

I Wish Someone Had Said This to Me

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When I was an undergraduate, I took a course that had the following participation requirement: if the professor knew your name by the end of the semester based on your contributions to the class discussions, then you would receive an “A” grade. No other categories of participation were specified. There were approximately 75 students in this class. I loved this course. I spent hours each week at the library diligently taking notes on every required reading. I talked about what I was learning with my friends and family. I aced every assignment and exam. But the thought of speaking in front of 75 people terrified me.

I gave myself a pep talk every week: this was the week I would finally speak up. I wrote out a script of what I would contribute to the discussion. I rehearsed it while I was on the treadmill at the gym, on the bus to class, at the grocery store, etc. Every week, however, as I walked down the hallway to the classroom, I embodied the famous lyrics from the Eminem song *Lose Yourself* “[her] palms are sweaty, knees weak, arms are heavy. There’s vomit on [her] sweater already, mom’s spaghetti.” I sat down and I waited for my chance to own the moment by speaking up. Many moments came and went, but I never spoke up. The professor did not know by name by the end of the semester, and I received a “C” in the course.

My fear was twofold. First, I was nervous speaking in front of groups. But second, I often felt that I had nothing interesting to contribute to a discussion, or I was not confident enough in my comprehension of the material, or I did not have a new perspective to share. My fear of speaking in class often led to my disengagement with my courses, peers, and my instructors.

Twenty years later, I regularly teach courses with enrollments of 150+ students. My experience as an undergraduate significantly influenced my teaching philosophy. My first day of class always begins with a conversation that goes something like this:

It is exciting to be at a large university with so many opportunities for involvement in campus organizations, cutting-edge research, activism for ideas you are passionate about, and career development. You are surrounded by people with different life experiences and belief systems than your own. What an incredible opportunity! I also want to tell you that at some point during your time here, you are inevitably going to feel like you are not enough. Perhaps you received an unexpected grade in a course, or you did not get the internship you dreamed about, or you have not yet found your people. Everyone talks about their successes, but no one talks about the hardships. I want you to know and remember that you belong here and that you have important things to contribute, even if it does not always feel that way. Your perspective and experience are important, and I am so glad you are here.

I then share a few of my experiences as an undergraduate, graduate student, and a professor. We end the conversation by sharing campus resources, with a strong emphasis on student health and wellness services, particularly counseling services. I return to this conversation in the weeks before the midterm and the final exam.

I wish someone had said this to me when I was a student.

This conversation resonates with many students. A handful thank me after class or by email for discussing mental health resources in class. Many more share their appreciations for talking about personal challenges in their course evaluations. I think the biggest benefit, however, is that students facing hardship are more likely to reach out to me during the semester to advocate for accommodations rather than waiting until the last day of class. I hope that this resource-sharing discussion at the beginning of the semester promotes inclusion and

engagement, and potentially lowers the stigma associated with seeking student health and wellness support and services.

The pandemic and subsequent move to online teaching brought a real disengagement from this conversation. I think one of the most powerful aspects of this discussion was (1) modeling how vulnerable conversations can lead to self-advocacy and support and (2) showing that everyone is susceptible to these feelings and experiences, including professors. A pre-recorded video did not achieve the same effect as the in-person conversations.

To address this challenge during the pandemic, I designated one module in the online course as a mental health day. Instead of just giving students the day off, though, I created an online discussion assignment with the following (shortened) prompt:

Some of your classmates are going through really difficult times. Would you like to share something that has helped you cope with a difficult circumstance (either past or present)? Do you have any advice or encouraging words?

The student responses to this discussion post were beautiful. Students engaged with this discussion in a way I had never seen: the response rate was nearly 100%, the number of peer-to-peer posts was over triple what I normally receive in an online discussion forum, and the length of the responses was also longer than average. Students shared excerpts from poems and books that helped them through difficult times, some shared details of personal hardships and the resources and strategies (including campus counseling services) that helped them through their hard time, and other students responded to these posts with messages of support and encouragement. From my perspective, the peer-to-peer communication in this discussion post fostered a strong sense of comradery and community amongst students.

I plan to combine both interventions in my courses for the upcoming semester. I hope that the instructor-led discussion on the first day of class combined with the peer-to-peer online

discussion will foster stronger connections amongst students and myself. I also hope that these conversations will help destigmatize the utilization of essential student services and support systems.