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All I Know...

Mackenzie Stone

I'm staring at my closet, which seems to be mocking me at this point, and I have nothing to wear. Dorm room closets are by no means large, but there are way too many garments crammed into the stupid thing for me to have nothing to wear. No, the problem isn't the size of my wardrobe—the problem is my size. Or so I thought. At this point, the therapy, self-help books, and health magazines have trained me well enough to know that the problem is my mindset, not my body. My inner perfectionist has a tendency to fixate on whichever of my features looks flawed that day. For example, when I try on the navy blue t-shirt, I take one glance in the mirror and my mind immediately hones in on my less-than-tiny waistline; slanderous thoughts crowd my mind before I remind myself how important it is that I focus on the good rather than the bad. Nevertheless, I can't bear wearing the t-shirt in public, so I quickly pull it off and throw it in the hamper. It's the same story for the leggings. I'm brave enough to try on that day. Oh my God! My thighs look—wait—stay positive, I

must remember to stay positive. Still, another article of clothing goes in the hamper. At this point, the sun is streaming in and I've already wasted an hour of this rare, beautiful day in Syracuse. It doesn't take long to finally give in to the not-so-terrible leggings and put them back on, but I layer on an oversized sweater in order to cover my legs as much as I can. It's sad to think that this is the healthiest relationship I've had with my body in years.

In the beginning, it was never about the weight. I chose to eat healthier and to exercise for my health instead of losing weight. I was halfway through my freshman year of high school, and the chapter about nutrition in health class had me itching to make a lifestyle change. I started with a workout routine of training on the elliptical for ten minutes every morning. Next was my lunch routine. I began packing a lunch for school every day: half a turkey sandwich on wheat, a handful of baby carrots, some strawberries, and a Special K bar. Pretty soon, ten minutes on the elliptical became twenty, twenty minutes became thirty;



I began to fear finishing my half turkey sandwich on wheat, the handful of baby carrots became no more than three, and some strawberries turned into one or two. Breakfast and dinner promptly followed this pattern. My inner perfectionist latched on to the newfound control and my rationality was beginning to slip away from me. I was losing weight and I was enjoying it too much.

By the time the summer heat rolled around, I found myself deeply entrenched in what doctors call orthorexia nervosa—a personality disorder in which the subject forms an unhealthy fixation on clean eating and exercise, often to the point that their efforts to become healthy actually make the subject sicker. The very restricted meal plan I had established for myself was already starting to take its toll. My strict routine during the week ended on the weekends when I loosened my dieting leash and ate whatever I could, and as much of it as I could, because it felt like I was never going to be able to eat it again. To this day, it's too painful to call this habit what it really was: binging. It's like there's some sort of shame in it.

I told myself that eating so much of that “unclean” food on the weekend would make me sick of it for the rest of the week. Nevertheless, the guilt of what I ate would weigh me down every Monday. But I never threw anything up (because, in my mind, that would have meant I had a serious problem). I would try to stop the guilt by “undoing” what I had done on the weekend during the week. My “purging” manifested itself in the form of exercise. Most days I made time for at least three workouts, mostly cardio and about an hour each. I did everything I had the resources to do: running, elliptical training, biking, horseback riding. By the week's end, I would've

clocked in at about thirteen hours of exercise. If this wasn't bad enough, that summer was probably one of the busiest times of my life.

For some reason, I made a point to keep my schedule full, whether it was volunteering to be a counselor at the local Kids Kamp, taking online classes at Academy of Art University, or attending every horse show made available to me, there wasn't a whole lot of down time. I can't remember if I chose to keep so busy because I wanted to tailor my resume for college or just because I wanted something to keep my mind off of the fact that I wasn't eating what I wanted for five out of seven days. Whatever the reason, there's no denying that I was biting off a lot more than I could chew.

There was a week that became so hectic I could only manage to get one to two hours of sleep per night. But of course, I still managed to squeeze in my workouts. It was a lot. Four hours of working at the Kids Kamp followed by an evening, and much of the early morning hours, doing homework. I was trying to get as much of my homework done as possible before heading to Pebble Beach the following week to compete in a horse show because it was imperative that I got my work done for my fashion construction class; you can't exactly take a sewing machine on the road with you to an out-of-town horse show—especially when you barely have time to take a breath, let alone sew a skirt.

