ever-persistent stigma surrounding mental health in medicine, our mission is to create a publication that shines light on the difficult challenges and pressures medical trainees face. *Breathe* provides a platform for healthcare professional learners of all levels who would like to share their experiences, reflections, and strategies to promote wellness.

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COVER *Hovering Over Water* by Sook Chang
Acrylic and crayon, 24" x 24"

dear reader,

FOR A LONG TIME, *Breathe* was a jumble of vague thoughts and ideas that I did not know how to put together. I grew up with stories and often found solace with the characters on the pages who were more familiar to me than reality. Time and time again, I wondered if there were others out there like me who sought out art and writing as a means to navigate, or even escape, the chaos of life. And so, *Breathe* was born from a desire to create a platform where students could find themselves in one another and feel less alone. We have come a long way since we began this project early this year and it would not have been possible without the support of *Breathe's* amazing team.

While many of us have heard of the challenges of working in a healthcare setting, the reality was much more daunting than the stories. Burnout and struggles with adjusting to working in clinical settings were particularly intensified in the context of the pandemic. To combat these feelings, being cold and unfeeling were traits that were seemingly romanticized and desired. And so, in an attempt to shed light on the often-hidden mental health stigma in healthcare, I envisioned creating *Breathe*. Through this literary and arts magazine, I wished to explore the collective adversities and stressors that many healthcare professional trainees face and hoped to perhaps help our readers feel a little less alone.

In creating *Breathe*, there were several values we wished to uphold. In the spirit of inclusivity, submission to this magazine would be open to any and all Canadian learners in the healthcare field. Secondly, *Breathe* would only be published when we as a team felt happy and proud of the final product. This project means so much to us and we wished to honour the artistic visions of everyone who contributed to our magazine

and believed in our mission.

Our first issue features many visual art and written submissions, all broadly within the theme of mental health and wellness in medicine. An interview with Dr. Siobhan Deshauer, also known as ViolinMD, is featured, given her profound involvement in both healthcare and mental health. There are a wide variety of topics discussed including challenging clinical encounters, struggles with mental health, and strategies to cope with these stressors. As some of these subjects may be sensitive, please read through the pieces at your own discretion.

We feel honoured to have received such tremendous support in creating *Breathe*. Many thanks to our wonderful McMaster University faculty sponsors: Faculty of Health Sciences, Post-Graduate Medical Education (PGME), Office of the President, and Department of Medicine, without whom this initiative would not have been possible. We would also like to share our deepest gratitude to all of our contributors who chose to share such personal stories with us. We are continuously amazed by your passion, resilience, and bravery, and will be forever grateful for your vulnerability and the trust you had in this magazine. And lastly, thank you, dear reader, for taking the time to look through *Breathe's* first issue and the product of our collective vision and hard work.

I hope that this first issue of *Breathe* finds you well.

Sincerely,



Keerthana Pasumarthi
Editor-in-Chief, *Breathe Magazine*

ADVISORY

The contents in this magazine contain themes of death and grief, depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and other material which may be sensitive or triggering to others. No offence is intended toward any individuals or groups. Reader discretion is advised.

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Sometimes (1)

There are little moments where the beauty and vibrancy of this world suddenly hits me. I'm forced to pause, look around, take a breath, and really enjoy the feeling of being alive. It's a rush that makes me quietly emotional and look for the right words to express this sensation-- the closest I can get is, 'happy'.

DIGITAL ART BY JENNY CHAN
MCMASTER UNIVERSITY MD 2023

constructive criticism

VALERIA DIMITROVA

UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA MD 2025

Notice:

This person is under construction.

Under construction

with constructive criticism.

Pedestrians, please use the other sidewalk

detours may cause delays.

Why can't I get it right the first time around?

My mind fumbles and crumbles under the weight

of knowledge dressed as concrete blocks

mixed together with fluid interpersonal interactions.

Perceived judgement from self and others

dilute the objective

and form subjective thoughts of self-perceived incompetency.

Why can't the process be smooth

without drilling or destructive blasting?

For you see, to gain new skills

you need to break the shell of your previous understanding.

Notice:

Please note that the water supply in this building will be interrupted between 8 am and 4 pm this Wednesday to replace the old water pipes with new ones.

Make space for new paradigm shifts.

This will act as the scaffolding

which will contain your new knowledge.

But know that it will take time to build a solid foundation.

Why can't I be perfect?

My dear, we were never meant to be perfect.

Besides, this is how we learn.

Society has conditioned us to be without flaws,

it's no wonder training lasts longer than one session.

Notice how it takes more than one hour,

one day,

one week,

or one month.

It takes years of hard work

to get to where you are now.

Practice with intention.

Perform with conviction.

The final structure — *you* — will surpass our wildest dreams.

Waitawa Bay, New Zealand, 2022

SIMARPREET ICHHPUNIANI

MCMMASTER UNIVERSITY MD 2023



CLEARLY VERY JUNIOR

ELIZABETH HAN
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Zhou mei tou is what my mother calls the shirring of brows, commonly accepted among Chinese parents to be the most unattractive facial expression a Chinese child can assume. My master's thesis before medical school was on the universality of facial expressions. With some exceptions, among a subset of cultures, the meanings of expressions can be remarkably stable. Dr. Rydell, my preceptor in OBGYN and renowned for her attractiveness, is as different from me as one could be besides our vocation. But as she scans the fax that suddenly spat from the ancient machine in her office following our gyne clinic, I recognize *zhou mei tou*—her confusion.

Part of me wants to tell her to stop or she'll get wrinkles, like my mother warns. The other wants to ask why she has a fax machine in 2022.

I've been sitting all afternoon on a stool at the foot of the examining table as she coached from behind, ensuring I inserted the speculums and swabbed correctly. Now I assume my usual clerkship position. Standing in the corner, hands behind back, fingers crossed.

"It's...an evaluation for you," she says.

Oh no.

"From Dr. Weinberg. But why..."

Yesterday, I did gyne-onc clinic with Dr. Weinberg. When, at lunch, I cautiously asked for feedback, she pursed her lips and said we'd do that later. But it never happened and she dismissed me with a hand sweep, dashing to pick up her kids. Two weeks of gyne-onc are mandatory during OBGYN, but Toronto being such a huge center, I hardly spend consecutive days with anyone. Except for my "main" preceptor, Dr. Rydell.

I have a quiver of questions. Again, why a *fax*? Medicine is so prehistoric. Then again, still using pagers too and I didn't have the heart to tell my parents about the pencilled records on looseleaf during outpatient paediatrics.

Secondly, and more importantly, what did Dr. Weinberg write? I'm used to bad evaluations. One preceptor wants OPQRST; another wants SAMPLE. Be flexible. I watch people's expressions and adjust. But *zhou mei tou* is off.

"Can't read her writing. But if I tried..."

I squeeze my hands harder.

"'Clearly very...*inferior*?' No, 'junior.' 'Clearly very *junior*.'"

Dr. Rydell peeps at me over her glasses. "Can you read it?"

She's right. The scrawl is illegible. All the competency boxes unticked too.

"But you *are* junior."

What should I say? Better be silent.

"How could you *not*? In third year, third block? Maybe she expected a resident?"

I swallow.

"I guess it doesn't matter. If we can't read it, we certainly can't do anything with it. *Junior*. Huh."

Dr. Rydell tosses it in the recycling, says I can go home for the day and be ready for prenats tomorrow.



#

“Junior,” I whisper in the elevator, after I’ve ensured the room, including the instruments and models of the pelvis, are situated just the way Dr. Rydell likes.

I know what we’re supposed to do. Shake it off, Taylor Swift style. Clerkship is one day at a time. You reset.

Plus, the evidence. New studies came out recently, supplementing the ones I already read in grad school, anticipating troubles as a non-traditional student, that one’s mental voice—*inner chatter*—after feedback is crucial.

They say you need a toolbox. I already exercise, eat, and sleep well. But the new stuff says to retrain that inner chatter to talk about yourself in the third person, even the second person, for the necessary distance to process feedback.

Given my dad is a basketball fanatic, one example sticks with me the most. LeBron James gave an ESPN interview in which he famously switched from the first person to the third, when questioned about wading through the countless opinions in his move from Cleveland to Miami: “One thing I didn’t want to do was make an emotional decision. I wanted to do what’s best for *LeBron James* and to do what makes *LeBron James* happy.” Not the team, the city, the fans. But *LeBron*. I watched the interview repeatedly on YouTube, marvelling at the pivot.

I know I will unpack being *junior* with my friends, even whilst all on different blocks. We are meeting for sushi later. But maybe this will be the time to practice the toolbox. And if it is good enough for LeBron, it’s good enough for me.

I mean—maybe junior is okay. It’s not *good*, but is arguably more fact than evaluation. Junior is...junior.

Wait—third person. Okay. Here we go.

Elizabeth, I say, as I walk home. I imagine a girl with long black hair and glasses with her hands behind her back, which she occasionally unknots to perform a history and physical. Elizabeth is clearly very junior.

I revise. Elizabeth was clearly very junior—yesterday. Today, *Elizabeth* did well at gyne

clinic. She’s improving with the speculum. Today, *Elizabeth*’s main preceptor shrugged off a confusing evaluation. Tomorrow—tomorrow is *Elizabeth*’s clerkship life + 1. Tomorrow = *Elizabeth*’s Junior Day + 2?

On CTU at Toronto General, the nurses had told Elizabeth to, no matter what, impress her Senior—the Senior Medical Resident, usually a PGY-2, who led their team.

“Be a good Junior,” they said to the PGY-1, who’d looked just as scared as Elizabeth on their first day, “by making your Senior happy.”

Junior. Okay. Elizabeth can live with that. Junior + 1 is 1 day closer to being better. Same with Junior + 2.

Elizabeth says her name all the way home and nearly semantically satiates. She loses the first syllable as she goes fast, then the third. *Elizabeth. Lizabeth. Lizbeth. Lizbeth.*

And as she walks through the lobby of her apartment and past the concierge, *zhou mei tou-ing*, the word sounds like spit.

“No spitting!” the concierge scolds and wipes down the counter with sanitizer. “We’re still in a pandemic, people. Geez!”

“Sorry.” Elizabeth lowers her head. *Junior*. She’ll raise it when she enters the elevator.

Or maybe the apartment.

Or, at least, some time before tomorrow.

Clearly.

END

Home is Where the Heart is, South Korea 2021

RYAN LEE
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PHARMD 2025



untitled

ANONYMOUS

I AM SITTING ALONE IN MY KITCHEN, looking through a “healthy” cookbook that I have come to realize I am unable to use. My thoughts and fears have become so restrictive, that even the “healthy” cookbooks are now deemed unsafe for me. This was one of the many times I recognized that my world was caving in on me.

I am working at the seniors’ home as a personal care attendant, doing a job that I can’t bear, surrounded by people who cannot understand the depth of my despair. I fear that I will never live up to the expectations that everyone once had for me — a promising teenager, destined to do great things. My hopes and dreams have been replaced with the desire to disappear.

