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Debunking Thoughts

Four years ago, I walked into an old room in The Music Tree located in Morgan Hill, California. A blonde woman in her mid 60’s sat on a black wooden piano chair looking up at me as I entered the room. Her name was Mrs. Hershey and she was assigned as my vocal coach for my junior year of high school. Every year she hosted a spring recital for students to show off their musical progress in front of friends and family. Living as a 17-year-old introvert with general anxiety made the upcoming spring recital a nightmare. However, I learned a very valuable lesson. I learned that the only way to overcome negative thoughts is by taking action and proving them wrong. The only way I could do that was by going through with my first public performance and proving to myself that I was capable of anything.

The morning of my recital I woke up dreading my existence. My eyes were puffy and red from lack of proper sleep. I looked over at the clock and saw it was 7 a.m. and my brain immediately took the task of tormenting me with anxious thoughts. As I stood in the bathroom brushing my teeth, squinting my eyes at the bright lights, my little sister Ana walked in and stared at me with a mischievous smirk. “How are you feeling?” she asked with a daring tone. Deep down I was so terrified, I could not think of any positive outcome of forcing myself out of my comfort zone. “I really feel like I am pointlessly setting myself up for a bad time,” I blurted. I sat in my room practicing my song most of the day because I knew I had to get up on stage and sing, regardless if I wanted to or not. My room was my safe place, and I had the consolation that I could always come back into my comfort zone when I was done stepping out of it. I sat in my room and all four walls seemed to close in on me every time I thought about standing up on stage. My anxiety was fully awoken, feeding my mind treacherous thoughts faster than I could keep up. Eventually it was time to get dressed and greet my biggest fear.

A yellow brochure was handed to me at the entrance of the auditorium with all the names of the students that were scheduled to perform. I quickly glanced through the names until I found myself, hoping I was amongst the last students performing. Of course, I was listed as number four in line, which either gave me a few minutes to relax or a few minutes to freak out. When Mrs. Hershey walked on stage, my heart instantly started racing. I could feel my heart pulse on my throat and my hands and body trembling. It was not even my turn yet and I was already shaking uncontrollably. As expected, my mind joined the party and decided that it was a good time to wonder about all the ‘what if’ situations. What if my voice breaks and it sounds like I am crying? Oh no, what if I forget the lyrics? What if I start laughing nervously and make a complete fool out of myself? What if I trip on the microphone cord, or on those stairs? What if I cannot catch my breath and I make a weird choking sound? I got up and raced towards the back of the auditorium. I could hear someone’s footsteps approaching quietly and some one whispered, “Sandy, wait.” I stood there with wide eyes, panicking as I stared up at my dad. “Dad, can you go back inside and tell Mrs. Hershey I got sick and that I am sorry but I cannot sing tonight?” I begged. My dad smirked and replied “Relax, you need to tell yourself you can do it. If you keep thinking that you cannot do it, then you will not do it.” “But I really cannot do it! Just look at my hands, they will not stop shaking,” I quaked as I stretched out my trembling hands hoping my dad gave in to my desperation. “Sandy, the only way that you will ever break out of your fear is if you face it. It is only five minutes of discomfort and then it is over. Those negative thoughts will only go away if you go up and prove to yourself how wrong those voices are” my father explained.

“Ladies and gentlemen, now we welcome Sandy to the stage. She will be singing “A Case of You” by Joni Mitchell,” Mrs. Hershey reported. I quickly made my way on stage as my name was being called. One step at a time, I made my way up the stairs without tripping. As I looked at how many eyes were staring back at me, I chuckled but regained my composure. There I stood in my most vulnerable state, hundreds of eyes focused on my every move. The room was so silent I felt like everyone could hear me breathing. Mrs. Hershey started playing the piano and I knew it was seconds before I had to bust out my first note and start singing. The moment I had been dreading had finally come. I took a deep breath and reassured myself that I could do it. I started singing and I smiled with relief when I noticed there were no nervous cracks in my voice. I got to the chorus, and sang the rest of the song without my voice breaking, and without forgetting the lyrics. Although I was still trembling, I got through the song without doing anything my mind was telling me I would do. I did not make a fool out of myself; instead random strangers from the auditorium came up to me after and congratulated me on my performance. A loud applause was heard after the music stopped and I triumphantly made my way down to my seat.

When I first learned I would be singing in front of an audience, I completely shut down and believed that I was not capable of doing it. It seemed like an impossible task I was destined to fail. Fighting back negative thoughts that were sizzling around in my mind was a very hard thing to do. I had to put myself in a situation where I could come face to face with my bad thoughts and discredit them one by one. Negative thoughts have a very big hold on a lot of us, and the only way to break free from their chains is to prove them wrong by stepping out of our comfort zone and proving to ourselves that we are capable of doing the ‘impossible’.