I remember one of the few moments I had to rest during that week; I was lying on the soft, green grass while my friends sat on nearby benches. I remember the sun being blindingly bright. The trees were our canopy, the shade our cooler. The children were inside of the church that hosted the camp, so we counselors had some time to ourselves. We were laughing about what little terrors some

Layout by Charlotte Oestrich. Photograph by Flickr user Leanda Xavian, CC BY-NC 2.0: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/xavian/2672532168>.



of those children were. One of the worst ones was in my group—he always managed to find a reason to throw a tantrum every ten minutes. The louder his screams became, the more I daydreamed of being at home in bed. I didn't want to tell my friends that I had only gotten an hour of sleep. I didn't want to tell them that I could've gotten two hours if only I had skipped my morning workout. These girls had been my best friends for about as long as I could remember, and I didn't want to tell them that I was consumed with homework, consumed with thoughts of self-loathing, consumed with the fear of gaining weight. Fatigue clouded my thoughts and weighed down my limbs, my body was aching, my stomach was growling, my mind was reeling, and I didn't want to tell them. I just wanted to lie on the fluffy green grass, close my tired eyes, and pretend that everything was fine.

I suppose there were a few instances where I initially acknowledged the fact that I wouldn't be able to maintain my torturous routine. I remember how during sophomore year I would almost dread coming home after school because of the immense pressure I put on myself to squeeze in an extra workout before starting homework. I remember the disruptive growling and pain of my hungry stomach while I did my World History reading assignments while feeling too guilt-ridden to even consider having a carrot or two as a pre-dinner snack. But by the time I began to realize that my "clean diet" and strict workouts were running my life, I had already lost the weight I wanted, and the idea of gaining it back was a hell of a lot more torturous than constantly thinking about food and exercise.

Friends and family began commenting on my appearance by the time I neared my low-

est weight. But my obsession poisoned my thoughts, almost allowing me to get a sick pleasure from people's worrying about my sudden weight loss.

"Have you lost weight?"

"When did you get so skinny-mini?"

My mind was diseased—diseased with the need to be skinny. A need to be skinny that stemmed from a need to be perfect. Everything else was in line: The grades, the friends, the sports...so my mind fixated on the one thing which seemed to stray from the society-driven image of idealism—my body. Unfortunately, my battle was not quite as private as I wanted it to be.

I remember the many identical discussions I'd have with my aunt and her partner, both of whom were also my riding trainers, about my "issues." The horse show would be coming to a close. Everyone running around, gathering the bridle, the saddle, the helmet they'd left here and there; the grooms reluctantly breaking down the fabric walls of beige and maroon that housed us at every show. My aunt would ask me to come to the tack room, the office, the dressing room—whichever one was still intact—"so we could talk." I'd step down from the cloud nine I was on after winning my last class, and I'd mentally prepare for an all-too-familiar end-of-show tradition. Their opening statements were always laced with embellished notes of compassion and sincerity.

"We're beginning to worry about you, Mackenzie..."

My aunt would go on to tell me that she knew what I was going through—that she too had a thicker body type at my age, as if that would make me feel better. Next, they laid into me with a lecture about how self-destructive my habits were becoming, "eating

too little” and “exercising too much.” I never spoke much during these talks. I cried a lot, occasionally I would fit in an “I’m fine” or an “It’s okay” between tears, but for the most part, I kept quiet. I would try to focus on the bustling voices of people packing up outside. I tried imagining myself anywhere but in that tent with those two somewhat well-meaning women. I just remember thinking how hypocritical they were being, telling me to change my “poor” eating habits while they were starting their new diet on Monday. I would insist that I wasn’t nearly as troubled as they thought and I’d promise them that I would eat more. They would tell me that they were doing this because they cared. We’d hug. My tears, which started as streams, would be rivers rolling down my cheeks. They’d leave the tent and go home feeling better about themselves. I’d try to clean myself up. I’d try to focus on the fact that I had a good show. I’d try not to let one bad moment ruin a great week. And although I do think that in many ways, yes, they did care, I’d wonder how people who claimed to care so much could make such a private issue such public knowledge. I swear, sometimes they told strangers about my “issues” just to make conversation, not caring enough to refrain from telling my barn friends, my parents, or my cousins about my struggles. As much as I denied it then, this was an incredibly difficult time in my life and the last thing I needed was everyone knowing about it.

