Finding Resilience Through Knitting

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By Rachel Hultman

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I have been surrounded by knitting my whole life. My mother, sister, grandmothers, friends, cousins, and aunts have knit. I grew up admiring the things they made, sometimes even getting to wear these items. I grew up watching their stitches, watching them expertly wield their needles, creating sweaters and scarves out of a long string of yarn. When I was very little, I could not wait for the day that my hands were big enough that I could do this too. Today I can make scarves, hats, sweaters, and cardigans. Yet, there is still so much that I do not know how to do. That’s the thing about knitting, there is always another challenge waiting. A new stitch, a new technique, or a new pattern to learn.

I could never have anticipated how important knitting would become to my life. How it could calm me down and distract me from the stresses of life like nothing else can. How it could make me feel confident in myself and my abilities, even when the rest of life feels like it is falling apart. Life, like knitting, always has another challenge waiting. I chose this project because I wanted to understand why knitting does this for me and the people I know. I also wanted to explore how the women in my family have used knitting to express their creativity and remain resilient in life. Resilience being our ability to get through and rebound from life’s difficulties. I am inspired by how their work sparked later generations to pick up the needles too.

Knitting is more than the act of moving needles, it can take on meaning beyond its physical bounds, travel down generations, and create an opportunity for its practitioners to find resilience.

What is Knitting?

It is important to understand what knitting is and some core terminology. Knitting is a technique of looping yarn together using two needles. It is essentially loops within loops, or what Corkhill et al. (2014 p. 36) calls the “continuous looping of yarn over a needle.” At its core, knitting is fairly simple; all you need are two needles, yarn, and a pattern. It can become
increasingly complex by using multiple needles and an almost infinite amount of stitch patterns. Needles come in all different sizes, lengths, and forms. The most common types include straight needles, which are pointed at one end; double pointed needles, which are pointed at both ends and are used for knitting circular projects; and circular needles, two needles connected by thin plastic and are also used for circular projects. Needles can be made from plastic, metal, bamboo, wood, and many other materials. They just need to be able to hold stitches and be comfortable to use. Personally, I use bamboo because they are fast, quiet, and often less expensive than other options.

![Figure 1: Examples of Knitting Needles. From left to right are double pointed needles, circular needles, and straight needles.](image)

Yarn also comes in different materials and sizes. The size of yarn is measured in weight or ply. The more ply’s, or the greater the weight, the bigger the yarn. The smallest is thread or fingering yarn, often used for baby clothes, while the biggest is called super bulky or jumbo yarn, which I have used to make blankets. Frequently, scarf and hat patterns call for worsted (8 ply) or aran (10-12 ply) yarn. Yarn weight corresponds to needle size. The bigger the yarn, the
bigger the needle. There is some flexibility here and different people may use different needle sizes depending on their tension, or how tight they make their stitches.

A pattern is an instruction manual for how to make a particular item, such as a scarf. There are all kinds of patterns out there: scarves, sweaters, blankets, even stuffed animals. I like to think that knitting patterns have their own language. They are full of abbreviations such as k2tog (knit two together) or ptbl (purl through the back loop). While some patterns provide a key or dictionary to explain these abbreviations, others will not. Some very creative and advanced knitters will make up their own patterns, while others prefer to follow a pre-made pattern.

Knitting can be as simple or complicated as we desire it to be. It depends on what you are knitting and the pattern. For example, a scarf is relatively simple to make because it is a long rectangle. A sweater, however, is more difficult, because it has to be designed to fit all dimensions of the human body. The types of stitches used also change the difficulty of the pattern. For example, stockinette stitch is much simpler to do than a cable knitting pattern.

Many knitters, like me, follow patterns other people have made when we knit. Pattern making is not easy, especially for those still new to knitting. Projects such as pants and sweaters have to comfortably fit and move with the body. These garments are designed to fit all dimensions of the human body and everything we do with it; there are many details to consider in this process.

