

CULTURE TO CULTURE
FOUNDATION



2014 MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS
AWARDS
WINNING ESSAYS



Introduction

The Culture to Culture Foundation is a non-profit, community-based organization dedicated to promoting mental health and emotional wellness within the San Francisco Bay Area's growing Asian-American community. Over the years, we sponsored scholarships and scholarship contests to promote mental health awareness to high school and college students.

This year we asked high school students to tell us about their personal definitions of success and how these definitions impact their mental health. We were greatly inspired by the essays submitted by 242 students from 78 California high schools throughout the Bay Area and beyond. This was a special opportunity to learn about the diverse perspectives and aspirations of the students in our community, while supporting and celebrating each of their individual paths towards achieving happiness and fulfillment. There were 10 winners and 20 honorable mentions in this year's contest. The following is a compilation of essays that won the award as well as those received honorable mentions.

To learn more about the Culture to Culture Foundation and our programs, visit us at <http://culturetoculture.org>

Winning Essays

Anita Roddick, a British entrepreneur, once said, "I want to define success by redefining it...Any definition of success should be personal because it is so transitory. It's about shaping my own destiny." For me, success is indeed an abstract and mercurial ideal, shifting and transforming by the second as I grow in both maturity and knowledge. My personal definition of success might be a long-term ambition of graduating from a prestigious four-year university, or a short term goal of passing an exam, to even a moment-to-moment aim of winning a single point in tennis. While these ideas are constantly modified and altered, one fact remains indelible in my mind: I am always seeking success, seeking to improve myself. Once I began high school in my freshman year, I threw myself into my studies, devoting myself to achieving absolute perfection, adhering to the various definitions of success imposed upon me by my parents, my peers, and my teachers, reprimanding and punishing myself if I failed in the slightest. This may sound unhealthy; that is because it was. My fierce determination to attain success caused my health to deteriorate and suffer for it, until I finally realized that my actions would not in any way contribute to finding happiness or success; they pushed me further from it.

Definitions of success must not come from others. Rather, it should come from within, as only I, the individual, could possibly comprehend my own personal limits and define my own personal success. However, in the freshman year, my own personal definition was warped by the heaps of requirements and mandates of others that it became crushed, lost in a sea of others' wants and needs, to the point where I actually thought what others wanted of me was what I wanted of myself. That definition of success was a curse and a poison, adversely impacting my mental and physical health. It was only when I realized I was shouldering more than I could bear and abandoned the burdens that others had laden upon me that I truly found my own definition of success and prospered for it.

The devotion I had to perfection and success throughout my freshman year could not be characterized as simply ambition. It was an unhealthy obsession, bordering on the psychotic, even, to fulfilling the wishes and needs of others with a reckless disregard for my own ideas and my own health. A large part of this compulsive fixation was due to the fact that high school marked a huge milestone and transition, as I came to realize I had a mere four years left until college. Studies consumed my every waking moment, as I fastidiously completed every assignment, quadruple-checked every test question, and religiously examined my grades daily. My perception, and consequently definition of success, was severely distorted by the requirements placed upon me: my parents wanted excellence, my tennis coach required a winning record, my teachers mandated nothing short of perfection. This soon began to manifest itself in my mental and physical health. I sank into depression, and missed countless days and weeks of school sick. My self-esteem suffered dramatically as it plummeted towards rock bottom. With the impossibly high standards set before me, I was bound to fail often, and fail I did. The worst part was that I disappointed myself the most, even though the definitions imposed upon me were not my own. In fact, those definitions were not at all what I wanted for myself.

As I realized that my health was on a downward spiral and I was suffering, I stepped back to look on my life to evaluate it, to see if I was truly happy. That is what success truly is: being happy with oneself and what one has accomplished. I realized that I was not happy, far from it in fact, and decided that something desperately needed to change. Attaining the success that others required of me was not

worth my health. Ultimately, I took Anita Roddick's advice and abandoned the burden of others' definitions of success and defined it for myself. I modified the existing standards so that I might realistically achieve those goals, while maintaining them high enough that I would still have to work and strive to achieve them. Sophomore year saw a different student emerging, a confident, self-assured individual that defined success for himself. Success came more often, and I began to enjoy myself more as I reveled in my own happiness. I still saw failure; the difference was that I did not berate myself tirelessly for my shortcomings. Rather, I viewed them as educational, learning experiences. My self-esteem and happiness both improved as I learned how to set my own goals and ambitions rather than simply allow others to define them for me.

While a tireless devotion to success and perfection can be unhealthy, success in and of itself is not inherently detrimental. It creates goals and ambitions and allows individuals to better themselves and the world around them. It is one's definition of success that truly matters in the end. Individuals cannot let others define their goals and limitations; to do so is failure already. This is the painful truth I had to learn. If one defines one's own success, one's own goals and ambitions, then one can find confidence, self-esteem, and happiness. These elements are requisite for success and exist only within the individual. Why, then, do we allow others to define them for us? I chose to define my own goals. As I grow older and mature, my definitions of success will undoubtedly change. However, I still remain the person changing them. As doors and opportunities open and close before me, I choose which ones to see and which ones to pursue. Ultimately, I choose which door to step through, and I shape my own destiny. It was only when I realized that I myself, not others, chose my own door, and that I held my own key, that I truly found success.



My entire life has been dedicated to being successful, which I defined as making my parents proud. Entrenched in an inferiority complex, I have always only aspired to be worthy in the eyes of my mom, who self-taught her way to being one of Beijing's top scorers in the College Entrance Exam, came to America to find better opportunities, and single-handedly raised me through my childhood. Under the desire to make my mom proud, I came to the conclusion that I had to do everything and I had to be good at everything as well.

To compare to my mom, I strove to achieve success in school. My course load was rigorous, and I pushed myself to maintain straight A's while taking the hardest classes. As a competitive swimmer, I worked myself through tough practices and sore muscles. No one had ever been afraid to tell me I lacked talent in the sport, but I was determined to become fast enough to prove them wrong. I also spent my life playing piano, dedicated to achieving consistent studio awards and statewide achievements. This junior year, I began an internship with a political campaign to increase my involvement with the community. I enjoy all the activities that I do, but I always felt that I wasn't doing

enough, that I could do more or achieve more. I had no time to take on another extracurricular; I was in a perpetual state of exhaustion, but I was motivated to succeed.

While my health was sacrificed in my attempt to succeed, it was my failure to meet my own standards that showed me how detrimental my need to compare to my mom was to my mental health. Setbacks and obstacles became more numerous and it took longer to recover and fight back. I would torture myself mentally for being incapable, ridicule my own failure and lack of worth. Everything began to snowball until one day, I cracked.

My meltdown began was last December at one of my championship swim meets. I had worked hard over the course of the season and I was motivated, determined, and confident that I could perform. Just short of being on the Junior National team, I was determined to make the cut at this meet, to prove that I was just as good as everyone else. Instead, my hard work did not prove fruitful and I watched my teammate rise and take the success I had wanted. As happy as I was for her, I was crushed and infuriated with myself, frustrated that no matter how much effort and time I had spent under the belief that hard work trumps talent, I could not achieve results. Part of me started to lose motivation, which only led to more frustration since giving up is not a successful attitude. Thus, at the same time as I lost hope, I pushed myself harder.

The internal battle that raged between the acceptance that I would never accomplish anything and the fight to prove myself wrong set my life in turmoil. I was fatigued constantly: sleeping through school, depending on after-school naps, lacking energy as I swam, unable to concentrate on homework. I stopped eating. It had started as simply being too tired to eat, but it slowly grew to where food made me sick as I became self-conscious of my body image and weight. Tired and depleted, my body broke down, yet the part of me that still fought to succeed claimed that taking breaks was unacceptable. I collapsed physically and mentally.

Isolation took over my social life. I withdrew from my friends, giving few people insight on my inner frustrations, and I walked through life as a bystander, choosing not to participate. In school, my grades fell from holding straight A's first semester to a C test average in math, dependent on large curves to support my grade. I had told myself I needed to work harder, but I lacked the energy to do so. My patience wore thin. Unable to maintain my composure, I began to lash out at my parents. My voice, propelled by my swimmer's lungs, was loud and harsh the day my mental stability crashed. I screamed and cried that I wanted to quit, that I didn't want to live this life.

I will never forget that day I raised my voice to my mom, nor will I ever forget the look on her face or the words she said after I screamed out all my struggles.

"I will always be proud of you, but are you proud of yourself?"

Her words struck a chord within me, and it resonated through my being. I had seen it backwards my entire life, and I had failed because I looked to others to decide my worth instead of deciding it for myself. I didn't need to be successful to get my mother's support.

Even now, after I understand my mistake, I remain broken. A life-long mindset is difficult to reverse. On the outside, not much has changed. My grades have not improved by much; my swimming performance has been disappointing; my physical health is still in a sickly state. However, my perspective is reforming; I have begun to do things for me and not for anyone else. I know I will succeed because I am

determined to one day be proud of myself. I will truly be successful the day I am happy and proud of who I am and the things I do.



I am a theater kid. It started when I was three, and my mom (who meant well) thought it fun to sign my twin sisters and me up with a talent agent. Although I had a stubborn streak, I was cute. This enabled me to land voice overs and photo ads. My mom's theory was that if the parents were easy-going and on-time, their kids got picked, because as Woody Allen once said, "Eighty percent of success is showing up!"

I got picked; still, I didn't always enjoy my success. On one occasion in particular, I was in no mood to perform my lines shouting into the microphone: "This is stupid!" At three, I think I already knew that I had talent, skill and "something special", but for some reason, I couldn't always cope with the pressure. Unlike other "child stars" who relished their lime light, I was distressed by it. My mood could sour unmanageably as my golden smile turned upside down with lightning speed. Relationships suffered.

Still, my strong working memory, sincerity, work ethic and good looks compensated for my lack of joyous participation and I achieved success on stage at Town Hall Theater in Lafayette, as an Irish Dancer for McBride School and even in team sports where I considered the experience a different sort of performance. Even though my peers and I brought down the house and triumphed in the eyes of our parents, I was not in a state of optimal mental health. Looking back, I realize now that I was developing performance anxiety. In fact, there may have been an inverse correlation between the standing ovations I received and my own personal confidence and happiness. Other's definition of success as measured by applause, did not serve me well. My heart sunk.

It is no surprise then, that during my sophomore year, like 26% of the female population, I was diagnosed with depression. I had lost my way as friendships faltered and grades plummeted. AP European History cursed me while my body's bio-chemistry further failed me. My disease became acute, and I misplaced my own personal definition of success along with my mental health. I could no longer find any value in my keenest abilities or cope with the normal stresses of life.

Thankfully I re-discovered the joys of theater when I signed up for Stage Craft class junior year. Above stage on the darkened, quiet catwalk and at the back of the house silently running sound, with no smiling parental eyes upon me I thrived. Like a stealth cat, dressed in blacks, I surprised even myself, relieved to discover feelings of happiness. After a very rough patch, I had landed on my feet! I had showed up and I was generously rewarded for my efforts!

Thereafter, with community support,(theater kids are the best), I found myself savoring the small, sweet personal successes as my developing technical skills led to increased responsibilities which in turn propped up my healing self-esteem. I believe now that my success grew because I was living on my own

terms and like “a white yacht jubilant with flags...” I began to “...sail through the world.” (John Gardner.) Simply put, I was captain of my own ship!

Today I am happy. As a Theater Arts major, I have yet to be denied admission to a single college choice, although admittedly, I await the decision from my “dream school”. Beyond this external definition of success, my personal life is good, chiefly because I continue to live it, as best a freshly turned 18 year old can, on my own terms; and so this is most certainly my personal working definition of success. I relish this moment and yearn towards my future with triumphant anticipation. To paraphrase Shakespeare, by definition, all my world is now a stage and I am a happy, healthy, successful player upon it!



Success, for all of my life, has been the unattainable, the white whale, the ungraspable phantom. Success is when my mom finally tells me that I have done a good job, and I am not compared to “someone else”.

As far as I know, I have never been successful. As my mother said countless times throughout my life, “Do your best; that is enough.” But bringing home the A’s was not enough, because someone else got an A+. Winning the school wide Young Author’s Fair Award in second grade was not impressive, because someone else won the District award. Earning a position as an officer for a prestigious club was irrelevant, because someone else was doing so, too.

Someone else, someone else, someone else.

Throughout the years, no matter how many hoops I jumped through, it did not seem to satisfy my mom’s expectations. Eventually, those expectations became my own, because I so desperately craved her approval.

To be perfectly honest, academics have never been an issue to me. My mom never acknowledged my straight A’s throughout elementary or middle school, but there was nothing I could have done about that because that was all that seemed to matter at the time. I couldn’t possibly do BETTER than straight A’s in school. Once I reached high school, the pressure came crashing down. I had to take SAT classes, I had to take AP classes, I had to show leadership, play music, play sports, do community service, and speak another language. But I had to be the BEST at all of these, so I could beat out all the other kids and get into the best college and get all the best scholarships and get the best job that would give me the best life so I could show the world that I had the best mom who raised the best kid.

The lack of feeling successful took a toll on me mentally, and the effects started to show themselves when I reached high school. My self-esteem and confidence were low. Because of this, I hardly participated in class and that brought my grades down. This caused me to become worried and distressed, which gave me chronic headaches. My worry grew to an extreme level, which made me

prone to anxiety attacks when I thought of and feared all the things I had to do. I would think about the assignments and projects and tests for each class, feeling each one weigh down on me as another headache came on. Even this scholarship, in which I could express my feelings and experiences about my mental health, gave me headaches. My friends constantly prodded me to get out of my house to go to the mall or to the park with them after school. But I found that that would take away from all the time I needed to work. In truth, I was terrified of what my mom would do to me if she found out that I had gone out on a school day. I was afraid to hear any more derogatory remarks and snide comments from her, because those would feel like setbacks in my quest to please her. I began to have trouble sleeping, waking up several times in one night.

