An alternative reality where things were different

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> Grace Mvika, 18, of the Birmingham community shares how flipping her perspective and persevering carried her through her A-Level exams, her mother's stroke last June, and a year off before starting children's nursing.

Some background first, because some of you don't know me. My name is Grace. I'm part of the Birmingham community. Those who grew up with me know me as Onye - my Korean name. I'm 18, the oldest of four girls, and I'm currently on a gap year, working full time at a daycare nursery. The title of my talk is "Flipping the Perspective: Hindsight as a Tool and Perseverance as my Fuel" - very rhymey. I want to say first that everyone is different, and we all process things differently. For me… this is still a work in progress.



I turned 18 on the 26th of May last year, and literally a week later, on the 3rd of June, my mum had a stroke. This was during my A-Level exam season, which was very stressful. Without realising it, I started flipping my perspective and persevering by reminding myself of my achievements. Physics had been a subject I really struggled with, and I'd worked so hard to get to a point where I was confident. So I told myself: "you've worked hard to get here, just give it your all, despite the situation." I focused on the exams first, and then on what was happening with my mum. Somehow I balanced revising, hospital visits,

and running the house. When exam season was over, I couldn't believe I'd gotten through it. What carried me was prayer, and a sense of hope that things would somehow turn out okay. That lit a fuel in me.

Between exams and results day I was in a strange limbo. I'd meticulously planned my life - exams, big summer, off to uni. Now nothing was certain. It was jarring. I had to realise three things. First, some things are out of my control, but I'd done my best on my side: I'd revised, I'd found my mum in time after her stroke, and she was now in hospital. Second, I had to be confident in what I'd done, and stop worrying about things that hadn't happened yet. Third, fear would only fuel anxiety. So I had to do something else, knowing the next big decision point was results day.

I decided to play the cards I'd been dealt. My mum's friends and my dad were helpful. I got closer to other BCs. Cadre, who lives in Sheffield and studies in Stoke-on-Trent, was great to hang out with. I went to Paris for a few days with Sophia, another BC. I enjoyed time with my sisters, especially Hope. My mum and I had been like super besties, and sometimes I'd left Hope out - so I got close to her. I learned to cook - I'm a really good cook now. We came to know our local park like the back of our hand, and watched a lot of classic films on my bucket list. Then results day came. I got lucky - got into my first choice with pretty good grades - and I changed my degree from children's nursing to chemistry because of my grades.

Now I could make some decisions. I decided to stay home to take care of my sisters and my mum. Things were still uncertain. Mum was moved from a hospital 20 minutes away to one over an hour away. Travelling further, plus not going to university, hit me hard. I felt conflicted, overwhelmed, disheartened. In hindsight, I had put university on a pedestal - unpopular opinion, but you don't always have to go. My current job in a daycare nursery actually lets me earn a qualification and title. I also had to realise: I am not behind. I'm literally 18 years old, with lots of life left, and one year out of education is not going to set me back terribly.

The biggest realisation was that I was holding on to an alternative reality where things were different - a big what-if. What if my mum hadn't gotten sick? It was crippling. It stopped me from enjoying my job, which I now love - working with children is such a unique experience. October to December was really hard, but once I saw I was clinging to that alternative reality, I knew I had to let it go… and reflect.

What started turning things around was Christmas. I decided I wanted to give my sisters a great one. We'd been through a lot, and I had money now, so I wanted to treat them. Buying their presents I got excited - I could actually afford things they wanted. And I realised, not in a weird way, that if my mum hadn't gotten sick I wouldn't have been able to do any of this. I wouldn't have gotten closer to my BC friends. I wouldn't have been to Paris. I wouldn't have built up things from my job that I want to bring to motherhood one day - techniques for helping children learn. That was a big realisation. I leaned back into God. Then in early February I went to Companions of Faith, a workshop for 18-plus, and it really helped me feel grateful, and refill my fuel tank. I was proud of how I'd persevered.

Here are some situations, and how I flipped them. When my mum was at Russells Hall Hospital, we thought she'd be coming out, then learned she'd have to stay longer. I told myself: she gets more time for care, and more time to get better. When she moved to the rehab hospital on the other side of town, I told myself: this is the first step on her recovery journey. The discharge date moved from September to October - more time with specialists. Then in October we learned she wasn't coming out, but moving again, to Circle Rehabilitation on the Bristol Road. That one was half private, half NHS, and she received great care - she actually learned to walk again there. Then her discharge date was pushed from January to March, giving her more speech therapy. She's now out. There's still a long recovery journey, but flipping each situation really helped my mental health.

In hindsight I was given so many opportunities - Paris, deeper friendships with BCs, closeness with my sisters, the Winter Workshop, Companions of Faith. I met incredible people. I mentioned I changed my degree from children's nursing to chemistry, but I've now changed it back to children's nursing again. I realised healthcare is the field I can really see myself in - helping people, and being part of their lives in that way, feels rewarding and fulfilling. I'm doing children's nursing, and I promise I'm not going to change again.

Some final thoughts - flipping situations can seriously improve your mental health, especially when you're low. Looking back at how you persevered gets you out of that state. Reach out to your friends - they're more than happy to listen. It's okay to feel bitter, angry, and confused, but it is so, so important not to sit in that pool of negative emotions. You have to work through them, or you'll drown. And it will get better. I keep repeating that to myself, because my situation isn't over. It has already gotten better. My mum is doing well. That's my talk.