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likeness

m a g a z i n e

taking care of me

Low Entropy is headquartered in Kwikwetlem First Nation Territory of the Coast Salish people, and in the shared territory of the sə́lilwətaʔt̓ təməxʷ, xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Stz'uminus, Qayqayt and S'ólh Téméxw nations.

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About Low Entropy: Founded in 2015, the Low Entropy Foundation is home to free programs and events that focus on personal and community growth through empowerment, authenticity and meaningful interpersonal connections.

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Foreword

Our interactions with the world are fundamentally inside-out — me first, no matter how kind or benevolent my (me, me, me) intentions, because even self-sacrifice comes from internal desire, and being selfless — truly selfless — would require, it seems to me, the abject horror of complete nonexistence.

And why shy away from this? Is it shameful to be saddled with the responsibility of looking after yourself? You deserve upkeep and upgrades. You deserve the highest-quality maintenance.

Our writers in this issue are not necessarily selfish or self-centered (and if they are, it's not relevant, really). They simply recognize the tiny little truth of our hierarchy of needs: that not only are we not good to anyone if we're not good to ourselves, but that we are *nothing at all* without ourselves.

So without speaking for everyone else, I just want to put it out there that I'm glad that you're around, even if we don't know each other. I'm guessing, by playing the odds, that you're a work-in-progress, and that's fantastic — I hope you're nurturing yourself, because I'm excited for all the growth and change that a little TL(self-)C will allow you to experience.

Seriously, take care, ok? And thanks for being here.



Editor, Low Entropy

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NEEMA
EJERCITO

Neema Ejercito is a professional writer, director and creative writing mentor. Her 3D edutainment series for beginning readers, *AlphaBesties*, is showing in YouTube Japan and Prairie Kids. When she's not writing or mentoring, she manages her household with her very supportive husband and three children.

Already There

Neema Ejercito

In the morning, I rise to meet you
but you are already there
I rise to greet you
but you have already sung
You need not wait for me to move
And yet you call
As if your actions depend on my will
When they depend on yours
On yours alone

My Magic Mud

Sue Turi

I’ve learned to love mud. Not the familiar kind of mud that cars get stuck in, that I bring into the home on my boots or that gardeners delight in seeding and watching for what grows out of it. I’ve learned to love the mud that causes my family to pinch their noses with its overwhelming earthy smell and think, “Oh no, it’s that time again.”

The mud I love is mud I buy in a box and put on my hair, and it comes from the crushed leaves of a spindly tropical shrub grown on hillsides in North Africa and Asia. *Lawsonia inermis*, or “henna” as it is commonly known, has become magic medicine for me for its uncanny ability to make me feel good. If a month goes by and I haven’t done my mud hair ritual, my morale begins to sink. I try to convince my grimacing teenager that even though it smells and looks a lot like dirt mud — earthy, brown, and clumpy — it has antiseptic qualities in addition to its copper-staining quality. The fact that it cures dandruff, heals wounds and is good for the environment are not the only reasons I like henna — I like it because it reminds me of my connection to the natural world.

Mud is a primal healing element, like fire, water and air, and just like the earth births life from decomposition, henna mud rejuvenates the depressed me, especially during the long winter months. From the first puffs of green powder that settle in a ceramic bowl, to the mixing of the paste with warm water, to its maceration to brown and reddish dye release, henna



is a sensory journey. The three-to-four hours of me-time reserved for this hair-staining ritual is also part of its attraction — as a large clump of mud on my head wrapped in cellophane and a towel, it is virtually impossible to run errands, serve as mom taxi or conduct Zoom meetings without a trickle of orange-brown seeping over an eyebrow and dripping onto clothes, requiring explanations.

I was introduced to henna when I was 18 while I was living a hippy lifestyle in a communal house with fellow hippies. Back then, dyeing your hair was considered a shameful selling-out to society, just like shaving armpits and eating fast food. Using henna was more about rebellion and rejecting commercial products than engaging in a beauty routine. Maybe this is still true for me today. Although henna is mostly known for its temporary tattoo art, in the west it still remains a fringe beauty treatment for hair outside of

Photo by
Katherine
Hanlon

Photo by
Sue Turi

the cosmetic mainstream, perhaps due to its smell, time-intensiveness or its powerful hair-strengthening and dyeing properties that can interact unpredictably with chemical hair dyes. Hairstylists have been known to freeze at the mention of the word and to blaspheme its flaming carrot-coloured results, which are permanent and cannot be lifted with bleach.

