

Skinny, and Yet

Camille Grady

Calorie: the energy needed to raise the temperature of one gram of water by one degree celsius. The average teenager needs anywhere from two-thousand to thirty-five hundred calories a day to maintain all working organs and their current weight. That's without any physical activity. Anything under that you start to lose weight and it's called a diet. Easy as pie.

What most people don't know are the problems with dieting and the dangers around it. I started dieting when I was five. After that, came the anorexia, and then the bulimia.

I was supposed to be playing with Barbies and instead I was telling my mom that I didn't like what she made for dinner and I wasn't going to eat it just because I was worried that three meals a day would make me fat.

I wish I could say that now, twelve years later, I know that three meals a day won't make me fat. I wish I could say that I know that

a net consumption of two-hundred and thirteen calories a day isn't going to make me fat. I wish I could say that I weigh one-hundred and nine pounds and know that that is not fat. But I can't say any of those things. And I know that in the average group of fifteen people, there are two of those who have some sort of aversion to eating. And there is nothing in the world that upsets me more than the thought of someone else going through this.

I was supposed to go to an intensive-care facility. I would be going six days a week for four hours a day until I got better, but the thought of it cutting into my running time, or my two-hours-a-day ballet schedule, made me cry. So I lied my way out of the appointments, told everyone I was getting better, promised I was trying. So, four months into my once-a-week therapy, I was lying, closed off, and saying that I was eating regularly when my nails were still blue and cheeks sunken in and I still couldn't remember the last time I had three meals a day.

That's kind of to be expected—for twelve years I've told myself over and over that I am overweight and not attractive and that the only way to be happy was if I was under one-hundred fifteen. Then one hundred-ten. Then one-hundred and five. Finally my therapist told me the only thing that has and still does make me cry thinking about: the predisposition for mental illnesses—especially eating disorders—is hereditary. The chance that my future daughter will have an eating disorder, if I don't get this under control, is about ninety percent. That means a ninety-percent chance that when I'm thirty or thirty-five and have a daughter who is around five, she's likely to see me skipping meals and something in her malleable brain will click, and so the cycle will start again.

So then the question is how do you stop it? I wish that going through all of this gives me jurisdiction to say what the fix is, but the reality is it's a problem that manifests itself from something so far away from vanity it's actually surprising: anorexia isn't actually about being skinny. It's about being in control, and bulimia isn't actually about losing weight through purging, it's about self loathing. I feel like I'm not in control of anything in my life, and I hate myself for it. I say that full of hesitation because I'm not actively think-

ing those things—it's more like subconscious mental loops that feel right but don't sound right. I'm not a ticking time bomb, like people seem to think. I'm not broken, just in need of help.

And that is probably where the whole problem of getting help and figuring out how to heal lies. There's a huge stigma around mental illness. Automatically someone who is mentally ill is labeled as crazy. The word "crazy" actually means deranged in a wild and aggressive way. And that's definitely not me. All I want—the only reason for writing this—is for people to be healthy and whole and happy with themselves.

We need to stop all of this feeling like going to therapy and being mentally ill is wrong. Recorded cases of anorexia have been around for over nine-hundred years and we're still shoving this stuff under a rug because we're embarrassed by it. We shouldn't let our embarrassment outweigh our fear because this is something to be terrified of. We need to stop thinking that we should hide things like this, because even though yes, it is a personal problem, it is not a private problem. You need a support group. You need people to talk to. You need help, and not enough people are getting it.

I know that a lot of people don't relate at all to what I'm saying, but think beyond yourself: think about how this could be your sibling, your best friend, your future child. And yes, boys too. There are over ten million men in the U.S. who have a documented eating disorder, which means that in your lifetime you've probably known a boy who's going through this. And the stigma around males with eating disorders is much worse than it is for females, since this is seen as such a vain, feminine problem. This isn't about image, this isn't about vanity, this isn't a teenage problem.

This is a serious, life-threatening mental illness. I didn't realize until almost too late that it can take away my independence, take away my future, and take away my life. It could take away yours too, just as easily as it can take mine.

This isn't a problem that people can grow out of without help. And so we need to get rid of the stigma around seeking help. Forget it completely. Just because you have a mental illness doesn't mean you're crazy, just because you need help doesn't mean you're weak. •