

A photograph of a lone, gnarled tree standing on a rocky cliff. The cliff is made of light-colored, layered rock. The tree has a thick trunk and a canopy of green needles. The ocean is visible in the background, with waves crashing against the base of the cliff. The sky is a clear, bright blue.

RESILIENCE AMBASSADORS

Inspiring stories of resilience
by UP students

2023/24

This publication is a collaboration between the University of Pretoria's Student Counselling Unit, Department of Student Affairs and Department of Institutional Advancement

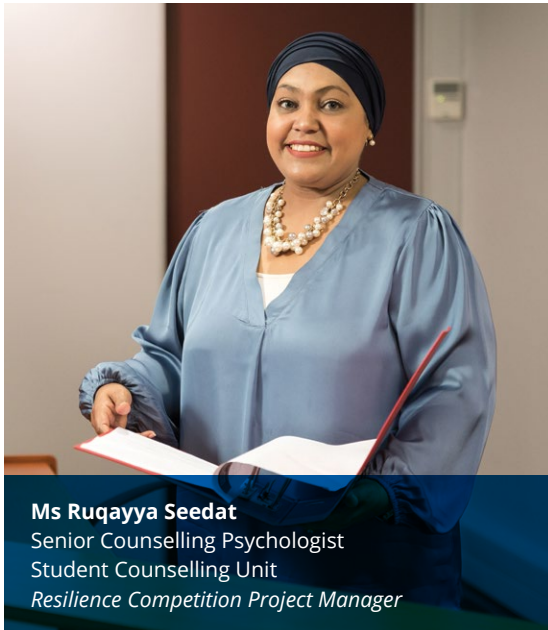


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FOREWORD



Ms Ruqayya Seedat
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It is with great pleasure that we share this special collection of fictional resilience short stories with you. These top 5 winning entries have been published with the consent of the University of Pretoria (UP) students who penned their inspiring stories as part of the Student Counselling Unit's (SCU) 2023 Resilience Competition. Consent was obtained as part of the competition rules document.

The idea for this resilience competition was conceived in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic and materialised in 2021 when the SCU launched its first Resilience Competition. This year, we were grateful to run the contest for a 3rd time. The competition format changed slightly this year in terms of requesting fictional short stories of resilience instead of autobiographical stories of resilience.

It must be acknowledged that it was incredibly difficult to judge these entries. Each person's experience, interpretation and depiction of adversity and resilience is unique, meaningful and valid. In choosing the winning entries, we asked the following questions to guide us in judging/appreciating the submissions:

- Did the author provide a clear, coherent story of resilience that included risks, challenges and adversity?
- Did they mention various coping mechanisms, skills or strategies that were used to overcome adversity? Did they mention supportive resources that were accessed?
- Did they adhere to the fictional short story format that was required and did it convey their story of resilience effectively?
- Was their short story moving, impactful or inspiring?
- Did they use basic language skills effectively (e.g. correct spelling and grammar)?

Even though the stories shared are fictional in nature, we hope it will invite you to pause and reflect on the possible types of adversity experienced by our students, the coping mechanisms that are employed and the supportive resources that are available. Perhaps these accounts may shed light on how the UP community could better support its students by providing opportunities to help develop coping strategies, and by strengthening and expanding the resources or support services that are available.

Thank you to all the students who shared their short stories of resilience with us. We are deeply moved and inspired by your stories of resilience. You are all winners for participating! We would also like to thank our colleagues at the Department of Institutional Advancement and the Department of English for their support of this project. Your contribution is greatly appreciated.

Thank you for taking the time to read these inspiring stories of resilience!

Stories are a powerful medium, they have the ability to not only describe reality but also to shape our reality in meaningful and impactful ways.



TRIGGER WARNING:

These short stories contain sensitive content that some readers may find triggering.
Reader discretion is advised.



