

Learning to Pause: A Reflection on my Academic Journey

By Kyla Watson

I have always been someone who focuses on what comes next. As soon as I achieve one goal, my attention shifts to the next deadline or challenge. I rarely pause long enough to appreciate what I have accomplished. Writing this reflection has forced me to look back at my journey that brought me to where I am and recognize how much I have learned and how far I've come.

I grew up in Johannesburg, and when it was time to choose a university to attend, I felt like I needed a change of pace. I chose to attend the University of Cape Town because I saw it as the best university in Africa and I believed it would offer me an excellent education as well as all the independence I could want. Coming out of high school I was sure that I wanted to major in biochemistry, but university introduced me to interests I hadn't discovered yet.

Through human anatomy and physiology, I developed a deep fascination with the human body. I loved learning how its structures and systems work together. Biochemistry complemented this interest by helping me understand the molecular processes underlying those systems. Together these subjects showed me that the human body could be studied at several levels; i.e. from its visible structures to the biochemical reactions that sustain life.

During the final semester of my undergraduate Human Anatomy & Physiology studies, I was introduced to Neuroscience. This became a turning point in my academic journey. The brain, to me, was the most fascinating part of the human body: an organ responsible not only for regulating bodily functions, but also for shaping memory, behavior, emotion, perception, and identity. Neuroscience was one of the most challenging topics I encountered during my undergraduate degree (I also heard horror stories from previous students), but it was also one of the most rewarding. The difficulty of the subject made me want to understand it even more.

At that stage, I knew that I wanted to pursue an Honours degree, but I was uncertain about the direction it should take. My love of crime shows had previously led me to consider forensics. However, after encountering neuroscience in my third year, I realised that my curiosity lay elsewhere. I had fallen in love with a field that challenged me to think about the relationship between biology, behaviour and the complexity of being human.

Entering the UCT Neuroscience Honours programme, I did not fully know what to expect. During orientation, previous students gave us an overwhelming amount of information and several warnings about how demanding the year would be. It did not take long for me to realise that they knew exactly what they were talking about. The programme has been intensive, with a constant stream of assignments, new

information and expectations. There have been moments of excitement and fulfilment, but there have also been moments when I felt overwhelmed and close to breaking point.

Those difficult moments form an important part of this reflection. Academic achievement is often presented through completed degrees, good results and successful projects. What is less visible is the emotional effort behind those accomplishments: the anxiety, exhaustion, self-doubt and persistence required to continue. This journey has not always been easy, and I do not want to minimise that. At the same time, I am beginning to understand that struggling does not erase what I have achieved. If anything, continuing through those struggles demonstrates a resilience that I do not always acknowledge in myself.

Now, approximately halfway through my Honours year, I find myself facing another demanding period involving research projects, assignments and important decisions about my future. My instinct is to focus immediately on these next challenges. However, this reflection has reminded me that I deserve to pause before moving forward.

The most important lesson I have learned is that growth should not only be measured by what remains unfinished. I am allowed to acknowledge the work I have already done. I am allowed to feel proud of surviving the difficult periods and of continuing even when I doubted myself. I am allowed to celebrate becoming someone whose interests have developed from a general curiosity about the human body into a genuine passion for neuroscience.

The next portion of the year may be the most demanding, but I approach it with a better understanding of myself. I know there will be difficult days, yet I also know that I have already overcome challenges that once felt impossible. I remain excited to discover where neuroscience will lead me and what the next chapter of my academic journey will look like.

Most importantly, I am learning that constantly looking ahead should not prevent me from looking back. Sometimes, progress becomes visible only when we pause long enough to see it. Today, I can say that I am proud of how far I have come.