But over the years, even though I have strayed from henna to chemical hair dyes for their convenience, I have always come back to using my magic mud without really understanding why I was enjoying this time-consuming, messy, grass-smelling ritual when a perfumed store-bought dye was available. It took a health scare a few years later for me to start thinking of henna as not only a cosmetic choice, but a health choice, when a large but non-visible precancerous skin lesion was found on my forehead, beneath my hairline by a dermatologist. After surgery that left me with a large hole in a swollen face, I decided that this was the ultimate sign that I should consummate my complex relationship with henna, and I have been a loyal user ever since.

My henna use has since taken on an almost spiritual quality, and has made me realize that coquetry and self-care do not have to be vain or environmentally damaging pursuits. My family has come to accept my relationship with henna, or at least are indifferent now to its lingering earthy presence and, just like with the lumps of moist clay that I sometimes shape into

flower pots and figurines, they perhaps understand that it serves my need to feel connected to my organic self and Mother Earth.

On a mantelpiece above my fireplace is a decorative wooden sign, hand-painted with henna paste that reads “Henna Forever.” Just like in ancient Egypt, where henna was used for everything from nail-staining to cooling down desert-hot skin, and in modern India where henna is still used for spiritual blessings, henna transcends cultural and corporeal boundaries. Maybe that’s another reason why I call it my magic mud.



SUE TURI I have been a book illustrator and painter for the last 30 years and more recently, a writer for Low Entropy. I'm passionate about many social issues and enjoy writing articles, short stories, and poetry. I live on the outskirts of Montreal where I'm able to enjoy both the peace of the Milles Isles River and the vibrancy of Montreal's city life.

ME TOO

Balreet Sidhu

Take care of me,
If I am free.
Look to see!
A weed! Aren't I a trèe?

Here I bleed,
There I accede.
And my need?
Here-now I plant the seed.

Away from the screen,
A walk in the green.
Less sugar, more bean,
Healthier than lean.

Bike, coffee, music, journal, a book to read,
More haste less speed.
Fingers on a prayer bead,
Tree by fruit, man by deed.

Sunshine and air,
To me, a wonderful pair.
A voyager or mountaineer; 'O brave do dare,
Like the devil may care.

Believe 'n' receive; of Expectation and Opinion freed,
Take risks and Lead.
Your own back, pay heed,
Less stressed, more blessed; indeed!

A century ago, in his poem “Leisure”, William Henry Davies emphasized the importance of taking time from everyday cares. I wonder how much of this we really practice as humans? Taking care of oneself physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually is important. It isn't selfish, social obligation or recovering for work. It is constant and different from nobody-but-yourself.

BALREET SIDHU I moved to Canada in 2018. It was in 10th grade while at Convent of Jesus & Mary in Shimla, India that my teacher, Ms. Kamini Singh, encouraged me to write for the school magazine. That never happened, but in hindsight, that verbal encouragement paid off today. We are all worthy and deserving.



NORMAN GALIMSKI

Norman Galimski is a multimedia storyteller with a passion for underappreciated people, places and food. His work has appeared in more than 80 publications across Canada, including the *Vancouver Sun* and *Toronto Star*. He is currently based in Vancouver B.C. Hudson happily lives in Cumberland, B.C. with his two moms, Sam and Tamar.

**The Friend
Who Leads
You Out and
Brings You
Home**

Norman Galimski



He is the bestest of boys. A good boy.
A natural leader. He takes you out and then brings it all back home.
He is an explorer. Trek through hot dry concrete jungle and cold wet temperate rainforest.
He is a happy boy. Just look at that smile.
Hudson.



“I need persistence to see the glass half-full again.”

NIKA
KHOSHDEL

Nika is a goal-directed young physician who is passionate about books, coffee, volunteering and learning new skills. She hopes to help more people live a happy and prosperous life.

Victim Mentality: A Toxic State of Mind

Nika Khoshdel

The world is no fair place. Many people are dealing with injustice in their everyday life. Youths may have to encounter even more inequalities for their openness to new experiences. The fact that numerous individuals were born to a not-that-perfect life with endless difficult circumstances to manage could make them feel frustrated, hopeless and even furious; why me?

I was not an exception. As a young medical graduate, asking the same question so many times a day had become a routine practice to my mind. Filled with an intense anger and deep sorrow, it was more like I was grieving for myself for being a victim of the cruelty of the universe.

The truth is, as long as we come from different situations and conditions, we can feel discrimination and injustice. For me, it was mainly about my place of birth, while for someone else it could be financial issues, family conflicts or ideological beliefs.

I needed to work harder and harder, and I knew I could not keep going with a miserable soul. I needed a peaceful and eager mind to concentrate solely on my goals and nothing else.