But then, in my psychology class, the teacher asked us, “Why do you live life the way that you do?” This really got me thinking, because for all of my life, I blamed my mom for my mental issues. I always thought that, “If Mom wasn’t this way, then I wouldn’t be that way,” or “If it weren’t for Mom, then I wouldn’t be like this.” When my psychology teacher brought that question to my attention, I realized that my distress wasn’t caused by my mom. Not entirely, anyway. I was wrapped up in pleasing my mom and I let all her criticisms get to me and affect how I saw and carried myself. I never thought of myself positively and only thought about how poorly I was doing.

So I’m trying to change. Instead of waiting for my mom to be happy and compliment how much I’ve accomplished, I’m trying to do so myself. Instead of seeing my goal as “pleasing Mom”, I’m trying to find my own goals and passions in life. I want to change my personal definition of success to “being happy”. It’s really difficult, trying to remind myself that my life is not all about reaching my mom’s expectations. But on the bright side, at least I have realized it. Moving my life’s spotlight from my mom to me is a slow work in progress, but it’s getting somewhere. My restless sleep has become a little more restful. Waking up several times in a night has been reduced to waking up one or two times. When I find myself counting all the assignments and feeling a mountain build over me, I tell myself to stop and think of only one thing at a time. This has decreased the number of headaches and anxiety attacks. When I start worrying about Mom comparing me to other kids, I ask myself, “Whom exactly are you working for?” The answer nowadays is usually, “Me.” And if my definition of success now is building a healthy, happy world, I have to start by building a healthy, happy “me” first.



Evaluating success is like a child looking for shapes in the clouds; where one child might see a bunny in a tutu, another might see a misshapen alien with a laser. Although there is not a bunny in a tutu or an alien with a laser in the clouds, these children each believe what they saw to be true. The same concept applies to success. To one person, success may include becoming the CEO of an important company, but to another, raising a family and being a stay at home parent might be their definition of success. Though very different, each of these evaluations is true. In the beginning of my high school career, success included getting an A in all of my classes and taking as many AP classes as I possibly

could. Now, having almost completed high school, my definition of success has somewhat altered from my freshman year.

Going into high school I felt a certain degree of pressure to do well and get good grades. This pressure did not come from my parents, who were happy as long as I tried my best. I have an older brother who, from the time he was in middle school until partway through his college experience, never received a B in any of his classes, and was salutatorian of his high school graduating class. Though my parents never encouraged it, I felt as though there was a competition between us. After all, was I not just as intelligent as he was? Did I not have the same capabilities? Even though my parents never compared me to my brother, I heard of this unspoken competition from others, including extended family. It began to feel as though I would be judged negatively if I did not meet the incredibly high standard my brother set. However, like a good little soldier, I pushed forward.

Freshman year passed by easily with only a few minor stressors and my grades never suffered. So, at the end of the year, despite the warnings that I heard, I decided to take two Honors classes and one AP class the next year, the maximum a student could take. I was intelligent, was I not? It would not be a problem, or so I thought. Halfway through the year, I began deteriorating rapidly. The workload was considerably more intense than I had expected. I started my homework when I got home from school, and was not done until close to one or two in the morning. Every so often that number slipped closer to three in the morning. At this point, I all but stopped eating because I was so stressed out. Getting only three and a half to four and a half hours of sleep a night, and eating next to nothing, I cannot really be surprised that my mental state suffered so much.

My first panic attack was terrifying. I had no idea what was happening. My chest was tight and I was hyperventilating and crying to the point I was practically choking. Despite this first experience, I continued to do my homework that night, as though my life depended on its completion, and I continued to go to school, where my panic attacks only increased in number and intensity. There were days that I would have five or six panic attacks, and feel awful for the rest of the hours in the day. I was not happy, but I pretended to be. I smiled and told everyone I was fine, all the while I felt awful. It was exhausting, but I was not in the habit of telling people my woes to receive their pity. There was another component that compelled me to pretend I was happy and well, and that was shame. In truth, I was ashamed that I was falling apart and everyone else seemed to be doing just fine with the workload. Not once did I stop going to school because it was too hard or simply because I just did not want to go. No, I plowed through because school was the most important thing to me, considerably more important than my failing mental health. There were days when I would sit in a classroom for hours holding in a panic attack that I would not release until I was in the car on the way home.

During this time, it very quickly became apparent that I would not be able to deal with my anxiety on my own. So my parents and I made the decision to see a psychologist. He helped me to understand what was happening and how to deal with my panic attacks. Through my visits I was able to cope with my anxiety and pull myself together so that I could get through school. I also had to reexamine my definition of success. Though I maintained incredible grades, considering what I was going through, I had received a B in a few of my classes. I simply needed to accept the fact that it was the best I could do. I also made the decision that I was not going to take any more AP classes for the duration of high school.

In the beginning of my high school experience, success dictated my mental health. However, after my experiences, my mental health now dictates my success. I no longer look at success as striving to be the best, but instead, I look at what makes me happy. One example of this was my second prom experience. Many people would consider it a complete failure. It is true, I did not dance much and spent

most of the night walking around outside with my date because it was the only thing that calmed my nerves, but I enjoyed myself, and so I count it a complete success. If I can be happy through life's experiences, I have succeeded.



As a community of Burlingame, the majority of us have goals influenced by the people we are surrounded by in our community. This can range from the way we dress ourselves, to the way we speak, or the actions we take for a “successful” future. Being adolescents, this is the period in our lives where we discover what we want, setting goals to accomplish in the future. The trends are like metaphors for the goals we set, while lululemon's are praised upon, sweatpants are looked down upon. Lululemons are worn throughout the community, but especially by high school girls who buy lululemon's purely to fit into the trend. Whether they actually like them or not, they sport the leggings because no one wants to be seen as “odd one out”. If someone asked any girl whether they prefer sweatpants or lululemon's, they would admit that they prefer wearing sweatpants, but at school would not be seen in such attire. Because of the image our community has created and the pressure to fit in that comes along with that image, we are manipulated into thinking that lululemon's are what we want. Lululemon's represent the colleges everyone seems to want to attend because they are “good schools”. Stanford, UCLA, Berkeley, etc. They also represent the awkward high school years where we focus on fitting in. In the same way you would be looked at differently for wearing sweatpants to school, you would be judged for attending a college that does not have the best reputation or ranking. This past winter, my family and I took a trip to Lake Tahoe. We just got done skiing and I realized that all I had brought were a pair of lululemon's and I was exhausted and did not want to wear such uncomfortable pants. My mom took me into the gift shop where they were selling clothing, and the first thing that caught my eye were a pair of sweatpants that were only \$5. When we got to the cabin and I threw them on, I felt a sense of relief. I realized after that moment that I would rather have success that fits me like a pair of sweatpants than lululemon's and the reason I bought the lululemon's were to fit in. I realized that my perception of what success really is has changed over the years.

In high school we are pressured to do so much and it is hard to just sit down and think if it is really what we want. In the end, many people overflow their capacities and crash. In reality however, although having good grades can help us in college, should it really have to define our futures? I used to be one of those people who believed grades determined everything. My parents would constantly tell me and my brother “We came to America so you can be successful and have a good education”. Although I wanted to go to a good college, I was never really able to push myself to my full capacity. I would get a 3.0 average gpa and I would settle. I would tell myself I will try harder next semester, but when next semester came around, nothing changed. I would begin to stress out at the end of the semester, feeling anxiety and regretting slacking off. I felt like I could no longer be “successful” and get into a good college.

Then junior year came around, the year I began flaunting my sweatpants because they were comfortable and suited me better than ever before. I began thinking why should grades define my future? And what really is the definition of a “good college”? A college that has a good ranking or a college that is good for me personally. I realized that it does not matter if I go to a prestigious college, but what really matters is that I go wherever I will find happiness. Whether that is a Harvard or some state school, I don't know yet. And although people might notice that I go to a not so highly ranked school, I will be happy because my sweatpants will remain on.

My mental health has definitely improved in some ways. I feel a sort of relief putting so much thought into my future and realizing I do not want grades to define me. I no longer focus on all the people who wear lululemon's because I would rather wear sweatpants any day. However, although I know what I want, my life during junior year has been a lot harder for me. Due to an accumulation of stress from trying to find a balance between friends and school, as well as my family life, I have become more anxious and at times depressed to the point where all I do is sleep and cry. These difficulties in my mental health have definitely affected my academic effort. And although I have a good idea of my future, it is still difficult to figure out what I want to do with my sweatpants. I am one of those people who want to accomplish a lot, while finding my true happiness and being able to look back at my life in 70 years and say that I lived my life to the fullest and not just like any average person.

In the end I truly believe with hard work and dedication, I will find my success in life with my sweatpants by my side, just like everyone else, whether they take the risk of wearing sweatpants, or stick to wearing their lululemon's. Just remember not to let society define what success is to you. Society makes it seem as if messing up in high school is messing up your entire life but in reality it is not. We should all just look at high school as one obstacle in our lives, if everyone were to let that little obstacle overrule their lives, then no one would get very far. And that is not just for high school, that is for any small part of your life, because success is not defined by one particular event in your life, but the accumulation of things you have accomplished.



One of my favorite quotes is “You have two choices, to control your mind or to let your mind control you” by Paulo Coelho. This quote reminds and motivates me that I have the freedom to choose my own path to happiness, success, and a life defined by my own choices. I used to think that reaching my goal is the way I define success. However, this method of defining success became discouraging when I failed to reach my goals. As a result, I decided to define success as the strength to continue to do my best under circumstances where I am least comfortable. This definition allows me to evaluate my performance depending on different situations. In addition, this flexibility enables me to maintain a

positive mindset throughout my life. I take advantage of this definition under three interconnected, important aspects of my life: family, school, and neighborhood.

I live in an immigrant family and I do not get to see my parents put up smiles on their faces often. It is understandable because they often have to stress over long-term unemployment, their children's living expenses, and monthly bills. The stress in my family is highly contagious. I often get frustrated because I am confused about the ways my parents hold grudges against each other. During dinner time, they would start pointless arguments about something that happened years ago. Overtime, I realized how deeply the tension between my parents affected my mental health. My idleness to react to their irrational behaviors only seems to elevate their anger even more. I began to look for a more effective way to deal with stress at home. One day while eating dinner, I decided to speak up and tell my parents about how they make me feel. It was a very brave moment in my life because I never had the nerve to criticize my parents before. I am still very proud of myself about the moment I spoke for myself and told my parents about my genuine feelings. Because it took a lot of courage for me to speak for myself, it was an unforgettable moment of success. Through this incident, I began to build the mental capability to withstand stress at home and learning how to deal with it more effectively.

In the midst of college applications, family relationship strains, and illness, my grades suffered, especially my Calculus grade, when I received a 38% on my first test. I was worried that I would fail the course and that would affect my college application later in the year. However, I knew I can do better and believed in myself. I learned to ask a lot of questions in class. I searched for extra assistance after school. On my second test, I managed to get an 81%, which was a huge improvement. I continued to persevere throughout the school year and took breaks from work to focus in school. I always worked collaboratively with my teammates and mentors. We became great friends and supported each other in and out of school. My overall grade slowly went up to a 92% by the end of the semester. More importantly, what I cherish most from this particular experience is the extra support that I received from my teachers, mentors, and friends. These meaningful relationships comforted me through one of the most stressful times in my life. Through my self-motivation to overcome failure, I am enabled to build inner strength that would allow me to tackle challenges in the future.

I live in the Chinatown of San Francisco for nine years and I always looked for ways to enrich the community I grow up in. I remember a memorable experience when I volunteered to teach seniors how to use various kinds of technology at the Chinatown Branch Public Library. Many seniors walked into the library with strong desires to learn how to write emails to their distant friends and families. When I saw how these seniors, some reached the age of 70, continued to be enthusiastic about learning, I felt so compelled to teach them everything I knew. The process of teaching took a lot of patience. It took practice to be able to explain steps clearly. I felt very rewarding when seniors learned what they hoped to know, such as typing Chinese letters to their relatives in China and making online phone calls via Skype. This wonderful experience boosted my confidence and enhanced my public speaking skills. Moreover, it changed the way I look at myself. I feel appreciated because my effort to help others benefited my community and made it a better place that fosters lifelong learning.

I believe that success is the motivation to continue and do my best during difficult circumstances. I use this definition as a guidance to live my life to the fullest, with courage, determination, and compassion.



I was told I succeeded when I my report card came back with a column of A's. I was told I succeeded when my SAT score finally came out. Now nearing the end of my junior year in high school, I am told that my next success will be in the form of college acceptances. Over the years, my definition of success has assimilated with that of my parents and college counselors, and in the process of reaching toward these goals set before me, I've developed an inconvenient case of insomnia with an accompanying state of hollow existence.

For as long as I remember, high academic expectations—from my parents' own experiences in social mobility and my elder sister's academic precedent—had been heaped before me. The truth is, up until high school, grades had not been a problem for me, so the demands—more or less law in my family—of academic excellence were accepted as something of a chore; something that was simple but necessary. And in some combination of Inception and the Baader-Meinhof Phenomenon, this constant echo of success in school became ingrained as an inveterate, albeit artificially rooted, part of my personal definition of success. But when I entered high school, the Platonic image of a smooth, polished path to success in an Ivy League college began to show cracks. The workload increased significantly and the way I had always done my work, and the way I wanted to, was not enough to meet the expectations of me. Not only did schoolwork consume more of my time, extracurricular activities that I was only doing for college applications were thrown into the mix. And what could I do but grit my teeth and tell myself that the lost hours of sleep and social activity were a reasonable sacrifice for this idea of success that was still dangling over my head. It was at this point that "life"—not just existing, rather feeling and experiencing and growing—became dull. My once constant smile lost its reason to appear and arguments with my parents became a regular occurrence. It would take a while for me to realize that my permanent scowl wasn't an unfortunate effect of the braces on my teeth and the fights weren't because "puberty", but when I did, I was already at an emotional low.