At the end of the day, no amount of “talks,” “discussions,” “lectures,” or whatever you want to call them, was going to make me change. At the end of the day, you can’t just turn off the obsessive compulsive tendencies that come with a need to be perfect. I got into the mess that was my eating disorder because of my

need to control; therefore, I wasn’t going to get out of it unless I did it on my own.

It was halfway into my junior year. I just got so tired of it all. Tired of constantly worrying about what I was eating or how much I was exercising. I finally acknowledged the fact that diets and exercise had come to control my life, and I began to question whether it was worth it.

I remember a conversation between my mom and me, after my having lost control during a potluck at school that day. I still remember the bittersweet excitement that consumed me when I laid eyes on all of the scrumptious goodies that I couldn’t eat. My mind began racing with ways to rationalize indulging in this little feast and I was a goner. I didn’t normally eat that much on the weekdays. I was terrified that because my eating schedule was thrown off I’d immediately gain weight that week. I tried to make up for it with a forty-five minute run after school (this was after the forty-five-minute workout I completed that morning) but I knew I still hadn’t burned off everything from the feast. I couldn’t focus on homework, couldn’t watch TV, couldn’t sit still. I felt so guilty that I’d deviated from my routine. When my mom finally got home from work I mustered up the courage to tell her about the critical mistake I’d made. The conversation quickly turned into one about my eating habits, my exercise habits, my growing impatience and restlessness with it all. She knew that I’d become obsessed, but she also knew that I wouldn’t listen to anyone who told me I was wrong, that it was a private battle. When she told me she thought I could afford to gain some weight I was relieved. I was so sick of killing myself with the workouts, guilt, and pressure that I just needed an excuse to



put an end to it all. There was no more pressure to obsessively keep the weight off. This was probably the first step I made toward recovery.

I remember the lightness I felt in the weeks following that talk. As soon as I could, I went to the grocery store to buy all sorts of food—mostly healthy, but some indulgent. I ate a lot. But as a compromise, I ate mostly healthy foods: sweet potatoes, raisins, nuts. This high lasted for a couple of weeks, but it wasn't long before the honeymoon phase was over. Though my more dangerous habits began to fade that day halfway through junior year, my troubles were far from resolved.

Eating disorders are a tricky thing because they usually stem from a fear of gaining weight or becoming fat. Yet one of the main side effects of recovering from an eating disorder is gaining weight. Let's be honest, there aren't many women out there who actually enjoy watching the number on that scale climb higher and higher, but to the diseased mind of a girl with an eating disorder, this very superficial, very insignificant problem is one of the most painful things to go through. After all, she just spent weeks, months, or years trying to lose the weight and keep it off, and now it feels as though all of that mind-consuming, relentless work was for nothing. It wasn't long before I felt as though the weight gain was slipping out of my control, so I promptly turned to dieting.

This was another beast all by itself. Trying to find the balance between a diet and an eating disorder proved tricky. I began obsessing over new eating regimens and workout routines for myself. This time was different, though; my fear of gaining weight was now competing with my fear of falling back into

obsessive, orthorexic ways. For a few weeks, I remember making a point to bring nothing but a carrot for lunch to school. When that became too tiresome, I switched from just a carrot to a very small salad. That too got old, and so I tried counting calories. I went on just about every diet there is. And though these regimens don't sound any better than the habits I'd tried to abandon before, the difference was that I couldn't succeed on any of the diets I started. Partly because diets don't work and partly because the concern of falling back into my orthorexic habits was always lingering in the back of my mind.

For a long time, it was hard for me to face the fact that none of the diets I went on were working. Once I finally acknowledged this, I was able to step away from the yo-yo dieting. I found this wonderful book called *Intuitive Eating*. I learned how corrosive diets are—not just to your health but also to your mind. I learned that I could stop dieting and not worry about becoming “fat.” I learned a lot, but I didn't fully understand it all, at least not yet. I wasn't ready to give up diets completely, I wasn't ready to face the fact that my issue wasn't my weight. The perfectionist within me was not satisfied and I wasn't ready to realize that it never would be.

