A good story to summarize what graduate school has done to me

In summer of 2019, I woke up as I would any other day, planning to walk to the downtown farmer’s market. As I began to get up and started to change clothes, I stopped moving. My body felt heavy, my breathing felt shallow, and I couldn’t feel my phalanges (better word). Other than short quick bursts, I found myself unable to move. My mind wasn’t able to make my body do anything.

To this day, I have no idea what happened to me. I went to the doctor and they blamed it on me not passing my preliminary exam, saying it’s a mental block and something I should be able to get over with time. I searched for a second opinion and they found a non-tumorous growth on my pancreas (Gilbert syndrome), which still wouldn’t explain my abnormality. All this time, the lack of success within graduate school also began to hit me. I stopped eating, would make excuses that I didn’t have time to eat because I needed to work in order to catch up to all of my peers around me. To meet the expectations of my friends, family, coworkers. But when the intrusive thoughts came in, I understood that it was time to get help: at every turn, I began to think of different ways that I could die. I work on the fourth floor of my building, and the stairwell has a gigantic whole in the middle. How easy it would be to step in the street and run in front of a speeding car. Flashes of my life in those moments would begin to seethe through my head, as if I was able to peer into the reality of me executing those acts to end my life. And so I went to therapy. I had been to therapy before, but never for suicidal thoughts. And I didn’t hold back: my first meeting when she asked me why I came in, I told my therapist all of the above. I was beginning to realize that things in my life didn’t make sense, and that I had to deal with the difficulties of it all (explain more).

Now after all of that you might be thinking: wow maybe the first doctor was right. But one of the most important things I learned in graduate school is communication. Maybe that doctor had a lot of this stuff that I might be going through worked out in their head. But saying it in such a blunt way made me think harder about the issue myself. Rather than just taking their word for it and expecting to get better over time, I sought out my own answers, went to different experts, tested out strategies in different parts of my life, and made sure to critically think of my own situation. That experience gave me the …

Also talk about imposter syndrome: how now I have become much better at giving myself praise and encouragement for my successes, rather than demeaning myself all of the time. Of how I know how hard I am working, so I feel more of the freedom to give myself time to relax and play with my cat, or video games. Or of how I reward myself with food after a couple of weeks of work and cooking. And how I plan a day to do laundry and actually take care of myself and clean rather than moping and sulking on my floor, crying about all of the things that I want to do and try to do that aren’t working. I’ve learned to take my successes in stride a bit better, but I still don’t feel like a “PhD”. I don’t think I’ll ever address myself as one outside of necessary situations (interviews), because I still think that I’m just a normal person who had the privilege to work hard at school and focus on my own growth because my family is strong, safe, healthy. And I know that I’m not there yet, but I hope that in the coming days and months, I’ll start to feel what it actually means to feel human again. To lay in grass on a warm day, allowing me to feel the heat and prickle of nature on my skin, listening to something peaceful and just being able to not think about anything at all. No “what am I going to do after this moment” or “how can I fix this experiment”. Only “what should I cook for my partner and I today” and “Damn the beat on this song is dope” and “I wonder if obligatory basketball player has a path to a hall of fame career”. For now, science is seen in my mind as arduous rather than the thing that I came to love and enjoy learning about. But I’m excited to begin that journey again in time, rekindling that feeling of discovery. And even if my future career isn’t in science, at the very least just knowing that science has given my such a wide array of thinking and problem solving skills will always keep my connected to it.