What I find interesting in hindsight is that going through this period of time, I had assumed that depression and insomnia and suicidal thoughts were natural things to feel when you're reaching for a goal—that is, I was always taught that struggles taught character and were necessary to succeed. So I ignored all the sleepless tossing and turning from my insomnia that began to develop from the stress. Lying in bed, I would just think about my grades and future college prospects until the sun came up. My sleep pattern and stress led to conflicts with my family and a noticeable loss of friends. My days became more and more routine, and going out with friends—the one escape I had from all the pressure—became less and less frequent. Objectively speaking, the deteriorating of my mental health wasn't extremely serious—self-harm was never seriously considered, and I was able to keep up my grades and activities. What bothered me most was that this idea of success I had devoted so much of my life to actually meant nothing to me.

At this time I began noticing the great things my peers were doing. There were tech guys creating clubs and startups. There were fashionistas with acclaimed blogs and online shops. There were people doing what they loved, working harder than I was, but happy. And that didn't make sense to me. They were supposed to struggle and face obstacles and fall to challenges along the way, but instead, they seemed happy? It was then that I began to see the difference between success and personal success. Studying for grades and for colleges broke me down, but there were other things that pulled me in the other direction. I felt accomplished—like I had succeeded—when the girl I had been chasing for months accepted my prom-posal. I was ecstatic when I opened the email that congratulated me on being a finalist in the Clean Tech Competition. Over the summer, while I was planting trees and teaching children English in Inner Mongolia, I felt happy.

I'm a second semester junior now—arguably the hardest months of high school—working to get good grades and preparing for upcoming college applications. On the weekends, I go to my environmental club's meeting and plan volunteer activities. I haven't had a sleepless night in seven months and I genuinely feel happy. I know for a fact that all high school students suffer from stress and anxiety, some more than others, but I also know that it doesn't have to be that way. The question: "How does your personal definition of success affect your mental health?" shouldn't have a negative affect, because then it really isn't your personal definition. The path to success will never be easy but it should be carved with passion and bring fulfillment in the end. I believe that the problem students have with mental health lies not in unrealistic goals but in the blind acceptance of what success means; that when students truly discover their personal definition of success as opposed to a parent or counselor's definition, they will still struggle and fall, but in a way that teaches integrity and perseverance—that their personal definition of success doesn't damage their mental health, but improves it.



I'd like to start this essay by saying that I have more than enough experience with mental health and how it can affect your life through stress. I myself have been diagnosed with BPD, depression, and the pending diagnoses of PTSD, ADD, and OCD.

For the first 5-6 years of my life I was raised by my bipolar mom and her stable girlfriend, with weekend visits to my dad every other week. They have been the three most influential people in my life, which has been rather conflicting, since they have each taught me different things about life. For the sake of this essay though, I'll stick to their ideas of what success is through school, friends, and work.

First, my mother: I think what she wanted most for me was to make it through school without getting pregnant, and in that way being sure not to follow in her footsteps. I think she wanted me to be able to enjoy my youth without the burdening responsibility of two children. She didn't teach me much

else before she died, since she was often preoccupied with battling her depression and occasional manic episodes.

Next, my father: I often think that my dad is worried about not being there for me, like in the past, and how my mother isn't now. Because of this, he often dumps parental advice on me all at once, about not wasting my life on school or getting into crippling debt through student loans. My dad graduated from UC Berkeley with a 4.0 or higher, and spent the majority of his school years studying and trying to cushion his portfolio. In contrast with this, he tells me that what I accomplish in life ultimately doesn't matter unless it makes me happy. It seems like a simple request, but for me it's often easier said than done.

Before I tie this in together, I'd like to mention my other mom: she now cares for me and supports me better than I think anyone else could, much in thanks to her seven years of experience dealing with my own mentally ill mother. I am told by her that as long as I get C's or better, she's proud of me. I am told by her to be and do my best every day, even if what that means changes each day. My other mom tells me that the most important thing in life is to "make sure your brain is your strongest muscle, and your heart is your most beautiful feature". She has paid for my bills when I was in the mental hospital, and she has always treated me with respect and rewarded me only with positive reinforcement. This to me is the best I could ever ask for, even with the almost reverse psychology effect it has on me.

By having an other mom that is so supportive about my decisions in life, I feel more pressured than ever to do good by her. It's almost as though I live to make her proud of me- live to make her happy, which is, of course, an impossible task. It is near impossible to keep a person always happy, since you are only one aspect in their life, with a limited amount of influence. Despite this, I still try, and because of this, I fail, so I punish myself in a continuous cycle.

I don't know what the rest of my family considers success to be, because not only am I not very close to them, but our relationship is so estranged that I don't think I'd care either way. As for me, I believe that once you have become content with your life- whatever that may be- then you have done well. When you enjoy your job, have a solid group of friends, and have reached some sort of equilibrium with your family, then I believe that you have succeeded.

The thing about all of this though, is that reaching the balance point in your life can take years, even decades, and I think that scares a lot of people. I think that we have become so accustomed to instant gratification that anything else starts a storm of stress and anxiety and negative thinking. And unfortunately, all of these unnecessary worries just expand in our minds, creating a downward spiral into a black hole that drains our mental, physical, and emotional health. Success is a blurry thing that I don't think can ever be reached until we lower our standards for ourselves, and learn to love ourselves for even the little things we accomplish. To me, that is the only way to protect our mental health, and to succeed in life.



The scarf was so pink it made my eyes burn. I watched its tassels swing over the metalbar of the shower frame as I tied another knot. I crouched onto the cold tile of my bathroom to admire my work-a picturesque replica of the gallows knot I'd seen online. Only this one was a scarf so pink it emanated its own light in the dreary bathroom and lacked the robust quality of a

There is art here, I thought. If I want to die, at least let it be artistic. And I've never preferred the damp sounds of "die" or "suicide." At that moment I decided I would wither. My mom would eventually break the lock on my door, discover a body that never felt like mine suspended near her head, and collapse with her head in her hands crying, wondering, how could she have let her youngest flower wither like this?

But it wasn't the artistry of the scene that made me feel unfinished in that moment. I knew that my red eyes and damp cheeks were not the most flattering way to be discovered. They were indicative, sure, of each ounce of depression under my skin, but I'd made a point of never letting anyone see that. Once I was dead the depression would die with me. I told myself that as many times as I could until my heart stopped beating irregularly and my breathing slowed. After this, there will be no more. No numbers. No disappointed phone calls and no whispers in the hallway. No voices echoing off the walls of my brain telling me I would never be good enough. No fears that I would end up in the dregs of society and raise children who wouldn't believe in themselves alongside a husband who wasn't interested. No worries that even if I worked as hard as I could I would never seize my dreams because of that one perfect candidate that was smarter, more athletic, and a better test taker than me. A slit of a wrist or a hanging torso more than makes up for the disappointment. It ends it altogether.

I will die a symbol, I told myself. A message that the system is wrong and we need to listen to those that fight it, not laugh at them because they can't achieve within it. An image that smiles often hide sadness and pain and loneliness. I will be immortalized in the hearts of all of those who loved me and they will carry me places I was too weak to go. Into valleys drenched with sunlight that I felt too dark to see. Into ice cream parlours my insides would never let me stomach. To birthday parties and weddings and funerals of people that I loved but did not feel worthy of. Out of bed and alongside their love for me forever.

I took the end of the scarf and began to knot it one last time around the base of my neck.

I couldn't properly count the amount of times I questioned how I had gotten to this point. Maybe it was the nights of depraved sleep, the dark days spent with anxiety attacks that followed each other consecutively, but I knew that there was a common denominator to it all: my personal fear of failure.

My first fear of failure came when I came to realize I had let an eating disorder control my mind. I was terrified of gaining weight, stepping right outside the line of being perfect. And at the first appearance of a B on my transcript in a school environment that seemed to brand those who weren't perfect as failures, I sensed that I was beginning to spiral down a road of no return.

The pressure to be perfect at school began to plague my rationality a year ago. Students at my school overloaded themselves with five to six AP classes and would talk down to those who didn't. My fear of being looked down upon-by my peers, by myself-drove me to doing the same. For months I would barely sleep at night, either from staying up to study or the relentless anxiety about failing. I felt behind in everything I was committed to-school, volunteering, soccer, and debate. My grades weren't perfect, I had contracted an injury that took me out of the frontrunners in soccer, and I could barely focus enough to research before debate tournaments. I became so consumed that I began sleeping for hours after returning from school, only to wake up, eat, and return to sleep. I was desperate to escape from the responsibilities of maintaining a perfect life.

It wasn't until my depression and anxiety threatened to take my life that I finally turned to my parents for help.

My psychologist asked me to think about why I might want to hold onto my depression. In all honesty, I told her it was because it had brought me closer to my mother. She had seen me go from a star student to a child incapable of leaving her bed in the morning and someone who was prone to violent, emotional outbreaks. She had seen me at my lowest and still loved me. That, I thought, was what my depression had done positively. But it was clear that there was more harm than good-depression has taken me out of each of my advanced classes and out of school altogether, stopped me from fulfilling my duties as debate captain, and turned me into an entirely different person.

The standards of success at my school have produced a culture of guilt and inadequacy among students. I know for a fact I am not its only victim. Especially since the beginning of my junior year I have felt that everything that I am, everything that I believe in, has been reduced to meaningless numbers on a piece of paper. I am an advocate for changing this culture. While I managed to get out and get myself help, I am frightened that others may not be so lucky.

Honorable Mentions

Success is a word that rings a different tone to every ear. To some it means money and fame, to others it represents something deeper than material possessions. But when it all comes down to it, I believe success, truly, is a friend to satisfaction. To be successful is to have a gift out of life- no, to *make* a gift out of life. Life is such a beautiful blessing, yet most of us forget this due to the daily shuffle of family and work and money and doctor appointments and groceries and taxes.... We all need to take time out of these busy schedules and agendas to sit back, take a deep breath, and purely appreciate the things we have in this world. That is what true success is.

This idea of appreciation and internal satisfaction is often overlooked, especially with those of us who suffer from Mental Illness. I remember a time when I wasn't able to think of a single thing to be grateful for. Life was so dreary and dark, filled with depression, anxiety, insomnia, and schizophrenic episodes. I didn't understand why I had to self- injure to get through a hard day, or why I couldn't seem to grasp on to the concept of "happiness" that I heard so many people talk about. My struggles clouded my view of the world and it became too much for me. It took three suicide attempts, living in three different states, and several hospitalizations, to change my view on life.

What I have learned from these years in which I've fought to stay afloat is that life is, in itself, the idea of change. And the key to success is that one must take that change and accept it, not fight against it with fear as an ally. Without acceptance, I would've always wondered why I seem so different from those at my school and why I've had to face such trials in my young life. Without acceptance, I would have always blamed myself for all the money spent on my treatment, and for all the feelings hurt by my suicidal actions. Without acceptance, I would not be able to look down today at my scarred arms and face, remembering that the past is a learning experience, not a tragedy.

Success can mean a world of a difference to someone with Mental Illness in their life. It is vital to realize that external satisfaction - although getting money or going out to a fancy dinner is wonderful - is not true success. It is all about the way one feels inside. Many of those suffering from mental health issues have goals and ideas such as "when I get better, that will be my success". From the perspective of a depressed, suicidal teenager, of course such an idea makes sense! But in reality, there is unfortunately no magic button or pill that will just make somebody "get better". It takes perseverance and hard work beyond measure to separate oneself from his or her issues and think with a clear, whole mind.

Mental health can be affected by one's personal definition of success, so much that it can change an old, hopeless perspective to a fresh, new one. As I've shared, my personal definition of success is accepting the change around you and the things that have happened in the past. I believe this definition of mine has certainly guided me over the years, when I wanted to give up, or stay under those covers and refuse to get out of bed. I was in an abyss, an abyss of loneliness and misunderstanding. I was confused, with nothing but the shadows of my thought to wrap around my shaking body. But every once in a while, I gained the courage to look upwards and take a peek at the light above this abyss. It was bright and glorious, as success often feels. I got up on my feet, and began to pace the floor. I collected strands of hope that I had experienced over time and soon enough I was able to pile the beautiful strands together on the floor. The thought of success was just beyond my grasp, but I daydreamed about it while trying to fall asleep at night. Eventually, I gained the strength to stand up and

face the light at the top of my abyss. I wanted something- I wanted to succeed, to be able to accept my fate and *keep on going*. I was tired of sitting there in my sorrows, with nothing to show for it but pools of tears shed from the lonely times. I was going to do something!

So I did. I took the strands of hope and twisted them in my hands over and over. Braiding them together, I mixed all the good memories from my life with the longing for more good experiences, and together this made a rope. My rope of hope was strong and it wanted success just as much as I did. And one day I became brave enough to throw it up to the top of my abyss, over the edge and it latched on to the rocks. The rocks meant that there were still going to be my rough, bumpy times ahead but they were making me stronger, reminding me to hold on to that rope until I could accept the future.

And then I climbed. I climbed and climbed. Sometimes I wanted to give up and I slowly dragged myself along; other times my desire for the light helped me climb faster than ever. But finally, I reached the top of that lonely abyss and bathed myself in the sunlight. I had never known success could be so warm and loving! Of course, my wounds were still there from the climb- I had bumped and scraped myself on the rocks along the way, but I had kept climbing. And now I understood why. I kept climbing because deep down inside, I had known this was my destiny. Low self-esteem was no match for my fate to be a survivor, and at the top of this abyss I vowed to never look down again.