It was the beginning of my senior year, and I was on the first diet I'd been on since the start of summer.

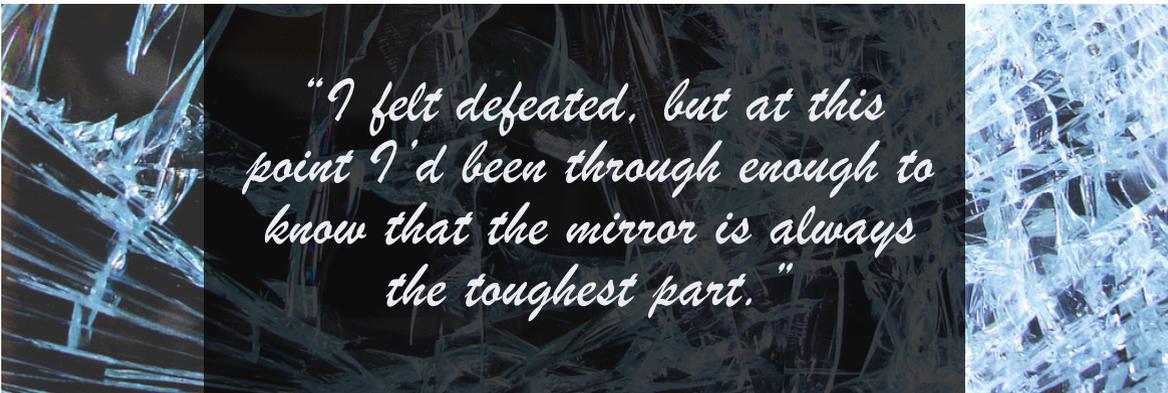
I remember getting ready the afternoon before the Homecoming game. Having just gotten home from school, I didn't have a lot of time. But I was nominated to the Homecoming Court and I was determined to look flawless. I prepped for weeks. I did my research and mapped out a strict diet plan. I scoured the Internet to find the perfect dress: not too



fancy, but not too casual. I made sure to stick to my workout routine religiously; I even threw in some extra workouts when I found the time. I was finally ready: hair was done, makeup done, dress on, sash in place. The first thing I noticed when I looked in the mirror was my torso—I *dieted two months for THAT?* Next were my legs—I *hope it's the tights making them look that thick!*

As I scanned my reflection, more imperfections found their way into my thoughts. I tried adding waist belts, I tried changing my tights, but it was too late. My mind was already a mess with anger and sadness and irra-

It took me a few more diets, and a few more meltdowns, to finally understand that the battle really was with my mind, not my body. When I did, I went back to the *Intuitive Eating* book, ready to give up on the meal plans, the workout regimens, and the perfectionism. I don't know that my incessant worrying and body-hate will ever be completely behind me. I would be lying if I said that I don't still occasionally consider dieting or that I don't occasionally consider going back to the intense regimen of my orthorexic past. But every time I do this, I remind myself of how far I've come. I remind myself that I am capable of eating a slice of cake with-



"I felt defeated, but at this point I'd been through enough to know that the mirror is always the toughest part."

tionality. Thank goodness my mom was there to assure me that I looked "adorable," at least in her eyes. I felt defeated, but at this point, I'd been through enough to know that the mirror is always the toughest part. At this point, I was better able to put things like this out of my mind, and I didn't let it ruin my night. Though I'd be lying if I said it didn't put a damper on it. The thing is, having been at a weight too low to maintain before, and having not yet understood the fact that skinnier isn't always better, even now, I have a hard time tolerating my figure, let alone liking it.

out feeling guilty or like I need to finish off a couple pieces more just in case I decide to go on a diet the next day. I remind myself that I'm strong enough to be living an entire country away from home, so I'm strong enough to resist the deceptive temptation of an eating disorder. I remind myself of what a blessed life I have, filled with wonderful friends and family. My orthorexia left me scarred, and I will likely be healing from it for a long time, if not the rest of my life. I don't know if I will ever have a healthy relationship with my body. All I know... is that I'm going to try.