

For the first seven years of my education, I was known as a “gifted kid”. Typically we think of gifted children as future honor students, college graduates, and successful adults. I’d kept myself in this category until my elementary years ended and I was moving on to middle school. I soon started to struggle with the traditional 5-7 classes a day model. I was overwhelmed and stressed trying to meet the increased expectations and pressure that middle school brought. What I didn’t know at the time was that I had been living my entire life with undiagnosed ADHD and anxiety.

My anxiety disorder manifested itself as one overwhelming feeling every day- fear. I was afraid of asking for help when I was struggling. If I acknowledged I didn’t know what I was doing and expressed it out loud to others, I was afraid I risked losing my “gifted kid” identity and its anticipated outcomes of success. This worry followed me for many years, even after my diagnoses had been confirmed.

Despite those challenges I managed to graduate high school with honors and am currently maintaining a 4.0 GPA, as a second semester college student. Reflecting on my educational history, I’m able to identify what contributed to my prospective academic success. Because my mental health became a priority in my life, I was able to meet weekly with professionals who would offer me counsel. When missing assignments began to pile up, every solution they’d suggest involved a personalized plan- something that I was not fond of. You’d think I’d be all for implementing their suggested strategies, but accepting help was hard for me, even when it was readily accessible- especially when it involved acknowledging that my brain works differently than my peers’. I ground out my required credits, often feeling like I was just barely getting by, all so I could get to the main goal: being finally done with high school.

I somehow made it through to my senior year. By second semester, I only needed one credit to graduate, which allowed me to take classes that I actually enjoyed- which in reality were classes I wouldn’t need help with. During that same school year, my therapist recommended that I undergo a neuropsychological evaluation. Over winter break, I went through comprehensive testing and was eventually diagnosed with ADHD (in addition to my pre existing anxiety diagnosis).

In the recommendations that accompanied my evaluation, one stood out as crucial: connecting with Disability Support Services at my future university. For the first time in my education journey, I pursued recommended support, without reluctance. It was an easy process, and I was able to get accommodations that would make my college coursework more accessible and effective.

You may be asking what changed to cause me to be willing to receive help. Finally having a name and explanation for the way my brain functions was the key to the change in my willingness to accept help. For so long I'd been limiting my mindset by believing that my brain works just like everybody else's, meaning I shouldn't need more help than anybody else. Being diagnosed as neurodivergent finally made me feel justified and accepting of my need for different support than others. I'd finally found a solution to a problem I'd been experiencing throughout the entirety of secondary school. Now in my second semester pursuing a bachelor's degree, I can confidently say that the half-hour Zoom call to get my college accommodations in place was worth it.

The biggest piece of advice I would give to younger students who are anticipating the transition from high school to college is to understand that there's nothing wrong with learning differently than others. Whether your struggle is because of a mental or physical condition, or a temporary period of stress, you deserve an education that is tailored to your unique needs and that takes your challenges into consideration. It may be hard to seek help; it can feel overwhelming, embarrassing, and too intense of a process to be worth it. Chances are, it's easier than you think. University staff want to see you succeed, and there are so many resources available to help you do just that. Services such as Disability Support exist to level the playing field for students, but you can only seize that opportunity if you put your reservations aside and accept the fact that there is nothing shameful or weak about needing help because, in the end, it will make you stronger.