

Layers

Olivia Kerr - 11th Grade

Owen J. Roberts High School; Pottstown, PA

My whole life, I have felt the need to do everything. I joined every club; I accepted all invitations, and I seized every opportunity. By the time I was in ninth grade, I found myself playing softball for two teams, playing two instruments, participating in multiple school clubs, Girl Scouts, volunteering in service projects, and taking the most advanced classes offered at my school. Any free time I had, I filled with homework, friends, and family. I never understood people who enjoyed alone time because I always preferred to have my days busy and full of people: my layers.

During the second semester of my freshman year, I learned what the word pandemic meant. In the blink of an eye, I found myself at home with the date to return to school tentatively pushed back weekly. One by one, my layers were stripped from me until only one was left—my skin. I read articles about parents concerned about their teens during these "unprecedented times". Part of me thinks that these strong feelings have always been inside us, but we always had our layers to protect us. While we used to question when we would finally have time to sit down and consider our feelings, the question became how we can escape our feelings. Once my overwhelming feelings of anxiety and uncertainty finally made it to the front burner, I still tried to escape them. I learned song lyrics, read every book I could get my hands on, tried to learn how to cook, spent hours with my family, called my friends daily, watched old movies, and tried writing. My writing was mostly unsuccessful. It turns out that writing is a poor distraction when trying to escape your feelings. My stories were dry and inauthentic as they lacked any true emotion.

After a couple of months, I finally conceded and decided to explore these feelings. I have always been a non-confrontational person, and I discovered that I did not stand up for myself enough. Before, I thought that everyone would think I was too sensitive or dramatic if I told someone I did not like something they did or said to me. Desperate to release some of these frustrations, I finally tried to be more open with people and remove another layer. Much to my surprise, most people, like my friends, were glad when I brought up my frustrations, so our relationship could become stronger as we dealt with our concerns instead of letting them boil. Apparently, my friends actually care about my feelings—shocking, right?

On my self-discovery journey, I also found that I was having feelings of anxiety. I think these feelings were always there, but I finally had the time to acknowledge them. As the middle child in my family, I felt obligated to be as little of a bother to my parents as possible. It always seemed like my older sister needed my parents' help because she did not have older siblings to

ask for guidance, while it seemed like my younger sister needed more support because of her age. I tried to be the "easy" child. I stayed out of trouble, tried to be as nice as possible, and never dared to concern my parents with problems I felt I could not describe.

As these feelings became the center of my life with the pandemic, I felt like I was drowning and could not take it anymore. I finally talked to my parents, and I felt like my final layer of the perfect daughter was stripped off. I cried, and so did my parents, but they did not cry because they were mourning the loss of their perfect daughter. They cried because I thought I needed that layer in the first place.

I now find myself as a junior in high school. During quarantine, I hoped every day for my layers to come back, so I could stop feeling again. Now, my layers are beginning to come back, yet they do not feel the same. These layers may cover me, but I finally feel the person underneath. This essay feels like the perfect collision. I learned about this opportunity through school, which I find one of my thickest layers. Yet, I am using it to expose what is underneath it. I cannot promise that I will never hide behind my layers again—everyone needs their distractions. But I will not drown in them. Now, I have removed the layers that block my feelings. My relationship with my friends and family has become much more open. I no longer feel like my feelings are a burden, and I finally see that people care about me—the real me. The layers no longer wear me, but I wear the layers.