A JOURNEY OF RESILIENCE AND LOVE: NQOBILE'S STORY

By: Thembelihle Mjiqiza

I stand in the middle of the new apartment, the sun rays streamed through the windows, casting a warm glow on the room, inviting hues. It is a place that Themba, my partner and the love of my life, has bought for us. I'm in the midst of unpacking when I stumble upon an old diary, its leather cover showing signs of wear and weathering. It's a relic from my past, a record of my life. I sit down on the couch, cradling the diary gently as if it's a treasure chest of memories. With a sense of curiosity, I open it, revealing the pages filled with my own handwriting. I flip through the pages and find an entry worth reading. It was when I became acquainted with writing my feelings, thoughts, and emotions. I lie back on the couch, and I begin reading.

11 May 2016

Hey Diary,

I don't usually write stuff like this, but today's been kinda heavy, and I just need to get it out. So, here goes.

You know, it's funny, but I've been thinking a lot about my parents lately. Or I should say, the lack of them. It's like this big, gaping hole in my life that I can't ignore anymore. My mom, well, she took off when I was just a baby. I don't remember her at all. Then there's my dad. He's a whole different story. He got himself into some kind of trouble way back when, and he's been locked up for as long as I can remember. Gogo says it's because of something he did a long time ago, but she never gets into the details. I wish I knew more, but it's like this big mystery. You know what really gets to me? Seeing other kids with their parents. They've got this connection that I've never really known. I sometimes wonder what it's like to be loved and protected by your own parents.

But here's the thing, Diary. I've got Gogo Nomsa, my amazing grandma, she might not be my real mom, but she's the most incredible person in my life. She's raised me since I was a baby, pouring all her love into me. I'm so lucky to have her.

Being in high school made me realise that family isn't just about blood. It's about the people who are there for you, who support you no matter what. Gogo is my family, and she's been my rock. I'm gonna use her wisdom to build our future and maybe, just maybe, find my place in this world.

Bella ciao.

26 June 2021

Hey Diary!

Long time, no see, right? Life's been all over the place, and I haven't written since I first got here. But there's stuff I gotta talk about now.

So, me and Ntando? Yeah, we're not a thing anymore. It sucks. The whole long-distance deal got to him, and he decided to call it quits. My heart hurts, Diary. I miss him like crazy, and I thought we had something solid. But that's not the only mess I'm in. My grades this semester? Let's just say they've taken a nosedive. It's freakin' scary because I'm on this bursary, and I'm scared I might lose it. The pressure's been insane, and the breakup didn't help at all. I feel like I'm letting everyone down.

Honestly, I'm terrified. Terrified of failing, terrified of losing that bursary, and terrified of disappointing Gogo Nomsa. She's done so much for me, and I don't want to let her down.

I flip through a few pages until I find another interesting entry...

But here's the thing, Diary. I won't give up. No way. I'm gonna reach out to the uni's academic support, hit up extra classes, and study my butt off. I'll prove I'm better than this slump.

*So, here's to picking up the pieces of my heart, kicking my grades back into gear, and showing the world I've got what it takes.
Girl Byeee!*

5 October 2021

Hey Diary,

So, here's something I never thought I'd be writing about – therapy. Yeah, I've been going to these sessions provided by the university, and let me tell you, it's been a real rollercoaster.

At first, I hated it. Like, seriously hated it. I didn't wanna talk about my feelings or my dad, especially how he came out of prison because of COVID-19, and then, bam, he had to go back right when I was starting varsity. It was like opening up a wound I thought was healing.

But, Diary, something changed. These therapy sessions, they've helped me open up in ways I never imagined. There's something about talking to someone who just listens, without judging or pushing you. It's like releasing all these emotions I've been bottling up.

Sure, it's still tough. There are moments when I cry my eyes out and feel all this pain. But it's like taking a weight off my shoulders. I can talk about Dad, about the heartbreak, about everything. It's like starting to heal for real. I never thought I'd say this, but I'm grateful for therapy. It's helping me process my past and the present. And who knows, maybe it'll help me tackle the future, uni and all, with a bit more clarity and strength.

*So, here's to facing the tough stuff head-on, even if it means talking about things that hurt.
Girl Byeee!*

11 May 2023

Hey Diary,

I'm writing to you from a place I never thought I'd be, and it's a good place. A really good one.

