

There and Back Again- The Body Image Journey

Anna Ling

Eastern University Senior Thesis

I was flying. My body was telling me to stop, but my soul was moving forward. All I could feel was the sweat dripping down my face and my lungs burning as if they were on fire. I could feel the invisible wall pushing against me, trying to defeat me and get me to stop. My mind and my heart refused. I could hear the thumping of my feet going up and up the street, going up the long and steadily rising hill to the top. I heard nothing but my own feet thumping as it was the dead of winter. The spanses of fields around me were barren, lacking the tall crops of corn that were present in the autumn season. I could see for miles across the fields and saw white mounds of snow. The emptiness was beautiful and created a peaceful solitude for me to challenge my tired body. "I can do it, I've done it a thousand times," I told myself. I've run this route every week. A five-mile run through my neighborhood, through the beautiful farmlands that I call home. While my body was accustomed to the flat run of the treadmill, running outdoors challenged me as there were hills in every direction. My legs would scream at me to stop and the wall would keep pushing against me. The winter cold never stopped me, running through the winter just assured me that I would be looking great for summer. "Beach bodies are made in the winter," I'd always remind myself. It did add an extra layer of pain, though. Gasping for air in the 20-degree weather hurt my lungs as if shards of ice were making their way into my lungs and freezing my chest each time I took a breath. As I neared the top of the hill I considered walking, but as always, I resisted. Running is just a sport of will. A fight against your own conscience. I made up to the top and then started to fly. Speeding up and letting gravity take me. Going downhill brought me joy, as I had done it. I defeated the hill once again.

I have been running for eleven years, four of which were spent seriously running for the sake of competition and personal improvement. My running and my focus on dieting due to

critiques of my body have led me to develop body image issues, such as eating disorders and exercise addiction. Body image issues have been a lifelong struggle for me.

According to F.E.A.S.T., Families Empowered And Supporting Treatment For Eating Disorders, 9% of people worldwide suffer from eating disorders. 1% suffer from anorexia nervosa, 2-3% from bulimia nervosa, 2-3% from binge eating disorders, and 4% suffer from other specified eating disorders. An even more shocking statistic, according to NEDA, National Eating Disorders Association, is that thirty million Americans deal with eating disorders. All of these statistics most likely are even higher, but unfortunately, many people suffer from these disorders in silence and never reach out for help.

Continued studies into the origins of eating disorders have shown that they may possibly be hereditary. A scientific journal entry written by Dr. Wade Berrettini analyzes genetic studies and links to eating disorders being at least partially hereditary. AN and BN, in this entry, stand for Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa.

Findings from the largest and most systematic studies suggest a 7 to 12-fold increase in the prevalence of AN and BN in relatives of eating disordered probands. This clustering of eating disorders in families of AN and BN individuals provides strong support for familial transmission of both disorders.

The rest of the article suggests that, at times, a child and parent's environmental surroundings may contribute to eating disorders rather than genetics, however, there is strong evidence that genetics at least partially contributes to these disorders.

These disorders look different from person to person. The widely held stereotype is that really skinny girls are the ones who have eating disorders, however, this is not entirely the case for many people. A thin-looking girl could be perfectly healthy with no trace of disordered

eating while a very overweight man could be fighting with a lifelong eating disorder diagnosis. Eating disorders can oftentimes be unseen battles, and the stereotypes over what eating disorders look like must come to an end. When I developed eating disorders at a very young age it was a hidden struggle. I was too young to understand what eating disorders were and would purge the food I ate in secret in the bathroom, finding no reason to share these body concerns with my family.

I went through puberty fairly young for a girl. I started developing breasts at nine years old and started menstruating by eleven. Needless to say, my body was changing quickly and everything seems out of proportion when one is going through puberty. As a child, though, I did not really understand anything that was happening to my body, I was too focused on playing outside and being a kid.

I remember the day all too well, spending the day at my grandparents' house, sitting on the couch with my grandmother, and looking through photo albums. I spent a lot of time at my grandparents' house, as I was only nine or ten years old, too young to be trusted at home alone.

My grandmother looked me over, up and down, for a long while. I could feel her eyes looking at me and I was just starting to feel uncomfortable when she said, "You are becoming a little bit fat." This caught me off guard. No one had ever said something like that to me. I never weighed myself or even looked at the fat on my body before. "I used to just think it was extra baby fat, but you really have filled out a lot. But that's okay, your sister also started to look kind of chubby at your age, too." These words made tears come to my eyes and heat to start radiating in my cheeks. I suddenly became very aware of the rolls on my stomach covering the waistband of my pants. I choked back the tears so that I wouldn't show how much these words hurt me. I

will never forget this moment. It was the moment where I went from being an ignorant child to seeing myself as a fat person in a child's body.

After that day I started noticing just how "big" I was. Granted, I had a couple of belly rolls, but I was in no way "chubby" or "fat" as my grandmother was suggesting. I was taller and definitely curvier than the other girls at school since I started "becoming a woman" sooner. This was only natural. However, it made me very insecure, as the other girls looked so cute and tiny while I felt ginormous next to them. Everyone at church would comment on how I was "such a big girl," which of course was meant to be endearing as I was still a child, however, it further made me notice that I was bigger than the other girls around me who were my age.

As a girl of nine or ten, my phobia over having belly rolls and fat-looking thighs started to peak when I was told by a friend that some people make themselves throw up after they eat so that they do not process the food. Throwing up was scary for me, as it reminded me of being sick, however, I wouldn't let anything stop me from gaining the cute, small body that I desired. "If only I could look like the other girls..." was the constant thought going through my mind. There I was, only a child, shoving my fingers down my throat after every meal and regurgitating the contents of my stomach. While most kids were eating whatever they wanted without a second thought, I was concerned about my ever-changing body and how throwing up was the only way that my thighs wouldn't look so big.

