Last summer, I was lovingly coerced by my favorite teacher to join her non-profit outdoor program, Sisters On Leadership Expeditions. The program teaches girls how to take on leadership roles through a week-long backpacking trip in the Weminuche Wilderness, along with monthly activities and service projects.  I was initially uncomfortable because I didn’t know many of the girls, and as a more introverted person I was expecting a week of awkward small talk and loneliness.

I backpacked when I was younger, but I hadn’t gone in a few years and I hadn’t had to carry much beside my stuffed animals and a raincoat.  Our first expedition was a little intimidating: a forty-six mile, high-altitude trip averaging over six miles a day, while carrying a forty-five pound backpack. To my pleasant surprise, it wasn’t that bad. The girls were witty and the hiking was a charming challenge. We bonded over trudging through ankle-deep mud and singing songs while we hiked. On the third day we camped at about 12,500 feet elevation at Moon Lake, a breathtakingly emerald lake surrounded by jutting black mountains with snow-dusted peaks. It was by far the most spectacular view I have ever seen.

Yet there I was in a warm sleeping bag, surrounded by people who cared about me, abundant natural beauty, and I was bawling my eyes out. Our water purifier was chlorine-based, and I have the unfortunate privilege of being allergic to chlorine.  When we reached the lake, the combination of my allergy, the altitude and my lack of eating, took its toll.

My mind has a funny way of turning bad situations into something disastrous. I became nauseated and overwhelmed with anxiety. All I wanted was my mom to scratch my back while my dad read to me. If I was at home, I would have curled up with some Pepto-Bismol and Netflix and fought through it. But I wasn’t home. I was in the middle-of-nowhere with a multiple-day hike out and no modern medicine.

I was forced to reconcile for myself the reality that I had 14 other girls relying on me to suck up my petty issues and continuing hiking. It’s a big moment when you have to take care of yourself. You seize responsibility of your health and you are no one else’s problem.

While sitting on the top of the mountain I remembered a trip to China that my family took when I was eleven. My mom asked our tour guide, “What’s the worst thing about Americans?”  Without missing a beat he replied, “Americans do not know how to be uncomfortable. You do not know how to be hot or sick without just being, you must always be completely comfortable.” This caused a swell of guilt inside of me. My sickness, while real, was not a big deal. I allowed my fear of being uncomfortable to get in my head.

The realization that the anxiety was in my head calmed me down. I could control how I reacted to a situation. I didn’t need to let my fears get out-of-hand. I relaxed and realized that I was in a beautiful area surrounded by people who cared about me. I didn’t need to freak out or get worked up. Once I got out of my head, I was able to appreciate the moment and how lucky I was to be there.

I began to use this realization in the rest of my life. Whether dealing with test anxiety or my existential crisis; I don’t have to get myself hyped up, I can actually perceive the situation for what it is, instead of making it bigger in my head. My mental breakdown gave me the confidence to deal with my emotions. It’s reassuring knowing that I don’t have to go into a downward spiral every time I encounter anxiety.  I have the power to perceive the world as I want to.