**“Getting Fat was the BEST thing that ever happened to me”**

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**“We do not become free by ‘fixing ourselves’. We become free when we accept that we cannot be perfect, and it is okay. We do enough, simply by trying, every day.” -EaE**

 Obviously, the title may be a tad misleading, getting overweight was not the best thing for my “physical health”. As a matter of fact, there were several inconveniences to gaining weight at the rapid pace that I did in 2019 (forty pounds in roughly 10-month time span). These inconveniences included extreme and excruciating pain/ fatigue during workouts, enhanced body image difficulties/ stressors, and a brand-new set of whining tendencies that I had never had in the past. In addition, many daily inconveniences such as more huffing and puffing upstairs, difficulty in tying my shoes and the devastating mental battle of whether I need to go up a clothes size-also adding that additional financial stressor. However, the mental freedom that I had gained over the course of this time combined with the new survival program of “not giving a fuck” was well worth it. This new attitude/ strange form of empowerment became deeply embedded in my ever-growing mind.

 Why did I need this so bad? For the same reason many “perfectionists” with eating disorders need it. We grow up pressured/ pushed into a completely obsessive, and unhealthy drive to push our bodies to fit an “ideal body type” that is often unachievable. These disorders are not a coincidence, they are often societally driven. Now take the demands of society and combine it with childhood adversities/ traumas such as abandonment, neglect, abuse, bullying, poverty, medical conditions, loss and so on. It’s a recipe for disaster, even more so when the support system is next to nonexistent. Sometimes, when children do not get the responses they need/ seek outward, they turn inward. They also, like adults, desperately search for that thing around them that can give them comfort. What was that comfort for me? Food.

 Food becomes comfort in many people’s lives, as a colleague of mine had once mentioned “Food is proven to make us feel good. We know, if we absolutely love that Big Mac and it satisfies us 100% of the time, we are going to go back to McDonalds on our worst day and get that Big Mac to feel better again.” My hunger was not a coincidence… or purely due to my “Mexican side” as many of my relatives and friends had suggested. My hunger was a result of childhood traumas and a desperate need to self-medicate associated feelings of fear, loneliness and excruciatingly painful boredom. Eating was amazing, eating was addicting and eating… led me to become a “thick” or “big boned” child. By age 14, my father and stepmother were nervous for mine and my brother’s future. The culture and habits were already embedded. Our ‘TexMex’ family was taught to eat a lot, eat often and our gene pool did not support this diet! I was just under 5 feet which didn’t help matters. Underneath all that, the emotional eating habits we had picked up that we never talked about.

 What’s a solution? Yard work! Chores! Sports! My father combined his military bootcamp fitness skills with my stepmother’s “raise the kids to tend to the farm” values into one powerful force with one major goal in mind: “These kids will not be lazy and doomed to a life of obesity.” “But are we going to talk more about the diet...?” “No, as long as you can burn the food off everything is fine”. Sounded full proof, especially because I still carried a strong food addiction. I hated Cross country; I lost all the time. I hated sports, I hated people staring at me, I hated competition. I was judged often, destined to be “a loser”. Unfortunately, during this crucial stage of development in my teen years, my mental health plummeted and took a turn for the worst. In my mind, “I was failing at everything.” I will never forget my cross-country coach looking me dead in the eye and telling me: “If you do not learn how to calm yourself down you will be dead by the time you are 30!” I shut up and let that sink in, but not enough. (Ironically, I just turned 30 on the date of 09/12/2019! I’m so proud I made it.)

 Now, fast forward a bit. I would describe my military career (starting 12 days after High school graduation) as an endless series of desperate attempts to achieve that “perfectionism”. I “must” achieve a “perfect body” and “perfect level of fitness”. As many can probably guess, the military can absolutely exacerbate eating disordered symptoms and behaviors. During my Air force career, I averaged 5-6 workouts a week: average workout being 90 minutes. Yet, The BMI chart consistently labeled me as obese. I was always told at my mandated military physicals that I was showing “pre diabetic” numbers based on my height and weight, but I felt energetic and healthy. Most of my physical fitness examinations I scored in the 90s out of 100%. Pushups were especially a source of pride for me, as I worked myself to maxing out at 54 pushups a minute: beating many of my male counterparts. I recall a time another female airman scored higher than me simply because she had a smaller waist. I out push upped her, tied with sit ups, ran faster, yet she was more “fit” due to a smaller waist. After this incident, I sucked in my waist even more (a habit I had developed since age 11), at the time I had to be under a 29.5” waist to max points!