This process of eating and throwing up lasted for less than a year, as my throat became raw from the stomach acid and my body was not becoming any smaller. My parents started noticing me leaving the dinner table to use the bathroom every night and my mom approached me, asking if I was throwing up my food. I never wanted to tell my parents, as this was a secret process for me in order to make myself skinny. My mom told me that I needed to stop doing this

and was monitoring me for a couple of months after this discovery, however, it was my own choice to quit purging my food. I could have continued in secret again, but I finally realized that throwing up was not making me any shorter or making my breasts and leg hair disappear. I could not reverse puberty, it was there to stay.

As an elementary-aged girl, it did not occur to me that other girls my age could be feeling the same way as myself. My friend who had suggested the idea of regurgitating all of my food was much smaller than me and was not hitting puberty yet. She would have no reason to have an eating disorder, nor would any of the girls in my class. I was the biggest girl I knew. As odd as it may have seemed, though, developing these disorders is not uncommon for children going through puberty. Dr. Kelly L. Klump, a professor at Michigan State University states in her scientific journal entry,

Puberty is one of the most frequently discussed risk periods for the development of eating disorders. Prevailing theories propose environmentally mediated sources of risk arising from the psychosocial effects (e.g., increased body dissatisfaction, decreased self-esteem) of pubertal development in girls. Moreover, recent research highlights the potential role of ovarian hormones in phenotypic and genetic risk for eating disorders during puberty. (Klump, "Puberty as a Critical Risk").

Klump's journal entry examines scientific records and observations of children going through puberty and its relationship to eating disorders, and it concludes that there is a high risk of body dissatisfaction and eating disorders in girls going through puberty. It concludes that there are stronger evidence and ties between girls going through puberty and increasing the risk of bulimia than anorexia, however, both are increased in risk.

Girls who are at more advanced stages of pubertal development have increased rates of both disorders, even after controlling for age. Likewise, with few exceptions, a higher percentage of early maturers are among those diagnosed with BN as compared to women without eating disorders.

BN, in this article, stands for 'bulimia nervosa.' There is less correlation seen for boys going through puberty and eating disorders. The most interesting part of this entry was Klump's note that "Early maturers are thought to be at particular risk given that they experience these physical changes earlier than their peers and may therefore experience even more body dissatisfaction than their developmentally on-time counterparts." Developing eating disorders must be addressed as soon as possible by a doctor or through counseling. While my mom chose not to send me to counseling at this point in my life, as she had bad experiences with psychiatrists in the past, it is recommended that people of any age struggling with an eating disorder receive medical attention.

The fact that I knew something I was doing was wrong but keeping it a secret from my parents shows the stigma around eating disorders. Society, more often than not, only addresses body image issues in women who are extremely thin. A lot of eating disorders go unnoticed in people who are overweight. It is hard for society to get rid of this stereotypical view and address these body image issues with people of every shape and size.

An example of this comes from an article I read in *The Washington Post* which was written by Amanda Sriver and follows the story of Alysse Dalessandro, a woman who lived with eating disorders into her adulthood but did not realize it. Dalessandro had been overweight as a child and was enrolled in a Weight Watchers program. She would starve herself and be congratulated and rewarded for losing weight, so she grew up believing that starving led to

gratification. This whole experience led to binge eating disorders that went under the radar because Delassandro was led to believe by her Weight Watchers program and by the media that eating disorders were something that skinny women had. It never occurred to her that someone of her size would have an eating disorder. “For fat folks, the narrative to lose weight is not an uncommon one. But during National Eating Disorder Awareness Week – which runs from Feb. 26 to March 4 – we rarely see coverage that centers around folks who are suffering in silence” (Scriver, “Fat People Have Eating Disorders, too”).

After my first experience with eating disorders, I became more aware of these stereotypes but still wanted to look skinny, seeing the unrealistic standards of beauty shown by celebrities in tiny bathing suits. As I got older I kept finding myself looking at the girls around me and comparing myself. The temptation would consistently return to take drastic measures in order to achieve the body of my dreams.

My body image issues were still a prominent source of pain in my life, but the way I coped with it changed. My family is full of runners. On my dad’s side of the family, my grandfather was a runner, my dad was a runner, his brother was a runner, and his sister was and still is a runner. My cousin, who is a couple of years older than I am, started running, too and I never stopped hearing about how great he was doing and how many times he placed in races. In middle school, I had the opportunity to join my school’s cross country team. I was never involved in sports in elementary school because sports never seemed very appealing. School nights and weekends dedicated to competition and exercise. In my middle school mind, this sounded like a living hell.

When I became aware of cross country, I felt the need to become a part of the team. Running was very important to a lot of people in my family and I had this magical running gene

within me. I never considered the fact that I had little to no stamina. I did not know the first thing about running and had no idea that it took a lot of time and effort to become a successful runner. I especially did not consider that by joining a team I would have to compete against other runners.

Cross country is a fall sport. The season starts before school is even in session. The first day of practice was in late August and it felt strange showing up to school during summer break. My dad drove up to the parking lot and I saw all of the students in their shorts and t-shirts. It was very new and very intimidating. On this first day of practice, I and the other middle schoolers on the team were asked to run a mile. Just one mile around the school building. That was our task for the day and it sounded so easy. However, I was quickly proven wrong.