I'm about to graduate from university. Yeah, you heard me right. Despite all the challenges, the financial struggles, the heartbreaks, I made it. I can almost taste the victory, and it's sweeter than anything.

But there's something even sweeter, Diary. His name is Themba. He's the love of my life, the one who loves, spoils, and supports me unconditionally. He's been my rock, my sanctuary, and I can't imagine my life without him. I've found happiness in ways I never thought possible. Themba's love has filled the spaces in my heart that were once scarred. He's shown me that it's okay to be vulnerable, to trust, to love with all my being. And you know what makes this even better? Gogo Nomsa is proud of me. She's watched me grow, supported me through thick and thin, and now, she's seeing her granddaughter graduate. It's a moment of immense pride and joy for both of us.

This is the last entry, and I feel an urge to write about where I am right now. It's like closing a chapter of my life, but with the excitement of a new one just beginning. So, I pick up a pen and start...

So, as I prepare to step into the next phase of my life, I can't help but feel an overwhelming sense of gratitude. Grateful for the love that surrounds me, for the strength that's carried me through, and for the dreams that are within reach. This is where I am right now, Diary, and I'm ready to embrace whatever the future holds.

I'm writing the entry when a soft knock at the door interrupts my thoughts. It's Themba, back from his work. He enters the room with a warm smile, his eyes curious. "What's that you've got there?" he asks, nodding toward the diary in my hands. I take a moment, then decide to share with him. "It's my old diary, baby. I found it while unpacking. It got entries from when I was younger."

Themba's eyes light up with genuine interest. "Mind if I have a look?" he asks politely. I hand him the diary, and he flips through the pages, scanning the words that describe my past life, my struggles, and my dreams. It feels oddly vulnerable, sharing these private thoughts with him, but there's a sense of trust between us.

As Themba reads, he looks up at me, his expression filled with empathy. "Nqobile, your journey is incredible. You've faced so much, yet you've come so far." I smile, feeling a sense of acceptance and understanding from him. "Yeah, I guess I have," I reply. "And with you by my side, I'm excited for what the future holds."

Themba closes the diary gently and sets it aside. He takes my hand in his, and together, we look ahead to the chapters we'll write in our new home.

"Despite all the challenges, the financial struggles, the heartbreaks, I made it. I can almost taste the victory, and it's sweeter than anything."



PAPER WINGS

By: Twana Nel

This is a story about a little girl whose biggest dream was to fly. When she was about five years old, she made herself a pair of paper wings, they had crayon flowers and finger-painted rainbows on them. She thought that if she believed hard enough, she would actually be able to do it, so she took these magnificent paper wings of hers and headed to the nearest tree she could find. I don't know how her little hands and feet did it, but she managed to reach a tall enough branch to jump out of. Obviously, she came thumping down to the harsh reality that is the earth's surface. That didn't stop her though, because even though she fell, she still believed that there was a chance that she could fly. She had that hope, so she took it with her into the tree again. That little girl is twenty now and she traded in her paper wings for anti-depressants and therapy sessions, they support her now.

I am one of the 280 million people in the world that suffer from depression. I guess that makes me just another statistic, just another person that finds life difficult. I read somewhere that depressed people are realists, that they see things as they are, rather than what they could be. Apparently, happy people see the world in a more distorted fashion and that's probably why they're so happy. Well, if that's true, then what happened to that little girl? How did the five-year-old who believed that she could defy the laws of gravity by putting her mind to it, end up here? She definitely wasn't a realist, she was just a little girl filled with promise and potential. She never knew pain and she had never experienced the godforsaken emptiness that makes a home within a depressed heart. To my friends and family, I am still that little girl. They still think I am full of promise and potential, they still think I am happy and don't get me wrong, I am the reason

they think so. It's easier to lie, than to try and explain the battles I fight inside my own head.

The only time I ever told the truth was in a dentist's consulting room. The dentist had me fill in this long form with a list of questions and a box you had to tick next to each one. They were pretty standard questions that a dentist would want to know, like whether or not I was a smoker or if I had frequent headaches. At the bottom of the page however, there was one question that stood out like a sore thumb, "do you have depression?" I looked at that piece of paper in complete disbelief, as if it was about to swallow me whole. I couldn't understand why that question was of relevance to my toothache.

