Mental Health and Grit

Hello! My name is Kamryn Dehn and I am a 4th year student in the Purdue Honors College. Some of you may recognize my name, but if you don't, I was selected as the Tyler Trent Resilience and Courage Scholarship Recipient for 2020. You can read about my story by clicking on this link, as the background might be helpful when reading through this message.

I am going to be honest with you. Mental health is something I often forget about. I grew up playing competitive sports, near the top of my class, and involved in a wide range of extracurricular activities. I am sure this experience is relatable to many of you in the Honors College and to Purdue students in general. I felt like I had to perform at my best, no matter the activity, all the time. Anything short of my best, to me, meant I was not trying hard enough. I've always been a hard-worker and had "grit" as Purdue puts it, but I never took the time to assess how I was feeling, whether or not I actually enjoyed what I was involved in, and the general state of my mental health and wellbeing.

In my opinion, many places, especially the United States, embrace a toxic culture that romanticizes the concept of working to the point that you are tired and exhausted all the time, constantly pushing through. This can be seen in media, TV shows, LinkedIn posts, etc. There is something fundamentally wrong with this approach to life. This attitude teaches us that our value is rooted in our productivity and our ability to get tasks accomplished—rather than in our humanity and in our uniqueness as people. In this toxic culture, there is little to no room for mental, emotional, and physical health and wellbeing. This is something I have felt rings true at Purdue. We are constantly told to push through whatever is happening in our lives in order to get the grades we want, pass the classes, get accepted into medical school, graduate with a certain GPA, etc. In the moment, these things may seem really important. I get it.

However, there is a bottom line. While it is great to work hard to reach your goals, at what point do or should we be sacrificing our overall health? In the long run, will the sacrifices be worth it? What are the costs? These are questions we have to consider—and come to our own conclusions about. If you read through my story linked above, you will see that I pushed through years of an extremely painful invisible disability that I did not share about with many people, save my family. The thought of reaching out for help, meant that I was weak.

- I turned in assignments while lying in my bed crying from physical pain because I would think lower of myself if that assignment did not get turned in.
- I pushed through swim practices while my body was in absolute agony--through some of the worst pain I had ever felt in my life.

This was just high school. But hey, I graduated with a bunch of scholarships so I believed it was worth it. Until a few years later when I realized—it just wasn't.

At Purdue, my condition slowly got worse. My sophomore year, I tore a muscle in my hip over winter break. I returned to campus after break without crutches and attended classes full time. I did not use crutches or any aid to walk because my pain tolerance had reached abnormally high levels. I was so used to pushing through pain—that pain became a normal part of my life. It

became an annoyance rather than something I cried over. Let me say directly—that is just not healthy.

That semester I found a surgeon who could correct the physical issues I was suffering from. I underwent surgery the summer following sophomore year. Again, I pushed through. I returned to campus less than 2 months after basically having my right upper leg and hip completely reconstructed. The surgery put me on crutches for 6 months. During that time, I had to literally relearn how to walk and yet I still took a full course load. For my efforts, I received the Tyler Trent scholarship.

What I truly want to emphasize is that my "grit" had a tremendous cost. Years of unresolved mental trauma had to be addressed and I went to therapy multiple times. I suffered from anxiety, depression, and PTSD. I had flashbacks, nightmares, and sometimes locked myself in my room and cried. In the midst of pushing through physically and academically, I had torn apart my emotional and psychological wellbeing. To me, my so-called "grit" was a trauma response rooted in the toxic culture I grew up in that valued my productivity over my general health and sense of self.

Through all of these life experiences, I have learned a lot. I have learned to be more honest with myself in terms of my own overall physical and mental health. I have started to value all of who I am as a person, rather than just what I can produce academically. I have learned to speak up for myself when interacting with professors. If there is a professor out there who does not care about your health and wellbeing, then they do not deserve your time and effort in class. In the long-run, that assignment you didn't get turned in or that exam you had to miss, won't be worth it. You—and your health and wellbeing—are worth so much more than any grade. Grit is not the answer—the cost of grit is just too high.

So where do we go from here?

Personally, what has helped me is setting limits for myself. I try to get at least 7 hours of sleep each night no matter how many assignments I have. While it can be easy to write off sleep, please realize sleep is needed for your body's maintenance and for your brain to properly function. In my experience, sleep deprivation has only brought more stress into my life. Another limit I am currently working toward is blocking out time for proper meal preparation. Again, it is really easy to write this off and reach for snack foods, instead of a meal, to save time for studying. However, eating too many snack foods can leave you feeling really slow and sluggish, especially if you are not getting proper amounts of fat, protein, carbohydrates, and vitamins and minerals from your food. I am not saying you have to eat healthy all the time, but rather you should make sure your body is nourished. You deserve that.

I also believe we need to embrace vulnerability more and share more about our struggles with each other. These steps were really hard for me to start doing, but once I started opening up to my friends, it felt like I was almost cleansing myself. I felt like I was getting rid of all these pent-up emotions that were dragging me down, and I felt stronger and more supported afterwards. I found people I could turn to and rely on, instead of bottling up my feelings. You should never have to struggle alone. Reaching out is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of strength, maturity, and humility.