

By Francis Aguisanda

At the end of the road, a new start

I never thought my mom's first tour of Stanford University would be of the psychiatric ward. When I arrived in sunny California 2 years earlier to start my Ph.D. studies, I was on top of the world. But that feeling of triumph vanished quickly. The uncertainty that had nagged at me for years grew overwhelming. I loved learning new things and talking about science, yet I couldn't envision working at the bench for the rest of my life. But after building my identity around being a scientist, how could I turn away? Stanford was, in many ways, my Hail Mary. If I was going to be happy, it had to be there—right?

I loved the students in my program. My classes were marvelously interesting and challenging. I found a mentor who cared about his students. I was pursuing fascinating research questions. I had a nice apartment, the most supportive and wonderful girlfriend imaginable, and loving parents. Despite all this, I was profoundly unhappy.

When you have so much to be thankful for, are you really going through a hard time? I was suffering under the simmering pressure of graduate school. But graduate students are expected to work hard. I didn't see my problems as legitimate, so I didn't seek help.

That was my biggest mistake. I had behaved similarly a few years earlier, when the end of a long-term relationship sent me spiraling into a deep depression. I didn't seek help then either, and I was proud of the fact that I didn't need any. I had more important things to do than focus on my own sadness.

In grad school, I kept giving myself milestones when I thought I would stumble upon happiness. Maybe after I passed my classes, I'd be happy. Maybe after I found the right lab and project, I'd be happy. I tried to kick the proverbial can so far down the road that it would disappear over the horizon. But there it was, staring me in the face: joy, just beyond my reach.

It's difficult to describe what it feels like to reach the end of the road. For me, it meant months of leaving the lab in the middle of the day because I couldn't breathe, anxiety wrapped around my throat and refusing to let go. I would sneak to a secluded corner under a staircase to cry or sit in the pews of the beautiful campus church, hoping that the heavy doors would keep terrible thoughts from breaking in. One day, I stayed home from lab. I made my coffee, answered emails—and prepared to end my life.



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But as I talked to my girlfriend that afternoon, I found myself telling her that I was having bad thoughts. She dropped everything, ran home to see me, and called a hotline. The therapist recommended that I go to the emergency room.

The doctors diagnosed me with major depressive disorder, with episodes of anxiety. After 6 days in the psychiatric ward, I spent 3 months going to therapy for 20 hours a week and started to take antidepressants. My graduate school life came to a screeching halt. I felt guilty for leaving the lab so abruptly, but my graduate program director sent a simple, welcome message: Take all the time you need, and we'll be ready to talk when you are.

Hitting a brick wall as fast as I did was a pretty clear sign that I needed to make some changes. A few months after leaving the hospital, I set up a meeting with the program director, bracing myself for what I thought was the inevitable end of my graduate school career. My director, however, proposed a solution I hadn't thought possible: What if I stayed in the program but left the bench and studied what I really love?

Now, that's exactly what I'm doing, exploring the world of science communication research. And before you ask, no, I have no idea where it will lead. But thinking about my future now fills me with a grand sense of adventure—not the dread I used to feel when I considered working another day in the lab. My director has made it clear that my mental health is his priority, and that it should be mine as well. That expectation has made a world of difference. ■

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