Never having run in my life I huffed and puffed my way around this building. The sweat was soaking through my gym clothes and my legs were burning. The heat of the August day enveloped me. The dry ground below me felt solid beneath my feet. I would see bees flying from clover flower to clover flower in the grass. The hot summer day was beautiful but exhausted me quickly. I needed to stop and walk. "You can do it! You're doing great! Keep running, only four more laps!" My cross country coach shouted these encouragements at me. "No, I cannot, I need to stop," I told myself. Having only ran maybe a quarter of a mile I stopped and walked. I was sneaky about it and walked only when I saw the coach disappear around the other side of the building. I couldn't let him see my shame, even though he would eventually realize when I did not catch up to him. The quickened footsteps behind me also suddenly slowed down. I turned and a couple of other stragglers from behind met eyes with me, quickly glancing away with a similar shame.

This first day of cross country practice was a foretaste of the rest of the season. My running did not improve much. While at the time I did not realize why I understand now that I was only running three days a week at practice for about an hour. A good portion of the time was spent warming up and cooling down. The other portion was spent running until the coach disappeared into the distance and then walking. The hot summer days turned into cool, crisp afternoons. When the last class of the day ended at 3:00, I would quickly change into my shorts and t-shirt and walk outside into the fresh air. The warm air and cool breeze refreshed me after a long day in the stuffy classrooms. The leaves were shriveling up and falling off of trees. Every day there were fewer leaves left on the branches. The bees started disappearing and were replaced by locusts, which would become startled by my encroaching footsteps and hop around in the grass.

I was frustrated that I was not improving, but without practicing consistently throughout the week and pushing oneself, a runner cannot build the amount of stamina needed to run effectively and competitively. Building stamina requires a certain level of discomfort, and my middle school self did not like this. Despite this embarrassment, I continued to join the team every year. I needed to live up to the standard of my family.

I had a revelation in late high school. It was the summer before I started the eleventh grade. My family would always go to the beach with my grandparents and my aunt and uncle. We would spend a good two weeks at the rented beach house. My aunt, being a serious runner, would get up every day and go for a run outside. "Let's go run together! New Jersey is so flat and easy, we could run along the beach," she told me. It felt like such an honor to be invited to run with her, however, it was a little nerve-racking since she was an actual runner. We slowly trotted along the waterline. The sand made it a little difficult as with each step my feet would

sink in to hold me back. Within five minutes I was huffing and puffing and had to stop. “You are doing so well,” my aunt said with almost an element of sympathy. This was a complete lie, and the familiar feeling of embarrassment crept into my face.

After this infamous run with my aunt, I gained a newfound seriousness about my running. Shortly after coming home from the beach, I started trying to run on the treadmill in the basement. I did this almost every day and kept pushing myself. I saw a great amount of improvement when August came around. I went to the first day of cross country a little more confidently. The chunky body that I used to see in the mirror became a little slimmer. This pleased me a lot. Even the coach commented on how well I was doing. “What was your 5k time from last year?” “Thirty-three minutes,” I said solemnly. “And what is it now?” “Twenty-two minutes,” I said, looking over at him to see if he would believe me. “That is incredible! I am so impressed!” he exclaimed. He seemed so proud of me and it gave me the sense of affirmation needed to keep me running on the treadmill every night.

I was never very fast and I was used to being the ball and chain of the team. The most flattering moment was during track and field practice in the spring, the cold winter thawing out into warm afternoons once again. I loved practicing in fall and spring because I was neither feeling baked by the sun nor feeling like a block of ice breathing in shards of ice. During relay races, where one runner sprints and passes the baton off to the next runner, groups always dreaded having me as a part of their team. Track and field is all about speed and having the quickest time. Relay races require four runners. If anyone runner is slow, it adds extra time to the stopwatch and ruins it for the other three. On this day, the team split into groups of four. The coach assigned “team captains” who could pick who they wanted on their practice relay team. Unsurprisingly, I was the last to be picked and was put with a team. I saw the team captain’s

face droop into a frown and felt a feeling of sorrow deep within my stomach. However, battling this sorrow was a feeling of excitement. I could finally prove that I was an active part of the team.

During that practice race, I heard the boys I was running with exclaim “Wow, our time was so good! Anna is so fast now!” While I do not think that they meant for me to hear this, I knew that I was a burden in the past, and hearing this made me so proud. I had finally proven myself. I was no longer going to be the last girl to be picked. Now I was valuable, a force to be reckoned with, and the desired runner.

All of this recognition as the girl who went from being the straggler on the team and the last runner to finish every race to being an asset for the team gave me pride. I strived to be even better and even faster. If I was not running with the team that day, I would run on the treadmill at home. “Why don’t we start training you to do a half marathon this spring,” one of my coaches asked me senior year of high school. I was shocked. This was not asked of any other runner on the team. This was an assignment given only to me. I felt like a prized runner, that this coach thought so highly of me that he wanted to personally train and see me run a half marathon.

Each week he gave me a different running assignment for the days we did not have practice. Over time I was up to running seven miles at a time on the treadmill at a high speed. “You need to eat more, you are way too thin,” my mom would tell me. I was underweight, but I loved it. I cried one day as I stepped on the scale. I was finally skinny. It was tears of joy. In a way, I loved the fact that people were concerned about how thin I was because it meant that I had succeeded. I fed off of the shock value. I could see all of my ribs and when I would stretch my arms back I could even faintly see the skin between my ribs move up and down where my heart

was beating. In my eyes it was beautiful. I had to start buying kid's clothing because I was now too small even for the junior's section.