I still trip and tumble over rocks every so often. But everyone does, and that is part of life. After all, that is what trials are for. When life becomes a struggle and Mental Illness shows its face, it is the thought of success, glorious acceptance and peace that allows me to keep going, with the knowledge that life isn't always so bad. My personal story of success stays in the back of my mind, reminding me that whenever a tough challenge is placed before me, *I can do it*.



At my high school, I believe there is an after effect of the American Dream. My peers, most of whom are first generation immigrants, are sons and daughters of parents who left their own families and home countries in pursuit of the American Dream. Their parents, as did mine, struggled to speak a new language and fit into a new culture, all for the sake of providing a better education and more opportunities for their children. As a result, we feel the constant pressure to make our parents' sacrifices worth something.

My own father is near retirement age but continues to work to pay for my college tuition and mortgage in my school district's overpriced housing market. My mother continues to struggle to speak the language of the country she has lived in for the past twenty years. Success to me means nothing less than achieving the best grades, excelling in extracurricular activities, and being the best I could be to make my parents proud. However, I allowed my determination to succeed to impede on my personal health.

It started last summer when I visited my relatives in China. Because I often snacked while staying up late at night to study, I had put on some weight during junior year. I remember the embarrassment I felt when my relatives bombarded me with straightforward comments like “you’ve gotten fat” and hurtful jokes such as “look at how much she can eat!” during family gatherings. The fact that these comments about appearance are seen as acceptable in Chinese culture did not ease my discomfort.

Meanwhile, as I began worrying about college applications, my life felt out of control. Yes, I had done all I could over the past three years to excel both in and outside of school, but the decision made by colleges was out of my hands. As my family continued to point out my weight, my attention shifted onto something I could control, a flaw I could fix – the number I see on the scale. I don’t blame my family for doing what they did; I believe they were encouraging me to eat healthily and were unaware of their impact on my self-esteem.

From the harmless diet I started in August began a downward spiral – from researching and writing down the calories of everything I ate to weighing myself every few hours to obsessively scrolling through posts of underweight models tagged as “thinspiration,” my new goal was to attain a perfect body. It was a goal that consumed my life for the next few months.

While pulling out my hair looking to fix every flaw on my college essays, I was also starving myself to feel in control. The days at the end of last year passed in a dark blur lit only by brief moments of success I felt at every pound shed. At the same time, there were days when I lost control and binged on junk food to feel better, yet after each binge I would feel like a failure.

During trips to the mall, I would try on jeans that were too small and sit with tears rolling down my cheeks in the dressing rooms. I made excuses when my friends asked me why I wasn’t eating lunch. I smiled painfully when my parents congratulated me on my weight loss without knowing the desperate measures I went to in order to achieve a perfection that I marked as a number.

When my hair thinned and began falling out in handfuls, I realized the coping mechanism I used to feel in control was actually making my life spiral out of control. I needed to talk to someone about my secretive behaviors, but I felt uncomfortable telling my family. We never discussed mental health – depression or suicide were not topics we mentioned. It didn’t help that with my Chinese skills, I could only communicate simple conversational phrases like “dinner’s ready” and “I’m done with my homework.” I eventually talked to my counselor who encouraged me to divert my attention onto hobbies and to take time to escape from my anxieties.

I still feel uncomfortable showing this essay to any of my family or friends. But I do wish that I could reveal my experiences without being judged based on my mental health, and I do wish that people were more sensitive when it comes to pointing out the flaws in other people’s appearances. This experience taught me that it is completely okay to remove myself from negative situations that make me feel bad about myself and that I don’t have to shift all the blame onto myself. Most importantly, it has allowed me to realize that a vital part of the path to success is taking care of my mental and physical health – after all, my body is the home that I must live in for the rest of my life.



Tears dribbled down my cheeks, hiccups convulsing my curled-up body. For a moment, I heard absolutely nothing--just a dull ringing in my ears. My vision blurred, producing several more droplets streaking salty paths down my cheeks. I felt caught in some cloudy limbo between reality and unconscious, perhaps because reality was just too uncomfortable to bear.

Everything had gone fine the entire day. My smile on the outside masked the unhappiness I felt inside. Friendly banter with fellow classmates temporarily relieved myself of the panic I knew would commence the minute I returned--as it did. A little voice on my shoulder reminded me that I wasn't good enough. That my plans would always be bigger than my present, that I'd always live one step behind satisfaction.

I checked my report card online, and my heart dropped hopelessly, as much as my calculus grade had. Then I cried.

My definition of success, shared with many of my peers, concentrated entirely on numbers. I cared so much for those figures that even my health and friendships were ranked behind the priority of my ever-important academics. I admired those rumors that sifted through the minds of Chinese parents--those student prodigies who managed to balance 4.0 GPA's and perfect 2400's with internships at local, prestigious universities and laudatory leadership positions at school clubs. That was success, I thought.

This single-minded desire to mold myself into a college-ready package propelled me through my first two years in high school. I took the hardest classes available to me, tried to sign up for six clubs in one year, and stayed up into the wee hours of the morning to study. The physiological effects from my efforts were evident: dark circles etched under my eyes, my hair thinned and left several strands of white in its wake. I consistently forgot to eat, sometimes surprising myself with my weight on the scale.

And I didn't succeed. I wasn't the top of the class. I didn't get perfect standardized testing scores. I struggled to balance so many extracurriculars with my academics. My results were first met with depression, and then frustration. If my peers could succeed, then why couldn't I? So I pushed myself even harder.

It inevitably led to my ultimate breakdown just a few months into my junior year. Defeat wrung out a rug of pity for me to lie on, and slipping to a new low, I took it. With my sleep-deprived eyes, I glared at my backpack, the surrounding papers, the pencils--anything that reminded me remotely of school and my seemingly overwhelming failures. My mental health was so skewed, so utterly damaged by my perception of what "success" meant to me that no words--not even my parents'--could console me.

When I was young, I struggled to defy everything. I'd jump down from the highest monkey bars, clenching my teeth at the sting when my feet landed on the floor, telling myself that it didn't hurt. After dinner, I'd read book after book, fighting to keep my sleepy eyes open, determined to finish that last chapter, that last page. I was constantly playing a game with myself, and becoming the perfect student was just another game I had to beat to succeed. I couldn't understand why I simply couldn't.

Inklings of a new mindset began developing during the summer before my junior year, when I attended a summer program in Philadelphia for a whole month living by myself. The program gave us much freedom to venture outside by ourselves; my friends and I took advantage of that opportunity and made frequent trips to the downtown area.

That Cupertino "bubble" I'd been so comfortably ensconced in almost immediately popped. I saw sights that broke and burned my eyes. I saw rundown, dilapidated stores with dirty windows and graffiti decorating the walls. Even the air felt suffocating, with the heat beating down and humidity hanging in the air. The homeless along the streets echoed inquiries for spare change, seemingly unfazed by the heat that I felt so bewildering. I handed them whatever I had; even a couple of coins seemed to mollify them, while a decent but not perfect SAT score could not placate myself. I could only describe myself as one word: spoiled.

The realization did not hit me quickly and suddenly, never with that wide-eyed stare and reformative flashback like how the movies depict it. Instead, it came slowly and surely, attaching itself to my perception of things and gradually altering it that way.

Today, I no longer define myself nor my self-worth as a number. I make a conscious effort to mix in scrimmages of basketball with my brother with APUSH study sessions with friends. Eating properly is paramount; I ensure that I eat three meals a day with proper nutrition to supplement my energy. It's paid off; I feel much healthier and stronger than I did a year ago.

That's not to say I'm completely independent of my previous inhibitions; my test scores and grades still matter to me--just not obsessively, and not as much. I see success differently. The outcomes no longer hold the utmost importance, but it is the journey that it took for me to get there, inclusive of all the people and stories that made it happen. That's where I believe the real success comes from, where I feel I derive my true satisfaction from.

That's what I believe truly matters.



Stress has a purpose. It can be the driving force to help us reach our goals or the good push we need to make a life-changing decision. In small doses, stress is actually good for you. However, too much stress is extremely unhealthy and can lead to serious feelings of depression and anxiety. There are many causes of stress for different people that come in every shape and form. In my experience, I have seen

that having great ambition is not necessarily a bad thing; however, when our strong desire to succeed threatens to tear us apart we become a danger not only to others, but also to ourselves.

One's personal definition of success is partly shaped by those around him or her. Society tells us that to be truly successful one must have a profitable career, in which that person is economically stable. Oftentimes, people forget that life is not always about the money and more often than not skip over the fact that your happiness with your job should take priority over monetary gain. This goes back to the cliché, "if you love what you do, you'll never work a day in your life." Growing up, my family always wanted me to be a pediatrician and for some reason I went along with it. I do not know if it was just to make them happy or if the idea of doing something worthwhile to make them proud intrigued me. Today, my choice in career path has changed slightly, from doctor to nurse, but the thought that I may not have a job after all the effort I have put into my education still weighs heavily on me. Some stress for students goes hand in hand with getting a job once out of college. With so many people entering the workforce newly graduated, it is hard not to worry about whether in a handful of years you may either be thriving at your new workplace or unemployed. However, before a student even thinks of getting a job, he or she must first dream of getting into a good college.

Once you first step into high school you are already being geared towards getting into college. Never mind that college is not the only way to reach success and never mind the fact that you are forced to choose a career path as a teenager still new to making decisions that may or may not make or break where your life goes from here. Society dictates that after high school you must go to college and that aspect of the definition of success is imprinted onto you as well. When choosing classes you take into account what would look better on your transcript for colleges instead of taking the interesting or fun ones you would rather take instead. The same goes for extra-curricular activities, so instead of joining clubs based on hobbies and such, a student beefs up their transcript with things aimed towards getting into a certain college of their choice. Then, there are the college applications and essays and supplemental paperwork that have to be filled out in order for you to even be considered in the decisions process. This was all too real for me as a senior this year, worrying about if a college would even accept me. I stayed up late at night days after I already submitted everything that needed to be submitted, wondering if I had done enough or tried hard enough or if my grades were good enough to get to where I wanted to go. Then, come the acceptance and rejection letters. Being told you are not good enough is never something you want to feel, but then the self-doubt creeps in and you start to wonder if anything you have ever done has been worthwhile. Yes, the college admissions boards have no idea who you truly are or who actually wants to go to their school and who is only applying as a safety, but it still hurts nonetheless.

Another big part of what I stress about is trying to reach other people's expectation of me, which is hard when your parents only want you to have the opportunities they did not have when they were growing up and you cannot help but compare yourself to your peers, who are in no way similar to you, by the way. And, usually when the workload is too much for one night, a student has to choose between getting a good night's sleep or staying up late to make sure the assignments are completed well enough to get a good grade. Even now as I type this essay I am currently thinking about so many other due dates and deadlines and things that need to get done in general. Ultimately, everything gets to be too much and suddenly there is this weight on your shoulders that you cannot get rid of and walls that are pressing in on you from all sides. You then get this mentality that you are a failure and one failed test quickly escalates to a failed class and not graduating high school and then ultimately failing at

life. I know it sounds morbid, but once you are stuck in this state of mind you all of a sudden assume that every mistake you make can never be corrected and each slipup is magnified for all to see. It is only when you step back and learn your limits are you able to ease off all the anxiety and not push yourself too hard. Getting the grade is not nearly important as making sure you are mentally healthy. Sometimes, when something seems to be affecting me too much I tell myself, “in ten years this won’t matter” and this puts things in perspective because a lot of times we stress too much over the small things and lose sight of what is truly important. So, yes, more often than not my definition of success, or rather, what I have been taught is the definition of success usually gets the better of me; but, sometimes you just have to believe that the decisions you are making now are right for the future you envision for yourself. Otherwise, you will be trapped in your own head, pondering where it all went wrong.



Psychologically proven, two extremely effective methods of deriving desired outcomes on others are operant and classical conditioning. In the former, a system of reward and punishment is utilized, whereas in the latter, a non-related stimulus becomes associated with another. The effectiveness of these two methods stems from the fact that they guarantee a result that is comparable with the outcome of any “successful” endeavor: the acknowledgement of one’s society.

Undeniably, society and cultural influences have had a huge influence on our perceptions of success. This occurs at both broad and specific levels: Citizens of two different countries may differ in their career motivations; students at two different high schools are shaped by their schools’ atmospheres to have varying standards of education. To some extent, this socio-cultural enforced definition of success brings out our innate potential, which can be seen in the drive of high school students to get into great colleges or employees seeking to get a promotion.

However, this definition proves to have many drawbacks as well.

In a society-enforced definition, the democratic view of diversity and acceptance are often subordinate to the established values of the majority, and as a result, unspoken rules, stigmas, and discrimination result. Specifically, those with more idiosyncratic values or unique personal interests are often excluded from what society defines as “successful”. For instance, in my own Western high school culture, it is considered less socially acceptable to be an art major than it is to become an engineering major. There is hardly any disparity between the skill of an artist and an engineer, but because of the stigma that society has assigned those who are more creative than task-oriented, many of my friends and classmates have automatically ruled out art as a potential career because they fear being deemed as “unsuccessful”. This stringent definition therefore leads to a deterioration of mental health, as individuals begin to lose sight of the things that improve their own mental health, which unlike social success, is unable to be generalized.

In middle school, I was a victim of society's standards; I strived to fit in and ride the wave to success. I played the clarinet in Band because everyone claimed it was the most educational elective. I told myself I would be a doctor when I grew up because the medical field was rated to be the "Most Successful" career path in a magazine I had read. Sure, I thought I was on my way to a successful life, but as a result, my personal happiness and confidence in myself deteriorated. Subconsciously, I'd always known that "Science Club" or playing the clarinets were not my passion; however, I felt inextricably tied to them because I feared that I would be completely worthless without them.

