

# Reclaiming My Tears | Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice

## Reclaiming My Tears

Edith Zarco

### Author's Note:

This reflection was written for an assignment for Carlos Robles, LCSW, AM "301 Social Intervention: Direct Practice" class. The assignment's topic was stress, as it is a common problem in living encountered in social work practice. Our instructor asked us to explore our experiences and responses to stress as they are intimately connected to the five domains of the Just Practice textbook: history, meaning, context, power, and possibilities. I hope that this reflection can provide comfort to anyone who may struggle to accept themselves.

*In honor of my mother, Irene.*

Throughout my life, I have had a tumultuous and unhealthy relationship with stress. Stress used to mean I had failed; I had not prepared enough; I had not been smart enough. Stress was something to hide and something to feel ashamed about. It meant being out of control and unable to handle feelings of pressure. It meant not being perfect and not being enough.

My family always told me that I was a very difficult infant and child. I was an infant who could not be soothed, a toddler who could not be consoled, and a child who cried too often. The context of my birth was the subtext that informed the pressure to handle stress. My mother was born with a congenital heart defect in 1960s Mexico. At an early age, she was told she would not make it to 15. Despite all of

this, she was very studious and ambitious. She pursued all the education available for her family while living in poverty. After her parents passed away, she was determined to seek a better life in the United States. My mom tired easily and could not exert herself. But the stories I heard growing up were about how hard she struggled and worked, despite those limits. That is how I remember my mom—steadfast, relentless, and brave.

She was also stubborn. So, when doctors discouraged her from having children and told her she simply *couldn't*, she did it anyway. I was raised knowing that I was, without a doubt, wanted and loved. When I was growing up, she would call me *mi tesoro*, my treasure. As an only child, I often wanted a sister or brother and asked why I didn't have one. In response, I was reminded of my mother's condition. It wasn't until I was in grade school, when my mother could no longer physically work and was continuously on oxygen, that I understood how sick she was. I felt that as the only daughter she could have, I had to be perfect.

I vividly recall my first anxiety attack when I was five. The school called my mom because a sudden, intense fear came over me when I didn't know an answer to a teacher's question and in my fright, was unable to move my legs. Experiences like this continued. Feelings of uneasiness became the norm. The fear of failing to be perfect competed with the fear of losing control. I cried for the most banal reasons. The tears often were followed by the shame I felt for being what everyone called "sensitive." There were other labels, too, like "chillona" or "crybaby."

I felt like these labels were branded on my skin. I could try to hide them, but ultimately, my sleeves always seemed to slip up and expose my bare skin. I don't think my family and teachers understood the power they had whenever they spoke those words. With each repeated utterance, I felt the scar thicken. When the tears dried, I was reminded how imperfect I was and how I had failed.

Janet L. Finn's "Just Practice a Social Justice Approach to Social Work" defines power as the ability to name another's experience. As a child, I did not have the vocabulary or power to name my experience or to understand stress and how to self-regulate effectively. Those around me had the power to brand me. This branding of my physical and mental experiences kept me on a path of fear—never knowing when something said or something done might cause my dysregulation.

As I have gotten older, I came to see that the meaning and power of the labels I associated with my stress reactions generated detrimental coping mechanisms and repeated anxiety. There are all those acts of avoidance, deflection, and procrastination that permeate my past, and sometimes still intrude on the present. Of course, I expertly learned to avoid topics, things, places, and experiences that might cause me stress. When my mom passed away two weeks before my middle school graduation, only my closest friends and school administrators knew. I managed to avoid talking about it for much of my life until the benefits of avoidance came crashing down, causing damage academically, emotionally, and physically. I was forced to face the sources of my stress in therapy for the first time at the age of 21.

I could only consider attending therapy once my coping skills had broken down. Therapy helped me to expand the meaning of my relationship with stress and anxiety. I finally allowed myself what was never permissible - to express my emotions and process my experiences. My grief was no longer denied. Once room was made to acknowledge my history and context, room was also made for new possibilities. Possibilities encourage and cultivate creativity even in difficult circumstances. It also allowed me to have greater empathy and compassion for myself and my mother. I no longer interpreted my mother's actions as a request for perfection. Now I see affection, hope, and love: emotions that encourage possibilities.

I believe that the encouragement of new possibilities is one of the primary roles of social workers. Within the social work profession, I see the practices of acceptance, validation, and fight for social justice as the catalysts of new possibilities; possibilities that can result in the transcendence of personal circumstances and communities. The creation of these possibilities does not mean the erasure of struggle, personal circumstances, or inequality, but it does represent an opportunity to reclaim power over one's journey.

It has been over a decade since I started my acceptance and name-reclamation journey. Scars fade over time. I still cry when I am stressed. I still occasionally revert to unhealthy coping strategies. Despite this, I am more forgiving and kinder to myself. I have many more tools, skills, and support to rely on when stressed. I no longer strive to be perfect. I strive to be imperfectly human. I, too, have the power to name and give meaning to my experiences. When I cannot hold back the tears, I no longer feel dread and shame when tear drops roll down my face. I am encouraged by the possibilities that acceptance has given me. Now I welcome the opportunity to tell the story I used to hide behind my sleeves.

## References

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Edith Zarco is a first-year, Social Work Master's student in the social administration concentration. She is a proud daughter of Mexican immigrants and is a first-generation college graduate. Edith earned her Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Prior to joining UChicago's Crown Family School, she had the privilege of serving trauma survivors and immigrants through her work as a Domestic Violence Court Advocate at the Elgin Community Crisis Center and as a Social Services Associate at the Tahirih Justice Center.