All of this kept fueling me to run more and more on the treadmill. Walking across the front to receive my diploma and shake my principal's hand on my graduation day became a haunting memory for my mother. To this day when she thinks back to my high school graduation, all that comes to mind is that I looked concave. "You almost disappeared when you turned sideways. Your stomach dipped in. You were so skinny that you looked concave," she says. This did not stop me, it excited me. I was someone to be envied because I was skinny. I was a source of shock and I would never stop running every day. Every single day without skipping a beat. I did this up until I left for college in August of 2017. I was addicted to exercise.

Food, being one of my greatest joys in life, slowly became a fear as I got lost in the spiraling hole of my exercise addiction. Running was always on my mind and anything that got in the way gave me anxiety, like my friends wanting to hang out after school or my family wanting to go out to eat. Any social situation that took away from my running time and that inevitably involved food terrified me. I lost all interest in social situations.

I used to get excited to go out to eat with my friends and family, but the thought of calories terrified me. "Let's go get dinner together tonight," my friend would text. "Is it too soon to lie and tell her that I am busy again?" I asked myself. I was the master of excuses. I gave so many in an effort to avoid hanging out that I could only imagine what my friend was thinking. She definitely knew that I was avoiding her. "I'm not going to lose my best friend over running. I am skinny enough." I gained the courage to text back that I was free.

I got home from school and felt sadness overwhelm me as I looked at the basement door which led down to my treadmill. “Do I have time for a quick run?” I asked myself. I felt tears fill my eyes as I knew that the answer was no. I had time to get changed for my dinner date and that was it. I looked longingly at my sneakers as I got dressed and went to put on my shoes. Sadness and longing overtook my entire body and I felt irritable. It took everything within me not to quickly cancel on her.

We were sat at the restaurant. As I looked down longingly at the menu I could hear the quick footsteps of the waitress approaching our table. I felt my stomach drop once more. My friend ordered the most delicious-sounding pasta dish. My cheeks flushed and my hands started sweating as I ordered the side salad. I couldn’t look up or make eye contact, I was too embarrassed with myself. As the waitress left with our order I could feel the look coming from across the table. I anxiously anticipated the questioning, but the questions never came. How I longed to be home in the safety of the basement. The treadmill never judges me. The treadmill never tells. “Why can’t I act like a normal human being and forget about the fat on my mid-section? I should have come up with an excuse when I had the chance. I don’t deserve to be out here in public. In fact, I don’t even deserve to have a single friend,” I told myself. During these sadly frequent socially uncomfortable situations, I was my own harshest critic. When I got home, all sad and embarrassed, I trudged down to the basement. I would run whether I felt like it or not.

Anorexia Athletica, otherwise known as exercise addiction, is a little-known sector of body image issues. The name is self-explanatory, but it is not talked about enough. While eating disorders affect a lot of people and are very serious, exercise addiction does not get as much limelight and does not come to mind as a possible issue nearly enough. Exercise addiction is

considered to be a behavioral disorder. GoodTherapy, a source for finding therapists and rehab facilities, defines exercise addiction through warning signs.

Exercise addiction may be implicated when:

1. Exercise no longer improves one's quality of life, but on the contrary, causes problems in a person's life in physical and psychological forms. Under these circumstances, an exercise habit is maladaptive.
2. A person exercises excessively, perhaps several hours each day, without giving the body a chance to rest. In exercise addiction, these defining criteria are often accompanied by withdrawal symptoms, which are present whenever a person, for any reason, cannot exercise. These withdrawal symptoms may include irritability, guilt, depression, and anxiety.

Other warning signs of exercise addiction are feeling irritable when one does not exercise, exercising even when one is injured or sick, allowing it to affect relationships and social events, choosing to exercise rather than socialize on a regular basis, losing interest in other activities, and many other symptoms that are still being found.

One of the risks of having exercise addiction is becoming injured, especially when being addicted to high-impact workouts like running. Running is very hard on one's joints. The Physics Factbook- an encyclopedia of scientific essays recaps a study done by Oregon State University on the pressure put on the feet of a runner.

The Saucony shoe company reports that a force of up to three times body weight can be exerted on the human foot while running. For example, a person weighing 670 newtons (150 pounds) can experience forces of up to seven times their body weight or 4700 newtons (1000 pounds). The greatest force is experienced on the forefoot phase of a stride when the whole width of the forefoot absorbs the surge of power that propels the foot off the ground.

This kind of pressure on one's feet and joints can quickly cause injury if one runs excessively or does any kind of exercise too frequently. Overuse injuries to bones, tendons, and ligaments can be incredibly painful, will take time and rest to heal, and require one to take a break from exercise or exercise lightly. Examples of overuse injuries include shin splints, stress fractures, tearing of the anterior cruciate ligament (acl), and the micro-tearing or tearing of other ligaments and tendons.

In order to prevent these overuse injuries, it helps to warm up before exercising, take break days to let the muscles heal, increase the amount of exercise gradually, and make sure not to push through any pain. During this time period in my life, I pushed through this pain. My shins were hurting often, as I had gone from running three or four miles a day to running seven while I was training for the half marathon. I also faced a micro-tear in my iliotibial band, which was incredibly painful.

The iliotibial band is a tendon that runs along the outside of the leg. The band starts at the top of the pelvic bone to the bottom of the knee. This band, since it both supports the rotation of the hips and stabilizes the knee joint, is in use every single time a person takes a step. With every step, the iliotibial band moves along with the knee, making it very susceptible to injury. When this band is overly used it can become inflamed and hurt. Since I was running a

lot, I noticed a sharp pain on the side of the knee. At the time I was unfamiliar with the iliotibial band, but with a lot of research (and no medical attention) my coach and I decided that this was the injury and was probably due to overuse. With every step, I felt a sore pulling.