My opportunity to start over came as I started high school. I was determined to redefine my idea of success and give it a more personalized twist. I started playing sports, specifically, joined the Women's Basketball Team my freshman year, and found myself completely in love with an activity that my group of conservative friends looked down upon as too dangerous and time-consuming. After joining the Chinese American Political Association my sophomore year and working as a summer intern at the offices of both Assemblywoman Joan Buchanan and State Senator Mark DeSaulnier, I found myself drawn to pursuing political science and advocating for Asian-American awareness in the community. Suddenly, it was as if my horizons expanded---my options were limitless and slowly, I started becoming comfortable with the unique person I was becoming.

This personal definition of success came to the test during the Fall of my junior year. Last October, I was diagnosed with two pneumothoraces, otherwise known as a lung collapse, which put me in the hospital for a span of two weeks on two separate occasions. Having lived a life of constancy and stability my whole life, this unexpected event threatened all of my ambitions and dreams for the future. To others, I seemed destined to fail; the rigor of a Junior year workload was tough enough for a healthy student. My hopes of becoming Team Captain for the Women's Basketball Team and section leader for Band seemed only distant dreams, as I was not allowed to participate in physical activities for 80 days after my lung surgeries. However, I did not back down. I ended first semester with academic excellence and was able to return to both Basketball and Band by February, working twice as hard to regain my leadership positions. Having a positive outlook on my situation truly saved me from falling into the pits of withdrawal during that time; I was able to prove to myself and others that success is not only limited to those with innate talents, advantageous circumstances, or skills, but rather, is completely dependent on personal drive, of which ultimately originates from your mental awareness and acceptance of yourself.

My personal definition of success is a two-part equation: a product of pursuing personal passions and defying discriminatory odds. Looking back, perhaps I've lived my high school years the hard way, sacrificing my sleep to make it to 6 am basketball workouts, working through weekends to make up for a month of Junior year tests and homework after my surgeries, or facing doubters who look down upon my intended major of International Studies. However, I don't regret any bit of my experience, because ultimately, success to me is defined by the level of positive mental health, and I have had an amazing high school experience.

People told me that playing sports during high school would only hinder my path to success. They told me that pursuing the humanities instead of the sciences wouldn't get me anywhere in the future. They told me that a girl who missed a month of her junior year didn't have the potential for success anymore.

But I didn't hear them. I've stuck to my own definition:

Success: Do what makes you happy.

And I'm still smiling today.



I was born with a genetic condition named Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA). Spinal Muscular Atrophy is a genetic autosomal recessive disorder, and for a child to develop SMA both parents must have the gene. I have been in a wheelchair since I was 21 months old. My wheelchair, that I rely on to get around is over 350 pounds. I also have a very weak immune system which means if I get sick I will end up in the hospital. A simple cold will turn into Pneumonia in a matter of hours. When I go to the hospital I know everybody on a first name basis. My brother said, "If there were frequent flier miles for the hospital, I would be at the top of the list". This hasn't stopped me. After missing more than half the year in second grade due to illness, the Special Education Director administered a multitude of tests to determine if I needed should be held back in second grade. Many school district administrators were very surprised, when I ended up doing very well. I passed the series of tests with ease and skipped third grade altogether. I've never been placed in a "special education" class and I'm enrolled in mainstream classes with my cognitively intact peers at my local public high school. Although I have never stood, walked, or crawled, I try not to let my condition prevent me from living a "normal" life. I'm just a teenager with regular dreams, aspirations, and passions. I am involved in many leadership roles in my community. My freshman and sophomore year of high school I was apart of the Burlingame Youth Advisory Committee. We give a voice to youth in my city while hosting events that give back to our community. In August of 2013 I became a member of the San Mateo County Youth Commission; the commission is a group of twenty-five teenager in the county who advise the Board of Supervisors on issues pertaining to youth. Last spring I had the opportunity to participate in Organization of Chinese Americans, San Mateo chapter's Speak and Lead with Pride intensive six week course. In this program we had to deliver eloquently spoken and written speeches by ourselves each week. Lastly, ever since the summer before eighth grade I have been a summer camp counselor at various church camps; I am now a junior.

My family's definition of success is graduating from college, being humble, giving back to my community and to those who have helped either me or my family in times of need, being respectful to all, and having high moral characteristics. My definition of success is different than my family's only because I want more for myself. I would like to continue my education further than just receiving my undergraduate degree. However, everything else my parents want for me, I want for myself too. I believe it is important to possess those qualities to be a well rounded and cultured individual. Since I was seven, I've aspired to be a lawyer. Stereotypically, many think my Asian parents pressured me into wanting to become a lawyer; however, that is not the case. The notion of being an attorney, having exemplary reading and writing skills, helping argue for the underdog, and giving back to their community has always captivated me.

The stress of missing so much school and not being able to accomplish all of my assignments has caused me to get exhausted easily and to have a sudden declines in my grades. Due to medical problems and other circumstances, I've been unable to meet my self imposed expectations of doing my very best in school. I also have experienced extreme anxiety due to school. I would not want to go back because I had been out for so long and my strong dislike of my aide. Since Kindergarten I have probably only had about four aides that were capable of doing their job and that I liked. I'm very reliant on my aides for help with basic actions such as taking items out from my backpack, sitting up, eating lunch, or going to the bathroom. There was one occasion where my aide and I were in the hallway and I said I needed to go to the bathroom. She told me that I had to wait until I got home, but then moments later she told me she had to go to the bathroom and then proceeded to abandon me in the hallway all by myself. Their incompetence and unprofessionalism has caused me much stress. In the past I have told my parents that I would rather be in the PICU (Pediatric Intensive Care Unit) then go back to school. When I am healthy and able to attend school I do my very best to keep my grades up. My parents will be proud of me no matter what, but the stress I put on myself is more than what others put on me.

Through my adversity in life I have learned many valuable lessons. I have learned to work with difficult people, which I believe will be very useful to me in the future. I have learned to advocate for myself and do activities independently. I have brought a new perspective to the different committee's I serve on. I've learned new public speaking skills and learned to speak for those who lack a voice or access to organizations of influence. My goal is to focus on the positives in life rather than the negatives. When I have mental health symptoms I try to move past them and look towards the future. I know wherever life leads me all the hardships I encounter now will be worth it later in life.



Crumpled papers, droopy eyelids, and insane amounts of caffeinated green tea. These were the factors I once thought made up the ingredients for ultimate success, which at the time consisted of a transcript of A's and strong standardized test scores. The varsity tennis practices, Key Club events, and Division Council Meetings subtracted significant chunks of daylight, so I resorted to late night studying for schoolwork as a compromise. I used to imagine myself as the tired, energy-drained, yet hardworking college student in the Game of Life. As far as I knew, trading hours of sleep for hours of study time was the norm for the average high school student. This lifestyle was rewarding academically in the short run, but I discovered the trade-offs I had unknowingly made concerning my mental health. I became exhausted, distracted, and stressed. Remaining attentive in my classes and completing homework became increasingly challenging. Frustration that stemmed from my constant drowsiness and my infinitesimal attention span hindered my motivation. I reached a point where I knew I had to change my ways. I sought the aid from my parents and friends, and they helped me formulate a different perspective on success—a success that promotes my mental health rather than adversely affecting it.

The change was everything but sudden. My parents suggested prioritizing my activities, and my friends suggested getting more sleep. Figuring out my strengths and weaknesses was a straightforward process, but inserting the changes to my schedule proved more difficult. I was in a seemingly impossible battle against time. There were only so many hours in a day, yet so much to do. In the beginning, I was ultimately discouraged. I had started getting a full 8 hours of sleep each night, but I continued to feel worn out during the day. I used to question what was wrong with me. Some of my classmates got 4 hours of sleep each night and were completely unaffected by the minimal sleep. Why couldn't I be like them? The questions continued swirling in my mind but I was able to stick with my commitments with the help from my support system, which consisted of my family and best friends.

After about a week or two, I started to see results in my mental health. By getting more sleep and improved time management, I started recovering from the affects of the unhealthy lifestyle I had previously followed. By getting more consistent hours of rest, I discovered an increased concentration and interest in my activities such as tennis and schoolwork. The mental block between learning and concentration gradually cleared. I was both faster and more accurate with a well rested mind. Everything gradually became less of a threat to the workings of my daily workload with my newly acquired efficiency. My adjustment to a healthier lifestyle not only benefited my schoolwork and extracurricular activities, but it also let me realize the absolute importance of maintaining my health. Success is something that should enhance my life, not hinder it by harming my mental health. I no longer define success solely based on printed number and letter grades.

Now, my definition of success is not a complicated one. I define success as anything that gives me pride, such as my friends, academic achievements, teammates, clubs, family, and community. I am proud to have such supportive individuals in my life. My mental health flourishes with this new outlook on life. I am able to appreciate what I have and what I need to have in order to feel one hundred percent. I aim to keep myself strong so I may achieve and contribute to those who have helped me along the way, such as my peers, family, and community.

My personal definition of success used to be a heavy burden on my mental health. With the help of my supportive family and friends, I am able to realize the true meaning of success. To me, success is anything that gives me happiness and pride in who I am. Taking care of myself is a necessity for my wellbeing. Enjoying life is success. I will be sure to keep this healthy vision of success for years to come.



We are 5-year olds. We run around, screaming our heads off as we run away from the Wicked Witch. We're Superman, dashing away to save our beloved damsel in distress. We take a bowl of spaghetti and mash our hands into the gooey tomato sauce and stuff what we have into our ravenous mouths. We annoy our parents but at the same time, love them so much. We slosh around in the swimming pool, intrigued by the power of the water and reciprocating waves. We take the myriad of

Crayola crayons and not only destroy piles of paper as white as snow, but also vandalize our room's walls with our masterpieces. But most of all, we are dreamers, unbeknownst to any obstacle that would even attempt to stop us mischievous, endearing 5-year olds. There are no limits.

We are now 16-year olds. We run around, but around a track—it's an extracurricular for college. To add to the pressure, our teammates scream at us to run like the wind and pass them the baton so that our team can beat our rivals in the relay competition. We're Superman—or, at least we wish we were. We annoy our parents with endless things, from money requests to endless chaperoning tasks amongst others, yet do we fully express our own love for them? We slosh around in the swimming pool, but only because we're warming up for our next race: the 100-m butterfly. The competition slowly wears us away. At home, whatever remained of our vandalistic adventures has been scrubbed down with a scrawny rag. Lastly, we are dreamers, but only of a different kind; no longer is the sky the limit. The looming monster, termed "Reality," sets in and crushes us all.

I am one of them. "Them" is composed of laborers who slosh around in the mud of papers and books. "Them" is a troupe of sailors who have to fight a storm on the wild open sea of formulas in order to survive. "Them" is a group of civilians facing the prospect of never-ending throngs of tests. We are crusaders. What is our goal? That is to be determined.

On the surface, teens like me all aspire to attend a top institution. This is a simple definition of success that is implanted into my mind and those of many others out there. Part of the admiration for such top schools can be blamed on society's idolization of these premier universities. My confession, though simple in words however, does not reflect the defeats I have endured, mentally and physically, that again, on the surface, is not always understandable.

I am a victim, a sufferer of chronic anxiety. Almost every day, I worry about my homework and my daily load. The Plague of Thermochemistry cripples my mind, increasing my pulse when I enter class every day. The Plague of Tests overwhelms my fragile soul, cracking the very cover meant to shield me from my attackers. Sometimes, it leads me to wonder if whether or not life is a plague that is almost nearly dictating my worries. Amidst the eeriness of the darkness, during many early morning hours, I have toiled over piles and piles of work. Expecting results worth the suffering I endure, I burn to a crisp when my hope collapses, feeling like I am of little value. Such extreme depths take me down a narrow and fragile path framed with such degrading thoughts that I question my purpose on this earth and if I should even continue...

Taking the brunt of the semi-truck that constantly slams into me has given me many internal bruises that many may not know. But the fact that I can and am typing this is a testament proving that society's effects on my fruitfulness is only short-term and minimal; what I may suffer from now may be as simple as a thing of the past. As a motivation, I look to what I truly strive for: enrichment with dignity, integrity, and pride. Marianne Williamson once said, "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure." In truth, within us, stands a power so fierce that no dust so fine is able to penetrate. This is what keeps me going. Life moves on and I must keep up with it.

In retrospect, though I am still just a student, even though an A symbolizes the "highest achievement," it should not reflect my highest achievements as an aspiring 16-year old teenager in high school. I could paint a wild soccer scene, research more to further my knowledge associated with my

aviation or auto passions, read some great American classics, or even make new friends around my community and abroad. Such seemingly daily and typical social activities count as successes in my book. Simply put, fulfilling one's passions is my own true definition of success. I would be doing what truly happy people are doing; by enriching my mind, I am rejuvenating my spirit. In the process, I am regularly baptizing my soul. Too often, I find myself and my peers neglecting this life principle for the sake of achieving what society believes as success. It is up to me, and only me, to see to it that I live my life to the happiest and most fulfilling moments possible under my own terms.

So, as I move on with my life in just a little more than a year from now, I will attend a place in a different area, meet new people, immerse myself in a new environment, and surround myself with a new culture. But even as I wake up tomorrow morning, assuming my 5-year old mentality will only allow me to break the shell that envelops me, the chains that bind my feet. It's time to dream again.



My definition of success is doing your best at whatever you do. It doesn't matter the score or grades you get, but if you did your best at something, you are successful. I like to think about the quote by Albert Einstein, in which he says, "Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid". This related to all teens because we all do a lot of comparing between ourselves and people we see as "better", simply because we are human and we all have an inner desire to go further and reach our full potential. But, if we know we are trying our hardest and reaching that full potential, we are all successful, and our mental health will benefit from this positive way of thinking.