I decided to feel every negative emotion thoroughly. I asked myself why I felt the way I did and tried to discover the root of each toxic thought. Meanwhile, I tried to give myself a positivity boost by thinking about and writing down what I had accomplished and the giant obstacles I had overcome over the

years. It took time and I needed persistence to be able to see the glass half-full again.

It was not easy, but I made it happen. This is another accomplishment of mine that makes me more determined to pursue my goals and dreams. I am unstoppable, a trait which never ever makes a victim out of me.

During my mental health journey, I learnt a lot. I read many books, got the help of professionals and expanded my network to actively seek beneficial tips and tricks. Here is a brief essence of what I came to: it is fine to feel strong negative emotions now and then. However, we should be aware of victim mentality. Victim mentality is a toxic mindset that manifests as excuses for giving up on life, success and cheerfulness. The sufferer tends to blame external factors rather than trying to find solutions when facing difficulties. It is a potential threat to mental health and productivity that has to be recognized as soon as possible.

Feel and explore your negative emotions thoroughly, and then let them go. Do not let them stay long. Instead, focus on your accomplishments and ways to overcome the challenges ahead of you. Fill your soul with hope, courage and enthusiasm. Remember that you need to avoid victim mentality to live a happy and fruitful life. It's not easy. But it is worth trying for, worth doing your best for. Practice makes perfect!

S H O R Y A
GOYAL

Shorya is a person who values the importance of both acquiring knowledge and wisdom. He believes that while studying is important in order to gain knowledge, it is also essential to observe and learn from life experiences in order to gain wisdom. He takes this belief to heart, and strives to not only improve himself, but also to help and lift others up along the way.

Untitled

Shorya Goyal

Taking care of me,
A journey that I must take,
To find the strength within,
To make the choices that are right.

It starts with self-love,
Embracing who I am,
Accepting my flaws and quirks,

And giving myself a helping hand.

It means nourishing my body,
With healthy food and rest,
Exercising and moving,

To feel my very best.

It means setting boundaries,
Learning to say “no,”
Protecting my time and energy,

So I can grow and glow.

It means finding balance,
In all that I do,
Making time for work and play,

And all the things that renew.

It means being kind to myself,
Forgiving my mistakes,
Letting go of perfection,

And all the heartaches.

It means trusting my intuition,
Listening to my heart,
Following my passions,

And making a brand new start.

Taking care of me,
A journey that never ends,
But each day, I'll take a step,

Toward becoming my best friend.

It may not always be easy,
But it's a path that I must tread,
To live my best life,

And be the person I was meant to be.

So I'll take care of me,
With love and care and grace,
Embracing all that I am,

And finding my rightful place.

For when I take care of myself,
I have the strength to face the day,
And all the challenges that come my way,

In a brighter, better way.

So here's to taking care of me,
A journey that I'll always choose,
To live a life that's rich and full,

And never, ever lose.

NATALIE ZEIFMAN Natalie Zeifman (she/her) was born in El Paso, Texas in 1994, but after many years of living in a land of polite door-holding and over-apologizing, she has since become Canadianized. Her main passions in life have long been split between the creative arts, social issues, lying in sunbeams and trying to understand how humans come to self-realization. She is a writer, poet, photographer and clarinet player, and she enjoys studying and raising awareness around topics related to social justice, critical animal studies, psychology, self-development and healing from trauma, in the hope that it will help encourage a more compassionate world for ourselves inside and out.

Self-Kindness as Self-Care

Natalie Zeifman

I think that we as a society do not value self-care enough, and it is, unfortunately, generally poorly modeled for us. Self-care in modern times often gets associated with consumerism. It’s suggested that you can buy self-love with a spa day or a face mask. But while that can feel good for many people, it’s also a disservice to frame self-care as a luxury amenity, or something you go to when things have already gotten too hard to bear. I would argue self-care is and should be represented as accessible and routine.

If you had asked me a year ago whether I felt I was good at taking care of myself, I would have shrugged my shoulders and said yes. I got myself to work and to school. I paid my bills. I kept myself alive with enough food and sleep. I tried to protect my mental space from

negative influences.

I accomplished the basic necessities of my life and goals, and therefore I had to understand this “self-care” term, right?

But I also wasn’t particularly happy or fulfilled. I felt like I was just surviving. And the reality was that I prioritized my accomplishments over my well-being; they weren’t a particular result of it. My self-worth and my sense of happiness with myself were so wrapped up

in my ability to “do,”

I didn’t know how to nourish myself in any other way than with a literal to-do list.

My approach to myself meant that I only valued the parts of me that produced, and thus any time that I used to recharge was viewed with suspicion and derision, if I was even able to recognize such time as recharging at all. The rest I took in between tasks was more often considered shameful laziness. Shame was the operative word, because surrounding myself with shame was how I both motivated and perceived that I was protecting myself.