The blur of soccer fields that normally whizzed by as I ran became slower and seemingly endless. The clovers were green. I counted the leaves, trying to find four, but only finding clovers of three. “Maybe if I could spot a four-leaf clover my pain will go away,” I thought to myself. The vibrant purple clover flower broke up the sheet of green. The beautiful flowers hosted bees that lazily bounced from flower to flower. It was a slow flight that made me sleepy. I heard the solid kick of a ball. I looked up to see the soccer team, all sweaty in their shorts and t-shirts run after the ball that had just been kicked towards the goal. The faint yelling of the team snapped me out of my clover-filled daze. As I slowly jogged down the pavement I was nearing the team, their field being next to the path. I avoided looking up, trying to get by as quickly as possible in order to regain my solitude. The stretch of green fields, made plush and vibrant from the sun and rain of springtime rolled on and on as I hobbled along. There were shining drops of rain on the tips of the grass, quickly drying up by the vibrant rays of the sun. With every step, I had pain in the side of my knee. Instead of taking the much-needed break to allow this to heal, I kept running. I am fortunate that both of these injuries disappeared on their own, but continuing to exercise through pain can lead to even worse injuries- ones that will prevent athletes from exercising for even longer periods of time.

The Department of Health and Human Services provides guidelines for the proper amount of exercise. It is recommended that adults have at least 150 minutes of moderate exercises, such as a walk, or 75 minutes of vigorous exercise, such as running. Some exercises can go from being moderate to being vigorous based on the speed or resistance being used.

Adults are encouraged to alternate moderate with vigorous exercises and to spread these exercises over the course of the week. Weight training is recommended for only two days per week. While these are suggested guidelines, each person has individual exercise needs. Some people need more while others need less. The amount and types of activity needed also differentiates from person to person based on if they are trying to gain, maintain, or lose weight.

During this same time period, when I was aged sixteen to eighteen, I also became hypersensitive towards what I was eating. Since I was running both vigorously and obsessively every single day, my body needed more calories. I was underweight, so I needed calories to make up for those being lost through exercise and so that I could gain some weight. Since I was obsessed with being skinny, I consumed far less than the required amount of calories. I became obsessed with “clean eating.” For me, clean eating meant cutting out all white flour, limiting both natural and added sugars, avoiding oil, and avoiding fat. I would eat a lot of vegetables, a limited amount of fruit, almonds, and lean proteins. I was obsessed with anything low-calorie. Potatoes and eggs became my favorite foods as they were filling and very low calorie.

While I was committed to counting calories and purposefully eating 1000 calories or less a day, I also had times when I would binge eat. I have a deep love for food. I love watching cooking shows and cooking new types of foods with my mom- foods ranging from Hispanic, Chinese, Thai, Italian, etc. The smells and flavors of foods excite me. Some nights I would cry because I was craving certain foods, more often than not unhealthy foods. I would find myself caving into my temptations once or twice a week. I would find myself in the kitchen late at night eating entire bags of chips or feasting on multiple full-sized candy bars. I would feel depressed afterward, immediately seeing myself as fat. My stomach would go from flat to slightly bloated.

When I sat down I would notice a single roll of fat. Because of this, I tried as hard as I could to avoid these nights. I knew that I was not only addicted to exercise but also anorexic.

My anorexia stemmed not only from feeling fat as a child but also from seeing unrealistic body shapes in magazines and on social media. These girls were tall and incredibly skinny- not a belly roll in sight. I wanted to look like this, and so did all of my friends. I felt intimidated by those girls around me who were skinnier and achieving this body shape. After losing a lot of weight from running and eating so little, my confidence was build but I felt the need to become even skinnier. During my senior year of high school, I could either conduct a science experiment or write a senior thesis paper. This would be done over the course of the year. While the majority of my classmates chose to conduct an experiment, I knew my strong suit was writing and I knew exactly what I would write about. Every night was spent researching the best exercises to decrease belly fat or finding extreme diets. Researching and writing about fad diets would be so much fun. I ended up spending my whole year researching extreme diets for forty-five minutes every day and becoming inspired. As an added layer to this project, I even tested these diets myself. My anorexia was fueled even further by having a chunk of my day set aside for dreaming about being even skinnier.

Not only did I feel encouraged by my senior thesis, but I was excelling in Anatomy and Physiology. The seniors were given the option of taking this class. Of course, always being the odd one out, I chose to take this class. I dreamed of becoming a physical therapist and going to college to achieve this dream. Every day I would identify bones and all of their indentations and protrusions. I would look at pictures of muscles and how they all connected throughout the body. Every day I would look at the human body. The human body is truly amazing and complex. It is able to do so much. The human body is so easily transformed through exercise.

Muscles can be increased and body fat can be decreased, however, its appearance has its limitations.

While taking Anatomy and Physiology, I became aware of bone density and “frame size.” A human’s skeletal frame is affected by the girth of bones and bone density. These factor into how someone looks and how much they weigh. A study done by the University of Washington shows that people who are black tend to have the highest bone density, white and Hispanic people are very close in their percentages and make up the people groups with the second to highest bone density, and the race with the lowest average bone density is Asian. The most popular way of roughly estimating one’s body frame size is by wrapping the thumb and index finger around one’s wrist. If the thumb and index finger overlap then that means the frame size is considered small. If they touch then this signifies a medium frame. If they do not touch then the frame size is large. The realization that there are factors I cannot control due to my genetics was terrifying. My fingers just barely touched and whenever I looked in the mirror I saw what appeared to be a girl with thick bones. I was jealous of the girls on Instagram (who appeared to be white like myself) with seemingly small frames. I knew in my heart that I would never be able to achieve this thanks to my stocky, western European ancestors.

