

Living along the pacific coastline, first in Yokohama and now in Vancouver, allowed me to develop a very unique relationship with the waters. I remember every year I used to countdown the days until I could spend every day exploring this beach town, allowing the current to drift the summer days away until the skies resembled blank canvases rather than a work of art we called the sunrise; until the leaves lost their colour. I spent the longest days of the year floating above the waters, but at the same time, I spent what felt like the longest days of the year trapped underwater.

What does drowning feel like? When the undertow hits and it feels like your lungs are filled with water; burning. For me, it wasn't water that pulled me down to my lowest point. I was once in a very dark place, but no one knew because I didn't let them. Not even my closest friends. I began to submerge in all the expectations. From the outside, it appeared as if I had my life together: my days planned, my journal by side, and kept myself busy. From the outside, you would never have been able to tell that it was all just a facade.

I used to play hide and seek almost every day. Well... mostly the hiding part — I'd hide behind my outgoing and bubbly persona. Almost as if it were a game. I'd hide behind the everyday hustle as an “elite student-athlete”. I'd fill my schedule up so I wouldn't have to face all the pressure. Because when you're busy, you don't even have time to be stressed, right? I'd set a timer when I needed to cry because I simply didn't have the time— there were always more tasks on the to-do list. I couldn't be bothered to waste my time feeling sad! I didn't even have the time to acknowledge the fact that a few years ago, my mental health capsized.

You see, I was always the friend everyone went to for help, advice, or support, and I was happy to be there for them but when it came to myself, I didn't want to burden anyone with my own troubles so I pushed these feelings down. Bottling it all up, I began to drift away from morals and common sense. I made impulsive decisions like stealing my parent's car and sneaking out countless times. But no matter how many times my parents got angry at me for doing something like that, I plugged my ears and brushed it off.

From a young age, I was labeled ‘gifted’ and I felt the pressure to live up to the expectations. In the beginning, I just did whatever I enjoyed— dipping my toes into the waters. Everything that sparked my interest. Hockey, Figure skating, Lacrosse, Piano— You name it- I loved it all so I did them all. But somewhere along the way, I became conditioned to think that if I wasn't the best at everything, I was a failure. I challenged myself to the point where I would be at war with myself.

I have clear memories of myself when I was ten, crying to sleep because I felt like a screw up. This later developed into a series of eating disorders, and sleepless nights. At this point, I couldn't touch the sand anymore and my head started to plunge under the familiar waters. I tried to tread water— to tough it out — but you can only tread for so long... I didn't see the problem because in my household, and actually I find this with a lot of immigrant households, mental health is not a common subject.

I finally recognized the extent of this neglect when last year, on my 16th birthday, I went to find the janitor after I accidentally spilled some water between lockdown drills. Beside me at the office, was an Asian boy with his mother trying to sign out but he wasn't allowed to leave. I chose to mind my own business when all of a sudden, he started to get hostile. The next thing you know, the police show up to settle the situation. With tears running down his face, I stood in the office, looking out at him, and listened to the sirens approach the school. His mother, clearly distressed, started apologizing for her son's behaviour but what she doesn't acknowledge is the pain in his eyes. I could see it and I didn't even know his name.

I wanted to ask him why... and I'd be lying to you if I said I just went about my day after. I realized later that I, too, was lashing out for "no reason". I was surrounded by negativity, latching onto me but I couldn't see it. I couldn't put a reason to it. Sometimes you don't know why you are feeling the way you feel but there is always an answer. For me, I was impulsively putting myself in situations where it gave me enough adrenaline to forget about the stress for a moment. But in the end, the root of the problem never really went away; it planted itself deeper.

Let me introduce to you a part of me that has given me something to look forward to on my darkest days and at the same time, has been the reason I broke down on the sunniest days. I play ice hockey and I played on a team full of outstanding hockey players. It took me a lot to get there though. I first got into skating when I got my first pair of rollerblades at 5 years old. Soon after, when I moved to Canada, my parents threw me onto the ice and I fell in awe with the feeling of flying. I was a talented skater but the stick part didn't come naturally to me. Regardless, all I knew was that I loved hockey and that I had potential.

