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So I started my own PhD back in 2003.. which is almost 15 years ago which is a little bit scary now... but anyway I started my PhD in physics in 2003 and initially my project was supposed to be a collaboration between two different departments. So someone from another department (another PhD student) was providing samples and then I was supposed to do various kinds of analysis on these... and I started with very high expectations both of myself and of the PhD program in general... I think this is true of most PhD students; nobody starts with low expectations... so I started working didn't really know what I was doing and the first year it was kind of a struggle and it ended up with the PhD student I was collaborating with from the other department leaving but nobody had actually told me... so I was left in this situation where I was sending emails but getting no replies and it looked like my PhD would be pretty screwed... so at the end of my first year, start of the second year, I was shifted on to a different project... entirely different project - some of the same skills but it basically meant learning some really new stuff starting again from scratch and again didn't really know what I was doing but I kind of maintained these high expectations of myself I still wanted to do well and things went on it was a very difficult project because it was instrument development and things kept breaking down and it got to my third year so the final year of funding and the pressure had really really really started to build I didn't have any publishable results whereas all the other PhD

students in my research group were publishing papers and it really looked like they were going to finish on time but I might not finish ever and so I had this level of stress that was just building and building and building and building I was going into work every day but not really engaging so I was stressed I really wanted to do well but I wasn't working in a very very good way I was undermining myself by procrastinating by as I said showing up late and not really engaging with the problems that came up so got to maybe halfway through my third year I was working in the lab and doing these very very very delicate sample preparation techniques it took two or three days to get things ready to actually run an experiment and at the very final stage I had these little things and I dropped him so if I basically ever hadn't gone into work that day I would have been further ahead than but I actually was as a result of the work that I had done it wasn't the first time that this kind of thing happened it happened several times throughout the course of the PhD but this time something inside me kind of broke as so it wasn't just the samples that broke it was something inside me so all that tension that had been building up suddenly had kind of just snapped and my swore loudly stormed out of the lab and didn't know if I was going to come back so I walked across the campus thinking I can't take this anymore I can't take all this stress I can't take this constant feeling that I'm not living up to the standard that I expect of myself or that anybody else expected me and I thought well maybe I should just quit maybe I should

find some some other job I didn't quite know what I wanted to do but I figured well you know I will find something and whatever it is it can't be as bad as they say can't be as stressful as this so then I started thinking well okay if I quit then obviously I've got to tell my supervisor he'll be disappointed I guess but I think you'll understand I'll have to tell my family my friends my colleagues who me up some of him and become very close friends but again if they're disappointed I think they will understand and so I sat on a bench on the campus for a little while just thinking about this and I thought well okay quitting quitting is an option and it's not a terrible option but I don't quite want to leave yet so few things I can try in a lab so today I'll go back to lab and try these things and if they don't work then I'll quit but I want to make sure that if this is going to determine whether I leave or whether I stay I at least want to make sure that I've given it my best shot and for once I'm gonna put all of myself into the work and so I sat there for a little while longer built up my resolve calm down a little bit went back to the lab and just slowed down did things basically as carefully as I could without really worrying about the end result so that pressure to perform that pressure to get the results I wasn't really worried about it anymore because I could leave my self-esteem was no longer tied up in how well I did and so I took my time did things as carefully and as meticulously as I could and then the experiments worked so obviously then

I thought shit now I can't quit so

taught me was that the way I'd been dealing with my stress the way I'd been approaching the PhD I've been constantly undermining myself because I put myself under so much pressure I couldn't think creatively I couldn't take care of the work because so much of myself was somewhere to my self-esteem was invested in it so by just relaxing but then doing things as carefully as I could doing things with a lot of effort but without worrying about the end result things started to come together then I applied this to all of the rest of the experiment for the rest of the time that I had left and I applied it to the writing of the thesis so anytime I had an experiment I tried to put all of my effort in in a relaxed way and when I was writing my thesis I tried to be as focused as I could on getting it done but without worrying about what the examiners thought and this simple change in mindset I think made the difference between me either failing or just quitting and going on to get enough data for a couple of publications having enough data to be able to write my thesis then writing the thesis pretty quickly I did it in just three months but to a standard that the examiners thought was one of the best that they had ever ever read and I passed surprisingly amazingly with zero corrections to my thesis and then went on and did a couple of postdoc contracts and then went on ultimately to start coaching PhD students and doing the work that I do now all of that came from basically that breakdown where I stopped worrying about the end result I stopped worrying about

what it meant about me stop worrying about what anyone else thought about me
and that was it everything stemmed from that simple change so think about how
much you're investing in your PhD what it means to you and whether that's
actually helping you or there it's holding you back
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