Two classes a day were spent worrying about my appearance. My senior thesis studied liquid diets, vegan diets, and Mediterranean diets. All three of these, at the time, were popular on social media platforms. While I was testing all of these out, the most detrimental to my health was the liquid diet.

The liquid diet can take many forms. Beyonce’s lemonade diet was brought to society’s attention when she lost twenty pounds within seven to ten days. The “lemonade” is a mixture of lemon juice, maple syrup, cayenne pepper, and water. This was supposedly all she consumed

day in and day out for a little more than a week. Many people have tried this diet and have failed, including myself. My parents were very unhappy with me depriving myself of food and I was starving by day two. This diet, while Beyonce made it seem so easy and doable, was a failure. How Beyonce managed to have the willpower not to eat, I will never know.

While juice diets were also a trend, I did not have a juicer at home, so I could not extract juice from stalks of celery like the Kardashians. Instead, I consumed nothing but smoothies for a couple of days. Juice was trendier than smoothies at the time, but I had to work with the resources that were available. My smoothies consisted of a banana, frozen fruit, and a cup of yogurt. That was it. The smoothies were a lot more filling than the “lemonade,” but I still struggled with hunger. When I would wake up in the mornings my stomach looked very flat, but I was exhausted. Getting out of bed was painful and my morning routine felt robotic, as my brain refused to be engaged in what I was doing. By the time I got to school, I would be a little more awake, but I would quickly become hungry even though I would drink a smoothie beforehand. My stomach would rumble in my classes. It was very embarrassing if the class was silently working. I would excuse myself to go to the bathroom so that I could let my stomach rumble without an audience. My head would start hurting after a while, my hunger continued and continued. By the end of the day, the room would spin around me as I stood up out of my seat. I would stand there awkwardly for a couple of seconds, trying to stop the room from spinning so I wouldn’t fall over in my effort to walk out of the classroom. It was both physically and mentally draining.

Fruit and yogurt provide little protein and fiber, as well as a lack of vitamins provided by vegetables. I was depriving myself of nutrition and calories, especially with my intense running schedule. It is no wonder that I was becoming way too hungry, to the point of nausea and

becoming light-headed, on this diet. I quit within a couple of days. I was disappointed in myself for not being able to succeed at these liquid diets.

By the end of the year, I was so skinny that I was very underweight and could see all of my ribs, but my eating and running habits were soon forced to change. When I left for my first semester of college I was nervous. Would I be able to run every day? How will I overcome my fear of eating in front of people? While these were worries all summer, I moved on to campus and I was comforted by the gym being so close to my dorm building. I was going to a college where there was a separate gym for students on sports teams and another gym for people like me who liked to work out for fun. I was able to go to the gym and run most days and felt comfortable being surrounded by people in my same situation. There were a lot of food options and every day I could take food back to my dorm room and eat the small amount that I allotted myself.

All of this comfort came to an end when I transferred to Eastern University. I faced the same fears but was met with less comfort. There was only one gym, which was crowded and always full of sports teams. I was no longer working out with others like myself but now with an audience of athletes. I felt so nervous and judged every day and started running less and less. The food options at Eastern were also less diverse and I was left with Sodexo food that would always give me fried options and food poisoning. My pants started getting tighter and tighter and I watched as I rapidly gained weight throughout that semester. It was exactly one year after I started college and I was now obese. Running was a distant memory and I caved into the unhealthy options that Eastern offered me.

The hill kept climbing up. I tried to keep my breathing steady and under control, as there were so many eyes watching me. I felt a bead of sweat start to slide down my face. Even if I

was not panting, everyone could tell that I was having trouble making it up the hill. I could see the building up in the distance. I was so close to class but so far. My legs were burning and I was gasping for air. How did I become like this? Blood rushed to my cheeks as I felt a wave of embarrassment overtake me. One would think that this same, daily struggle up the hill would start to improve. I hiked my way up it multiple times a day. People were passing me because I was going too slow and everyone I saw was having casual conversations and walking up this hill effortlessly. When I finally reached the top I rushed my way to the bathroom. I needed to breathe and wipe off my face before class. I needed to hide myself from the shame.

While I may have felt like the only one facing obesity in college and feeling embarrassed, there are a shocking amount of college students who also face being overweight or obese. According to Statista, in 2019 31.3% of college students in the U.S. were overweight. 6.4% were obese. While this, of course, is a rough estimate based on available resources, it is a shocking amount. The main culprits for weight gain are lack of exercise, unhealthy snacks, stress, and fattening cafeteria food.

I was fully aware of the bad choices that I was starting to make. They were choices based on my depression over the amount of weight I had gained and I felt hopeless. I started ignoring the fact that I was getting no exercise and that I was binge eating very unhealthy foods. North Shore University Health System suggests ways that college students can avoid the dreaded “freshman 15.” In my case, it was the freshman 85. North Shore suggests that students remember to eat so that they do not become overly hungry, which leads to overeating, drinking more water than liquids with sugar and calories, using the college’s gym, having friends join in recreational activities to make them more exciting, managing stress, eating in moderation, and getting enough sleep.

Every day that I was obese I felt disappointed in myself. I felt disgusting. My depression was greater than ever and I would stay up some nights looking back on pictures of myself in high school. I was mad at Eastern for being inconsiderate of people who were not on sports teams but wanted to use the gym and I was mad that they didn't have good food. I could have acted on this issue sooner but I was so depressed that I could not find the strength to get back on my feet. I was living with a mentality of giving up. I was already fat, so why shouldn't I just eat whatever I liked. These fried options seemed more appealing. Every once in a while I would tell myself that I would bring my own food and eat healthier, but I was so used to eating a massive amount of food that I never felt full. I tried going to the gym again, but I felt the same discomfort at an even greater intensity. At least I was physically fit a year ago. Now I was fat, sweaty, and sad.