After debating about it for what seemed like an hour, I eventually decided to tick that box. As silly as it seems, it was nerve wrecking, but also exhilarating. For the first time in years, I didn't have to pretend, I didn't have to put on this flawless facade to keep people from worrying about me. I could simply just tick the box that said I had depression. I guess that's the beauty of a medical form, you can't lie to it.

The dentist was a short, brown-eyed, middle-aged woman with a big smile. She had kind eyes and that for some reason, made me want to trust her. Before I could stop myself, I decided to confront her about her peculiar question on my form. She paused as she was putting on her gloves and looked at me with a sincerity that few people possess. She said, "Well, sometimes depressed people are unable to brush their teeth as many times as they should and as a result of that, their overall oral hygiene is not what it should

“Resilience isn’t always about seeing how hard you can push yourself. Sometimes, true strength and resilience is found in the seemingly mundane.”

be. I need to know if that is the case in order to make an accurate diagnosis.”

For her, depression was all about the impact that it has on one’s teeth, which makes sense given the fact that she is a dentist, but something in me wanted to shout at the top of my lungs that it is so much more than that. It’s waking up in the morning and feeling nothing. It’s being unable to do anything, let alone the things that you used to love. It’s always being tired, yet never being able to sleep. It’s trying to fill a void in your heart with things that only make you feel worse. It’s constantly having matted hair, because you can’t get out of bed to brush it. It’s thinking that the pain is just passing through and then being horrified at the realisation that it’s back and here to stay. It’s living with a mind that hates you. Depression is like bleeding internally and not being able to find the source, it slowly starts to kill you inside. It’s so much more than a lack of oral hygiene, but I didn’t have the heart to tell her that, so I just sat there and let her finish examining my mouth.

She told me to go sit in the waiting room area, while she finished writing me a prescription for antibiotics and pain medication. On the coffee table, there was a pile of old lifestyle magazines, along with brochures and pamphlets of brands trying to sell toothpaste and miracle gum that makes you want to quit smoking. Uninterested in the toothpaste advertisements, I decided to page through some of the magazines. Right above a picture of a

smiling couple doing some sort of yoga pose, I saw an article that caught my attention: “*10 Tips and Tricks to Improve Your Resilience*”. Before I could finish reading the article, the dentist handed me my prescription and told me to have a nice day, so I got my things and I left.

I realised something very important that day, something I doubt the smiling couple in the magazine or the writer of that article ever knew. After a very awkward encounter in a dentist’s chair with a complete stranger, I realised that resilience isn’t always about seeing how hard you can push yourself. It isn’t just about waking up early or exercising or getting all of your work done. It’s not always about achieving all of your goals in life or fighting equally hard every day. Sometimes, true strength and resilience is found in the seemingly mundane. It’s getting out of bed in the morning when you feel like you can’t. It’s brushing your teeth twice a day and finally deciding to comb your matted hair. It’s drinking your medicine and going to your therapy sessions, even though it’s awkward and uncomfortable. It’s trying every day to feel alive again. True resilience, is having the courage to ask your dentist why she wants to know if your depressed and it’s clinging blindly on to hope, because you know it will make you feel better. It’s believing in the power of paper wings.



POLISH YOUR SHOES!

By: Boitumelo Molapo

I remember the loud thud that came from the kitchen, it was preceded by a quick scratch from the sound of the rubber tip of the chair dragging across a short distance on the tiles. I was doing my English homework; Miss Yolanda told us to write a letter to the person we admired most, mine was dedicated to you. I placed a maroon towel on the floor and used my bed as a desk. On top of the soft pink, purple and yellow patchwork blanket you knit for me, there lay my A4 soft cover, faint margin, 72-page notebook covered in the sturdiest clear plastic. The letter opening stated 'to my biggest love' and signed off with 'from your biggest love'.