One last important point to make about knitting is that it is practiced by many people, across the world, in different social classes, and throughout history. Depending on the yarn and knitting needles, knitting can be quite inexpensive. On the other hand, some yarns and needles can be very pricey. Knitting creates useful objects that people can use throughout their daily life and is therefore an appealing practice and beneficial knowledge to have.
The Many Meanings of Knitting

Knitting can be many things, mean many things, and has a multitude of benefits. One of its most discussed benefits is the ability to lose oneself in the work. Repetition and rhythm are central to knitting, the same stitches are repeated over and over again, producing a sense of calm (Corkhill et al. 2014; Collier 2011; Turney 2009). Under these circumstances it is easy to get lost in the rhythm of knitting. People can become so engrossed in their projects, that the worries of life fall away. This is called entering a flow state. “Flow” is a term from Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s book of the same title from 1990. He describes Flow as a state of optimal experience, when consciousness is harmoniously ordered, and when our goals become reality (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). There are a few elements that must be achieved in order to experience flow. Flow is achieved while practicing a challenging activity that requires skill, when our attention is completely absorbed by the activity, and when we stop perceiving ourselves as separate from our actions (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). There needs to be clear goals and feedback, concentration on the task, and a feeling of being in control of the task to the point where we do not worry about losing control (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). Through this process we lose self-consciousness and our grasp on time; people might say that “time flew” while working on their flow task (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). Csikszentmihalyi (1990) also says the product of the activity is rewarding. In knitting there is a finished product from the hours of time put in. Knitting is an activity where people can enter this flow state. The repetition and rhythm of knitting lulls the practitioner into a state where their mind is completely focused on the task at hand.

Many people can experience flow while knitting. In “Conversations about Creativity and Chronic Illness” Reynolds (2004) found in her research that many people described entering flow states while knitting. Entering this state could simultaneously distract them from their present worries, such as illness, while also confronting their illness through the creative process.
Knitting soothes worries and anxieties, allowing people to confront them in a calmer, more ordered state of mind.

Lampitt Adey also writes about flow in *Knitting Identities* (2016). She writes that people find flow through the balance of challenge and perceived ability (2016). In knitting there is always a challenge because there is always something new to learn. It is a skill honed over time through practice. Knitting is a lifelong practice, something that we can keep throughout life and throughout the difficulties of life.

Another article that discusses flow is “The Well-Being of Women who Create with Textiles” by Collier (2011). She connects flow to art therapy, which she describes as therapy through engagement in the creative process. Creativity helps individuals cope with illness by expressing their feelings through art and finding fulfillment, even when life is not fulfilling. Sometimes being creative is simply a distraction from what is ailing us in the present moment. Even more articles connect knitting and flow. They highlight that flow means devoting full attention to an activity, balancing challenge and accessibility, creating a sense of control and accomplishment (Kenning 2015; Lampitt Adey 2018). All of these factors come together and make people feel good about themselves and what they can do. They can have control over one thing, when life is out of control and too challenging to cope with.

People often say that knitting makes them feel good about themselves. To look at something and say, ‘I made that’ and I am proud of my skills feels good. Pollanen (2015) writes that knitting produces feelings of empowerment because people can make both aesthetically pleasing as well as useful things. Knitting produces visible, tangible achievements. Additionally, knitting feels good because it is a calming practice. When a person enters a flow state they are empowered by the reduction in their stress and worries.
Perhaps one of the most powerful elements of knitting is that it connects us with others, both past and present. At each stage of the process there is potential for connection. Kenning (2015) writes that knitting confers a sense of self, identity, community, and of belonging. In Gauntlett’s (2018) book *Making is Connecting* he shares how people connect through creating. This can mean sharing their crafts, tips and tricks, and other knowledge over social media or in person. We can make things that other people see, enjoy, use, and learn from (Gauntlett 2018). Social connections can appear through sharing skills, joining a knitting group, and more (Corkhill et al 2014). Knitting can also connect us with our past, commonly the women in our past. Fisk (2019), in her article “Stitch for Stitch, You are Remembering,” argues that knitting allows us to build and maintain bonds with our deceased relatives, and even cope with their loss. We connect with our past by continuing the practice of knitting throughout the generations. We may even use the same patterns and the same knitting needles that they did. Fisk (2019) argues through this practice we can celebrate our ancestors. Knitting is a skill that is passed down through the generations and therefore connects us to our past. The garments themselves also last throughout generations. We can feel the stitches they made, know the care they put into those projects, and wear what they have made.