Though I was objectively taking care of myself during that period of my life, I had an internal voice that treated me worse than I would ever treat anyone else. It told me that I was only worth as much as I did. It told me that how other people responded to

me, and even their integrity, was my responsibility to carry. It told me that I had to prove myself more than others, that I was less than others. It told me that I needed to do more, more, more, and right now. When I could not meet the immense demands of that voice, it told me I was confirming what it already knew. So my mood sank lower and I had to put even more energy into getting myself back up. I thought of being my own friend and caretaker like being a whip. My internal voice told me that

I treated myself badly for my own greater good,

that I had to be harsh and punishing so that others wouldn’t treat me that way.

I would consider that voice viciously abusive if it came from anyone else, but I lived with that voice everyday.

I know that self-care can mean many different things to different people. What’s nourishing for one person could be destructive for someone else. But I want to talk about a kind of self-care that I believe isn’t modeled enough, and that’s our everyday approach to ourselves: how we think about ourselves, how we treat ourselves and how we define our well-being.

A powerful form of self-care I have found is simply talking to myself in a kinder way, and just actually being my own friend. I’ve come to realize that I am my one true knower and caretaker. We tend to romanticize the idea of a soulmate level of love or intimacy with someone else, and yet here I am, the one person truly able to know everything I have been through and all my good intentions. The one person who can name the feeling of being on the path that’s right for me. The one person truly responsible for making sure that I am okay. How could I not be kind to that person?

But when you’re surprisingly unused to self-kindness, it’s hard to change your approach to yourself overnight. So if you’ve ever struggled with this like I have, I wanted to share a few cognitive tricks that you can use to help aid this process.

One is imagining that you have an inner-child that you are caretaking. We have a knack for treating ourselves worse than we would treat others. You can denormalize that by thinking of yourself as taking care of, loving and achieving little you’s dreams. Hold your self-care to the same standard as the care you would provide someone else. If you wouldn’t feed

someone else cold leftovers, then you shouldn’t feed them to yourself either.

The second thing you can do, especially if you have an inner voice that is more like an inner bully, is add a couple of voices to react to your harsher thoughts. First, imagine what a friend would say on your behalf if they heard such things. They would call out that bully’s cruelty and say kind things instead. You can also imagine a second voice that explicitly identifies your pain and how such harsh words affect you in a negative way. For example, “When you constantly set goals higher than I can manage, it makes me feel like I’m not meeting your expectations and that I will never be good enough in this world. You always care about what I should be producing, but not what I need to feel okay and soothed. You don’t see me as a full person, only as a box to be checked.” Clap back at that inner bully, and with time, the voice of the friend is the one that’s going to be in charge.

Another big thing is to try and approach yourself with empathy and understanding, rather than self-flagellation, when things don’t go as planned. You can ask yourself why things didn’t work out and empathetically witness how the previous expectations didn’t take into account the circumstances. You can encourage self-awareness and acceptance, and make a more informed plan for the future. You can motivate yourself with kindness, caring and empathy, rather than threats of worthlessness. In fact, beating yourself up about things means you need more time to soothe those feelings afterwards.

Getting real, if you really struggle with self-worth issues, as a lot of us do, it can be really helpful to make it a regular practice to name what you like about yourself. Name your strengths and skills. Name what you would want other people to love about you, and give yourself that affectionate validation. Explore who you are and recognize what you have to offer.

Naming your value gives you stronger self-validation. It lets you believe in yourself, even when others doubt you, or think you should go in a different direction. It builds self-knowledge to be confident in and feel strong in. It gives you a better ability to stand behind your standards and boundaries.

Most of all, when you are able to internally name your worth,

you won’t feel such a strong urge to seek it externally,

and this can make a big difference in how you comprehend self-care. If your approach to self-care was

Photo by Paul Hanaoka



to nourish yourself just enough so that you could produce what others would give you care and approval for, but then you increase your ability to give a lot of that care and validation to yourself, then you have changed the meaning of self-care from nourishing your image to nourishing the actual you. And when you're not so focused on proving yourself, but instead on being true to yourself, that can feel like such a release of weight from your shoulders.

Finally, a really helpful practice of self-kindness is to make time to be truly present with yourself, listen to what you need in the moment, and enjoy it being fulfilled. Don't live exclusively inside a preconceived to-do list. And in this, try to witness and accept yourself for who you are and where you are. Try to feel peace knowing you're on your path. I personally really appreciate these words from therapist Patrick Teahan: "To be good enough is to be really alive." When you are really engaged in what makes you truly happy, you're not likely to be worrying about your self-worth. You're too busy feeling fulfilled.