I am grappling with my future, trying to dig myself out of the black hole that has become my life. The thought of a career in medicine remained nestled in the back of my mind, but is overridden by intense shame about my eating disorder — *How could I, someone who severely restricted intake, compulsively exercised, and had chronic suicidal ideation, ever take care of someone else? Who would trust me with their life if I was actively destroying my own?* I didn’t deserve to be a doctor — I was the resistant patient.

I am on the phone with the chief psychiatrist, begging to get access to eating disorder care. She tells me that my stubbornness is what gave me anorexia. She stops answering my calls. I am left alone to navigate a broken medical system that has nothing to offer me and doesn’t seem to care.

These are distant memories that live within me and will remain forever. My mental health journey began before medicine and will continue throughout my career as a physician. I am entering clerkship, another step on the arduous path to becoming a doctor, and although my mental health is better than it has been since high school, I fight every day to remain well, and I still fear the possibility of relapse. I remind myself that my obsessive thoughts about my body, exercise, and food will ebb and flow, just as mental health does as a whole. I rely on those who love and care for me to remind me that I have made it through the darkest periods of my life and will make it through the challenges to come.

I remind myself that my own health will always remain more important than my career. I remind myself that I deserve to be here — “baggage” and all. I remind myself to breathe.



Rangitoto Island, New Zealand, 2022

SIMARPREET ICHHPUNIANI

MCMMASTER UNIVERSITY MD 2023

strange

SARAH KLAPMAN

MCMASTER UNIVERSITY MD 2023

It happened slowly and then all at once,
Much like we're told love works.
One minute — cold, unmoving, feeling nothing
Or maybe everything (simultaneously) —
Steady breathing in silent rooms,
All at once, it was impossible to stop.
It's a strange thing to wake up from a
Year and a half
With the realization that you've been sleepwalking through
The parts of your life you'd once thought were important.

Easy. Steady.
Steady there.

Maybe it's grief.

I thought, once, uneasily,
That if I was going to do something, I had to do it perfectly.
It had to be in one fell swoop,
One seamless process, beginning to end —
Do everything, or otherwise nothing —
And all at once, I had to stop.
It's a strange thing to change the way you see the world
Because your body can no longer sustain your own point of view.
Pushing back, and down, maybe keeping rage and joy and grief at bay
For a while, first slowly, then all at once,
They come back.
It's unsteady to come back to life this way.

Go easy. Please go easy on me.

Maybe it's love.

I never fell in love with medicine.
I'd done that once, and the heartbreak didn't feel
Like it was worth the high.
Instead, I became — slowly, and then all at once —
Someone in medicine.
All thoughts and time and energy
Were for catching up and keeping up (impossible, maybe,
But it had to be everything, or otherwise nothing).
It's a strange thing to change the fundamentals of who you are,
And easier not to feel it. Better not to.

Much better, probably.

Until, of course, you do.
Unsteady breathing in a hot, airless room,
Full to bursting with people, overwhelming rage and joy and grief —
Mine, maybe, others', definitely —
It happened all at once.
I got caught in the current and drawn out beyond the horizons
Of what I knew to be true
And there was nothing I could do but feel and feel and
Sleep and eat
And come apart, ice into water,
And do it all again the next day,
Wide awake.

Maybe that's just how it has to be.

Maybe I'm grateful to feel this way.

Maybe I grieve having to feel at all.

And maybe that's love — the kind you feel for perfect strangers,
all at once.



the 5pm sun evades the clouds,
peeks through the windows,
and finds me under the blanket.

ZAKARIYA NIMAK

MCMASTER UNIVERSITY MD 2025

indecision makes an incomplete slice,
with a rusted blunted garden shear,
through the taut rope at my sanity
being pulled apart in opposite directions.

now sliced and fraying,
the thinner threads start to unravel at the middle
and i'm split into two half-empty martinis...

i'm mixing metaphors like a bad bartender.

but i ought to be satisfied with this half-tail i drink to go to sleep,
and the other i'll down to get through the day...

sometimes, life needs dicing apart for digestion
metaphors — a polaroid to protect the eyes from truth's blinding glare...

so, when i wake at 4am with my neck cold and wet,
you'll have to understand what i mean by being strangled
by dog tags or dragged by a steel collar.

when i collapse back to bed eight hours later,
i *am* a dishcloth, wrung and wasted...
ineffectively drained,

i wake in the late afternoon
sun, red and crusted with pieces of me shaving off
as i drag myself out of the coffin i just died in.

Nightfall

DIGITAL ART BY SAI KOLLA

MCMASTER UNIVERSITY MD 2023

when i say my muscles are in a perpetual state
of acupuncture, i'm not lying...

that with each movement
i feel a thousand needles stand taller than i ever could be not
hyperbole...

that my spine is a stack of jenga pieces and
my ribs are metal bars stopping me from breathing...

i mean it.

some days, i'm a brisket in a pressure-cooker
and my insides have melted to a tender point.
a spoon could cut into me and find no resistance.

some nights, i long to be spooned.
maybe that would draw the ants in my ear
out with the melody of a flute and i will follow them
into the quietness of deep waters.

but when my eye-lid's fly open,
there are no arms around me.

i'm alone.

in my bed.

where i've been all day.

i can't get myself off the mattress.
i can't peel these blankets off of me.

there are no shackles at my feet.
no ants in my ears.
no needles in my muscles.

there is no cage around my lungs
or steel around my neck.

i'm wide awake.

in my prime.

and no crude imagery can hide the incompetence or atrophy...
mask the stench of stagnancy in the face of possibility.

i'm 20 years old,

in my prime,

and trapped between two sheets of fabric.

essay: a careful equilibrium

KATIE VAN KAMPEN

MCMASTER UNIVERSITY MD 2023

An essay exploring the way medical school becomes a barely surmountable beast to defeat. Wielding weapons of debt, inadequacy and failure, the pressures of trying to be a good student and good friend, and match to CaRMS is overwhelming in itself. When that perfect balance is disrupted by personal matters, it feels almost impossible to keep your head above water. You fear the consequences of not keeping up to the class, and how taking time off will affect your future rotations.

This is an essay delving into the experiences and emotions I had when my grandmother passed away, how scared I was to fall behind, and how medical school became the world I scheduled the rest of my life around, even as I mourned.

No one told me medical school would be easy. In fact, a lot of people told me it would consume my life. Medical school seems like an ever-evolving, growing star, ingesting everything in its wake. Its taunting whispers threaten to undo all my carefully curated to-do lists and previously planned social events, telling me that I know nothing.

Most notably, medical school requires learning an abundance of information. The beast wields a weapon of infinite knowledge. Concepts I barely scratch the surface of, I will likely forget in a month. Though the actual process of learning medicine is barely surmountable, with the power of Anki, UWorld, and Osmosis, it is manageable.

“So, what happens when something disrupts the balancing act? What happens when the teeter-totter tips in the direction of chaos? Life becomes a whirlwind (read: shit-show) of crumbling self-esteem, depression, and stress.”

But the beast has different faces. It turns and rears the ugly head of the Canadian Residency Matching Service (CaRMS) at me, taunting me with the threat of going unmatched. With a long finger, it points out all the flaws in my professional identity. Who am I in comparison to my classmates that have Master’s degrees, start-ups, and previous experiences in healthcare? How do I stand out against students who are all capable, dedicated, and intelligent? As my student advisor told me, I must have hobbies, activities, research, and extracurriculars to prove that I am worthy to advance. So, like anyone facing the threat of ongoing debt, I sit down every weekend and dedicate a day to catching up on my numerous research projects and extracurricular ventures.

And this is all I do in the name of my dream career. When I’m not treading water to survive medical school, I manage a robust social life to prove (to myself) that I’m not a workaholic. On my one day off, I try to plan something to look forward

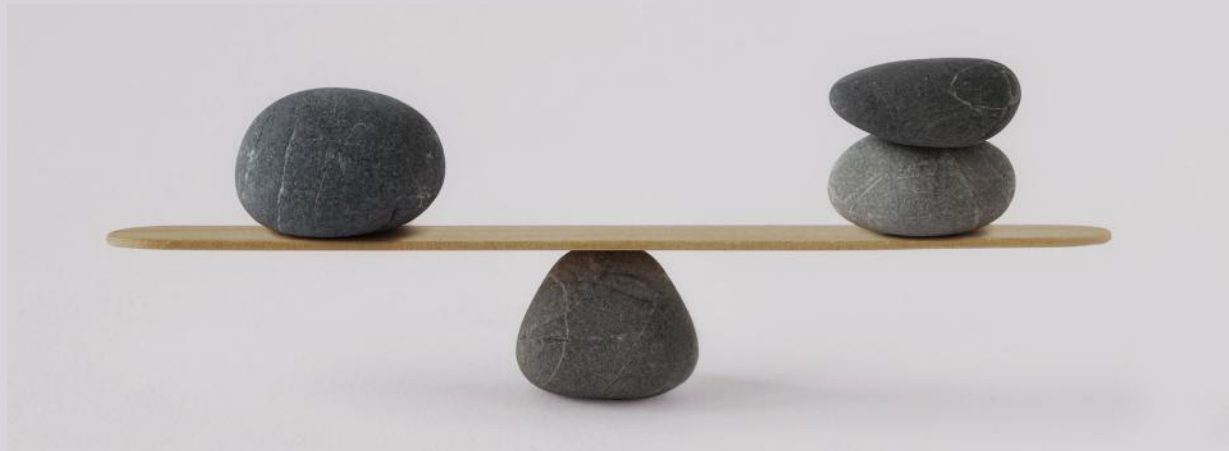
to, whether it’s playing Dungeons & Dragons, going to Canada’s Wonderland with my partner, or simply going out for dinner. These are some of the only times I can free myself from the chains of productivity.

Staring the beast in its face, I craft an ever-changing, adaptable routine to conquer medical school. It’s a careful equilibrium of work, play, and most often, lacking sleep. Though difficult to maintain, I succeed in the balancing act. Medical school can so easily become your entire world, as you lose everything that makes you an individual. I cannot simply survive to pass medical school; I also must live.

So, what happens when something disrupts the balancing act? What happens when the teeter-totter tips in the direction of chaos? Life becomes a whirlwind (read: shit-show) of crumbling self-esteem, depression, and stress.

The world doesn’t stop for you to make it through medical school. It revolves independent of whatever race you’re trying to win against the medical school gauntlet. Sometimes ... people die while you try to keep your head above water.

My grandmother, my Oma, was hospitalized in December. Adopted by a single mother, my Oma was a huge part of my upbringing, and one of my biggest fans. A vacation I desperately needed turned into a period of sadness at my Oma’s deterioration and anxiety over my mom’s role as her caregiver. I was grateful when I was with my Oma during her hospitalization, since my knowledge as a medical student allowed me to advocate for her care. Facing the start of my clinical rotations in the



shadow of her hospitalization, I asked for three days off, the maximum amount of time I could ask for without having to sacrifice future vacations or rotations by having to make up more clinical time. Embarrassed to even ask for time off, I was determined to continue the balancing act, fearing that any more time off would affect my ability to perform well. After my three days off, I felt that I could tread water again.

