

I have been there. Sitting in the bathtub, legs tightly crossed with arms protectively folded around the knees with my head buried between.

Sitting there, trying not to think about anything else other than the soft, familiar patter of the shower as it saturated my hair.

“This is not a life worth living,” I said to myself.

And whether you can believe it or not – moments like that in life, when you feel so unbelievably vulnerable and broken and ashamed and completely disposable...those are the moments you will grow from. I know that there are a lot of quotes out there meant to encourage, meant to bring you from devastation to inspiration. But there is something to be said about going from an experience that shatters your soul to picking up those pieces and building back your former self that is even more resilient, more empowered, and more badass than you could ever imagine.

After my sexual assault experience, I gave up on a lot of things. I still had lofty goals and career aspirations of going into veterinary/medical research, but the motivation for a lot of things in my life, like caring about myself, now that was gone. And I didn't care about rebuilding that. I felt ashamed and even guilty to talk about what had happened to me, even to those I was closest with. And I concluded that I was somehow fundamentally fucked up. Or that's how I felt very sincerely, every day. You'd be surprised about how many things in your life are centered around your self-worth...I didn't realize that until I had no self-worth. I've also struggled with mental health issues of some sort most of my life. Since I was 15, I have been in and out of therapy and seen multiple psychiatrists with a MULTITUDE of diagnoses to include generalized anxiety disorder, depression, bipolar disorder, and borderline personality disorder. And let me tell ya, if you're already struggling with self-esteem, let's just go ahead and lay it on thick and just flatten you with the entire DSM. Yeah, that fucking sucks. No way to sugar coat it.

So, does it get better? And if so, when?

Yes, it gets better. And I really hope you stick around to see it get better. And I hope you don't mind the hyperactive interplay between my current and former self – that's life, right?

Personally, it took about 6 years for me to confidently look my fiancé in the face on one of our hikes and say, “I'm done feeling ashamed about what happened to me.”

I was so done with discussing it in hushed tones and having everything in this neat little framework. So, before it gets better, if you're full of 'piss and vinegar' like me, you'll get a little heated, a little amped up.

In those 6 years, I had worked towards my goal of becoming a veterinarian – something I was incredibly passionate about.

The initial goal was to get a job in research. Sounds easy enough. Well, not quite. I will save my story about how I scooped heaping piles of s**t for hemophilic dogs for a VERY lengthy 3 weeks for a different day.

Well, over the past 5 years I had applied and been denied. I couldn't afford to apply and attend an out-of-state veterinary college, and it was a personal, non-negotiable to be away from my fiancé and our adorable little fur family (we have a beagle named Emma and two cats Milo and PJ).

It was after receiving my 5th denial letter when everything came full circle...kind of. It was a Friday in late March 2022. I didn't have a good day at work. I had a lot of difficult appointments (I was employed at a small animal/companion animal hospital) that day and I was developing one of my migraines. I clambered into my car, unlocked the iPhone, and for whatever reason, checked my email. I never do that before driving home. Why would I do that? Who does that? Who checks their email just to think about more things to stress themselves over before a drive home? I don't know. But I did. And I got the email. "Blah blah blah....it is with great regret...." Swipe, delete. FREAKING GREAT. "Now what am I going to do?" I thought. Then, before my brain was even consciously aware, my lungs just started filling up, and I heaved a huge sigh. Don't get me wrong – I walked my ass back inside, found the owner of the practice, with whom I was close with, went in her office and sobbed my eyes out. But throughout that weekend I kept wondering about that sigh. "Why was I so relieved?"

I grabbed lunch that Sunday with one of the vets I used to work with, also a good friend of mine, and we talked about all those different thoughts, feelings, and WTF's. "I think I'm done," I told her. "I gave this all I have, and I just don't think this is my path anymore. And I think I'm okay with that. I never thought I would be, but I guess I'm meant for something else. I didn't want to focus on companion animal medicine anyway. There are other avenues to take to achieve a career in medical research." I pondered...PhD...MD... She looked at me and smiled and said, "I think you're done too. And I'm so proud of you."