The warm sunshine enveloped my body while the cool breeze gave me a chill. The smell of freshly cut grass overwhelmed me and made me smile. Summer was just around the corner. As I walked up the street I was wary of the bees floating around in the air, surrounding the mailboxes. The larger and scarier bees liked to hollow out holes in the wooden mailbox posts while the smaller bumblebees would fly from flower to flower. I was careful to avoid them and set my sight on road ahead. This was the same road I used to run up. I could see a little bit of heat coming off of the street. I looked out over the field. There used to be fields on either side, but now a new development was being built. My beloved rolling hills and fields were becoming smaller. I lose myself to the warm, spring weather. It refreshes my soul and reminds me of what I am working towards.

When most people look back on the Covid-19 pandemic which began back in March of 2020, they look back on it in disdain and remember a host of bad memories. When I look back on March of 2020, I feel happy. This may sound wrong, but it was the month that changed my

life. When I was sent home from college, I was disappointed. I would be stuck at home for the rest of the semester with my family and I would be unable to go anywhere to break up the monotonous days. It certainly began like this for a couple of weeks. I was the heaviest I had ever been and growing even more depressed than I was at college. I had a lot more time to reflect on my sadness and disappointment in myself. I was prepared for nights of tears and memories.

“What am I doing?” This was a question I asked myself very often. “Why am I allowing myself to live like this- living to slowly kill myself?” These questions were so frequent but always came to no avail. I tried so many times to change my ways and lose weight, but I always have to go back to college and reverse all of my efforts. However, one morning these questions resonated more than they ever had. Here I am at home, not going anywhere in the foreseeable future, with all the resources I need to lose weight.

While I cannot remember the exact date of this awakening, it was towards the end of March 2020. This was the day when I set goals- goals that I would maintain for months to come. I started watching what I ate. My family makes a lot of vegan foods, with little to no fat, very little carbohydrates, and only natural sugars. It is the healthiest diet one could find. I always looked down on these foods because I had given up on myself and was used to my processed meals. I started embracing these fresh foods and cut out all of the processed foods in my diet. I watched my portion sizes. As far as exercise goes, I started taking baby steps towards running. I started by jogging and mostly walking. Over the course of the months, I increased the amount of running until I was running again. Hiking also became a big part of my weight loss. I used to dread hikes because I was out of shape and it was embarrassing, but now they were something that I was craving every single day, especially with the warm weather.

The fat was melting off relatively quickly. My clothing size was dropping constantly. I cannot deny that there were times I was ready to give up again. I felt hungry for the first month and felt the pain that comes with trying to build physical stamina. I had never thought I would be skinny again and had gone to the extent of getting rid of all of my smaller clothing. I had thrown aside running as a past enjoyment. By the end of the summer in 2020, I was unrecognizable. While I would not have considered myself skinny, I was at least 40 pounds lighter than I was back in March. I had an amazing amount of stamina and was loving healthy foods just as I had before starting college. My depression still existed as it always had, but it was definitely improved by my satisfaction with myself. I had accomplished something that I never would have even fathomed a couple of months prior. It was amazing. I was invincible.

The heat was steaming up from the ground. The bone-dry dirt beneath my feet served as natural padding, supporting every step. I was sweating profusely, but not because I was out of shape, but because of the heat of summer. No hill was too steep and the miles were countless. I could hear birds chirping above me in the tall and skinny trees. Their chirps were deafening along with the rustling of the leaves. The ominous solitude within these trees was lightened from the sunshine. Every once in a while I passed by a section of the reservoir. The sun sparkled off of the water and it was so bright and brilliant. Hours out there in the beauty and heat felt contagious. I would have walked for hours more, but I knew that I would return tomorrow.

65 pounds later and I am considered to be a “healthy weight.” Stopping my weight loss was something that never came to mind until my telehealth appointment with my physician in early February 2021. “You are at a healthy weight. At 5’4 your target weight should be between 130-135 pounds,” she said. Why did my heart immediately drop when she said this? There were still rolls on my stomach and even a roll on my back. My arms were still slightly flabby. While

my physique was now thin, I was still unhappy with these factors. “Everyone has some fat on their stomachs, even the skinny girls,” my mom reminded me. She was right, so what could I do to resolve this issue?

I ran for 30 minutes every morning and was making an effort to work my muscles. I had never prioritized building muscle because I had always thought it would make me look bigger. However, it gives definition to the body and helps burn more calories, even if it does weigh more than fat. I was hopeful that it will tighten up the loose skin that I now had on my stomach and arms.

I see myself starting to adopt the same body image issues that I had in the past. Even if I am tired, had a late night, or am feeling unwell, I force myself to do my 30 minutes of running every day. I even have started making myself use the elliptical in the evenings to add even more exercise. I still view myself as being obese and push my body way too hard. I also obsessively count my calories. I still refuse to eat processed foods, mostly because nobody truly feels good eating those, but I still make sure that I am eating fewer calories than I am burning because that is what I am accustomed to. All of these were necessary when I needed to lose weight, but now they are just obsessive and are spiraling into eating disorders and exercise addiction. In order to stay at my healthy weight and avoid being extremely underweight like I was in high school, I am trying to build my muscles.