But the world doesn't slow down, no matter how much it feels like you can barely make it up for air. My Oma was transferred to hospice and I knew that she wouldn't have much time left. In between shifts, I flew back for a day to see my Oma three days before my exam, knowing I had to see her before she passed.

A preceptor asked me how I was feeling about my upcoming exam, and I confessed I was nervous. "About the exam?" There was surprise in their voice. Apparently, I don't seem like someone who would be nervous about exams. I told them I was flying back home for a day to see my family member who was in hospice, and I was worried about when I'd be able to study. "So, are you worried about your exam or your family member?" They asked, and I

nearly broke there.

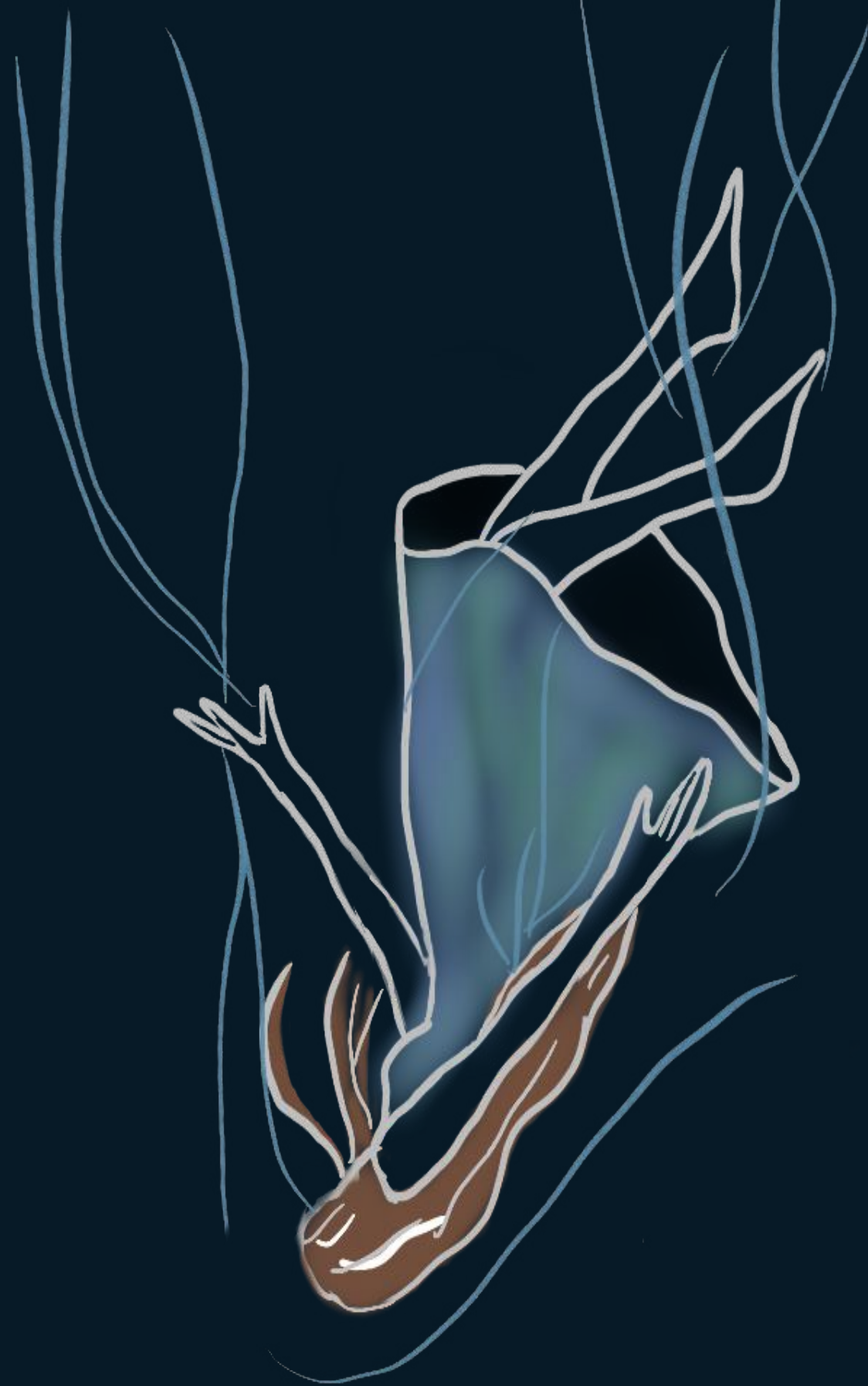
Yet I didn't. Could I have taken more time off? Probably. It would have forced me to change around my schedule, interfere with other plans, and affect other rotations. Could I have moved my exam? Probably. Yet, those all felt like failures. A white flag raised saying, "I've had enough."

I saw my Oma, and for the time I was there, I tried to put the fears of failing my exam from my mind. I passed my exam well over the minimum score. My Oma passed away. I took two days off for the funeral, leaving immediately after work. I pleaded to move my shifts so I didn't miss school, fearing the beast would get the upper hand, as I struggled to keep my head above water.

So, the perfect balancing act went on. The equilibrium always returns to a steady state. I will be okay, one way or another. Sometimes, when a patient reminds me of my Oma, there's a disruption in the balancing forces and for a moment, I give myself the chance to choke on the emotions that I so carefully keep in line. Then, with a smile, an apology for the outburst, I go back to work.

*"So, the perfect balancing act went on.
The equilibrium always returns to a steady state.*

I will be okay, one way or another."



Drown

KEERTHANA PASUMARTHI

MCMASTER UNIVERSITY MD 2023

LIES I TELL YOU

ANONYMOUS

You ask me
How are you

I reply
I'm good

It's always the same question and the same response, mostly because I do not know what else to say. I do not know how to tell you that my heart is broken into a million tiny pieces, my brain is constantly enveloped in a thick fog I cannot traverse, and my soul is trapped in the darkest parts of me. I am lost in so many more ways than one and I do not know what I can do to find myself – if that is even possible anymore. I feel like a sailor lost in the treacherous seas without a map and no matter which direction I go in, I see no sign of land. They say that it's nice to be lost sometimes and the journey to find yourself again is worth it but all I feel is dread of having to do this for even one more day. All I feel is an overwhelming

urge to abandon ship and find peace under the water. Or maybe if I wait a little bit longer, I will crash into an iceberg, and I won't have to make that decision myself. I do not know how I could begin to explain all this to you when I barely understand it myself. I wonder if you would even really care. So, when you ask me how I am, I always tell you I'm okay, I'm fine, I'm good.

But deep down, all I've really wanted is for you to unveil my hollow lies and tell me

*I know you're not but don't worry,
I'm here.*



Birthday Balloons, 2022

RYAN LEE

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PHARMD 2025

AN APPLE A DAY

GLORIA KIM

MCMASTER UNIVERSITY MD 2023

The following piece is deeply personal in many ways. It illustrates an experience that, for years, I have kept hidden from many around me: my eating disorder. Upon the encouragement of a few confidants, I have decided to share my writing with the hope of connecting with those who may have gone through, or are currently fighting, a similar experience. Let the words to come serve as a reminder that your thoughts and your fears, although seemingly uncontrollable, do not define your value. From someone who is currently healing, I can say two things with confidence: (1) small steps are big wins, and (2) there is always someone willing to listen. Myself, included. Please reach out, as my inbox is always open: gloria.kim@medportal.ca.

The clock hits 4:00 pm. You look around anxiously, checking your surroundings. It's not like anyone's watching. You're alone in your room, sitting in disarray. Your thoughts brewing by the second. Are you actually hungry right now? How much have you had to eat today? Your first meal at 12 pm. Nothing since then. The next meal is scheduled for 7 pm. No earlier, and no later. Eating before 7 pm would mean that you broke the rules, that you were weak and couldn't hold out. Eating late at night could never be allowed because then you would wake up the next morning feeling bloated and guilty. You hear a noise. Quiet at first, then growing in intensity. It's your stomach, growling out of frustration. Rumbling, thundering, screaming. You sigh in shame. Why do you do this to yourself? What would they think of you? You have so much work to get done, you need the energy, and you know this. Self-harm. Who are you kidding? That's exactly what this boils down to.

You close your eyes and try to drown out the incessant thoughts hollowing you from the inside out. You shift in your chair uncomfortably in an attempt to discard this unshakable feeling: *you will end up giving in.*

Giving in to the disordered thoughts that have clouded your mind for years now.

In a way, your restrictive behaviours started out innocently.

At first, you sought out an idealized state of health, so you cut out the sweets.

Next, the breads, and the cheeses, and the meats.

Then, you stopped eating out entirely.

You forgot what it was like to enjoy food. Food, no longer communal, became entirely isolating. A chore. All your thoughts centred around restriction. Rules and orders. Rituals. Fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts, oats: these were foods you were allowed to eat. But the list of foods that were completely off the table grew by the day.

No chocolate, no pizza, no baked goods. Nothing fried or heavy in oil. Pasta was allowed on occasion, but you couldn't eat it with another carb. So, pasta was fine; but pasta and bread scared the living shit out of you. Your salads could never have too much dressing. If you ate carrots, you could only have 9.

Because 9 carrots were exactly 30 calories. You were ashamed that you knew that.

Eating became ritualistic, mechanical, soulless. 12 pm. 4 pm. 7 pm. 12. 4. 7.



Twelve. Four. Seven. 3 numbers. 3 chances. 3 missed opportunities.

What were you thinking about again? Oh right, the time. It's 4:00 pm. And you need some energy. It takes every ounce of willpower you have left to get yourself up and out of your chair, make your way downstairs, and open the fridge door. You really want that spoonful of peanut butter, but you already had one in the morning. Dammit. You glance around the kitchen counters, yet nothing sounds appealing. You are starving and your insides are screaming. You start to feel light-headed, faint. How are you going to manage the rest of the day feeling like absolute garbage? You need to eat. You need a boost, just a little bit of energy to get you through the next few hours. Something green catches your eye. A Granny Smith apple.

You'll allow yourself an apple. Just one apple. Because an apple a day keeps the doctor away. Far, far away, and you do not want help. You need help, but you couldn't possibly let anyone save you. Not right now. Not when you were losing all this weight and following all the rules. Not when you're just getting started and have so much further to go.

What a fool you were to think that restriction and deprivation were sustainable. Because they weren't, and they aren't. No body is meant for destitution. No body should be subject to so much ruin. Thinning hair, dry skin, lost period. Stomach pains, incessant shivering, poor circulation. Depression, dysmorphia, demoralization.

Isolation.

An apple a day does not keep anyone away.

An apple a day is an excuse, a ploy. A trap with no escape plan.

An apple a day is a cry for help.

Maybe tomorrow, you'll grab yourself a second. Because there's always room for second chances.

3 opportunities. 2 apples. 1 way out.

One day at a time.