One dictionary definition of success is "the attainment of wealth, position, honors, or the like", meaning that success only comes to you if you have made it to the top, farther than many have gone. I do not live my life by this standard, nor do I believe anybody should. There is another definition of success that claims it is "the accomplishment of an aim or purpose", which I think makes a more positive impact on the confidence and mental health of people who follow this description. Success shouldn't be having the most, or being the best, or even being most popular, and that is why I believe I have such a positive outlook on my life and who I am as a person. I try my hardest to not let myself stress over anything, because once I start worrying about everything, I take the enjoyment out the things I do in life and forget to appreciate the experience while simply focusing on being the best at whatever I am doing. Although it may sound cliché, if I am working my hardest at something and looking at things with the "glass half full" point-of-view, I am satisfied with my work. I do not believe there is such thing as "perfectionism," but rather I believe that society and the pressures of being a teenager through media, technology, and peer pressure force us to lose our desire to learn and live to the fullest and replace that passion with getting the most money or being the most famous. Nowadays, with so many great colleges, jobs, and futures at teenager's fingertips, it is difficult to not want to compete to be better than

everyone around you, and I believe it has caused us to abandon our own self-respect and individual determination.

At the same time, it is a naturally-born human quality to want to be great at something. I believe there is a difference between working your hardest to reach for goals and just fighting your whole life to be richer or more popular than the people around you, in some way trying to prove yourself of something. I believe that is a new flaw in the complicated system of being an adolescent. When did getting good grades and following the phrase “practice makes perfect” become a competition? Possibly some of us as teens have not been brought up with the right explanation of that expression. If you’re going to be perfect, it should be only to enrich yourself and have great experiences, not to seem like the person who has the best life.

In my life, my family has always been very supportive of anything me or my brother (or really anybody) wants to do or be. I have lived under the belief that hard work and your best work is success enough, as long as we keep the religious and ethical morals and values we were raised with. My parents were never focused on getting the best grades or being the coolest or being the star on my sports team, but rather if we were well rounded with a good understanding of what it is to just be a good person and a hard worker. The focus in my life was more to be an example of humbleness, respect, and hard work, showing my peers that being successful doesn’t mean being above everybody, but rather reaching your full potential and living by the values you’ve been raised with, building lasting relationships and leaving a positive mark on the world, no matter how you choose to go through with that. In fact, the more people try to be more and more perfect, the more they lose passion and happiness. Working too much on getting the best grades could even lead to not getting enough sleep and lowering your grades or losing respect for yourself. Luckily, I am not pressured by my family to live up to impractical goals, unlike some others, but nobody should be pressured to be something that they aren’t at the expense of happiness and confidence, in a perfect world.

All in all, I hope in my life I can help people who struggle with this problem realize that there is no such thing as “perfect”, and we shouldn’t try to reach for that, because no one will get there. I am not trying to claim that I am all-knowing or perfect myself, but because I believe I have a good understanding of what I can and should be doing in my life, I hope to rub off on the people around me and start a positive fire in my own children when I am older. Living by the fact that working your hardest is being the best you can be and all you need to be successful, hopefully teens will start to realize that they don’t need to hold all that pressure on themselves and start living life to our own definition of full-potential, avoiding the mental health issues we can regret later on in our lives.



Having slightly sad looking brown eyes is more than from my genetics and by looking at me you would see simply a gentle soul. Engage in conversation with me and you might notice my subtle

communication handicap. Very few people know my story and it is certainly painful for me to relive the details or share what my life has been like. Keep in mind that my definition of success is to do my best in school and to feel safe. I am not an overachiever taking multiple AP classes, but if I could make it through the day without being humiliated that would be a positive day for me. Please understand that I am not dwelling on the past or complaining. This is my story of never feeling like I was good enough and sadness that was like a melody playing in the background that could not be turned off.

Taken from a private junior kindergarten and placed in a public CH class at the age of 5 was to set the tone for my entire academic life through high school. Being placed in a special day class setting is like being in a roach motel. Although I made friends that were mostly all on the autism spectrum, which I am not, the pace was so slow it was impossible to ever enter a mainstream classroom. Don't get me wrong. These kids were my friends and we clung together like a bunch of grapes. The irony of it all is that I was not even getting speech therapy! My parents made a bold decision to put me in private tutoring to catch up and I then repeated second grade in a mainstream classroom.

Other children would mock and bully me not just for having been in a special education class, but for repeating second grade. I was the perfect target with my generative speech delay. As the bullying escalated I became more withdrawn and my self-esteem plummeted. This would continue throughout elementary school. The teachers and administration knew, but nothing was done.

Middle school was a personal nightmare for me. Kids would misbehave and blame it on me. I was not fast enough with my words to speak up. I was bullied by groups and in one class it was enabled by my teacher. My IEP states I am to sit in the front of the classroom. I was placed in the back in one class and every single day I was tripped and kicked to get to my seat. My mother would ask me where I got the bruises and I would say I fell in PE. I feared what the bullies would do to me if I told. My PE clothes were stolen every week. My parents went to school countless times to talk to teachers and the principal, but nothing was done. In May of my first year there I changed schools to a school with an anti-bully program. It was not perfect, but it was a lot better. My grades soared and I frequently had all A's. I made the honor roll and I started feeling a little better about myself.

Then came high school and I thought it was all behind me. My mother would ask me every single day if anyone was messing with me, but I told her it was all fine. In reality there was one boy in particular that would humiliate me in front groups of other students. It turned out he was also poster boy for the Aryan Brotherhood and would go into anti-Semitic rants and talk about burning me in a furnace. I was afraid to be around where he might see me, so I walked around during lunch or hid. My excuse for my lunch coming home uneaten everyday was that I was doing test corrections. Again my parents contacted the administration and the only punishment was the other student was asked to write an apology, which turned out to be a letter telling me what I should do to improve myself. It seems like there is constantly some tragic story in the news about bullying in the schools, so the awareness is there.

Unfortunately, it is one thing to present the façade of an anti-bully program and an entirely different aspect to implement and act on what is being preached.

I saw a counselor outside of school and he helped me find a way to deal with people who try to make me feel insignificant. We identified events, feelings and situations that trigger a crisis for me and worked out coping skills and a support system.

Practicing mindfulness has helped me immensely. Learning to focus on the moment and not dwell on the past, or what is going to happen in the future, sounds like such a simple thing to do. It takes a lot of practice. Being in a quiet space and focusing on my breathing while I count on the exhalation really helps clear my mind and be in the present.

My physician thinks I have social anxiety, but it is difficult for me to separate that from being cautious due to the years of bullying. I am, however, making a huge effort to be more talkative and communicate my feelings.

For a boy who started out his academics in a special education class I am proud to say I have been accepted to all eight colleges I have applied for. I am not just hoping to make a fresh start, and not be the special ed kid who repeated a grade, but I know that I can and will achieve anything in life that I set out to accomplish. I will treat everyone with dignity and respect and be an ally for those who are not. This is something that everyone should strive to do in life. Most importantly I no longer have that sad melody defining me, but a feeling of excitement and happiness to start the next chapter of my life.



"What's wrong, Phony Michael? Got another cramp?"

"Hey Phony, why don't you swim with a more suitable team? Like maybe a group of ten-year olds."

"Give it up Phony, you'll never be as fast as Michael Leung, the real Michael."

Every day, it felt as if I were locked away behind the walls of my own prison, which were collectively adorned with but a single one-way window. Though I couldn't see through the glass, I knew that my teammates, including the "real" Michael, stood cackling on the other side. I was utterly alone, left to writhe in agony as the deafening torment shredded my ears until they bled streams of red. "Leave me alone!" I hollered at the glass, but the biting remarks kept coming: "Phony. Phony. PHONY."

I jolted awake in bed with tears trailing down my face. Each night, I returned to that nightmarish room, unable to escape my disparaging nickname. Regardless of how much I improved or worked, my teammates never accepted me as anything more than a second-rate Michael. Eventually I couldn't help thinking that, perhaps, they were right. Maybe I really was just a hopeless embarrassment to the team.

This agonizing cycle of torture persisted for over a year, in which it became increasingly apparent that my mental health was suffering. What should have been simple, enjoyable days at school and swim practice became filled with an all-consuming paranoia of hearing the dreadful P-word; my mental stability was slowly chipped apart by this recurring nightmare until I straddled the border into insanity. However, the real problem stemmed, not from the conduct of my teammates, but from myself instead.

"Success," to me, was a purely black-and-white matter. I deemed myself "successful" only if I had earned the acknowledgment, respect, and admiration of everyone around me. Results otherwise were instantly branded failures. Every snide jeer, every disparaging comment from my teammates had the blow of a hammer pounding a stake into my chest, striking crippling blows that may as well have been people screaming at me, "What a failure you are, you'll never accomplish anything!" My personal definition of "success" was the very poison responsible for my mental degradation.

It wasn't until over a year later that, driven to the edges of my sanity, my coach, Chris, offered me words of solace in a personal talk after one of my races at a competition. The few statements that Chris made were more than enough to expose the cause of my declining health.

Throughout the next months, I mentally chanted his words every moment of the day; whether I was listening to class lectures, engaged in a grueling practice, or soldiering through homework assignments, I incorporated the values he left me into everything I did. Slowly, I began transforming his words into a new lifestyle -- a new mentality -- that would free me from my cruel nightmares.

"There's always someone out there who's better than you."

I learned to accept my place among peers in terms of achievements, rather than become emotionally caught in my shortcomings. I grow at my own rate, learn at my own pace, and follow my own passions. Judging my own accomplishments, my own "success," based upon others' achievements and opinions simply isn't an accurate measure of my individual progress.

"What's most important is that you're holding nothing back."

There's no magical formula, no exclusive secret or hidden shortcut to achieving my goals; there's only "holding nothing back" to make the largest improvements possible. Each workout, I strive to kick a little harder, dive a little farther, and endure searing pain a little longer. Through sheer effort and dedication, through improving every day, there's no doubt in my mind that I'll eventually surpass someone like Michael Leung.

"Live without regrets."

I acknowledge that I may fall short of my goals at times. I may miss the U.S. National standard, or lose to Michael Leung again. However, I can accept those shortcomings with the peace of mind that there was nothing else I could've done in the past to better the results. By having the satisfaction of knowing I tried my hardest, I can proudly "live without regrets."

I am above petty mockery and nicknames. Others cannot define my successes or my worth. That cursed room with the one-way window is nothing more to me today than a flimsy cage attempting to contain my bursting potential. Who's "Phony Michael?" The only person I recognize in the window reflection is Michael Chen: the most real Michael there will ever be.



Weaving through the congested halls on my first day of Junior year, I hear the harmonic blend of twelve hundred different voices. Three short months ago, my feet tread through similarly locker-lined corridors, but all I could hear then was the persistent ringing of my own thoughts, challenging and interrupting each other like an unhappy couple.

I spent my first two years of high school in a ruthlessly competitive environment. In every classroom, hallway, and corridor, the looming pressure for nonstop “success” hung thick in the air like the smell of pungent coffee wafting from every sleep-deprived student’s thermos. With every second place finish at a track and field race, every less-than-stellar test score, and even every losing game of Scrabble, my brain would exude self-criticism that only accumulated throughout the day with my building anxiety. The minds of youth are fresh, making them permeable to the negative effects of our stressful environment. Two years in a cutthroat private school imbued in me a perfectionistic attitude, an unhealthy competitive nature, and a minimizing perspective on my own achievements, all of which I am still in the process of reversing.

However, my junior year, something changed. My parents, my therapist, and I agreed that I could not spend the remainder of my youth comparing my achievements to an arbitrary definition of success provided by my teachers and peers. When I transferred to public school, I felt like a captive bird released for the first time. The diversity of personalities, interests, and beliefs opened my eyes to a type of success that I had been sheltered from for two years.

Exercising, for example, used to be an obligatory form of self-torture, which I only performed to prevent an influx on the scale and a consequential drop in self-confidence. In the past few months, however, I’ve learned to relish my daily exercise. This change in perspective has little to do with my increase in fitness or comfort with my body; in fact, little has changed but my intentions with working out. Instead of allowing a capricious number on a scale or jeans tag determine my self worth, I focus solely on appreciating the movement of each running stride, dance move, and yoga position. Success in the gym is when I finish a workout at full speed, not when I burn a target number of calories.

Another example of my change in perspective is evident by my work in the classroom. Although my thoughts have always revolved around essay grades and test scores, I’ve become more process-oriented, focusing my attention on how much I can learn instead of how many points I can earn. Instead of beating myself up about my grades, I’ve begun looking at grades as a byproduct of my willingness and capacity to

I realize now that at my old high school, I was letting an external definition of success determine my own sense of self-importance, but in reality, I am the only person who can dictate what success means to me. Since I’ve had the chance to reanalyze my life and rid myself of the negativity that once clung to me like an ill-fitted sweater, the concept of personal success has reentered my life, along with my returning confidence and mental health.



From a young age, success to me has simply meant being the best that I can be at everything I do: as early as elementary school, I spent hours crafting science fair projects, speeches, and short stories for school contests, and I wouldn't rest until every sentence, diagram, and illustration had been scrutinized and critiqued. Back then, I had time to spare for such incessant perfectionism; however, once high school rolled around, my hyper-fastidious standards began getting more and more in the way of my efficiency, and ultimately my health.