My fiancé, Sam, is currently in physical therapy school (doesn't that alone just melt your heart – he truly is the sweetest) and we agreed that after every exam or quiz day, we would take sweet Emma girl on a hike to decompress. Well, that Tuesday, so just 4 days after my denial sigh-cry session, we trekked through Umstead Park. I was telling him that I was thinking about medical school, since I've already completed the pre-requisites (they're essentially the same for vet school), and I *just* needed to conquer the MCAT. I told him "I feel like something is missing though. I never once wrote on my vet school essays about what happened. And THAT was why grades and extracurriculars slipped."

They ask that formal question, more so written as a statement, wanting an explanation for why academics might be less than ideal. Ok, well as someone that has had some huge issues with my whole SELF and all that jazz...I wasn't ever ready to talk about it. That was the question I 100% knew the answer to – a "gimme" question. But that was always the most difficult to answer. I knew that I could and would never disclose that information. I always thought "far too personal, no one would understand, it's not applicable, get over it." That wonderful self-sabotaging narrative. I told Sam that I never wanted to reveal that aspect of my life. That I didn't think people deserved to know something that made me feel...exposed, vulnerable, and utterly unraveled. But that deep sigh allowed me to let go of more than just the DVM title. I was ready to let go of the shame and make that horrible, twisted experience finally "happen for a reason."

And that's when I said, "I am tired of feeling ashamed and I want to help others in the same situation. I wish I could do what my aunt does and make kits for survivors of sexual assault. But we can't afford that."

His response, "why don't you do that? Ask Sam if she will help you build a website!"

By the way, we have a very close set of friends, Sam, and Ryan Wellmer. So, two Sam's very close to me...not confusing for you guys, at all. Nope.

I lit up. I bet one could visualize an aura of color illuminating my face when I turned to look at him.

"That's perfect!" I said, "And you know what? I'm through with being silent about what happened. If someone can look to me, hear my story, and it give them hope? That's a win. Even if it's just for 1 person."

The aspiration of medical school. A website. Giving back in an unimaginable and incomprehensible way – a way that I can only explain as crafted by destiny or divine intervention. And lastly, this newfound feeling of sharing my story and feeling unapologetically myself, for seriously the first time in my life. Or probably since I was little, too little to remember. It was more than I could bear. I hadn't felt that genuinely happy before, like smiling to my core, tripping over roots and rocks happy.

We got home and I immediately texted Sam W. She loved the idea and even filled me in on the fun fact that Ryan's stepsister has her own non-profit and said, "I'll give you her number and see if she thinks that we could take this even a step further."

Wednesday evening, I had a Zoom call with Daysja, Ryan's stepsister, and I'm proud to say she is one of Moxi's board of directors.

So, from Friday to Wednesday, there was probably about as much change and growth as that huge caterpillar on A Bug's Life. As he desperately flapped his too tiny of wings and sang out, "I'm a beautiful butterfly!" ...yep, I feel that.

I look back at that night in 2016 and I'm able to smile. I can smile because something beautiful has come out of it. I can share my story of resilience and perseverance and hopefully it gives at least 1 person the fight to give life another day. Because trust me, I know that feeling of utter despair, and even lower than that, just staring out into the shower, feeling so gut-wrenchingly empty. Over the past 6 years, I have said "everything happens for a reason," referring to that night, but I really struggled to find any logic to justify that statement.

I met Sam 7 months after that night, and he was the first man I decided to take a chance with and trust.

Our relationship has been filled with a lot of shame on my part and self-hatred and the feeling of inadequacy – "Well if he was with someone not tainted, intimacy might be easier. This isn't his fault." But you know what...it wasn't my fault either.

And it's not your fault.

I gave applying to vet school everything I had. After each application cycle I revamped and took on the essays with a fresh set of eyes, experiences, and areas of expertise.

Denied. Denied. Denied. Denied. Denied.

Did I tie my self-worth to becoming a veterinarian? You betchya.

But if I had never remained so passionate about veterinary medicine, Moxi probably would never have come to be.

I like to look at Sam, my Sam, with a cute smile and a wink and say, “Moxi – 5 years in the making.”

That’s my story. I wanted you all to know how Moxi was born. Through trauma, trial, error, denial, perseverance, fight, fortitude...and yep, Moxi.