Her Strength, Her Struggles

PEN AND PAPER BY ANU CHINNADURAI
WESTERN UNIVERSITY MD 2024

This continuous line contour drawing depicts the continuous disregard for mental health within the health care community. The persistent nature to push, push harder, and push hardest through burnout begins early in medical trainees. Women in healthcare have intersecting burden of mental illness and gender discrimination, making them more vulnerable to mental health struggles. The familiar nature among women to uphold a strong façade despite deteriorating health, questions the progress we have made so far with mental health stigma. 'Her Strength, Her Struggles' depicts the dichotomy of this façade. We have a long way to go with mental health and we have a longer way to go with women's mental health. I hope we soon see the day when strength shines brighter than struggles and stigma.

1. Flow (1), 2022 2. Flow (2), 2022 3. Bridge in Vancouver, 2021

RYAN LEE

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PHARM.D 2025



I WILL NEVER FORGET

FATIMA MAZHAR

MCMMASTER UNIVERSITY MD 2023

I will never forget the smell of cancer,
the stench of a body rotting on the inside,
like death making a home in a living soul.
It haunts my mind.

I will never forget,
her body eating itself from within,
a gaping hole from side to side.
And the pain —
a gnawing pain that made her want to die.

I will never forget,
every flinch she made when we moved her leg,
administering fentanyl though she refused to beg.
But she whimpered all night long.

I will never forget,
her hand holding the bedrail so tight
as I cleaned and packed the abyss where
her uterus ought to be,
where her dignity ought to be.

I will never forget,
the jagged edges where flesh turned to disease,
where bone was metaphorical to say the least.
It was dry coral, crumbling in my hands.
Once full of life, now nearly extinct.
I tried not to cry while piecing together the bro-
kenness of what remained.
I will never forget.

I called it cancer,
but figuratively,
like, his words are a cancer.
This policy is a cancer.
This practice is a cancer.
It all started with her.
Her pain was a cancer.
Her bones were melted by cancer.
Her gut was eaten by cancer.
She beat the hell out of her cancer
and lived for three whole months.
I will never forget.

I loved to say,
there is a beauty in death,
in letting go,
in moving on.
But I saw no beauty in cancer.

With my nose filled with the stench of decay,
as I schooled my face to hide my pain,
I watched her soul fade away.
I packed and packed her festering wound,
and I listened to her pray.

I will always remember the smile on her three
year old's face,
waving from her bedside frame.
I will always remember her careful smiles when
her family finally came.
I will always remember how she prayed for pa-
tience and love and grace.
Where all I saw was pain, she saw forbearance.

I will always remember.

Tranquility, Taiwan 2018

ISABELLA LIANG

MCMMASTER UNIVERSITY MD 2023





H I D D E N

KEERTHANA PASUMARTHI
MCMASTER UNIVERSITY MD 2023

As I approach his room, I move through the motions in my head. Greet the family at bedside, perform the physical exam, pronounce the death, give my condolences.

It was straightforward and simple. I can hear the family sobbing now. A feeling of panic begins to form deep in my chest, ready to spill out. What if I do this wrong? What if I break down? What if I say something to make the situation worse? His daughter looks up to see me waiting by the door—it is too late to back away now.

“Sorry for your loss”, I tell them, “I’m sorry we’re meeting like this.”

Words had always come easy to me, but in that moment, they felt empty and meaningless. In medical school, we are taught what to say in circumstances like this—we express our empathy and share our condolences. We practice these phrases with standardized actors until it is no longer uncomfortable. Real life was different though. Not knowing what else to say, I walk closer and touch her arm, hoping she would be able to understand the remorse I had been trying to convey. Now for the part I had been dreading. I ask to perform the physical exam.

I finally glance down at him.

Unblinking, stark blue eyes stare back—oddly familiar and cold at the same time. Mouth open slightly and curved at the edges, as if he was greeting death with a smile. Arms at his sides, rigid and pale. He appeared comfortable, and for that I was grateful. I whisper his name under my breath. I had seen him a mere six hours ago. I held his hand as he told me he was finally ready to go, his sea-blue eyes glistening.

“There’s no point in fighting this. I want to look death straight in the eye when it comes for me. I do not want to cower in fear”, I remember him telling me.

The logical part of my brain understood that this was the best-case scenario. With a prognosis so grim, what mattered to him most in the end was his dignity and to be made comfortable when it was finally his time to go, with his family by his side. And yet, all I could think of was the moments we had together over the past week I tended to him. The jokes, his memories, the little tidbits of advice from his life. It was jarring to see him now, unmoving, and cold.

I reach for the stethoscope around my neck. I place it on his heart. Empty. Quiet. Hollow. I rest it there for a little while longer and complete the rest of the examination. I was wading through honey. Each movement became rhythmic and robotic as my mind was

playing through old memories. I heard myself speak to his family once again. Giving my condolences and thanking them again for their time. Time was moving slowly, too slowly. Or maybe it was me. My limbs move out of the room as my mind remains a jumble of fragments. I help complete the death certificate. I hear the resident tell me to get some sleep. “Before someone else dies”, he adds with a chuckle. I mumble a response to meet him later and walk back towards my call room.

I wish the walls weren’t so thin. I scrunch the pillow in my arms and sob as quietly as I can, my breaths coming in short and shallow gasps and my mind a racing blur. Twelve more hours until I could leave. Twelve more until I could wail and scream and break down in privacy. In that moment, I wasn’t even sure if it was normal to feel so much pain after his passing.

After all, I had known him only a week. I knew he was comfortable at the end and at peace. The residents and nurses all appeared nonchalant, as if this was an everyday occurrence. Perhaps it was for them. While it was my first death, it was probably their twentieth, thirtieth, fortieth. I wonder if it gets easier. I wonder if I’m supposed to turn a blind eye to death too.

Or maybe we are all quietly crying alone, hidden by thin walls.

Re-Energizing by the East Coast, Halifax 2022

JAY CHEN

MCMASTER UNIVERSITY MD 2023



Medical school can be draining. Trying to care for patients and impress your preceptors by day and then going home to study by night. We don't receive many breaks, but I think it's important to stay present when we do get one. During my recent vacation, I went on a road trip to the east coast and my favourite moments were by the ocean – taking in the astounding views, smelling the saltwater breeze, and listening to the waves crash endlessly against the shore. I tried during these moments to stay present, putting away any thoughts of medicine for the time being and simply re-energizing while enjoying the ocean. Now I'm not suggesting that wellness requires the ocean, but whatever you choose to do with your breaks, make sure to treat it like a break, allow yourself to escape medicine, and just breathe.

Perfection

HELEN JIN

WESTERN UNIVERSITY MD 2025

Visionary and scholar, club president
My time to the vulnerable
So many medals
Only A's

Perfect scores, perfect student
Let me in

Shadow and network, remember my name
See all my papers, *Nature* no less
I know all the answers
Never take breaks

Perfect personality, perfect skills
Let me match

Yes to the teaching, the referral, the admin
Advocate, confidant, mentor, and friend
My patience, my gentle demeanour
I'm great with the kids

Perfect efficiency, perfect role model
Let me work

For the sake of my dream
I'll let perfection obscure me
To err is human
There are no humans here

Perfect person, perfect existence
Am I broken if I'm just me?

Perfect person, perfect existence
Am I broken if I'm just me?



An Imposter

DIGITAL ART BY SNEHA GUPTA

UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA MD 2025



Girl and the Moon

ART AND TEXT BY
KEERTHANA PASUMARTHI
MCMASTER UNIVERSITY MD 2023

I cried into the night until the moon finally heard me
*I have darkness in my heart where light should be
What if I stay broken forever?*

She whispered back, waking the deepest parts of my soul
*Darling, I have darkness too
But even when I cannot bear to show the smallest sliver of light,
The tides in the vast seas never stop crashing as I beckon
My darkness is not weakness and it does not define me.*

*So, I hope you realize too, my dear,
That you were never broken.*

behind the mask

RUTH NEUMANN

WESTERN UNIVERSITY MD 2023

The Differential

Patient

“The results are back”
My heart drops when I see the
tissues on the desk

Physician

The results are back
I fight tears as I slide the
box across the desk

Mask Off

Patient

Too preoccupied
to see that beneath the drape
I am terrified

Student

Too ashamed to share
that beneath the mask and gloves
I am just as scared

A.M./P.M.

The clock reads seven
Twelve more, are looming, before
it's seven again



Façade

DIGITAL ART BY ISABELLA LIANG

MCMaster UNIVERSITY MD 2023

Sometimes (2)

DIGITAL ART BY JENNY CHAN
MCMASTER UNIVERSITY MD 2023



Checking, checking, checking.
Next page.
Checking, checking, checking.
Next class.
Checking, checking, checking.
Stop.
Exhale.
Try to breathe.
Ok it's just me.

No it can't be just me.
Please don't make it just me.

But it is.
Again.

Smile.
Say you're grateful.
Perform joy.

But it hurts.
The deep aching kind of hurt.
The pain that presses against my tongue when I bite
it to hold my voice.
The dizziness, the isolation, the grief.
Oh the grief.
It feels like I'm having a funeral for my dreams.
The chaos.
The unrelenting feeling of unwantedness.
Why did I want this?
I thought it'd go away.
Why is it still here?
Who do I tell?
Who knows how this feels?

A L O N E

YASMIN DINI
MCMaster UNIVERSITY MD 2024

how it would feel

PENELOPE NEOCLEOUS

WESTERN UNIVERSITY MD 2024

Digital art by Priscilla Matthews



Part One

“How does your patient, Doctor?” — Shakespeare, Macbeth

I am so tired.

The cracked mirror reflects someone else
Someone else’s dark circles in the sterile light
Someone else’s blue eyes crinkled with sleep
Not mine.
They can’t be mine.

My pager scolds,
Show me a sane man and I will cure him for you
I begrudgingly acknowledge he is right,
as usual,
And leave the call room.

The bright hallway scalds my tortured eyes
Shafts of sunlight dazzling, dizzying
As I race towards the ward.

Raze out the written troubles of the brain

My supervisor stands, arms crossed,
eyes narrowed.
I wonder if mine will someday harden like that.

He picks me to check on the first patient
Again, remarks my pager.
I shush him.
My face is composed, this is a test I am used to taking,
but my hand feels heavy
as I reach for the door.

I am so tired.

Tired of the long nights,
endless nights,
when I dream of sleep and dread the dawn’s fingers creeping in between the blinds.
And when the alarm sounds,
I bury my face in my pillow.

I live to dream,
dreaming of sleep,
wondering what would happen
if I should not wake.

I enter the room.

She stares out the window, a hand tapping absently on her lap
Introduce yourself to the patient, and your role as a medical learner
 I follow my pager's advice
 but the patient ignores me,
 her attention captivated by a glistening cobweb outside.

Some sweet oblivious antidote

My supervisor clucks his tongue
Cure her of that!
 The residents file into the room,
 and begin the exam.

Poking and prodding
 with words sharper than any scalpel.
 Perhaps it is a mercy that her mind is elsewhere,
 lest she hear the disgust in their tones
 or read the judgement in their eyes;
 the accusations thrown,
 and conclusions drawn,
 from the well of knowledge
 we call
 insight.