You always told me that self-love starts with caring for the things that belong to you. "Nqobile! Don't forget to polish your shoes and wash your socks! Next year you'll be in matric with no one to remind you of these things!"; "Yebo Gogo!" as I placed down a dull blue-green plastic bag filled with three tomatoes, three onions and five potatoes from our very own uber eats, Bhut' Sakhile, who roams around with a glistening silver trolley carrying only the freshest fruit and veg. I won't forget your voice, it had so much love and joy in it, always slightly high pitched garnished by a touch of scratchiness because you'd complain that if you couldn't hear your voice occupy the room, it meant that no one else would hear you.

It wasn't just your voice that occupied the room. You were big and bold not only in personality but in stature as well. I remember your arms the most, they were filled out; they were smiling so much, and I know because your elbows always had dimples. I remember your hands; I would take camphor and rub it into every wrinkle which was a moment in time for all the people you cared

for. I remember your lips, the plumpness had left them by now, but they were so tender and soft that when you'd kiss my hands every morning on my way to school, I felt the softness of your love lay upon me like silk rubbing across skin. You'd always stand tall, always with pride, no matter the circumstance. You always told me to do the same, "the years go by my love, the seasons change, the wind blows where it wishes and the world can get cold, but you'll always have you, and you need to be a safe place for yourself".

"Gogo!", I said once, "Gogo!", I called with a panic that led my feet into our kitchen. It was so devastating to see my big love, lay there on the floor, with all the life she had within her suddenly gone. "Gogo! Gogo! Gogo please! Gogo!", I wailed from the deepest parts of my stomach. I begged and pleaded with God; "You need to give her back, she's all I have!". I ran out our bright red door which was no longer a signifier of love, the love had left, and anger had found its new home, this was now the time to go to war and fight for you to live and I knew it was bold of me to challenge God, but I had begged and pleaded, I couldn't let you go, not now. Not ever. I yelled from what was left of my lungs, "Mam' Kelly! Please call the ambulance! Gogo isn't moving..."; as the tears pouring down my face carried the last three words with a defeated and helpless voice, too scared to actualise the big, bold, boulder of a woman I so deeply loved was now collapsed so carelessly as if she had never existed before.

Mam' Kelly asked her tenants that stayed in the backrooms she rented out to assist her in carrying your body into her silver Corolla. She insisted on driving because as a nurse she knew

that the ambulance would not arrive in time. The hospitals in the townships had very little resources and you would have a very low chance of even making it if we didn't drive there ourselves. I had a bit of hope. We got there and within minutes the doctor uttered something about how your heart had failed and it could no longer carry you and I couldn't understand how a heart so filled with love had now not known how to pour back this love into a body that needed it most. How could your heart fail us like this. I think I cried. I left my body for a while.

I remember the day of your funeral; you looked peaceful now. Your box was decorated with the most beautiful flowers, big, bold and beautiful just like you. The church women came to send you off with voices that filled the room just like yours. The men carried you out. And then at some point you were lowered into the ground. God had really won the battle. We had the cleansing ritual a week after the funeral, I was still crying for you. I sat in a portable basin, while Aunt Thembi poured a mixture of water and coarse salt over my head and body. She prayed over it. She was now my new caretaker. I moved in with her.

"Nqobi, I think it would be good for you to leave this home for a little bit. I know that you don't want to forget Gogo and you won't, but I see how your eyes water every time you go into the kitchen. I'm worried about you, my child. But you might need to leave so you can heal", she said. She wasn't wrong, my eyes began to tear up again. It wasn't just the kitchen. The warmth had left our home, the colours were now dulled down, and I had stopped polishing my shoes too. I knew had to leave to heal. "Can I come back?", I whimpered; "You can always come back Nqobi, this is your home, it will always be waiting for you to come back when you are ready", aunt Thembi said, as she held me in her comforting arms.

Aunt Thembi found me a support group in her neighbourhood. The youth usually go there, and they are given support and guidance on how to manage their mental health and work through trauma. I was reluctant to go at first but when I saw that I had given up on polishing my shoes I knew I was losing my self-love and in turn I was losing you. So, I started with individual counselling, I cried a lot but eventually things got better.