These days, when I am struggling with being kind to myself because I'm associating my productivity with my self-worth, I like to think of cats. Yes, cats are amazing, but more than that they have been beloved by billions of human souls for thousands of years. And I would argue that us cat lovers love them not because of what they do, but because of who they are. Their soft presence. Their quiet affection. Their little noses.

In the end, I think what defines healthy self-care is not just its ability to nourish your next task, but its ability to make you feel happy, worthy, safe, comfortable and confident in yourself.

“When you are engaged in what makes you truly happy, you’re not likely to be worrying about your self-worth.”



Photo by Unsplash

CAMERON KIRCHNER I am a 22-year-old student pursuing graduate studies in public safety. For the last several years I have struggled with mental illness, specifically depression. It has been quite debilitating and difficult to describe to others.

Depression is Drowning

Cameron Kirchner

I have struggled with self-improvement and moving forward with personal acceptance, but as of late I have made significant movement in acceptance and working towards achieving my goals. Nonetheless, I want others to understand how depression personally affected me and how it can affect people in different ways and forms.

At first you are okay
Daybreak is just surface break away
It's almost fun,
A challenge to see how long you can hold your breath
You are in control
And yet you don't even realize you are drowning
You can't breathe
But you can still smile and laugh so you don't even care
Panic sets in
By now you have reached the bottom

Sometimes you struggle to swim back to the surface
Other times you can't even bother to care that you are laying flat against the bottom
And no matter what you choose
You can't go anywhere

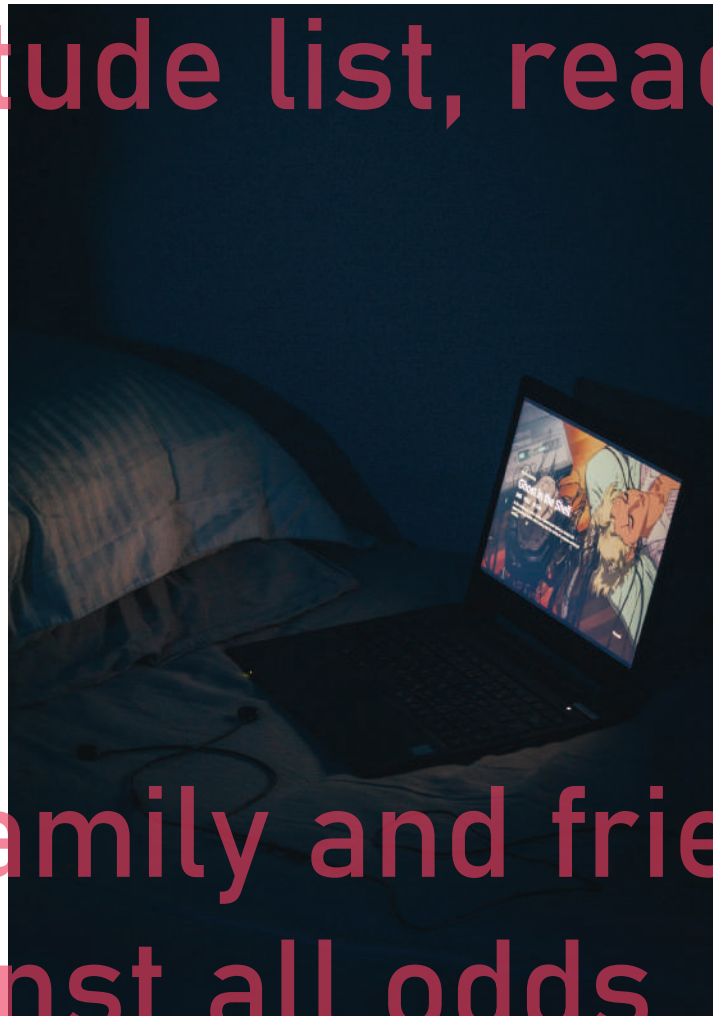
Because the water you are stuck in is just your mind and you can only see out of your eyes.

Taking Care of Me



Shayan Afkari I am a motion designer and 3D digital artist. I made my layout in Maxon Cinema 4D.

“When I become over-
whelmed, I look at my
gratitude list, reach out



to family and friends,
against all odds, to do
something, anything”

Photo by Atul Vinayak

Manic depression and taking care of me

Kathy Woudzia

I have bipolar I disorder. That means I have manic-depressive disorder and I need to do more self-care than the average healthy person, especially when I am feeling depressed. I cycle between mania and depression and, as I write this story, I am in the depressive stage.