Knitting has the ability to take on more meaning that its physical bounds. This is one of the central themes of *The Culture of Knitting* by Joanne Turney (2009): knitting is malleable and therefore we shape it to our own desires and messages. Turney (2009) argues that knitting is deceptively simple and can take on highly complex meanings. It has been a way for women to carve out their own sense of self and express themselves through what they make. Lynn Abrams (2006) writes about the significant of knitting for women on the Shetland islands from 1850 to 2000. In these communities knitting integrated women into the market and the economy (Abrams
2006). Not only was the practice central to female relationships, but it was also an opportunity for economic autonomy. It gave women, a sense of self, strength, and agency. It became more than a home activity (Abrams 2006). For these women, knitting had a large impact on their lives beyond the physical things they created.

Knitting can also be used in activism. The projects themselves, as well as the way knitting brings a group of people together, is a powerful tool for making a social statement. For example, Francis Early (2009) writes about the knitting project for Vietnamese children that took place between 1966 and 1976. A Canadian organization of women came together to knit camouflaged clothing for Vietnamese children living in combat zones (Early 2009). Early (2009) points out that normally, war knitting projects have focused on making clothing for the soldiers away from home, especially women knitting for their husbands and sons (Early 2009). For example, during World Wars One and Two it was viewed as a patriotic duty to knit (Maines 2019). Knitting socks became especially important during trench warfare as a method of preventing trench foot through the supply of clean, dry socks; women were specifically recruited for this task (Maines 2019). This Canadian women’s organization, by instead making clothing for non-soldiers and possibly members of a group their soldiers were fighting against, was a clear message of disapproval over the war. It was a message for peace and perhaps an acknowledgement of universal humanity. No children anywhere should be casualties of war.

Another example of knitting as a form of activism is from Peru. In the 1980s and 1990s a civil war took place in Peru resulting in many missing people (Kargol 2022). The women whose family members went missing came together and knit a large scarf to commemorate those relatives. Each woman knitted a small piece, often customizing it with a photograph of who they were missing, then each piece was sewn together to create one large scarf (Kargol 2022). The
scarf represented a symbolic grave, or memorial, because their missing would never get a real one. In this case, knitting was a way for these women to make their voices heard, especially when they had few other ways to express their voices. Kargol (2022) argues that in this single event, knitting became an act of protest and commemoration. Knitting was more than yarn looped together; each square symbolized one person who would never be seen again.

Personal Stories: My Family and Knitting

Knitting helps us to be resilient through multiple avenues. It is something that connects us with others and can be passed down through the generations. My own family is full of knitting. I would even like to say that I am related to many talented knitters. For us, a handmade project is the ultimate sign of affection. While each of us go through phases where we do not knit, it is something we always come back to because it is fun, it is helpful, and we enjoy it.

My mother, Susan, often knit for me. She is the one who first introduced me to knitting. She made me legwarmers for an 80s themed dress-up day at school. She also knit me a blue cardigan and even let me pick out the buttons. I chose glass buttons with tiny seahorses in the middle. She made many hats, especially in the beret style. I have worn many different items of clothing throughout life; the custom-made knits from my mom are those that I remember most vividly and appreciate the most. Today, she often makes baby booties for coworkers, friends, and family who are expecting. Whenever she hears someone is having a baby, she goes to a yarn store and picks out a tiny skein of wool or cotton, soft enough for a baby.
Throughout her life, my mother, Susan, has gone through phases where she has picked up knitting and phases where she has not knit much at all. She knitted in high school and then again in college, and then picked it up again after having children. Susan says she enjoys knitting because it is a way to be creative. Creativity keeps stress, depression, and other negative emotions away. It also helps manage those emotions when they do appear. Knitting is a repetitive activity, and most patterns have the same stitch or set of stitches repeat over and over and over again. Eventually, one hardly needs to ready the pattern at all because it has been memorized. This repetition creates a calming feeling, like a mindfulness exercise, for Susan.

In our conversations about knitting my mother brought up Flow, just like in the literature on knitting. She describes flow as a mental state defined by being completely engrossed in a task. Flow includes intense focus while engaging in a creative activity as well as a loss of awareness of time and self. For her and other members of my family who knit, we can achieve flow through knitting. As my dad would say, artistic pursuits, no matter what they are allow us to slow down and escape from the rat race.
Susan was taught to knit by her grandmother, nicknamed Grammy Ducky. Susan’s mother, Nancy, always said that Grammy Ducky was a very fast, efficient knitter. This is a skilled acquired through years of practice and knowledge over the craft. She frequently made baby booties and sweaters for expecting families, especially those she knew from church. My mother adapted this pattern and uses it to make baby booties today. Even though the pattern is slightly different, the tradition of making booties for babies lives on. My family has even nicknamed these patterns, the Grammy Ducky sweater and Grammy Ducky baby booties.