When I switched from boys hockey to girls hockey, I made the rep team and I was over the moon to play at a more competitive level. I quit figure skating that year as well so that's how you REALLY knew I was all in - diving into the deep end! About a week in, coming from boys hockey with a background in figure skating, although I knew I was good enough- or I would not have been there in the first place- my coach at the time neglected me right off the get-go. It was a lot to navigate for a 12-year-old and I let it get to me. In retrospect, I'm grateful, because I learned a lot from it.

At the time, I was too scared to do anything about it and speak up because I didn't dare to disagree with any of the coaching decisions that were made, but something wasn't right. My parents also had no influence, unlike some of the other girls' parents because mine knew nothing about hockey. But rather than allowing me to quit when the waters got choppy, they encouraged me to persevere. All I had to fend for myself was myself. Although I knew that I was deliberately being mistreated, I still showed up because I didn't want to give them a real reason to bench me.

I gave it another year after that, but I began to believe I wasn't good enough to continue. I even planned to quit but something told me to give it one last shot. I ended up trying out for the Major Midget AAA team, the Fraser Valley Rush. To put it into perspective, it's a high-performance hockey league, essentially the highest level you play to pursue post-secondary hockey. Well, what did I have to lose anyway? The coach of the Fraser Valley Rush, Delaney Collins was a former team Canada player, gold medalist, Coach of Team BC, and I thought wow, how cool would it be to be coached by her. Well, there was a lot of competition and as I

said, this team was full of superstars. I was a third-line grinder majority of the time. With my confidence plummeting by the minute, what made me think I had a shot? The way it worked in my head was, make this team, or quit hockey. There were two tryouts, one in May and one in August. Long story short, the first tryout comes around and I didn't get a spot. But by then, I didn't care anymore. I didn't care about hockey, lacrosse, rugby, my job, or school for that matter. Regardless, I showed up to the second tryout, expecting nothing.

On the very last day of the tryout, I went to say thank you to Delaney and she ended up offering me a spot mid-conversation. Among the most seasoned hockey players, she chose me. From that day on, this coach gave me more chances than I could've ever asked for. Little by little, she started to develop me into twice the player I used to be. Starting with the mentality. She saw the potential, and when you gave the girl a chance, she was a different person. She sprinkled some confidence in me and taught me more than just how to be a hockey player, but insisted that I reach for the 'unobtainable'. She doesn't know the impact she had on me by being such a remarkable role model but I give her credit for helping me to get to where I am today.

I had a conversation with her at the end of the year, asking for advice about the upcoming year. As grade 11 was approaching, I knew that it was going to be extremely difficult and busier than ever. My councilors at the time strongly suggested that playing elite-level hockey and doing full IB, a very rigorous academic program with college-level coursework, would be a combination of disaster, but Delaney disagreed. She said she believed in me, and in order to be great, you must take these chances. She assured me that I had her support to take on this upcoming challenge but I wouldn't have had the courage to pursue this obstacle if it wasn't for the little nudge.

She is one of the reasons why I am so passionate about coaching, mentorship, and giving back; why I always try my best to check in with my friends; why I'm involved in non-profits and startups. To ensure that everyone can become their best selves, supporting those around me, elevating one another. It's a domino effect, it a full-circle moment.

Now that I look back, I gained more than I lost. Not only did this hockey team give me countless opportunities that I am beyond grateful for, but it also gave me 19 other girls I call family, 19 people who I can count on any hour of the day. *Another one of my best friends wrote me a letter that said, "Make it count, but at the same time do not negotiate with your mental health and well being... While I stand in awe of your work ethic, I encourage you to sometimes let yourself relax and if you need a friend, I'm one text away".* That stuck with me.

Well, underneath the walls and labels, we are all constantly working to become better versions of ourselves. You won't be able to tell, and most of the time they won't show it either because of the fear of vulnerability. But I hope by being vulnerable today, it can spark some conversations. Amidst all the blur, all you really need is an individual who sees this struggle and gives you a small push. It happened to me, and the impact it had on me, I carry with me every day.

Imagine how powerful we could be if all of us became that person for someone else. It's so simple, yet, we rarely think about taking that extra effort to do so. Most of us just need that little push, a steer in the right direction. Learning how to swim is not easy and does not come naturally. Even when it feels like you've dropped a thousand meters below the surface, you will rise again. The feeling of finally floating is refreshing and rewarding, but you will never experience that in the shallow waters. You can stand in the sand all you want, however, life's thrills appear where you can't see the ocean floor so you decide, sink or swim?