That perilous stuff which weighs upon her heart

I follow her gaze out the window,
 anything to avoid looking at her.
 My supervisor is watching, I know,
 but I'm too busy trying not to see
 the curve of her cheek,
 the blood and dirt under her nails
 the eyes, somehow clearer than my
 own *It was her choices that brought her*
here I glare at my pager.

The doctor shakes his head in disgust
 As we leave the room, I chance a look over my shoulder
 The woman is still gazing out the window,
 A smile ghosting her face

And as my heart breaks I wonder
 How it would feel to be so insane.

Part Two

"My soul is in the sky," — Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

A bird stood by my bed today
 A splash of blue against the gray
 Sunlight falls across my bed
 It's peaceful here inside my head

Above the window in my sight
 A dancer twirls in her delight
 Dewdrops glimmer on her web
 But my delight begins to ebb

For the bird is beaming, blue eyes bright
 Singing commands to me, despite
 The ruffled feathers, downcast glow
 Her exhaustion finally starting to show

I know those well, those empty eyes
 The light in them that flickers, dies
 A dash of darkness, a pinch of E
 She could be lying here instead of me

More birds join her in an orderly line
 They chant, though the sun continues to shine,
 Then swoop away — how fast they fly!
 Their voices are in short supply

Returning to my dancer, I wonder in vain
 How it would feel to be so insane



a hands-on experience

ETRI KOCAQI

MCMASTER UNIVERSITY MD 2023

MY HANDS FEEL HEAVIER since I started medical school. It's a train of thought that is objectively stupid because looking down, I can easily confirm that they are no different than before.

The small square palms, the angular curve of my thumbs, the ostentatious mole on my right middle finger.

But under the artificial glow of the hospital lights, they feel leaden, unfamiliar, practically removed from my body.

These are the same hands that have felt the rock-solid edge of a tumour so large it encapsulated a kid's whole liver.

The same hands that have painstakingly cleaned dried blood off a teenager who dived headfirst into traffic.

The same hands that have been gripped by a cachexic terminal

patient dying in the worst way possible — slowly, fully aware, and desperate for comfort.

These hands, oftentimes clumsy and unthinking, have had the unique fortune of experiencing a lifetime of human experiences.

They have felt joy holding the meaty arm of a newborn kicking and screaming its way into the world.

They have felt defeat across the edge of broken ribs shifting under inexperienced palms performing CPR on a DOA patient.

They have felt tragedy, as they landed on the defeated shoulder of a man who found out his first daughter was stillborn.

They have unexpectedly acquired an intimate knowledge of people in their most basic form.

They have felt the surprisingly

smooth edge of bone.

They have skimmed across trails and trails of intestine.

They have drummed directly against the beat of a strong femoral pulse. They have bathed in the warm gush of blood that feels never-ending.

My hands have felt heavier since I started medical school.

They feel more experienced, wholly different.

They have somehow surpassed the rest of me, despite their relative proximity.

But under the gentle glow of sun, I worry.

I worry about the seeds of dread planted in my chest.

I worry about the constant headaches, relentless fatigue, and tight smiles.

I worry, I worry deeply that the heaviness in my hands

Is spreading.



Halifax, 2021

RYAN LEE

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PHARMD 2025

My Experience with “Therapy”

CHRISTOPHER LI

MCMMASTER UNIVERSITY MD 2023

Social anxiety has affected me for much of my life. It has impacted the number and quality of relationships I have formed with others.

Throughout all of my undergraduate degree, I made maybe three or four new friends, only one of which I saw on a regular basis of any kind. It's not that I was ever looking to be that guy with 2,000 friends on Facebook, or to be at a different party every night with a different group of people, but I just wanted people I could share experiences with and support each other through life.

My experience in medical school has been somewhat different. I have met many more people and made several good friends as well; however, that looming background anxiety remains. The only difference between then and now is my willingness to engage with others.

The title is somewhat misleading. I was never formally enrolled in therapy, nor have I ever spoken to a licensed therapist. I was, however, enrolled in a 16 week “coaching” program hosted by an organization called HealthyGamerGG. This is an organization led by a Harvard-trained psychiatrist, initially established to help individuals with video game addictions, as the name suggests. It has now expanded to addressing the psychological challenges younger generations

experience. I am in no way affiliated with the organization nor is this an advertisement of any sort, but I would highly recommend checking them out if you have any presence in the online sphere.

These “coaching” sessions were not therapy (they were certainly a lot cheaper!). As a medical learner, I think of therapy as either individual or group sessions where clients share their experiences and feelings, and the therapist offers insight and tools to try to mitigate maladaptive thoughts. This was slightly different. We were a group of about eight guys who happened to be put in the same group solely because we signed up for the same time slot. We met on Saturday mornings virtually for our discussions for 16 weeks. These discussions were led by a “coach” who guided discussion and helped organize our thoughts, but never served a prescriptivist role. He specialized in reflective listening and prompting us to come up with our own conclusions. Each week, we talked about whatever topic happened to come up. We spoke about many topics including motivation, procrastination, feeling stuck in life, anxiety, and expectations. We often got into detailed discussions about these topics, what kinds of feelings they brought up, where these concerns came from, and how to manage them. Some weeks, we focused specifically on one member of the group and the nuances of their situations in hopes of supporting them. One week was focused

specifically on me, where we got into a fruitful dialogue on my social anxiety, how it came about, and how others could relate to it. I certainly found this session the most helpful; there was a lot of validation between group members as they sympathized with shared experiences. There were no definitive answers. There were no specific “tools” that needed to be employed. While at the beginning I certainly felt “different” from the rest of the group, partly because I felt “further along” as a medical student while they were still struggling with finding direction in life, I was glad to be proven wrong. We were simply a group of guys from around the world who found each other by mere chance but had fundamental human concerns in common that can't be delineated by one's profession, age, or location.

In the end, as one may expect, my social anxiety never completely disappeared. Does it make it harder to be face-to-face and speak with patients and colleagues? Definitely. Would I still recommend therapy or coaching to others? Definitely. I certainly don't think that people should wait until they're in a crisis. Therapy can be done prophylactically as well. I think one of the biggest things that I learned from these sessions is that being in healthcare does not mean that our challenges and thought patterns are unique to us. In fact, we may often find that the best form of validation and support can come from people who are seemingly quite the opposite.

“We were simply a group of guys from around the world who found each other by mere chance but had fundamental human concerns in common that can't be delineated by one's profession, age, or location.”

switching chairs

CELINE VEREECKEN SMITH
MCMaster UNIVERSITY MD 2023



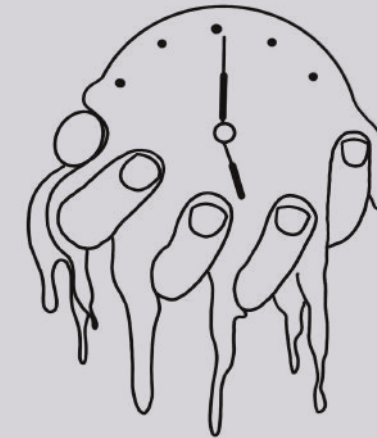
My mother
Was never one to be timid or shy
She'd vociferously teach and study
Frequent readings to edify

So when
She had a fierce and sterile retreat
Off and away from this mortal coil
All that remained was an empty seat

Quite suddenly
I chose to find myself turned
Sitting on the other side of the desk
Delivering news I once had heard

Some days
There is a pounding
In my head that anxiously thrums
As I see obstacles mounting

My role
To help, to listen, to heal
Sometimes reminds me too much
Of the wondrous magnitude we can feel



counting time

KEERTHANA PASUMARTHI
MCMaster UNIVERSITY MD 2023
Digital art by Sai Kolla

I spend my days counting.
Counting heart beats, counting memories,
Counting time.

I measure time by the seconds, minutes, days I have left.
How long until I can finally breathe, smile, rest.
I watch the skies change from dark to blue to dark again.
I count the days and the nights.
I count how much time I have left.

One by one, I count until the numbers conquer my reason.
I cling onto time until I disappear amidst the clicks and the chimes—
Let them quiet the heartache and drown the noise.

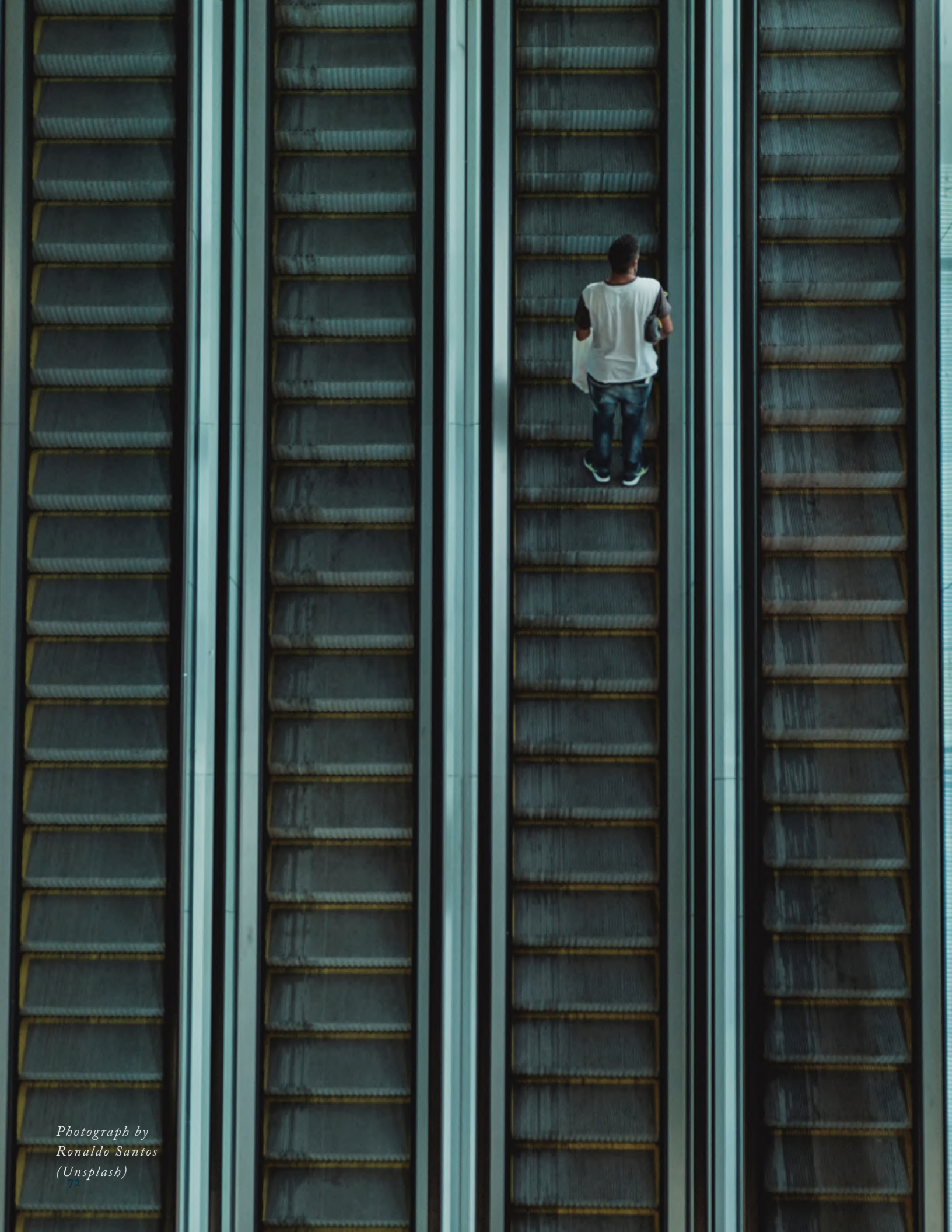
I count to keep the exhaustion at bay.
I count so I do not stop.
I count because time goes on and so will I.
I am terrified I will spend forever counting and yet,
I spend all my days counting time.