Like many teenagers, I chose to sacrifice regular mealtimes and a good night's sleep in order to spend more time poring over textbooks, perfecting my latest violin concerto, or picking apart essays on my computer. Success became, and still is, my utmost priority: my ambition to be the best both in and outside of school drives me to work towards ever rising goals, whether it be getting straight A's in advanced classes, landing my dream internship, or getting published in a magazine. Even more powerful is the consciousness that nearly every one of my friends and classmates is pursuing their goals with the same rigor and zeal that I am my own: their drive to achieve pushes me to exceed their standards, a practice that can be both admirable and detrimental. Healthy competition leads to progress and innovation, but when that competition is taken too far it can backfire badly on the people invested in it. Lack of sleep is a prime example: even on days when I have little homework and can afford to turn in early, I often choose to stay awake in order to study, research college information, or do additional work on extracurricular projects. Often, there isn't any pressing need for me to cut back on my rest and wake up puffy-eyed and groggy the next morning, but I feel guilty knowing that while I treat myself to an extra two hours of sleep my friends will likely spend that time doing productive work. It's difficult for me personally to justify taking a break when I know that many of my peers aren't; I feel compelled to work even harder than they do in order to achieve more, but at the same time I'm conscious that I sacrifice my personal well-being in order to do so.

In the back of my mind, I've always been a little apprehensive that choices such as these have the potential to hurt me in the long run. I've heard the horror stories: lack of sleep is said to increase the risk of heart attacks, stroke, obesity, and even Alzheimer's disease, and eating meals at irregular times has been linked to a higher susceptibility to cancer. Nevertheless, I frequently find myself pushing aside such thoughts with the excuse that on the whole I feel okay. Throughout high school I have been healthy and gotten good grades; I've never been depressed, and I've always attributed the stress I experience on a daily basis to the normal pressures of going to school and being a teenager. But when I'm truly honest with myself, it's indubitably apparent that my choices have taken a mental toll: over the last four years my efficiency has gradually declined, and I've found myself growing increasingly tired at school and on weekends. While in seventh grade I finished most of my homework in class and seldom wanted to sleep during the day, I now find myself slumping lackadaisically at my desk and ready to nod off at a moment's notice. My mind, which has always been active and imaginative, races and wanders more, distracting me from tasks at hand. My patience, which has never been inordinately great, now wears out more quickly than ever.

Perhaps the greatest price I've had to pay in my quest for personal success is a deteriorating relationship with my family: I regularly eat meals alone to avoid arguments with them, and I find that as I am growing older I am withdrawing further and further into myself and my personal goals. I seldom take my problems to my parents or reveal my deepest feelings to them, because we haven't developed the mutual understanding and friendship that is necessary for such a close relationship. I tell myself that this is normal, that it's simply a part of being a teenager; but the other day, when my mother wondered

aloud what had happened to her once happy, chipper daughter, I too began to puzzle over that question. Have I really changed so drastically over the years? Is my smile really so rare now that it's surprising when I show it? I know that the girl my mother remembers hasn't disappeared – she's just being stifled under all the pressure, stress, and travail she's brought upon herself in order to gratify her ambition.

Although I'm still as motivated as ever to achieve my vision of success, I realize that if I'm going to find personal happiness within that goal I need to make a change. If I continue living only for the future without enjoying the present, my life will never be truly happy or fulfilling: I can't afford to keep neglecting my health, my personal relationships, and my equanimity as I strive to gain distant achievements. It is vital that I and others like myself find ways to work productively towards success while enjoying what we love most about life – for me, things like traveling, reading, and playing my violin. The experiences that we have when pursuing these innermost passions are those that truly shape us and make every day meaningful. While I know I won't be able to point my life in a new direction overnight, I'm trying to take slow but steady steps towards a positive change. By making an effort to create little improvements in my daily habits, I believe that I will be able to live a healthy, balanced life, and that I can find contentment every day while still pursuing unbounded dreams.



I am ranked second in my graduating class, I own a seventh place trophy from the speech and debate state qualifying tournament, and a third place award in editorial writing from the regional journalism competition sits on my shelf. Though these achievements should have initially satisfied me, I was inevitably unimpressed by my personal growth, seeking instead to compare myself to others.

From the moment I was born, I spent every hour of every day struggling to keep up with my sister, who was everything I could ever hope to be: well-respected, liked, capable, and sophisticated. Our seven-year age gap made no difference to me — I wanted to be as much like her as possible, even if her accomplishments were well beyond the reach of my smaller, softer hands. My teachers expected as much of me as they had seen of her, holding me to the highest of standards as I floundered, confused, unsure of my own place in the world. My parents accepted my B's and less-than-perfect SAT score with quiet disappointment, understanding, to some degree, that I never was and never would be the exemplary model student I had shown promise of in elementary school.

My early years were carefree and filled with easygoing Saturdays spent watching meaningless cartoons, afternoons of coloring in scribbled pictures with wild abandon, endless after-school hours at the local park playground unwittingly filling my shoes with sand. I was the top student at my K-8 school; classes were never difficult for me, and I never worried about classwork or exam scores. Everything was an easy A. I took this relative ease for granted.

And it was because of my prolonged stay in the comfortable, surreal world of lazy summer days that high school slapped me in the face. Hard. I was suddenly thrown into an environment in which all my previous bursts of self-confidence were gradually but surely worn away. I was not the best in math, or English, or science. I was not the best at managing my time, studying, or articulating my thoughts. I was not the best at connecting points A and B whenever the teacher asked questions, leaving me frustrated at not being able to do something I was so sure I could do. I was not the best at anything. That fearful realization began the crippling self-doubt that maybe I simply wasn't good enough.

I found myself withdrawing from the activities that had previously brought me pleasure; I no longer read for enjoyment or watched scientific documentaries. Instead I absorbed myself in whatever idleness required the least amount of thinking or feeling in my free time, the least amount of active involvement in the world or interaction with other people. I started hating myself progressively more, angry at myself for being subpar, increasingly aggressive on the verge of becoming abusive in my internal monologue. I stopped wanting to exist.

Moreover, most frustrating of all was that nobody else seemed to understand. My grades were good -- I was very nearly a straight-A student. I was fairly well respected by peers and teachers alike, and my performance in my extracurricular activities, while not exceedingly superlative, was at the very least above average. I should not have, by any means, been ungrateful for what I had achieved. Why, then, was I continually dissatisfied with myself and my results?

My discontent stemmed from jealousy. I am not proud of this fact, but I deeply resented the notion that others accomplished more than I did. I wanted more than anything else to be better than them, to excel in every possible category I entered — an impossibility but nevertheless a fantasy of mine. I wanted, in short, to be the best.

Looking at the mantelpiece adorned with picture frames and the collective awards of my lifetime, I realized one day that "best" is overrated. There is no best and there never will be; the standards by which I had been measuring my worth are boundaries that cannot contain all that I am. I am not limited to my imperfect GPA or standardized test scores or the number of trophies and certificates that I own. I am not defined by how many people I rank above or how many problems I solved incorrectly on my latest math test. I am so much more than a comparison to others.

While it is still a struggle now to break free of a detrimental mindset I've retained for the majority of my life, there are better days, times when I recognize how far I've come as a person. I should wear my B in calculus like a badge of honor; I had been expecting a C. I should hold my head high when I look at my seventh place speech and debate trophy; four months ago I was nowhere close to even making it to semifinals. And I should be proud that I was a third place editorial writer when two years ago I was not even among the top 20 competitors.

Though I know that a battle with depression is not one that ends easily or quickly, I am glad at least that I am able to fight an aspect of my mentality that has exacerbated it so greatly. As I realize that my progress as an individual has only been an upward climb, I hope to maintain this trend while quieting my fears and self-doubt. I am boundless and undefined, and I hold an infinite universe of skills and capabilities within myself that can only continue to expand.



A loud beep shatters the blissful, calm atmosphere. I jolt out of my sweet, ignorant sleep, and immediately am filled with a crippling dread. My stomach clenches, but my eyes flutter closed, trying to return to a world that is not the one I live in every day. My mind does not comply, however, and rapidly dredges up every bit of worry from night before. I didn't fully understand the calculus problem I was working on. What if my teacher calls on me to explain it? I have a presentation due in English. What if I get to the front of the class and completely freeze? What if we have a pop quiz in history? I don't want to see the grade I got on my last Spanish quiz. I flood with anxiety and accept with a crushing defeat that my day must begin. I think about why I am doing everything that I do even if it puts me into a state of constant stress. Then I remember. I do it to succeed.

My personal definition of success is being in a position of comfort and pride, in which my accomplishments speak for me. My own slightly twisted perception of success is that it is analogous to perfection. This deep psychological desire to be the best and the notion that I will only be happy if I am in a state of utter transcendence is what drives me to push myself in all aspects of my life. I am the first to acknowledge that this is wildly unhealthy, yet it continues to be difficult to change the way I think.

Ever since I was little, I was told that I was intelligent. I was told that I learned quickly and was creative. Over time, I started to believe that since I had special qualities, it was my responsibility, even my duty, to strive to achieve the most that I could. Every little failure became devastating, and even the large triumphs did not seem very amazing because I constantly let miniscule things bring me down. I berated myself for the tiniest mistake and took a generally pessimistic view on school. I compared myself to everyone around me to an extent that I became so insecure and shy that it was hard for me to let my guard down and let people in. I dug a hole for myself and sadly, I could see no way out.

More often than not, high school is overwhelming. From the minute you set foot on campus freshman year, you are thrust into a busy, unrelenting world. The school days are filled with assignments and after school activities. The breaks are filled with extra volunteer work or studying. Even summers are scheduled with extra classes, internships, or anything that would look remotely impressive on a college application. I find myself overextending myself participating in versatile extracurricular activities and then coming home only to sit and tiredly complete homework and pore over textbooks in order to prepare myself for the next day. Morning comes much too early, and I arrive at school with a heavy schoolbag and matching bags under my eyes. My lack of sleep makes me moody and restless and diminishes my ability to concentrate. I start to feel paranoid and fidget constantly. Everything about myself irritates me. My clothes are ugly, my hair never looks good, and I eat too much. Everything about the students around me irritates me. People are too loud, too close, and too much better than me at everything.

Needless to say, I am not the only one who feels this way. I see the people around me push themselves every day. While at one point I thought that other people were better at handling things than I am, I now realize that they are simply better at hiding them. It has come to a point where people's secrets about their mental health or drug use do not even surprise me anymore.

What I observe brings important questions to light. Is my idealistic, unattainable goal worth the deterioration of my mental state? Will an academic honor or acceptance by another person give me a sense of fulfillment? Or will happiness come if I allow myself to be proud of what I have accomplished instead of mourn what I haven't? The choice seems easy when I look at it written down in words, but is a lot more difficult to work through in my mind.

My personal definition of success puts me in a state of constant stress. I reach out farther and farther trying to grab it, but it continues to elude me. Deep down I know that nobody and nothing is perfect, yet some part of me forces myself to try to be. Lately, I have been trying to give myself a break. I understand now that there is only so much that one person can do with twenty-four hours in a day. I find that I actually perform better in school when I am more relaxed and have slept well the night before. I do still find myself in moments of breathlessness and panic when I am overwhelmed by everything going on around me, but I continue to do my best to take care of myself. We only have one mind, and I know that it is the most important thing to take care of to ensure a healthy, happy life.



Every night, I dream of golden grades and Ivy League college acceptances. My day-to-day life is comprised of studying, homework, and more studying. The 2400 SAT score does not come easily, after all. My goals and drive for success are reflected in all my actions, for all my actions have only one purpose - to help me achieve my goal - attending an Ivy League college, becoming a successful lawyer and living a happy, prosperous cookie-cutter life. However, dreams do not come easily. In order to even have a chance of success, prices must be paid, and I am paying my dues - mentally, physically, and emotionally.

Although I perspire daily, I am hardly ever inspired - what I have are not dreams, but goals. Do not even bother to ask me to "hang out." No, if I am to be successful, all of that must be quickly thrown outside of the window once highschool starts. Practically every spare minute is devoted to studying, practicing, reviewing. Watching a movie during the weekends? Not a chance. The time used to watch a movie, which on average lasts 1 hour and thirty minutes, could be better used to study advanced calculus concepts. My life revolves around my college application, and "going to Disneyland with friends" is not going to impress the admission officers. My self-esteem varies proportionately with my test scores. If I do not have dreams about grades, I have nightmares about failure.

Going without sleep is not a problem, especially if it means I can get an extra two percent on a project. Every graph, art project, and even my homework must be a work of art. Every word must be

clear, concise, and legible. Because of my desire for success, I have developed the traits of a perfectionist, and it shows in other areas of my life. I do my best to be a well-rounded person, keeping up with various clubs and activities. Sometimes I am at school for more than fourteen hours, and stress and anxiety have become my two best friends. On the rare days that I am able to sleep before the early AM hours, I lie in bed, pondering any possible mistakes, typos, or miscalculations in my work. For me, having breakfast, lunch, and dinner is unheard of - there is always a club meeting, long homework assignment, or hurry to make it to school in time for band at 7 in the morning. If it means I can improve something, there is nothing that I am not willing to sacrifice - food, sleep, relaxation.

As I inch closer and closer toward the possibility of success, I find myself withdrawing further and further away from my peers, my friends. For me, relationships are hard to maintain because of the constant events that come with being involved in extracurricular activities. My focus on schoolwork and success has also led me to become a quite emotionally immature person - even the slightest conflict with family or friends is difficult for me to handle and resolve. My emotional state is often determined by the results on a test, the success of a project, or the ease of assigned homework, rendering me extremely socially awkward when I am in situations not involving academia. Friends are, for me, rare to find and hard to keep.

Sometimes I wonder how life would be if I were willing to break free from my obsession with success and live life as freely as I would like, but I am too afraid to break away from the world I know, from the security that being successful would provide. Longing for spontaneity and wishing for variety is something that I face daily. I realize that my desire to be successful is unhealthy; however, I cannot bring myself to let the possibility of success pass me by, even though it has taken a toll on me mentally, physically, and emotionally. And sometimes I wonder, are the dreams of good grades and college acceptances dreams... or nightmares?



