

SAMPLE ESSAY #1

I sat on the cold cement, my heart racing at the thought of leaving a place that felt more like home than home itself. I gasped for air, overwhelmed by the most draining, yet life-giving month of my life, thinking about hurling myself back into the swirling chaos of my ordinary life. Laura sat next to me, her arm resting heavily on my shoulder. In this moment I fully grasped the importance of surrounding myself in a solid community.

This past summer I spent a month in the mountains as a camp counselor for girls whose eyes lit up at the mention of ice cream parties and were always on a mission to perfect the newest dance trend. Laura and I counseled together my first week, and she quickly became a support system for me.

While I was there, I received daily calls from my younger brother with threats to harm himself. I had to find the time to talk him through these episodes while still fulfilling my camp responsibilities. On top of my brother's need for support, I lost one of my own safety nets when a mentor of mine, a second parent when my own father did not step up, moved away. Camp has always been my escape: a place where I can be authentic and build positive relationships. Having real life infiltrate my safe space was a smack in the face. One night, as the reality of returning home set in, Laura asked if I needed to talk to someone. Reluctantly, I sat down, but soon felt comfortable enough to open up.

That night, I understood something I am constantly told but had never put into practice: it is okay, and necessary, to ask for help. This has been an area of difficulty for me since my mother passed away when I was 12 years old. Suddenly, I needed to take care of myself without help from my family. I developed a tendency to address problems on my own because I felt that talking to others about my issues would only weigh them down. As our conversation developed, I understood that vulnerability is essential to honest relationships. I have wrestled with facing my emotions since my mother's passing, as being forced to grow up so quickly left me little time to process losing her. My internal conflicts became a second priority to talking my brother through one of his episodes, or making sure I could get to the grocery store.

Talking genuinely about my emotions cultivated new ways for me to handle obstacles, and pushed me to grow in my shortcomings. I now make a conscious effort to take note of my feelings in turbulent situations and reach out for support when they become overwhelming. By allowing the people around me to step in, I have been able free myself from the suffocating weight of my past.

I have learned to prioritize self-care, and now have an awareness of unhealthy patterns I need to interrupt. Since then, I have had constructive and honest conversations with my family about the impact their expectations have had on me, and how to progress past conflict that has been dividing us for years. Mending core relationships in my life has allowed me to live in a more positive and intentional way.

The lessons that I learned from Laura I am now able to model for my brother and future campers. I hope to have an impact on these children that will last long after the adrenaline rush from riding down the camp zip line fades. Helping them see the value in vulnerability cultivates a space where they feel comfortable enough to open up, something I desperately needed at their age. This conversation kept me up until three in the morning giving me a long list of things to put into practice at my home away from camp.

SAMPLE ESSAY #2

My fridge was a 300-pound temptress I couldn't resist. Every night, I would find myself exploring my fridge's interior for what felt like hours, staring into her blank abyss. Just when I would think I was done for the night, she would pull me back in and I'd spend another 20 minutes basking in her dim light. It became harder to resist her grasp, and I wasted almost every moment ravishing shelves for leftovers before bed, binging bags of popcorn if I was bored, or baking and eating cookies just because I could. She made food my safe space; it was always something that I never had to worry about, something I never lost control over.

Being diagnosed with type one diabetes threw our relationship off track.

At the ripe age of fifteen I was forced to burn down every wall of my food shelter and put up my own defenses against the very thing I once held so close. My life turned from spoons to syringes as I now carefully calculated every carb in my food and administered it through a needle in my stomach. I quickly realized how I took every midnight snack, every freshly baked brownie, and every piece of celebratory candy for granted. As my disease progressed, I learned that I had only been half-taught how to deal with type one diabetes. Sure, I received the supplies and medicine and was told how to check my blood sugar six times a day by pricking my fingertips, but what I was never told was how to adjust socially. I was floored when my closest friends would make offhanded remarks like, "So you just ate a ton of sugar and now you're diseased?" and "I would buy this bag of Oreos but I don't want to end up like you."

As I watched my peers' biggest concerns become their next math test or the boy they liked, I realized that I was given no choice but to grow out of my fifteen-year-old problems. A part of me was proud of myself for becoming so mature so quickly, but another part felt robbed blind. I was fifteen but forced to frontline a fight against my own body and win. Nevertheless, I was determined to get back onto the kitchen tiles, and I wasn't about to let my pancreas stop me. It was true that nothing could replace the happiness that food brought me, but I was sure I could find something else in the kitchen that would make me just as satisfied. I thought back to before my diagnosis and searched for a way to enjoy my safe space again without worrying about needles or insulin.

So rather than pouring food into myself, I poured myself into my food and started baking again for the first time in months. This time I baked not for myself to eat, but as therapy. There was something so simple and calming about the way a recipe laid everything out for me that made me feel more secure than I ever had since my diagnosis. I whisked my sadness into my cake batters, folded in my stress with chocolate chips, watched my anger rise away with my bread doughs. I even got a job at a bakery where I bonded with customers like a father and his diabetic son, whom I helped understand not only the number of carbs in the cupcakes we served but also diabetes care and how to adjust to a new diagnosis. Now my sweet tooth no longer ached to eat my own confections, so I gave them to everyone around me. Watching their faces light with excitement when I would surprise them with desserts was more filling than any late night rendezvous with my fridge. Even though food wasn't my own safe space anymore, I knew I couldn't let anyone else take it for granted.