 The never-ending battle that I had from ages 11 to 29 was to “Not get fat”! I worked to no ends to keep up with this struggle. Restricting, binging, excessive exercise & laxatives (both forms of purging), rinse, wash, repeat. Unfortunately, during this timeframe, it never occurred to me that “perhaps society is wrong”. Instead I felt I was wrong, because I was difficult to mold to that “perfect form”. Also, food continued to be one of my only outlets, I lacked self-care skills and the ability to even ask for help. I credit that 1- to being raised as a child in the south, we only speak when we are spoken to. And 2- The military raised me next. In the military the mission is a priority, and self-care gets in the way of the mission. An additional factor is that the boyfriend at the time (now an ex) consistently reinforced a negative body image, as he obsessively engaged in his own body building routines, strict diet and constantly nagged at me to conform. I hid my binge episodes from him as much as possible, I snuck food, I had my hiding spots. Sometimes I even stole his food! It was a bad time for me to say the least. “You have to choose, either food or me.” That was the comment that ultimately destroyed the relationship. I hung onto it, resented the words, was torn up by the words, and three painful years later, finally loved myself enough to called it at quits.

 What was the breakthrough that ultimately led to my change? 1- I finally found my dream fitness activity: Martial arts. A fitness activity where I can focus on the functionality of my body vs appearance. Appearances no longer matter when you are learning self-defense and molding your body into a fighting machine. And 2- Again, I got fat. I did not plan it; I certainly did not do it on purpose. It was multiple factors in late 2018- 2019 that led to my weight gain: Work stress, commuting, toxic living environments, less gym time, a new relationship, inheriting stepchildren, moving twice, binge eating due to stress and so on. With the heavy combination of factors, I finally broke. I finally gave in and let it be what it was. Ultimately, I had bigger cares in the world than my numbers! Waist size, scale weight and pant size were no longer a priority.

 So, what did being overweight do for me? It taught me that it **wasn’t the end of the world**. I finally stopped fighting because it happened anyways. That awful and horrendous thing that I had been fighting exhaustingly to avoid my entire life had **finally** happened. I got fat. I survived being fat. I was truly embarrassed at the beginning of it, but what happens after that initial embarrassment, is that you must accept it and sit with it for a bit (literally because fat doesn’t just melt off a Mexican girls hips!). I went on to continue living life, I was forced to put the body image crap to the side, because life moves on regardless of whether or not you look “perfect”. It was valuable for me to be free of that fear, the “worst” had happened and yet it was okay. I also read self-help books, started therapy and I even give myself therapy sometimes. Despite my fears I continued to push myself and go to martial arts. Martial arts techniques continue to improve regardless of your body type.

 Slowly but surely 15 pounds have now melted off in the past 8 months. I’m in no rush, I am simply living the most balanced life I can now. I no longer have a scale at home, I no longer forbid foods from myself, I no longer change outfits 4 times out of fear, I no longer obsessively stare in the mirror or compare myself to the models, I no longer have to eat an entire family sized bag of chips because I can put it away now and eat more later if I’m still hungry. No hiding food, no more working out up to 16 hours a week while also having a full-time job and kids to spend time with. Luckily, I have an incredible fiancé of whom shares in my passion of food with me, I can be myself. In summary, no shame.

 I know the most common debate on this topic: “We should not condone obesity”. Truthfully, I do not. I’ve been overweight and it was unhealthy, and I felt unwell. On the flip side, I have also been extremely “fit”, yet my mind was unhealthy. Society looks at a body and decides right then and there if that person is “right” or “wrong”. There’s more to the story, I was ill with many body types. I was ill from 115 lbs. to 172 lbs.; I was ill every step of the way. My body image, my cravings, my perfectionism haunted me on the daily. No one would have ever guessed that I had struggled in the way I did, to the extent that I did with such a “good” body once upon a time. Our bodies do not tell our story. There are “good” bodies with ill minds, and “bad” bodies with flourishing minds. **A healthy mind is MORE important than a perfect body, and I will stand by that.**