I would go home once a month, but it was always overwhelming, so I stopped for a while. I've been going to the support group for five months now, it's been two months since I've been back home. Last week I was tasked with remembering what you've taught me. Even if it's something small. Gogo, you won't believe it. I started polishing my shoes again! I cried so much because it felt like I had you back. Gogo, I think I'm going to be okay again. I'm going to plant the most colourful flowers in our backyard so that there's always a symbol of you at home. I'm going to continue to write to you and about you. I have a dream to publish many books, but I want my first one to be titled '*My Biggest Love*'.

Gogo I just came to give you these flowers and give you the letter you never got to read. I came to wash your tombstone because I wanted to care for you beyond this lifetime just like how you cared for me. I'm going to come visit you a lot more often now. I'm going back home today I'm going to kick out anger and put love in its rightful home again. I love you so much, rest well. Until next time.

"I had given up on polishing my shoes I knew I was losing my self-love and in turn I was losing you. So, I started with individual counselling, I cried a lot but eventually things got better."



FROM A CATERPILLAR TO A BUTTERFLY

By: Molatelo Troyder Maletle

Speak is a second-year learner at the University of Pretoria, and she resides off campus. Her name is ironic because she cannot speak out her feelings very clearly when something bothers her. As a result, she bottles things up and tends to take time to respond to her emotions. Academically she has no problem with interacting with other students and her lecturers. Thus, she can share her opinions about something discussed in the lecture halls and does her best in every activity that they are given, to get good results. But will Speak finally speak? Is the caterpillar going to turn to a butterfly?

During her first year, she was coping with academics and did not let any negative thought to be a stumbling block and prevent her from being effective in her academics.

Speak strongly believes that "*lesole le swela ntsweng*". Which is a Setswana proverb, expressing that a soldier never gives up. According to her, it means that she can do anything in her power to do better in her academics and always aim for perfect results.

She was not expecting anything less than seventy-five percent in her modules and would keep wondering what went wrong or what is wrong with herself if it happened that she did not get her seventy-five percent at the end of the semester.

The wondering got worse during her second year after she lost her friend, who was enrolled at another institution. She kept asking herself what was wrong with her and why was she not there during the day her friend died. As she was mourning for her friend, her father became hospitalised, her mother got unemployed, her younger brother was prevented from going to a

day care by the principal because the parents were no longer able to pay for his fees. All of that occurred and Speak did the opposite of her name about everything that she was going through. Speak kept quiet.

Keeping quiet did more harm than good to her. She bottled everything inside and that led to her having anger issues. Her academics dropped and she would feel attacked by anyone who would try to find out what is wrong in her life. Instead of sharing her problems with them or asking for advice, she snapped at everyone who would try to reach out to her. As a consequence, she felt guilty, developed suicidal thoughts, and attempted to implement them a couple of times. One concerned lecturer, Dr Breath, was good with communication and noticing when something was wrong with her students. She talked to Speak, who kept crying every time she was supposed to open up. As the Dr noticed that, she informed Speak to seek help from a professional counsellor from the University.

For once Speak was able to open up about her personal life and share her emotions with the counsellor Mrs Green Leaves. She was one of the best people in the University to help Speak to break the silence and learn to talk about her emotions. Mrs Green Leaves was like green leaves on tree branches that a caterpillar needs to eat in order for it to become a butterfly. This is because she provided Speak with the emotional support that she required through the counselling sessions that they arranged and attended every week on a Thursday. The sessions occurred as planned and Speak was now speaking about her issues with Mrs Green Leaves.

“Speak can now speak! She is no longer bottling up or allowing emotions to decide on her behalf. She takes the lead!”

Although it took a while for Speak to start opening up, Mrs Green Leaves was patient with her, and never made her to feel stupid or regret opening up. The first session they had they discussed was about “Mindfulness”. Which was about getting rid of the negative thoughts, by training the mind not to be all over, but learn how to feel the thoughts one has, without being carried away and end up doing something that will make one tired or regret their action. Thus, Speak stopped having suicidal thoughts that were caused by overthinking. She was thinking about her hospitalised father, unemployed mother, younger brother, and what would happen if she lost her parents. She was anxious as she thought about being left with his younger brother all alone in this world.