Quiet, Los Angeles 2018

KEERTHANA PASUMARTHI

MCMASTER UNIVERSITY MD 2023



*Photograph by
Ronaldo Santos
(Unsplash)*

On Social Capital

SHAILY BRAHMBHATT

WESTERN UNIVERSITY MD 2024

I am careful with what I say
The words catch at the back of my throat
The fire in them burns out
With a puff of invisible smoke escaping my lips
A soft sigh.
As I choose silence.
As I choose fear,
An illusion of safety,
Every word, every uncomfortable chuckle
Hangs in the air, above spaces I desperately
want to occupy.
Who am I waiting for permission from
To speak?
To breathe?
To take up more space without earning it.
I am scared to take up space,
A space I was told was a debt to be repaid
To a country, a society that lent it to me.
But in bustling emergency departments
or quiet examination rooms,
Even the space I have earned feels like a

purgatory.

Never stable,
More expensive than it seems for everyone else,
More expensive than it is worth.
I work to earn my voice, yet
Those poorer in experience,
Less wealthy in effort
Tax away my earnings
Until I am left trying to squeeze into the
smallest corner,
The quietest shadow.
Speak when only spoken to, but
Perfectly or not at all.

I am trying to earn my existence,
But after two decades
A couple houses
A few steps up the immigration ladder
My parents are treated no different
Than the people they were two decades ago.
They have worked and earned
Yet inside, our bodies ache from winters past
without warmth
From springs past without fresh air or gardening
From summers past without beach days and
potlucks and full bellies
From autumns past with only surprise at the
survival of another year.

We have earned our existence
Yet we are too poor for our words.
We have worked for this country
Thinking we were indebted
But in witness of my silent sobs
In bustling emergency departments
And quiet examination rooms
This silence is deafening,

Overpriced.

counting backwards

GLORIA KIM

MCMMASTER UNIVERSITY MD 2023

Sometimes I count backwards until the numbers become so jumbled that they start to make sense.

I am twenty-three and I can barely stand on my own.

Twenty-two was a vanishing feeling.

Twenty-one was a tangle of emotion.

Sometimes I draw pictures in my mind with shades flawlessly curated.

With trimmings framing a perfect rectangle around conversations.

A copybook where monologues are meant for centre stage.

Except I'm not the main character. She is.

Sometimes I make lists of the most trivial things.

I write down yesterday's tasks just to check-mark them off a second time. A third time.

To temporarily satisfy cravings of accomplishment, and reassurance, and order.

To say that I've enjoyed a well-balanced, three-course meal.

Sometimes I dream upside down.

Because the world looks better when you can only see feet.

When faces are only imaginary fragments of the mind.

And bodies are merely vessels and no longer measuring sticks of worth.

Sometimes I yearn for a moment of calm.

So that I may temper the fear of never making it to the place where X marks the spot.

And **SUCCESS** is engraved in bold.

To create room for careless mistakes and second chances and Chapter Twos.

Sometimes I look inwards and think, What more do you want?

What more can you create with your sum total? And paint with your colours?

Which friends can you make along the way?

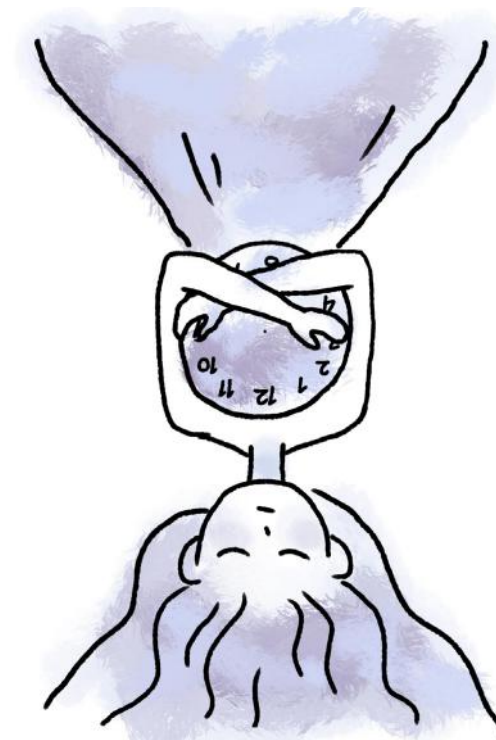
And with whom does your main character fall in love?

Sometimes the best lessons learned are those that are sandwiched between moments.

When the lights are turned off and the music is silenced.

Like kinks in a revolving door.

And clocks that take breaths in between the ticking of seconds.



DIGITAL ART BY JENNY CHAN
MCMMASTER UNIVERSITY MD 2023



Halifax 2022

ISABELLA LIANG

MCMASTER UNIVERSITY MD 2023



You're In

SHAELYNN BARRY

MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY MD 2025

You're in!

A dream come true via a highly anticipated email.

You're in!

Overwhelming glee from finally walking through the front doors.

New people, new classes, new anxieties, new

Everything.

Surrounded.

But at the same time,

Enveloped.

By thoughts of unworthiness and entrapment.

And guilt for having these thoughts.

How can dreams and nightmares co-exist in an unshakable balance?

You're in.

Deep, too deep.

Escape would mean failure,

Would mean disappointing everyone,

Mostly yourself.

Help!

Comes in the form of scheduled conversations and

Tiny pills.

Waiting

For something.

Anything.

And then, forcing a peace.

Better than no peace.

You're in.

In a livable state of getting by.

You might even be content.

The highs overshadowed by expectations and responsibilities,

Partly self-induced.

You're in.

Over your head but

You continue.

Because that's what we do.

There's no time to think or waver,

Just do,

Because

You're in.

And this is all you worked for,

Wished for, yearned for.

And what someone else is

Working for,

Wishing for, yearning for.

You keep on.

And pray, hope, beg

For next year to be better.

For you to be better.

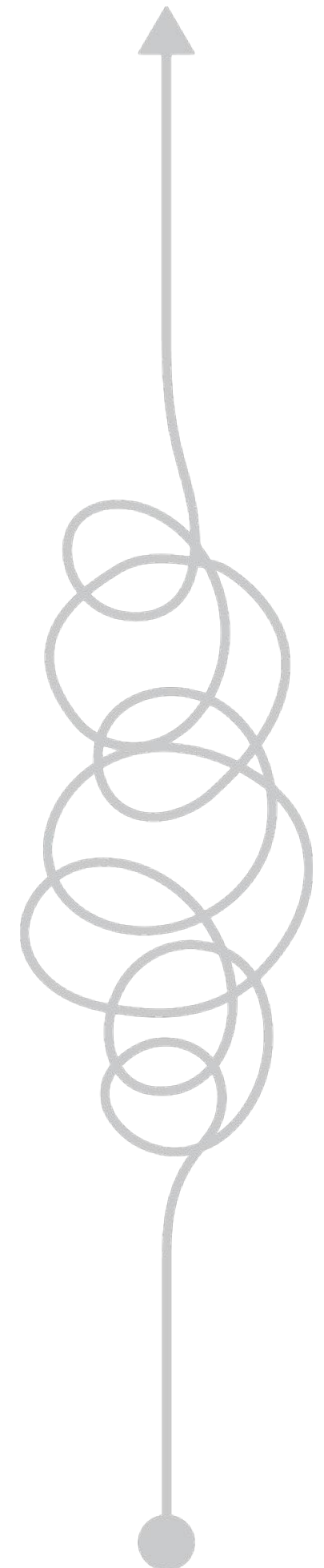
For gratitude to outweigh distress.

And for

Peace.

Because

You're in!





untitled

ANONYMOUS

A caged bird sings
In the depths of my heart
He doesn't yearn for escape
He doesn't hide
Instead
He glides through the day
Whistling careless tunes
Unsure of his past or future
Only sure of his present
And only in the dead of night

A caged bird sings
As he sees the daily suffering and shrugs
I say
Do you not care?
Or did you care too much?
I hate him
But I love him all the same

Get out I say
Get out, get out, I want to be free
Don't you?
He doesn't listen
Neither do I
And so we continue
Slowly and quietly into the darkness
Weeping
Into the dead of night



the backbone

RUTH NEUMANN

WESTERN UNIVERSITY MD 2023

*Scan the QR code
to listen to an
audio recording of
The Backbone*



They say we are the backbone
The glue, the sticky tape
The heroes without capes

We bear the load
Of young, of old, I'm too cold
Says the patient, male, ninety-five
My N95, a pressurized guise
As I arrive, bay nine, bed five
We lock eyes, I realize
That mine match his

Bloodshot, upshot, we're caught
Between doing what we're told
And doing what we're taught
Holding out for a two-dose shot

Of adrenaline
Coursing through my veins
The doc arrives
Says he'll take the reigns

In ten seconds
The ten blade meets the patient
I've known for ten days
With ten grandchildren
And another on the way

