

How important is your social and emotional well-being and what aspects of your social and emotional well-being have helped you be successful?

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In a world where physical health often takes center stage, it's easy to overlook mental and emotional health's vital role in our overall well-being. When I was diagnosed with Crohn's Disease in early 2020, I quickly learned how essential it is to prioritize my mental and emotional health alongside my physical health.

My diagnosis wasn't clear until five months after my initial symptoms of intense abdominal pain appeared, which brought several hospitalizations and more ultrasounds than I could count on one hand. Due to Covid's impact, it was difficult to get in with a doctor due to delays in appointments, long waitlists, and shortages in medical resources. Nevertheless, after months of deliberation, I was diagnosed with Crohn's Disease and introduced to my new lifelong partner: chronic pain.

Learning to accept that I will spend the rest of my life balancing work, stress, family, sleep, and persisting discomfort was a difficult pill to swallow, and it took a heavy toll on my mental and emotional health. I felt helpless knowing that there was little I could do to control my body's decision to attack itself, and I fell into a pit of depression and anxiety. Knowing that lifelong chronic pain would be a constant battle was a hard concept to accept. I spent months pitying myself and blaming the unfair circumstances, but eventually, I realized that I needed to take steps to move forward.

I spoke to my parents about getting help and began seeing a therapist and a nutritionist who helped me regain control of my life. I started journaling and began channeling my emotions through art, research, and exercise. My illness showed me the extent of my love for learning and psychology, and I found myself spending hours researching different autoimmune diseases and how they worked. It became a common occurrence for me to talk my friends' ears off about rare human diseases or how nutrition ties into mental health. I began to truly appreciate the beauty of Alaska through pain management exercises like hiking, jogging, and skiing. I built stronger connections with my friends and family through time exploring the outdoors and figure skating. I started looking forward to my therapy sessions because they honed my interests and guided me to an extremely important lesson: I am more than my condition.

I thought I had a death sentence when I was diagnosed. I was convinced that I would never be able to live a normal life or be able to hold down a job due to uncontrollable flares or hospitalizations, but I am so happy to have proven myself wrong. I worked a job at an ice cream shop for two years where I made lifelong friends and learned how to balance stress, school, and mental and physical health. I am now a strong advocate for mental and physical health resources because, without them, there's a good chance I wouldn't be here today. Through despair and seemingly impossible challenges, a light was shone on who I am and how little my condition truly reflects on me. There's so much more to me than my diagnosis, and I want to help others in my situation understand that as well.

I want to study psychology to help build a world where diversity, inclusion, and access to knowledge are at the forefront. I want to help break the stigma around disability and show others they are not defined by their diagnoses or challenges, but by what they make of them. I wish to conduct research in the field of psychology and become a college professor so I can teach others the wonders of the human brain and how mental health ties into physical health. I am determined to dismantle negative social barriers and create a future where the brain and body are better understood, as well as to support those who are facing the same self-doubt and unseen obstacles I once did. My mental and physical health challenges are not something I ever expected to battle, but they have revealed how much I love learning for the sake of learning, exploring scientific research, and expanding my mind. Thanks to my family, doctors, therapists, and nutritionists, I now know that I want to help others through their own struggles and show others that their disabilities do not define them. Our value lies not in our limitations, but in our ability to overcome hardship, our resiliency, and the wisdom we carry forward and teach others.