Building muscle mass takes time, just like cardio, and has a lot of health benefits. Muscle training increases people’s resting metabolism. A person who lives a completely sedentary lifestyle burns calories even without exercise, just by being alive. People who do cardio exercises regularly have a greater resting metabolic rate because their body burns more calories even after exercise. Muscle training boosts the metabolism even more because muscle

burns more calories than fat. Healthline, an online platform for health and fitness articles, summarizes this phenomenon by saying,

Research has shown that you burn more calories in the hours following a weight training session, compared to a cardio workout. In fact, there are reports of resting metabolism staying elevated for up to 38 hours after weight training, while no such increase has been reported with cardio. This means that the calorie-burning benefits of weights aren't limited to when you are exercising. You may keep burning calories for hours or days afterward.

While I have been told by my physician that I should not lose any more weight, I still strive to improve my health in any way I can. Building muscle not only improves running and improves metabolism, but it also weighs more than fat. I am still able to maintain my weight while also losing some excess fat that I do not want on my stomach and back.

My diet has slightly changed since being told that I must maintain my current weight. I still love my "clean eating" diet. I love cooking with a variety of vegetables and grains. It makes me feel good and provides me with so many nutrients. Sometimes I forget that white flour and processed snacks even exist because they have never made me feel as good as lean meats, vegetables, grains, and fruit. The danger with this clean diet is that it tends to be low in calories. This was fantastic when I was trying to lose weight, but now I must be mindful of my eating in a different way. Instead of going back to processed food, I must eat a greater quantity. My diet is adaptable even to people who need to maintain or gain weight. It is all about portion size. If I eat enough to fulfill the number of calories that I need each day, then I am succeeding.

What does it mean to be healthy? As someone who is healthy, I ask myself this each day. While one would like to argue that anyone can be healthy no matter their size, one must steer

clear from glorifying obesity. The media is crafty in how it promotes both a very underweight body and a very overweight body as healthy, but very rarely an actual healthy body that is somewhere in between. Yes, one can be overweight and be working towards obtaining a healthy weight and lifestyle. This is healthy. However, it is unhealthy to be overweight, eating the wrong kinds of foods, living a sedentary lifestyle, and jeopardizing one's health with excess fat, which increases the risks of heart disease and diabetes. This is not healthy, no matter how hard the media tries to promote this. An article written in *The Advance-Titan*, the school newspaper of the University of Wisconsin, summarizes health perfectly.

While weight loss may come with exercise and eating healthy, the marker of good health should not be measured on waist size. Health goals should stay clear of the toxic and predatory culture of beauty. Health and beauty should incorporate multiple facets of physical, emotional, social and mental health. Feel good to look good, not the other way around. Exercising, eating nutritional, well-proportioned meals, surrounding yourself with friends and getting adequate mental health services should be everyone's health goals, never just simply losing weight. We need to turn our attention on health away from looking good and achieving beauty standards and move it towards feeling good about ourselves and getting healthy.

Instead of dwelling on how I could look, it is time for me and everyone else who suffers from body image issues to focus on what actual health looks like. Like this student says, "Feel good to look good." Body image issues are not just physical, but also mental. It is very hard to overcome because it is a full-body struggle.

My body image issues have haunted me at such a young age and continue to haunt me to this day. They have taken many different forms and like to try and work their ways back into my life. Sometimes these ghosts of my past creep into my memory; painful moments of hatred against my body filled with unspeakable acts all under the assumption that they would transform me into the skinny girls I saw on social media. Hours, months, years of my life were wasted

judging myself and being my own worst critic. These are issues that I am still facing, even after my dramatic weight loss. I should be happy, I changed my life, but part of me remains dissatisfied. The reality is that there will always be a voice inside me telling me that I should look a certain way, but it is up to me to challenge this voice and to do what I can to stay healthy and refuse to conform to what the media tells me I should look like. This painful battle is shared worldwide with many trying to block out these unrealistic standards that are being promoted constantly. The choices are either to spend one's life hurting oneself in order to obtain a dream body shape or to find inner happiness and focus on true health. Living a healthy lifestyle with an adequate amount of exercise and a healthy, balanced diet should be the real goal.

I look outside, the sun is shining. The 40-degree weather looks like it could be a warm summer day. The snow on the ground glistens with moisture. The sun is melting it slowly but surely. I can't remember the last time I've seen sunshine like this. This sun and warmer air pulled me out of the tedious cycle of gloomy days that I didn't realize were consuming my life. I am starting a new chapter in my life. I can do anything.

Works Cited

- <https://www.feast-ed.org/eating-disorders-by-the-numbers/>
- <https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/get-involved/nedawareness>
- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3010958/>
- <https://www.thelily.com/fat-people-have-eating-disorders-too-why-dont-we-talk-about-them/>
- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3761220/#:~:text=Data%20over%20the%20last%20four,eating%20disorder%20symptoms%20in%20girls.>
- <https://www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/issues/exercise-addiction>
- <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/fitness/expert-answers/aerobic-exercise/faq-20058561#:~:text=For%20most%20healthy%20adults%2C%20the,this%20exercise%20throughout%20the%20week.>
- <https://depts.washington.edu/bonebio/bonAbout/race.html#:~:text=The%20bone%20density%20is%20quite,little%20bit%20higher%20than%20Caucasians.>
- <https://www.peta.org/living/food/complete-proteins-vegan/>
- <https://www.statista.com/statistics/826670/us-college-students-self-reported-weight/>
- <https://www.northshore.org/healthy-you/tips-for-avoiding-the-freshman-15/>
- https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/cardio-vs-weights-for-weight-loss#TOC_TITLE_HDR_2
- <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00421-001-0568-y?LI=true>
- <https://journals.physiology.org/doi/abs/10.1152/jappl.1993.75.4.1847>
- <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02701367.2014.999190?journalCode=urqe20>
- <https://advancetitan.com/opinion/2020/03/04/health-comes-in-all-shapes-in-sizes>