As human beings, it is only inevitable that we will face tribulations in our lives. We will find days when our patience will be tested, our perception of self-worth will be doubted, and our sense of hope will suffer. But for some of us, these feelings will develop into patterns. They will become more than stressful obstacles in our lives. They will become routine, challenging us with the task of balancing our internal battles with our external ones. This is the challenge that the majority of our youth faces today. Students today are growing up in a fast-paced education system where the expectations are high and the competition is aggressive. To a degree, today's standards for success motivate students to be their best and strive for excellence. But as a student that finds herself distressed by these expectations more often than motivated by them, I often doubt the importance behind becoming someone's textbook-definition of a successful person.

When I consider what it takes to grow into a successful adult, it is easiest to fall back to what I am taught. I am taught to take challenging courses and excel at them, get accepted to a worthy college, and get a job to earn a living. There is value in these teachings, and I know that becoming a successful person means eventually being able to earn stability in my life and providing myself and others with the means to be happy and healthy. Beyond that, I know that success means reaching my potential and being content with my achievements and impact on this world. I want to become a person that relies on their own standards for accomplishment and earn a job that taps into my human capabilities to adventure, discover, and help others along the way.

Success is more than doing well in school and achieving high standards academically; and when I consider the journey it takes to get to my destination of success, I realize how little it is valued in schools in comparison to the destination. As a result, I find myself focusing, too often, on expectations centered on numbers: SAT and ACT scores, AP scores, GPA. It is easy to lose sight of my greater goals and find myself distressed on how I fail to meet someone else's standards of achievement. Even more often, I lose sight of the sense of purpose behind the schoolwork I do everyday, feeling trapped in an endless cycle of class, homework, and tests. I am taught in school to nurture mental and physical health, but it becomes too easy to prioritize other tasks over attending to my well-being. The emphasis on academically challenging ourselves in school has created an environment where students are overridden with test anxiety and feelings of helplessness when it comes to planning our futures. "I'm never going to college," "I'm a disappointment to my parents," and "I'm never going to have an impact on this world" are all common sayings among students, and they are all feelings I have had before. Though these statements might be exaggerations of what reality will actually bring, we cannot disregard the widespread feelings of distress and hopelessness. How can I expect to reach my definition of success when I can't even maintain my psychological health?

I find that my aspirations for success are buried in the everyday anxiety of school, and it begins to take a toll on my mental health. Sometimes I wonder if I am on a path towards depression, but I quickly blame such feelings on myself for not being able to keep up with the work that is expected of me. Sometimes, when the week is booked with consecutive tests, I wonder if the tension in my muscles or the pounding in my head is due to an actual, physiological problem or if it is just because of school. I wonder if the reason I struggle to make conversation with my friends is due to a lack of topics or if it is just because I am occupied with other worries. Some days I catch myself yawning in class or dozing off while doing homework, but other days I feel exhaustion that is beyond a lack of sleep. With three AP's and an expectation to get A's in most of my classes, I accept that I chose to take on the workload myself, but I can't help to feel that lightening it would be the weaker decision. Every week, I get through it by looking forward to all the photography, music, and adventures the weekend will bring; but when it comes, I feel anxious if I cannot get out of the house and tired if I can. I feel robbed of basic, childhood experiences, confused when adults tell me that these are the best days I've got. I can't help to feel that my exhaustion and anxiety will not be relieved when the wave of tests passes. Instead, it all feels cyclical, as if I will find myself graduating college, free of an academic environment but inevitably indebted to student loans, and I will not know what to do.

Still, I try to keep a positive attitude. I try to focus on how the hard work will pay off some day in some form or another. I know that I cannot get caught up in my stress or overanalyze my problems. When reading for my anatomy class, I try to understand my body, knowing that I can take steps to reduce the exhaustion and tension. When reading for my psychology class, I try to understand my mind,

especially when it comes to knowing that our expectations of a situation often determine our emotional response to it. With that in mind, I strive to keep my expectations true to both my dreams and reality, hoping that I can bring myself to the person I want to become.



To succeed is to break away from banal, old-fashioned ways and “take the road less traveled by” (Frost). Unfortunately, our vision of success has been marred by societal pressure, which dictates that we must achieve stellar grades and maintain a thriving social life. My personal definition of success, albeit slightly similar, differs in a fundamental way; I now view success as a balance between my academic pursuits, my personal life, and my community. My newly discovered lifestyle has positively influenced my mental health by encouraging me to pursue a practical way of thinking, a method that is free of disillusionment and disappointment.

I have been an above average student for most of my life. I always completed assignments on time, promptly studied for exams, and did excellently. In fact, I would go so far as to complete the following week’s homework days ahead of schedule. However, I severely neglected my physical and emotional health in order to be at the top of my class. I sacrificed hours of sleep in order to study well. I forwent eating dinner with my family; instead, I chose to complete tedious extra credit assignments, which were pointless considering that I had very high grades. As a result, I became unhealthy, paranoid, and unsociable. My flawed idea of success led me down a path that I would never choose to take again. The anxiety that drove me to be a perfectionist whittled away at any self-esteem I had left; I abandoned my friends at lunch time and chose to lock myself in the library so I could study for tests. In hindsight, my work ethic was atrocious, and my involvement in society was equally despicable.

As a sophomore in high school, I still maintained excellent grades, and I became slightly less inclined to alienate myself from society. After my English teacher assigned a career research project, I was forced to further throw myself into society so I could interview adults that were working in an industry that I had interest in. As I interviewed these professionals, I realized that they had a single element in common: they were successful despite being “average”. A doctor that I interviewed explained the concept of balancing her studies with her social life; throughout college, she refused to succumb to the pressure of having to pick one of the two. “Without balance, you are left lopsided,” she said toward the end of our interaction. By this time, I realized that I was moderately successful, but my lingering perfectionist attitude would not settle for any- thing adequate.

I see junior year as my personal pinnacle of success. So far, I have made minimal sacrifices in order to excel in academics. I have developed a positive attitude by rejecting to accept the hurtful criticism of others; I have also learned to reward myself for achieving goals and love myself even though I might temporarily stray from the right path. Junior year has been a year of new experiences and self-improvement as well. I joined my high school’s knitting club, a small organization where we knit and

crochet ecologically friendly products that can be donated to hospitals and shelters. Prior to joining this club, I was apprehensive about any activity remotely art-related, since my lack of confidence led me to believe that I would fail at creating pieces. As soon as I joined, however, I realized that all of the club's members were incredibly warm and offered to teach me the basics of knitting. Although I was forced to join by a friend and did not have the courage to decline her offer, I am relieved to have been pushed into a new social situation. I met an extremely nice girl, and we quickly found that we had the same academic interests. We decided to study and knit together. I would not have to dedicate separate social circles to each of my interests. I became an avid knitter, churning out projects every week or so; much to my excitement, I did not have to sacrifice my academic goals. Today, I see knitting as a way of giving back to the local community while improving my self-esteem, therefore improving my overall mental health.

Knitting kindled the spark that pushed me to pursue the culinary arts. My desire to be independent was long hindered by my inability to create even the most basic foods. A mentor and great friend of mine suggested that he could teach me how to cook. Considering that I could only benefit from this experience, I decided to learn how to cook. My friend and I communicated via webcam. I positioned my webcam so that he could see what I was preparing; he explained how to go about mixing spices and other ingredients. As time passed by, the culinary master-pieces that I learned to make stimulated me to step my skills up a notch. Instead of waiting for our weekly sessions, I became proactive and took the initiative to create recipes on my own time. I did extensive research on foods from various cultures and proceeded to create my own rendition of them. I received immense praise for the dedication I set forth and compliments for the food I made. This inspired me to execute more elaborate meals. I completely regained my long-lost belief in myself, a feeling that I pathetically released in favor of anxiety. I am proud of myself for refusing to give in to the stress I induced upon myself. I saved my mental health from falling into a state of despair.

Balance and success coexist in a near perfect bond. Since learning to stop criticizing myself, I have maintained an overwhelmingly positive attitude toward academics and my peers. By giving equal importance to all my activities, my mental health improved exponentially. No longer am I the sleep-deprived, cranky teenager I was once. Today, I am a successful being who is proud to have turned her life and mental health around.



I was raised with the knowledge that succeeding was not just doing my personal best, but being the absolute best. Success was not relative- I could not succeed by coming in second place. Success was 100%. Success was Stanford, Yale, Harvard. Success was not settling- it was constant comparison, a constant questioning of whether what I was doing was enough, whether I was enough. It was constant doubt and guilt. Success was everything.

My father grew up in rural Taiwan and woke up long before the sun rose every morning to cook for his family and prepare his brother and sister for their five mile trek to school. His afternoons were spent working in a bottle factory. He would tell me his story while helping me with my math homework, forcing me to repeat each problem over and over while I counted down the minutes until dinnertime. He would explain to me all that he went through in his life, crossed an ocean to a strange country thousands of miles away from his friends and family, so that I would not have to struggle as he did, so that I would have an easy path to success. I would ask him what success meant and his answer would never change. Success was being the best. Success was never giving up. It was putting all other matters- friends, happiness, life experiences, second. It was an acceptance letter to an Ivy League school. It was making all the right choices, receiving all the right grades, excelling in all the right activities, selecting the right career path. Success was never being satisfied because nothing was ever enough. It was constantly looking for a way to be better, greater, smarter, and wealthier.

This knowledge was something I internalized and carried with me with pride but also with a sense of guilt. I would look at the accomplishments of my friends and peers- straight A's in countless AP classes, editor-in-chief of our school newspaper, nationally ranked archer- and I could not help but chastise myself for not doing enough, for not being good enough. I became so concerned, so consumed with comparing myself and my activities with my peers and their accomplishments that I found myself in a constant state of stress and anxiety. I would look at my friends and instead of seeing people whom I could laugh with and confide in, I would see yet another reminder of my shortcomings, of the activities and classes I was not good enough to participate in, of the person I was not good enough to be. My parents were no different; they constantly reminded me that others were succeeding while I was failing, that I was not doing enough. While their comments were intended to motivate me to push myself harder and fulfill what they and I both believed to be my personal definition of success, I found myself becoming increasingly panicky, moody, and anxious. I began to dread the activities that I previously enjoyed-- swim practice became a chore, volunteering became a nuisance, and homework became an insurmountable burden. I constantly reminded myself of what I was working to achieve, the success that I wanted to become, but thoughts carried no weight and left me feeling exhausted and empty.

In my darkest moments when I could not quiet the voice inside me, it would scream that I was a failure, that I was no more than that B- I had just received on a test. In those moments, I would turn to my viola for solace. I would release my frustration at the pressure cooker atmosphere I had been raised in, at the insanely high expectations I could not fulfill in crescendos and down bows. As I spent more and more time doing what I felt pressured to do and not what I actually enjoyed doing, I realized that success is not pain. It is not constant anxiety, it is not fear, stress, loathing, or self-doubt. Success is making mistakes and learning from them. Success is happiness, it is recognizing strengths and weaknesses and adapting expectations accordingly. It is allowing time to relax and recharge, it is learning to recognize when I need a break. It is occasional failure but, moreover, it is strength, it is fulfillment, it is passion for what I enjoy doing in life.



Like most things in my life my definition of success needs to be split into two areas, temporal and eternal success. As a Christian I believe that there is more to life than being born living and dieing. I believe that I am on the earth to develop into the best person I can be. When I enter the next life I want to be able to confidently face a perfect being and say that I did as He asked. That is the ultimate definition of success.

Granted, I first have to get through this life. My temporal definition of success is best summarized as being self-sufficient. I don't have to have the most expensive home or be the most popular, I just have to be able to provide for a future family and have a little extra to help others in need. For some that may seem like underachieving, but from my perspective when we leave this life we do not take our money or status with us. The only thing we have is our knowledge and our deeds, so the focus of life should be learning, serving, and preparing to meet God.

I have found that having goals that are focused on my personal best instead of competing with others brings me peace of mind. In a world where there will always be someone better, competition brings feelings of inadequacy while focusing on myself and improving means I always achieve satisfaction. I don't have to keep tabs on other people or worry that they are getting ahead. I do not sacrifice friendships in an effort to outsmart those around me. I can be genuine. I can honestly care about what happens in a friend's life and celebrate their triumphs without secretly harboring fear that they are getting ahead. I can care about what is important and not be pressured by what others think. All that will ever matter is that I am happy with myself.

It sounds simple, but in practice maintaining that perspective is much more complicated. In an area where most people see life as a competition it is easy to forget the eternal perspective. At times it seems the only way I can accomplish my temporal goals is by competing against everyone around me. Sometimes I wonder if I can provide for my needs if I don't do as well as everyone else. Maybe I will need more than a little extra to help those in need. At times like these I look at those around me and realize I can't compete against them. They are smarter, have better resources, are more focused, or less honest. I question if I am right to tell my teachers when they mistakenly give me undeserved points. I wonder if I should give up something I enjoy so I have more time or if I should be staying up later to study. The stress levels mount and self-confidence plummets. I wonder if I have the right focus. Should I be putting more emphasis on my temporal goals? I enter a dark time where nothing seems right. I find myself tired, depressed, wondering why I cannot be like everyone else, wishing I was anyone but me.

Thankfully around the time I can no longer face the person I've become, reality pulls me out of what I like to call my pity parties and I realize the competition is not worth my current condition. I fall back on my eternal plan. Soon the temporal goals are reinstated. It no longer matters what others may think or how they chose to live their life. I chose to live the way that makes me happiest. I decide to stay on the path that will get me through this life and allow me to confidently face God. There will still be stress and other roadblocks to overcome, but they are more manageable with my priorities back in place. As I continue to honestly achieve my personal best, I know that despite whatever methods others may employ to get where they are I have made the right choice. The self-confidence that arises from making good choices lasts regardless of where I end up or what anyone else may achieve