Grammy Ducky’s daughter, my grandmother, Nancy Dutro, knit as well. I have two sweaters she made. One is an orange sweater done in stockinette stitch. At the line between the shoulders and the body of the sweater she worked yarn-over stitches, creating intentional gaps in the stitches, adding some decoration to the shoulders. The other sweater used to be my mother’s. It is a black sweater with a multicolored pattern going across the chest. This technique is done by working multiple strands of yarn at once, called intarsia, something I have not been brave enough to attempt. My uncle has an almost identical sweater, except that it is in red. There is a painting in her old house that she made depicting her son wearing this sweater, with my grandfather standing with him, on a riverbank.
Perhaps some of the best things she made are the Christmas stockings. Everyone in the family got a customized Christmas stocking. She never wrote down a pattern, as far as anyone knows. Each stocking is slightly different and mine has a chicken on it. This past Christmas my mom and my sister each tried recreating the pattern to make stockings for my brother-in-law and my fiancé. Each step of the process there was frustration trying to figure out what Grammy was doing, but also a sense of awe at how smart she was and the beauty of her design. Nancy knit for her children and grandchildren, though she did not often make things for herself.
My grandmother was an extremely intelligent person, that was something one figured out very quickly on meeting her. I talked with my mother quite a bit about my grandmother and her knitting. My grandmother has passed away now, so I cannot ask her these questions myself. My grandmother used knitting as a creative outlet. She enjoyed designing the Christmas stockings. She did many other crafts outside of knitting, like sewing and painting, to occupy her mind. She seemed to use these crafts as a way to use her brain because she was bored, especially during the years when she was not working outside the home because she had young children. She also lived in a time where women were not expected or encouraged to work outside the home. Knitting was a challenging and productive activity for her. The entire process from start to finish was fulfilling for her, when other parts of her life were not.

My grandmother on my father’s side, Amy Hultman, knit as well. My father recalls that she made wool stocking caps for him and his brother. She designed the stocking caps, so they matched the school colors of each school her son’s attended. Often people knit to make things for other people. My great-grandmother and my grandmothers did not often, or ever, make things for themselves. My mother, and my sister hardly ever make things for themselves and if they do it is small. Their bigger, grander projects are for friends and family. My best projects are the things I have made for other people. It is an easy gift idea too, who can complain about a handmade gift? It also feels fulfilling to give away something that we have made. It makes a gift more personal and meaningful.
My sister, Rebecca, can knit, though today she prefers to crochet. Crochet is very similar to knitting, except instead of using two needles, it uses a singular hook. Frequently people know how to both knit and crochet, but they tend to favor one over the other. Rebecca finds knitting relaxing and methodical. Doing the same thing over and over again creates a rhythm that is calming and relaxing. Rebecca also enjoys that knitting can be done alongside other activities, such as watching TV or spending time with people. She can be engaged in conversation and knit at the same time. Knitting and crochet is also functional- we create things that ourselves or other people can use. Knitting is a creative outlet, one that Rebecca turned to during the Covid-19 pandemic and while she was wedding planning. Wedding planning is incredibly stressful, and her knitting projects helped her through this stress. She made makeup bags for each of her bridesmaids during this time. Rebecca also sees knitting as a way to continue tradition. She recreated our grandmother’s Christmas stocking pattern to make a customized Christmas stocking for her husband.
I learned to knit in fifth grade. My teacher, Mrs. Johnson, allowed us to knit during class. It was not allowed during every lesson (especially not those when we were required to take notes) but when she read aloud, when we watched movies, or during other calmer class activities we were allowed to knit. We mostly made hats and scarves which we later donated to a local homeless shelter. We shared yarn, knitting needles, patterns, and ideas. Sometimes we knit with dull N.2 Ticonderoga pencils instead of needles because we were in fifth grade, and it was fun.