When I'm manic, I have a great desire to look after myself, so self-care is easy. There isn't anything I don't think I can accomplish. The sky's the limit. I wake up at all hours of the night and write. I get up at 6 a.m. and do a workout. I have a million things planned, believing every task is meaningful. I shower and do my make up even if I won't be seeing anyone. I record myself dancing in front of the mirror. I spend hours writing, drawing, painting and taking on major projects. I paint and repaint my nails, sit in an essential oil-infused bath with the scent of candles burning all around me and love listening to music. I am excited about everything in life and nothing bores me. It is like being on the best high any drug could ever give you.

Unfortunately, I also take part in incredibly negative impulsive acts that leave me with regrets. I go shopping and spend money I don't have. I think the money's going to come when I'm famous. I think I'm going to be the one to save the world and care about other people immensely, but then I lash out at people who have wronged me, making enemies. I read the news and become enraged at the state of our country. Then I spend hours writing mean emails

to government officials, asking them to do something, anything, about it. Being manic is a double-edged sword. It brings out both the best and the worst in me, but self-care is never a problem.

Then I hit my low and life begins to unravel.

Problems I never worried about before start to pile up, which I find overwhelming. I am disinterested in everything and minutes go by like hours. I have all the time in the day and yet just getting into the bath is a chore, so I put it off for another day. I don't want to cook anything for myself, yet can't get myself out the door in an effort to buy something premade.

Shopping, something I used to love, now gives me feelings of anxiety. I feel almost nothing — only apathy. I can't stand listening to music anymore. I care little about my appearance. Brushing my teeth is a task. I like the idea of spending time with loved ones, but when I do, I can't wait to leave because I am anxious that I don't have anything to contribute to the conversation. I worry about everything, where when manic, I worry about nothing. Bed and Netflix are my safe haven. I go to bed at 7 p.m., watch mindless tv shows, sleep, wake up, watch more Netflix and then finally manage to get out of bed at 10 a.m. It feels like every decision I make is a bad one. This happens on repeat, minute-to-minute, day-to-day.

With bipolar disorder, when manic, the higher and longer you go, the lower you fall. I go long and high,

Kathy Woudzia is a writer and mother of four children, the eldest one deceased. She is nana to three grandchildren. She has a background in both white-collar and blue-collar work, and is now self-employed. She considers herself a graduate from the School of Hard Knocks and wants to make the world a better place.

so that makes my fall unbearable. My manic episodes tend to last for 12 months. My depressive episodes last longer. I don't "want" to be medicated, but I now know I need the medication because the fact is, what I do when I'm manic, I regret when I'm depressed. I also need to be on medication because each time you go manic, you fall hard and I can't do this anymore. It seems there is no middle ground for me.

The fact I am depressed means I need to look after myself more, not less, and yet I don't have the will. So I start my day by journaling. I try to start by writing down my feelings and things I am grateful for. Sometimes it's pages; sometimes it's two lines. I still watch my iPad in bed but now it's documentaries, world events and listening to others' stories about living with bipolar disorder. I try to meditate, though due to my impulsivity, it is hard to keep negative thoughts out of my mind. I can only think of the obstacles I have in front of me, so I try a Buddhist chant — "amituofo," repeated over and over. It all helps.

I manage to get myself out of bed after the chant. I give myself credit for combing my hair, brushing my teeth and putting my eyebrow liner on.

It's the little things I accomplish that give me the will to take baby steps into the day.

I am very lonely as the kids have all flown the nest and my marriage failed because of my illness. I am not currently working, but I just got a job in the bakery department in a grocery store. I try to focus on the positive and the fact I will be making some extra money and being around people in my otherwise solitary life. This gives me a sliver of hope. Work is good.

I make breakfast and call my mom — she needs to live as long or longer than me because she is the one person I can always count on. She makes me feel better, if only for a while. I get out my pencils and spend the next two hours practicing my drawing, if only to take my mind away from reality. I'm proud of my drawings and show them to family members when I get the chance. I open up Pages on my iPad and I write — poetry and short stories. I find writing

helps me cope with my feelings and insecurities. Another important form of self-care is lacing up my running shoes and either going for a walk, outside if it's nice, or on the treadmill in my building. I try to find an interesting YouTube video to listen to while I'm walking to pass the time. Then, back to more writing and drawing.

My mind doesn't stay still.

I look around the house and see dust. I convince myself to get the vacuum cleaner out, knowing that being in a clean house will make me feel better. I notice that it's one hour till my acupuncture appointment — a very important part of self-care. There, I can be honest with my traditional Chinese medicine practitioner. She helps me with the depression and with the side effects of the medication.