Another solution Mrs Green Leaves shared with Speak was to let go of the things that she cannot control or do anything about. As a result, Speak stopped thinking about her bad grades but learnt from her mistakes and worked on improving them. Again, she stopped thinking about the death of her friend and allowed her friend's soul to rest in peace by accepting that she is no longer with her physically, but believes that heaven gained an angel, and that she is spiritually with her. This is because she has instances whereby, she faces a little problem, then wonder what advise her friend would best give her, then she implements it.

As Dr Breath realised that Speak was going through a lot, she had a little chat with her, which also made Speak to realise that speaking out helps and makes one to be relieved and worry less. Breathe, Breathe, Breathe! That is what Dr Breath encouraged Speak to do. She informed her that whenever she feels like the world is on her shoulders, she should inhale the fresh air around her, given out by green trees. Then like a caterpillar, eat the green leaves, in order for her to relax, worry less, but be positive about becoming a butterfly.

Thus, she will not panic easily or be anxious as she will not quickly fill up her mind with negative thoughts that will put her mental health at risk. Speak disclosed that she had called the University's counselling careline a number of times during her counselling process. She thinks that the counselling careline only helps for that particular time when one feels overwhelmed, as she can talk to someone during that time to ease the pain and make her to feel better. But she admits that talking to them makes a huge difference, as the thoughts are blown away by wind like dry leaves on a tree.

Speak was only seeking someone who could listen to her and allow her to vent without being judged. This is why she opted for the University's student counselling services, as she believed that a professional would not laugh about her problems that affects her mental health but would try to help and advise her about what to do. Currently, Speak is on a prescribed medicine that she got after being referred to a doctor by her counsellor, and she is pulling up her socks academically. Mrs Green Leaves sees her as a butterfly now because Speak can now express her emotions clearly and is doing good in her schoolwork. Speak can now speak! She is no longer bottling up or allowing emotions to decide on her behalf. She takes the lead!



ONE MINUTE

By: Jenna Schubach

All I needed was just *one* minute for my brain to switch off. Never mind the science and the potential drawbacks that may occur should I go through with it.

Either way, it would be a blessed reprieve from all these feelings. The bench was hard beneath me, the viewpoint empty of any sundowners. As the sun set, dyeing the sky with hues of pink and orange, I tried to take a deep breath. Through the tight sensation in my chest, I inhaled and imagined every single cell sighing with relief as the oxygen fought its way into every crevice. And slowly, that tightness loosened and I relaxed further into the bench.

As I closed my eyes, I felt her settle into a seat beside me. "You came," I said. "I told you that I would," said Grief. I bit my lip and tried to ignore the moisture beneath my eyelids. My counsellor constantly suggested that I allow myself to *feel* what I'm feeling but I didn't want to anymore. I haven't for a long while.

"Why did you call me here, Moira?" she asked. I glanced at her out of the corner of my eye, noting the tendrils of shadow whispering around her amorphous shape. I suppose it seemed impossible to personify grief, even more so to imagine it as a woman. Yet she seemed like a woman to me. Who else could carry the unbearable weight of her responsibilities? I turned to face her fully, not allowing myself to get distracted by the swirling of her shadows. "I want you to take it away," I said seriously. Her eyes became infinitely more sad, even as she whispered, "Take *what* away?" "The memories."

She let out a soft, bitter laugh. "Surely I have taken enough away from you." "That's the thing - it wasn't enough. You took him away, sure, but I am still left with the memory of him. I have to wake up each day with the realisation that he is gone and *never* coming back. You would think that I would've grown used to it by now but it takes me by surprise every single time."

Grief lashed out, grabbing my arm furiously as she pulled my face towards hers. Her lips curled into a snarl as she said, "Do not mistake me for Death, child. It is a far more benevolent foe than I. It leaves as soon as it has done its duty, whereas I will remain with you forever. Whether I want to or not."

My face crumpled, tears leaking out the corners of my eyes but I managed to murmur past the ache in my throat, "I don't think I can do this anymore."

"Do you think that you are the only person who has lost a loved one?" she asked incredulously. "Do you think that you are the first human to have contacted me and asked for an alternate reality where they did not need to bear the burden of loss? You are young, don't wish it all away so quickly."

