

A Message to Incoming Freshmen

High school is simply a collection of small choices. Your success in high school is determined by the choices you make. Do not allow the pressure of fitting-in to interfere with your goals. When you look back at your time in high school, you will find that constantly worrying about the opinions of your peers is toxic to bettering yourself. Throughout my life, I have struggled with the concept of fitting-in. My thoughts and actions always seemed to revolve around pleasing others and ensuring that I was seen as *cool* or *popular*. Being cool or popular did not come naturally, causing me to constantly question and change myself; this has been a lifelong battle.

As an underclassman, this battle worsened. I struggled with myself to stop worrying about what everyone else did and thought. Finally, after a series of events that caused me to question my priorities, it was time to finally focus and create my own path that was not determined by the opinions or actions of others. It was a slow process; I forced myself to consciously think about many of the decisions I made. Understanding that my every move was not being judged by onlookers was crucial. Even if my every move was being criticized, what effect would a stranger's opinion really have on my life?

Since I made the decision to worry less and focus more, taking advantage of the incredible opportunities I have had in high school has been much easier. Gaining control over the social pressures I felt just months ago gave me the ability to improve my judgment and become fulfilled with my achievements and everyday life. My newfound confidence allows me to escape my comfort zone with ease rather than doubt. I speak in front of thousands and freely practice my faith without reservation. I made a commitment to myself to change the way I deal with

social anxiety; I no longer blindly follow simply to fit-in. The decisions I make and actions I take align with my personal goals, principles, and desires. Moving forward, I will maintain this mindset in order to advance my education and future career.

It is crucial that you take my experiences and discover whether you question yourself in the ways I did, and, honestly, often still do. I am extremely proud of my achievements, but I can only imagine where I would be today if I had changed my mindset earlier. I fully believe that the words and opinions of others will control you if you let them. Do not let them - rise above it. You are not what other people think of you. You do not have to abide by the stereotypes people force upon you. Worry less about what everyone else is doing and worry more about what you want to do. Each small choice that you make should reflect who you want to become. It really is that simple: the positive choices you make today will impact your life far beyond high school.