I have joined some online bipolar support groups, which helps me out because I get to hear about others' behaviours and how they cope. Many talk about the heights reached when manic, the regrets and the descent into depression. Their struggles help me manage my own. We're all facing different obstacles, and yet feel a sense of camaraderie. These groups keep me going. So does family.

Self-care is always important, but especially important for those struggling with manic depression. I try to live in the moment and stay thankful for what I do have, rather than what I don't have. I am trying to live the best life possible under the circumstances. When I become overwhelmed, I look at my gratitude list, reach out to family and try, against all odds, to do something, anything, even if I'm not interested in it at first. The interest comes. I push myself to do these things because I always feel better during and after. And I now take life one minute at a time.

CASSAN-
DRA DI
LALLA

Cassandra Di Lalla lives life purposefully. She enjoys reading, writing and mental health initiatives. She's an animal lover for life and an innovative individual always finding new ways to create.

Taking Care of Me

Cassandra Di Lalla

Eight hours of sleep
Eight minutes of meditation
Eight cups of H2O
Eight moments of self recognition

A marshmallow cloud
A clear sky
The angels' wings
A path of zen

Fresh start
Clean air
Pure heart
Kind soul

The feeling of 'existence'
The belief in 'purpose'
The mindfulness with 'exhaustion'
The understanding of 'emotion'

My body has these settings
Similar to my MacBook
And all I need to do is
Force quit, sleep, restart, or log out

But I've escaped death
I'm trying to cope
I've fought my demons
I'm living on hope

I will hydrate
I will meditate
I will hibernate
This is my fate

GURLEEN KAUR BAJWA Both a prolific reader and writer, Gurleen likes living inside exciting stories. She's working on making her own the most exciting of all.

Breathing Underwater

Gurleen Kaur Bajwa

Photo by
Joshua
Hoehne

The length of the exam seemed to stretch out infinitely, trailing along at the pace of a snail crossing the length of the entire continent. Hudson felt the creep of summer over his shoulder, waiting for him to hand in the paper. But for a reason he couldn't exactly verbalize, he did not. The timepiece on the wall ticked loudly, strips of golden sunlight decorating the gym floors, and soon, when the clock struck six, there would be scraping of chairs and desks, calls to remain quiet and seated lost among the chatter.

Imagining the level of noise alone nauseated Hudson enough to hand in the exam five minutes to. He walked out, standing out on the steps to peer at the sunny day around him. The moment his phone turned on, there was a stream of messages and calls of invites to social activities. He thought about turning them down and just going back to his dorm room, but as if reading his mind, one of his friends shot off a warning, claiming to have taken his laptop hostage.

Hudson groaned. But he knew when he was beat, so an hour later (after confirming that his laptop was indeed gone) he found himself squished between Ravi and Tim as they tossed back compliments and insults variably, the booth much too small for three people.

"We should next time," Tim shouted over the winningly loud music of the bar.

"I'm down," Ravi said excitedly, as Hudson politely rejected the next drink being handed to him. "What you think, Hudson?"



Oops. Hudson had definitely not been listening.

"Er . . . yeah," he agreed.

It must have been the right response, since both faces lit up delightedly. They said something more, but this time boisterous shouting nearby drowned them out. Hudson nodded despite that, since otherwise Tim would repeat himself by yelling directly into his ear, which was, from Hudson's experience, very painful. Hudson didn't enjoy these kinds of scenes, but he couldn't tell if it was because he was just

going to the wrong parties. Or maybe he was just that boring. People were always drunk, sweaty, inappropriately handsy regardless of reciprocation, and loud. The loudness, most of all, got to him. In the three years he'd been in the city, Hudson couldn't get over the noise. The ones he woke up to, the hum of the building, the chatter in the dorm hallways, rushing cars and ringing bells, and bustling crowds inside coffee shops. Rushing students over crosswalks, into lecture halls, out of exams — always so fast, making his head spin. Everything was so fast. And cramped. Why was everything cramped? There was so much space to grow, but instead they had tight dorm rooms, tight hallways, tight classrooms, tight elevators — everything suffocatingly small.

He loosened the top button of his shirt, wanting to breathe.

He lay his head back, muting the droning murmurs and laughter, watching reality go by outside the windows. The world didn't span infinitely, but stopped on the other side of the street, illuminating a 24-hour grocers. Hudson hoped the world was bigger than



Photo by
Kate Sade

that. Than this one street holding lines of honking cars and yelling drivers and running pedestrians. But it was false hope, he knew that — wasn't this what he had signed up for? He'd be done his last year at college and then be off to work in an office cubicle, hunched over with a view just like this, maybe a bit higher if he was lucky, blocked by skyscrapers instead of pedestrians, and then he'd go home to the same view, and then go for drinks and dates with the same view, and then show the same street to his kids, and tell them,

"Look, this is the world. It starts here and ends right over there."