For a long time after that I stopped knitting. Once or twice in high school I picked it back up again, though I did not really start it up again until the lockdowns of the Covid-19 pandemic. When you are in a family with people who knit, yarn collects. Somehow, in every knitting project there is a leftover skein of yarn. Knitting needles, patterns, yarn, and half-finished projects collect until there is an entire bin, or collection of bins filling a closet. During the pandemic I picked up knitting again and went through this closet. I needed something to do with my brain and my hands while we were all stuck at home. I felt this gap in my life that I needed to fill, a gap in my time. Most of the projects I worked on during this time I do not have anymore. They got unraveled and I recycled the yarn for something else. There is a bit of a learning curve
with knitting and each time I return to knitting it takes me a while to remember those skills. I took a break for a while until my second year at Western Washington University. My first year of college was completely online. It was stressful, but manageable because I was still within the comfort and support of home. The winter and spring of my second year was difficult, however. I was constantly anxious and unable to distract myself from it. I could only do schoolwork and felt guilty when I did anything besides schoolwork. To cope, and finally have something fun to do, I started knitting again.

Over spring break, I broke into that bin of surprises and found yarn from an old project, borrowed some metal circular knitting needles from my mother, the kind that clink together when knitting, and took it back with me into the dorms. I made a scarf. The difficult thing about scarves is that they always have to be longer than you think. I knit row upon row of the same stitches, again and again. Eventually, I did not even have to glance at the pattern, I automatically knew what to do. I knit row upon row until, eventually, I made a scarf that I still wear today. Having something that occupied my mind, and my hands allowed the time to pass faster. Having a usable and pretty finished project made me feel better about myself. Even when school was difficult and I was not doing well, I could knit something beautiful. I cannot say that knitting got rid of my anxiety or my depression (I had to change my relationship and approach to school to achieve that), but it did allow me to do something else for those hours besides do homework and feel bad for myself. With the leftover yarn from this scarf, I made cases for my glasses. Another useful thing that I still have today.

As I said, knitting did not solve all my problems. I spent that summer trying to recover from being burnt out. At the end of the summer, I started to make a blanket. This is the first project I worked on where I thought to myself, wow, I really know how to knit. I made it for the
apartment that I moved into the following fall. It took many hours to complete, and that was the point. I needed something to take over my waking hours so I could think a little less. When I am knitting a difficult pattern, I can hardly pay attention to a television show or podcast, let alone whatever other struggles I am going through. Knitting, working with my hands and mind, takes over. It is all encompassing. I am focusing on following the pattern, maintaining tension, and holding the needles correctly. I am there in the movement of the needles, in the unwinding of the yarn, in the making of something else instead of my own troubles.

One of the hardest classes I have taken was a class on the Anthropology of war and human rights. It is difficult confronting some of the worst acts of humanity. I learned about genocide, what happens during a genocide, what happens after, and how little the rest of humanity acts to try and stop it. This is the kind of material that sticks with you, and I had trouble escaping it. When I was home from work and class, trying to relax, it popped into my brain making me stressed-out and overwhelmed. There are always more readings and more documentaries waiting. There is always more research to be done. I felt this need to be well-informed, to understand what happened. I could have dedicated every extra minute of my life to this and still would not have read it all. Eventually, I began to think about the what ifs. What if this happened to my family? What if this happens here? It is easy for these sorts of thoughts to start snowballing.
In this class we talked a lot about taking care of ourselves. If a reading became too overwhelming, we set it down, took a break, and came back later. It was also ok not to pick up the reading again. We needed to know and respect our own limits. I had to learn this, and it was difficult. I also had to learn how to prevent myself from thinking about death and genocide all the time. This is when I decided to pick up a knitting project, a shawl for my mother. Like before, having something to occupy my mind and my hands allowed me to feel better. I could not think about genocide while I was focusing on a complicated pattern. My fiancé even noticed the benefits, commenting that knitting helped me calm down. Knitting is something I turn to again and again. There is always something new to learn and I am still mastering the basic skills. There is always another goal, another challenge, and it never has to be boring.

Why Knitting?

For myself and my family members, knitting is more than just looping yarn together. Knitting means finding resilience. It helps us relax when life is stressful. It helps us feel good
about ourselves when the rest of life is bringing us down. It is also a means of expressing our love for one another. We make things for those we love so they know that we appreciate them. For me, knitting became a way for me to connect with family member that I never had the chance to meet. When I knit, I can continue their legacy. When I wear the items they made or use the same patterns, that is one way for me to connect with them. Knitting has become so integral and important to my life. It helps me to be resilient and to feel good about myself when life is hard. Knitting is more than the movement of needles or the looping of yarn, it has become an integral part of my own identity and connection to my family members.
References