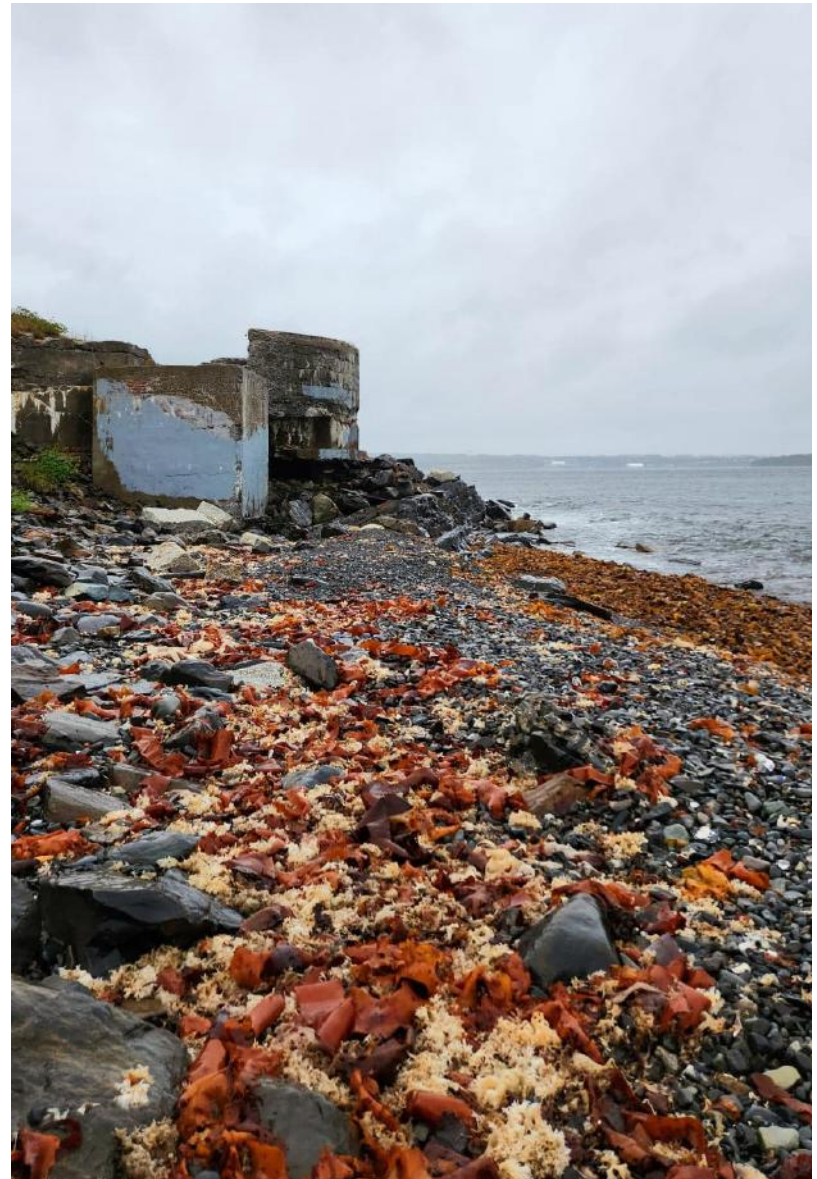
We must brace
Brace ourselves to save face
Facing yet another day at this thankless —
Pace yourself, it's only hour eight

Four more ahead
Three more are dead
Too preoccupied to eat, I
Wonder what it will take

They say we are the backbone
But sometimes backbones break



Digital art by Priscilla Matthews



Sticks and Stones, Halifax 2022

ISABELLA LIANG

MCMASTER UNIVERSITY MD 2023

a painful competition

SANYA GROVER

UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA MD 2025

our pain is two tacky outfits
discovered before date night
time to start comparing,
it has to hug you just right!
who hurts more — you or me? here is a battle that can't be beat.
our pain is two burning stars
trashed onto the sorrow sky
find the one that glares brighter
pick quick — bull's eye!
who hurts more — you or me? here is a battle that can't be beat.
our pain is two matches
laying shrewdly on the countertop
check which one is stronger
the house ignites, crackle and pop!
who hurts more — you or me? here is a battle that can't be beat.
our pain is our pain
yours is yours,
mine is mine.
this battle of comparison, dear friend, is not benign



My Happy Place

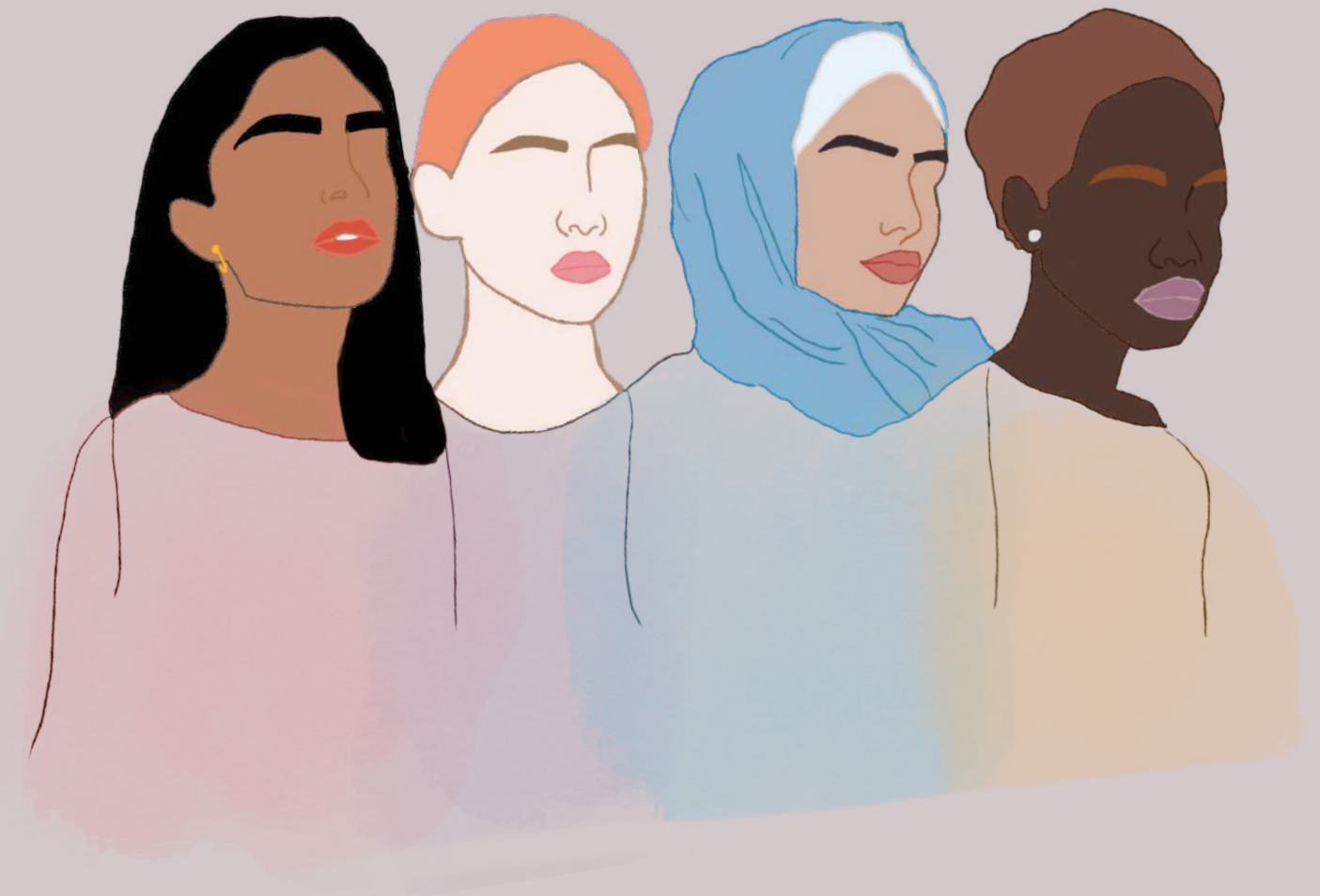
WATERCOLOUR ON CANVAS BY
ISHITA AGGARWAL
QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY MD 2023

the faces of autism spectrum disorder in medicine

KAYLEIGH BASTIN

NORTHERN ONTARIO SCHOOL OF MEDICINE UNIVERSITY MD 2024

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder that involves a component of marked social difficulties. ASD is often underdiagnosed or misdiagnosed in females who tend to fly under the radar, frequently as a result of a phenomenon referred to as “masking” (or “camouflaging”) within the neurodivergent community (Hull et al., 2020). Masking is a cluster of behavioural and social adaptations used by neurodivergent folk in order to better blend in, or camouflage, amongst neurotypical individuals (Hull et al., 2020). It can take on a variety of forms, such as avoiding the urge to “stim” (or fidget), forcing eye contact, or mirroring the mannerisms and behaviours of those with which the neurodivergent individual is interacting (Hull et al., 2020). This allows them to better fit into social contexts and norms, but does not come free of cost — masking is associated with higher levels of anxiety, depression, fatigue, and burnout in neurodivergent individuals, evidently taking a large toll on the mental health of those who are forced to mask (Bradley et al., 2021).



Women

KEERTHANA PASUMARTHI

MCMASTER UNIVERSITY MD 2023

“When interacting with ASD colleagues, a simple query as to their state can generate a conversation which allows them to correct misconceptions about their intent and be open regarding their current frame of mind.”

Medicine is a socially based career, entailing interaction with both patients and families, as well as other healthcare professionals, both within and outside one’s own team, in order to facilitate patient care. There are indubitably countless physicians and medical staff who fall on the spectrum who must mask on a daily basis in order to meet professionalism standards set out by the industry. Further compounding the inevitable exhaustion which comes from prolonged masking are the pitfalls of stigma and lack of awareness surrounding ASD.

There are many misunderstandings and negative connotations associated with a diagnosis of ASD, and individual abilities are often questioned due to the intrinsic nature of the disorder. Diagnosis is often based around pathology and social deficit, rather than unique abilities which benefit individuals and can be seen as a benefit of ASD. It is important to note that ASD is exactly that — a spectrum disorder, with each individual possessing a different constellation of strengths and weaknesses. For example, in males and females, ASD often presents differently, with females displaying less restricted, repetitive motor movements or interests compared to males, as

well as possessing a tendency towards greater linguistic ability (Lai & Szatmari, 2020).

Compounding the stigma that one may experience if their diagnosis is disclosed, leading potentially to prejudice and discrimination such as questions of competency, the lack of awareness surrounding ASD and its needs are equally harmful. For many individuals on the autism spectrum, social “downtime” is required to attend to sensory needs and recover from social demands. Beyond medicine being a socially demanding profession, it also frequently pressures individuals to spend their free time socially as well, such as by attending dinners, networking over lunch breaks, and meeting outside the clinical environment for recreational activities. Those who do not conform to these social standards are labelled as uncooperative or disinterested when the reality may simply be that they do not have enough social stamina left to devote to extracurricular affairs. When interacting with ASD colleagues, a simple query as to their state can generate a conversation which allows them to correct misconceptions about their intent and be open regarding their current frame of mind.

ASD is a complicated disorder that cannot be fully explored within the constraints of a short essay, but its implications on the lives and careers of those impacted are clear. Greater understanding of the needs of autistic individuals is needed to allow for progressivity in medicine and to shift the interpretation of atypical social behaviours as someone being disinterested or defiant to that of simply being different. With this shift should come the recognition that competence and professionalism can still be maintained despite deviance from societal norms. Autistic individuals also provide a unique viewpoint amongst both clinicians and patients, often understanding the world through different ways and bringing powerful new perspectives and practices to the medical industry. For example, Griffith et al. (2011) state that ASD can “afford a sense of intellectual liberty from the constraints of the ‘normal thinking process,” as well as affording ASD individuals abilities that neurotypicals may otherwise lack. Grandin & Panek (2014) also support this hypothesis, stating that there are functional differences in the autistic brain, with discrete brain regions possessing local

overconnectivity in some areas and long-distance underconnectivity in others. These disparities can allow for thinking differences, such as being able to make unique or fast connections between topics, the ability to “think outside the box,” and particular thinking patterns such as visual memory. It is also autistic practitioners who have the empathy and power to combat ableism in the industry and better understand the needs of patients with developmental disabilities. ASD is both a disability and a different ability, and autistic voices are needed to better the field of medicine for patients who live through similar experiences.

