

Graduate Student Learns Self-Care While Helping Mother Face Alcohol Addiction

Words by Elizabeth White

Illustration by Samantha Lee

I sat on the porch on a warm Sunday summer night, brainstorming story ideas for my summer news reporting class when my phone rang. My sister was calling, and she was hysterical. My mom was drunk again.

Two weeks before I left for graduate school, I discovered that our mom was drinking again after 13 years of sobriety. I couldn't sleep, I couldn't eat, and I didn't know how I was going to move six hours away from home in only a matter of days.

My mom and I have shared a deep connection since my parents got divorced when I was 9 years old. She is my best friend and the person I am closest to, and being apart from her is difficult on the average day.

Despite worries about my mom and what was going on at home, I chose to go to school anyway. Education has always been my top priority; I couldn't let this derail my plans.

There were a lot of tears and lonely nights as I struggled to adjust to a new city with new people. I didn't make many friends in the beginning because I didn't want them to know what was going on with me and I certainly didn't want them to pity me.

My sister gave me updates on my mom

as I completed my summer courses. Every few weeks, the cycle would restart: relapse, she seems okay, drinking, lies, a fight, and so on. I spent hours on the phone with everyone at home while I sat useless in upstate New York.

Time and time again, a question arose within me: How do I take care of myself

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and my mom at the same time? Both needed to be done, but taking care of her was at the cost of my own mental health. Each relapse sent me into a frenzy of emotions, mentally affecting me for hours and sometimes days.

A few weeks into summer boot camp,

the nickname S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications graduate students give to the intensive six-week summer courses preceding the fall semester, I decided to see the counseling center on campus.

I wasn't sure what the sessions were going to be like, but the counselors were understanding and kind. The first few sessions were frustrating because there was a lot of talking about my situation with my mom. Talking to a stranger about my problems was both liberating and exhausting. Each session left me feeling raw and exposed, as if I was just shouting my problems out to the world.

But after a few sessions sitting in a comfortable chair in the dim-lit room, my counselor and I started to make some progress with my mental health. I didn't realize before going to see a counselor that so much of mental health and taking care of myself is how I frame my own thoughts. Combating negative thoughts with positive ones and framing everyday life in a more optimistic way goes further than I realized.

My counselor taught me that taking care of myself is an indirect way of helping my mom. By focusing on my school work, dedicating time to myself, and pulling back from constant contact with home, I am helping her by letting her come to her own conclusions, live her life, and figure out things for herself.

I also learned to trust my gut.

This is something I have always struggled with, but my gut has told me several times that my mom was drinking based on the way she spoke to me on the phone. It's hard to be tough on my mom, to call her out for drinking and acting strange on the phone. It goes against every fiber of my being, but I know that I have to do so that she can get better.

My counselor also helped me realize that I need to take care of my own mental health. Self-care is a relatively new concept to me. As someone who often cares about others more than myself, I have struggled to prioritize my needs over the demands of my academic work and those around me.

During my undergraduate years, I often skipped meals and sleep to meet the demands of classes and of the newspaper I was managing.

When I got to graduate school, I realized how much living this way was costing me. As if the demands of a

rigorous graduate program weren't enough, the additional stress of the situation at home meant that I was struggling more than ever just to keep my mental needs in check.

This semester I've made a deliberate effort to do little things to take care of myself. I try

to start as many days as possible for myself. Before beginning work, I make myself breakfast or lunch at home and enjoy it without the distractions of work for school. I aim to make a meal for myself at least once a day. Though it seems insignificant, taking the time to physically make something simple like a meal allows me to take a breath, step back, and focus on something other than school. I find time to do the things I enjoy, like watching my favorite television show or sitting on the porch with a cup of coffee without feeling guilty that I should be doing something else.

With so many assignments and projects going on at once, graduate school can make me feel as if I am not giving each task my full attention and devotion. My counselor challenged me to change that view. What if I am doing enough? What if I am doing the best that I can? Believing you are doing your best and not feeling guilty about "lost" time taking care of yourself is important.

The process of coping isn't linear. There are good days and bad. In today's world we want everything to be immediate, yet long lasting. And that is what is damaging to our mental health. Because healing isn't immediate, it takes

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time, and sometimes it doesn't seem to be working. Self-care is about making sure you're okay in the long haul. Yes, for that moment, for that week, but also for the semester and year. It's about taking a breath now and learning to relax so that later you can keep working.

Four months after my mom began drinking again, I am still struggling to find that balance between dealing with problems at home and doing well in school.

And it's not over yet. My mom will always be an alcoholic but I am hopeful that we'll get to a point where it's manageable, when both of us have learned how to properly take care of ourselves for the long run.

I don't want to paint my mom in a bad light. We all have demons, and hers is alcoholism. She isn't a bad person. In fact, she is the person I look up to most. She has the biggest heart of anyone I know, and she is kind, patient, and always has a smile on her face. She is still my mom and my best friend. Her alcoholism does not define her or make her weak; somehow, despite everything, she fights on. She raised two kids as a single mom and she never let anything get in her way. She raised me to be strong and independent, relying on no one but myself.

After six weeks of bootcamp, I went home to the Jersey Shore for a final week of sweet summer before the fall semester started. My mom and I went to our favorite beach and sat in the hot sand, faces tilted up toward the warm sun, the smell of salt and sea breeze in the air. We just talked. In that moment, everything felt okay. The week was full of a lot of laughing, crying, and just being together. Even though she is the reason for a lot of tears and stress, I love her with my entire heart. This battle isn't over, but together I am confident we can overcome anything. //