

## STOKES

I think probably the biggest difference now, between two years ago, for me is those connections between me and my friends and my loved ones and how much more I appreciate them and how much more deeply I want to engage with the people that I'm around. I was always kinda had a smaller group of friends that I wanted to really invest in and even more so now. I just am constantly reminded, yes, I want to only really spend that time with those people and be able to have it be something deeper than just a passing, you know, "Hey, good to see you. Talk to you later," kind of thing. So I think my list of priorities two years ago was just sort of maintaining, but I realized, especially looking back now, how stagnant I was.

I have realized that there are some people that I don't want to keep in my circle and have yes, lost a few friends that I thought would always be in my life, but never out of, you know, anything more than wanting that to be what's right for both of us, you know. There's certain things that hurt in the moment, but there's so much better for both people involved. So, you know, you should only put in as much energy into whatever it is, whether it's your passion project, your job, your interpersonal relationships, your work relationships, or others, as much energy as you're receiving back. And that is very hard to do. And it's very hard to experience sometimes.

A big thing I think all of us have realized is how much, you know, our mental health is important. And I use the phrase, uh, you know, out of spoons and definitely try and do my best to remember it's okay to be out of spoons and say, "No, you need to stop," and, you know, focus on the things that really matter to you. And I'm still learning how to put myself first, absolutely. But, um, a lot of things is not just saying, "Yeah, sure. That's fine," and things like working on my spiritual health and my physical health and emotional health. Um, you know, I do suffer from some anxiety and OCD and those types of things just, you know, can overwhelm. I think my dad told me one time, he said, "Is anyone going to die because of this decision that you're having to make? And if not, it's going to be okay." Like it'll be okay. So, you know, we, we sometimes act like certain things are life or death, and they're not. It's okay. Sometimes you just have to let the thing fall.

My self-confidence, it still fluctuates. It's something I'm still working towards. I like to think that yes, especially in certain aspects, I am so much more confident because of that, yeah, prioritizing myself. It is very tough to love yourself sometimes. I think, uh, RuPaul said it best is "If you can't love yourself, then how the hell is anyone else going to love you?" It's hard, but it's so worth it whenever you can. Now I can say a lot more is that my first priority is me, and that's huge to even be able to say that. Second is my family, um, especially, you know, my future husband and everything. And then from there, it becomes things that still fill me up. Thankfully, my job is so awesome. You know, it's not just a nine-to-five kind of job. It is something much more creative, working in a gallery and in a small

business, especially. These past few years, it's huge to still be able to happily want to work here and get to do what I get to do.