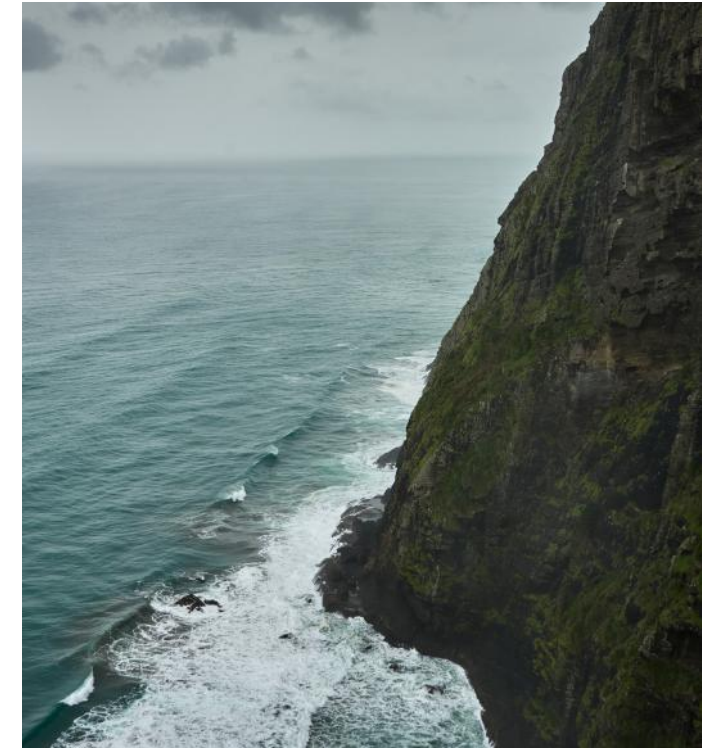
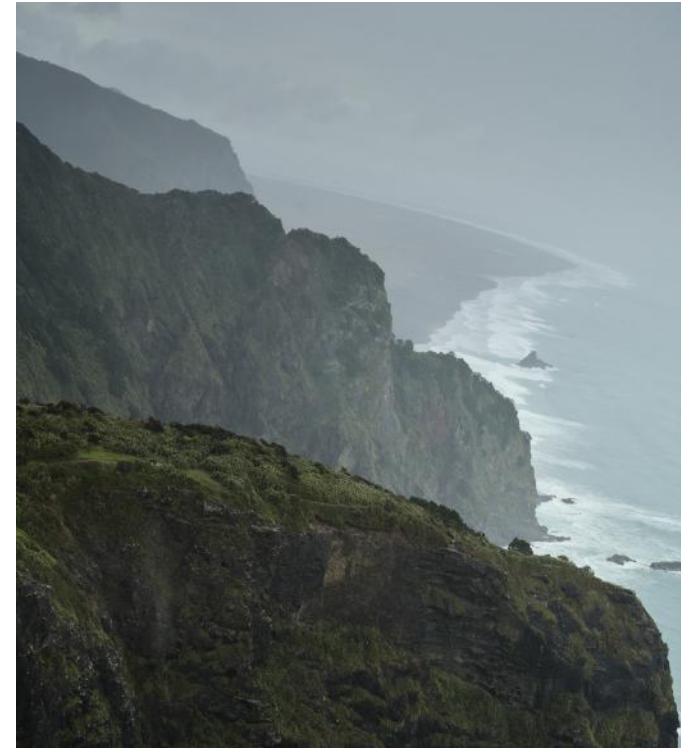
ASD is a neurodevelopmental condition which carries both drawbacks and benefits for those diagnosed. In the context of medicine, ASD can present challenges and benefits for diagnosed healthcare professionals, but autistic perspectives are needed to aid in combating extant misconceptions. Autistic practitioners can provide unique views and insights for autistic patients and contribute to the reduction of ableism for patients and practitioners alike.

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Mercer Bay, New Zealand, 2022

SIMARPREET ICHHPUNIANI

MCMASTER UNIVERSITY MD 2023



Breathe

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. SIOBHAN DESHAUER ‘VIOLIN MD’



Dr. Siobhan Deshauer recently completed her training at McMaster University in Internal Medicine and Rheumatology. She has a unique background and journey in medicine, which she has chronicled in her popular Youtube channel, Violin MD. Her videos include educational videos on medical topics, vlogs of her on-call shifts, and exhibitions of other healthcare professions as well as patient experiences. She has gained deep insight into mental health and wellbeing throughout her education and is excited to share this with junior trainees!

What does mental wellness mean to you?

I believe at the root of mental wellness is adaptability. Life constantly throws curveballs at us, within and outside of medicine. The key is being able to pivot around those obstacles, adjust your plan (even if you've been preparing for months!), and move forward. Whether it's a clinical rotation that triggers emotions you didn't expect, or being unable to secure the elective you thought would make or break your career, or something much more personal like a break up ... I believe adaptability is the key to maintaining mental wellness.

How has your understanding of mental health changed throughout medical school, residency, and now as a staff physician?

I used to think that mental health was a static state that you could achieve by checking off the right boxes — exercise, meditate, nutrition, time with friends and family. But now I think of it as a continuously changing state, much more like walking on a tightrope. Just as a tightrope walker is constantly making tiny adjustments to stay balanced, so do we as we're navigating through busy schedules and unexpected challenges ... like a global pandemic.

Feeling off balance is part of the processes and it doesn't mean that you did anything wrong. It's normal to feel stressed or overwhelmed at times. The key is to recognize when you are starting to feel off balance so that you can make small adjustments that allow you to keep walking that tightrope.

Balancing your professional life, violin, YouTube channel, and your numerous other commitments sounds incredibly challenging. How do you take care of yourself and your mental wellness during busy and stressful times?

I think one of the most important lessons I've learned is when and how to say no. I'm sure you've heard this before. It doesn't mean don't say yes! In fact, I think it's so important to take advantage of the exciting opportunities that are available to you in medical school — research, education, and advocacy projects. Right now while you may have more free time as a pre-clerk, use it to explore your passions. As you continue in clerkship and then residency, there are many more demands on your time. This is when learning to say no becomes critical. Focus on the projects that you feel passionate about, rather joining a committee or research project because you feel like you have no choice. This will give you more time to take care of yourself and have enough energy to work on the projects that matter most to you.

If you could go back in time, is there something you would tell your first-year self in medical school?

Focus on fuelling your passions within and outside of medicine. Medicine can feel all consuming — there's always more to learn, more research to do, and more patients to see. So if I was speaking to myself in first year med school, I'd encourage myself to make more time to play the violin once clerkship started ... and to worry less about things I can't control, like reference letters.

Often, people like to share their highlight reel and things they may be proud of on social media. However, in several of your YouTube videos, we see glimpses into the challenges in medicine, your struggles, and important learning points for yourself. This is something many of us admire greatly! If you feel comfortable sharing, would you be able to tell us about a time where you failed and what you took away from that experience?

Failure is an interesting concept. It's something so many of us fear, and yet it's often something that we impose on ourselves! In my last year of residency, I felt overwhelmed by creating video content while studying for my rheumatology royal college licensing exam. When I finally admitted to myself that I needed to take time off from video production to focus on studying, I felt like I had failed. I had failed to meet a level of productivity that I had set for myself. Since then, I've been striving to hope for the best rather than setting expectations that aren't always realistic. If I could go back in time, I would have hoped to continue creating content throughout the year, rather than setting that as an expectation.

Do you have any takeaways that you would like to share with new learners in healthcare professional programs with regards to mental health and wellness?

My biggest takeaway is that your mental health is something that fluctuates. You will likely feel pushed to your limits during the next few years (I know I did!). Sometimes we can handle it with the support of our friends and family, but it's also common to seek out help. Although wellness is talked about a lot more now (which is fantastic!), most people don't share if they are speaking to a therapist, taking time off for their mental health, or

starting medications while they're in training ... so I think we still have a long way to go to normalize what it means to take care of our mental health. So look after yourself and look after those around you. And if you're worried about someone, reach out to them and make sure they know they aren't alone.

I personally really admire your bright personality and how you are always smiling in your interactions with patients, healthcare providers, and your audience! So ... what makes you happy?

I do consider myself to be a positive person, but don't be fooled, I'm not happy all the time! There is some selection bias in videos because I'm less likely to film at a time when I'm feeling down or overwhelmed.

Medical training can be a real grind, and at times, it can be hard to remember why you signed up for the stress and sleepless nights. One surprising benefit of creating YouTube videos is that it prompts me to reflect on my journey and allows me to interact with viewers who are grateful for the work we do. This really helped, especially on those difficult long rotations!

But practically speaking, if I have a secret that makes me happy in the hospital, it's reframing and giving people the benefit of the doubt. I basically make up context so that I can let go of the little things and avoid internalizing stress. For example, if I call another service and the resident is rude to me, I imagine they're having a really stressful day and that they have a mean staff. Or if a patient snaps at me, I just remind myself how much they must be suffering. And in fact, when I'm not able to shrug things off easily, that's usually a sign that I'm not getting enough sleep and need to take care of myself!



Check out her channel at <https://www.youtube.com/c/ViolinMD>

Dear younger me,

A collection of messages we wish to share from our current selves to our past selves.

IT'S OKAY TO FEEL ANXIOUS, worried, angry, insecure, and confused. We all do. The important thing is to focus on what to do next.

I can't tell you that things get better because I don't know yet. But I can tell you that you're strong enough to get through it.

Your health is most important. Eating well, sleeping well, managing your stress - make self-care an utmost priority and the rest will come.

You will not be the best at everything, and nobody expects you to, despite the pressure you may feel from your surroundings. Trying your best is more than enough.

Go through the motions. Act the way you think someone happy would act. And hopefully, someday, the act will become real.

None of it was your fault. You are doing the best you can and I am proud of you for that, even though you don't know that yet.

Don't neglect your personal life! Your career is an important aspect of your life, but you will feel happiest when you have a close group of people with whom you can share your successes and tribulations.

I am so proud of you and the person you choose to be every single day. I know it's easy to compare yourself to others and feel like you're not enough, but I promise you - **YOU ARE MORE THAN ENOUGH.**

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dear reader,

THANK YOU FOR TAKING THE TIME to peruse through this magazine. We hope you enjoyed your time with us and hope you continue to support *Breathe* as we release more issues. It means so much to us that you took the time to look through this issue – this project would not have been possible with you!

We are always looking for new voices and submissions, so please follow us on our social media linked below or visit our website for information on how to get involved. If you have any feedback or suggestions regarding this issue, please feel free to reach out to us as well, since we are always working on improving *Breathe* for our readers. Thank you again for your support!

Yours Truly,

Breathe Magazine Editorial Team 2022

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thebrethemag.com

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