"Don't you think I've tried?" The question exploded out of me as I tried to *breathe* through that unbearable pain in my chest. "He. Is. Gone. I cannot bring him back—these feelings will not bring him back! I don't understand the bloody point of all this misery, surely you can ease the pain."

Grief watched as the force of my shudders wracked my entire being. Her grip on my arm loosened and tightened as she listened to the strangled gasps making their way out of me. I hardly knew what was happening but the viewpoint disappeared and suddenly I was between somewhere and nowhere.

A vast landscape in front of me, shadows obscuring any light that would have illuminated distinguishable features of my new location. "Where are we?" I asked in a detached voice I had never heard myself use before. Grief took a few steps away from me, a wisp of her shadows here and there as she looked at the bare expanse of land before us. Her voice cracked as she said to me, "I lost someone too, you know. The sorrow that emerged in the moments after losing that person nearly tore me apart—and in truth, it did. We never plan to lose the people we love, Moira. We often tell ourselves that we should savour every moment but you never know when that last moment will be. I have spent millennia watching people lose the ones they love and all I could ever do was be there for them in the way their loved one no longer could be. I became a monster when I lost my person and because of that, I will remain a horror. But if I change into the memories that one needs to remember to cherish the time spent with that beloved person, then I will happily oblige."

I collapsed onto my knees and began to hug myself, hoping to keep the broken pieces of my heart from shattering completely. "He promised me that he wouldn't leave!" I wailed. "Irrespective of our differences, he *loved* me. He didn't care that our opinions were never the same—all he cared about was me."

Through the blur of my tears, I saw Grief drop down in front of me and grip my face. Her fingers dug into my cheeks but the

discomfort melted away as she said, "If he cared about you as much as you say he did, then you have to know that he wouldn't want you to waste away. They may no longer be able to love us as they once did, but it does not mean we should throw their affection away by becoming slaves to our misery."

I bit my lip, trying my best to stop its quivering, but I could not stop the wretched sob that forced its way through me. "I know I am better for having known him but I never had the chance to tell him that. What if he spends the rest of eternity not knowing how much he meant to me?" "He does, Moira. He does."

As I stared into the eyes of Grief, I took note of the rippling emotions that stirred deep within them. Though I hated her for all that she had put me through, I suddenly realised that she was the only thing I had left. The only thing that had kept me company during this tumultuous period of my life. "What do I do now?" I asked tremulously. Her one hand slid down my face to grasp the arm I had around myself, pulling it so that it was now in front of me. "You *live*, Moira. You feel all those dreadful feelings and embrace the kinder ones once they come along. You move on with your life and you do everything knowing that he is still with you—even when you cannot see him."

"But I don't want to be alone." Grief tilted her head while she gave me a tentative smile, "You will never be alone, child. Why do you think I am here? You share me with every single person who has ever lost someone and in that way, know that you will never be alone ever again."

"You live, Moira. You feel all those dreadful feelings and embrace the kinder ones once they come along. You move on with your life and you do everything knowing that he is still with you—even when you cannot see him."

CONCLUSION



Dr Hanlé Kirkcaldy
Head: Student Counselling Unit

The Student Counselling Unit is thankful to all the students who participated in the 2023 Resilience Competition. We enjoyed going through all the imaginative and creative contributions.

Students who participated in this competition, had to employ critical skills on many levels. Their stories were about a hero negotiating life, or a protagonist reflecting on life. When adversity struck, or circumstances changed, the characters in their stories had to employ problem solving skills, look for resources, develop interactional and interpersonal skills, use analytical thinking and even imagination or humour, to negotiate the difficulties they faced. Their heroes had to find ways to manage pain, contain disappointment and negative emotion, be sensitive to their own

and others' needs and create hope for the future. That is the essence of resilience and reflect skills we all have to learn to be happy and to succeed.

Besides thinking about a good story, students who participated in this competition also had to use language well and imaginatively, and capture the reader.

We are proud to present the winners in the competition for your reading pleasure – may you too be inspired.



Email the Student Counselling Unit for any service request:

24 hour telephonic support:

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