Hudson drifted into sleep.

Leaning against an old pick-up truck, Jay waved just as Hudson had heaved his bags out of the dorms. Hudson felt surprise flutter in his chest as his hand raised to return the gesture, and Jay grinned with that familiar cat-like smile.

"Why would you come here?" Hudson reproached, even as Jay helped him load his entire life on the back of the truck.

"Why not?" Jay retorted. "I had nothing to do any-ways."

"Don't you have a job?"

"It's Sanchez's arcade, be serious for once."

Hudson laughed, feeling something heavy move off his chest. He relaxed into the cheap passenger seat as Jay chatted his ear off while they drove.

"I don't even know why the theatre is still open even. It probably has a daily traffic of two people and occasionally a tourist might pop by — oh did you know Ryan finally fixed up his dad's old car?"

By the time Jay had started listing all of Noah's recent breakups (some of which had confusing enough timelines for them to exchange knowing looks), the city was dying away outside with the light. As the ocean came into view, zipping by behind trees and highway dividers, Hudson felt his heart lift slightly with fondness and familiarity. Shoulders relaxing. The streetlights flickered on just ten minutes away from their destination.

"You know," Jay said into the quiet that had fallen as soon as the darkness did, driving in comfortable silence, "a part of me was a little scared that you'd be different."

Hudson’s glaze flickered toward him, confused.

“What do you mean, ‘different’?”

“Just . . .” he exhaled, putting his head back. “We used to hang out a lot when we were kids, all of us, but after you went off to college. . .

you didn’t really stay in touch with anyone

besides Kris, and this is the first summer you’ve taken off.”

“Ah.”

Hudson felt the guilt pool in his stomach. A part of him, of course, had felt the void grow between him and his friends as the years went by, only briefly meeting in passing at birthdays, weddings and funerals. Conversations had grown briefer and more distant, and it occurred to him that he and Jay probably hadn’t spoken like this alone since high school.

“Sorry, guess I got busy with school.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Jay chided. “We’re all happy for you, you know? Only you and Noah took the jump to leave, and we’re proud of you guys for it. Just wish . . . I mean, don’t you miss high school?”

They passed by an old, familiar, dilapidated pier, pulling memories from Hudson’s head, summer afternoons filled with screaming laughter, freezing cold water, and sunsets and sunrises.

“Yeah,” Hudson admitted, exhaling as they came to a stop next to the boardwalk where it led down to the ocean, soft waves lit up in the car’s headlights. “I do.”

“It’s settled then.”

Jay hit his hands against the steering wheel.

“Tomorrow — before daybreak?”

Hudson stared at him.

“What?”

It only truly hit Hudson how long he’d been away when he cut his hand climbing down the jagged rock side, something that had once been too easy in absolute darkness, every step second nature to him. He hesitated before jump the last few feet of the overhang, doubtful of his own past knowledge of the soft sand that lay below. To his surprise and relief, just as his memory had told him, he landed safely on the more private edge of the beach, that only those who grew up in the small, close-knit town knew of.

Hudson slowly padded forward, the taste of salt on the tip of his tongue, both overwhelmingly familiar but unfamiliar. He felt the chords of the acoustic guitar in his very soul when they were plucked close behind, among laughter, and he turned to see Noah surrounded by their friends, as he strummed the way only someone who’d played since he was ten could. He caught a glimpse of Hudson first, his bright, dimpled, infectious smile already in place, and never amiss.

Hudson didn’t move for a moment, watching them almost in bewilderment, Jay and Ryan gesturing him over encouragingly and Kris already in the water on his surfboard, running a hand through his hair as he waited for sunrise. Hudson thought about how long it had been since he’d last seen them like this, with no purpose at all.

He thought there would be more talking, more reminiscing, more reflections of the past — but there wasn’t. There were very few words as they left the land for the water. It was a medium that had always felt more

natural and easier for them

to survive in, far removed from anyone but themselves, the waves gently moving them up and down. Kris reached out with a grin to clasp Hudson’s shoulder once as their boards drew parallel, daybreak spreading over them. Hudson turned to watch it, mouth gaping slightly in surprise and awe at the brilliant hues shining over the universe as he remembered that yes, the world had been this big.

Infinitely big, out of his reach, no matter how far he swam. It had made him feel small and alone once upon a time, enough to give it up for adventures more conquerable and material. The water rushed over Hudson as he fell into the grasp of the cold darkness, hearing the laughter of his friends high above him. And then he was surrounded by the cushioning, but comforting silence of the sea and he finally breathed, feeling at peace.



