

# How Skinny Feels: My Experience with an Eating Disorder

*Zoey Thomas*

Sometimes, I wonder if I was born anorexic. After all, I've obsessed about consuming "healthy" foods and maintaining a fit physique for as long as I can remember. In elementary school, when the other children in my class brought cupcakes to share on their birthdays, I told my peers I had an "allergy to desserts" to avoid the danger of a potentially fattening treat. At the school's annual harvest festival, I ordered unflavored ice from the sno-cone stand; while the children around me drenched their cones in teeth-staining cherry red and lime green syrups, I ate my cup of frozen water and shuddered at the thought of willingly ingesting artificial sugars. When the teacher at my after-school dance program measured us every year for recital costumes, I held my breath while she wrapped a measuring tape around my waist, then lingered around her chair as she called out the other girl's measurements – mentally staking my competition amongst the other seven-year-olds for the smallest waist in class.

A desire for parental validation largely shaped my obsessively healthy eating habits. My dad, an athlete and health nut, impressed his enthusiasm for whole grains and lean proteins onto my sister and me from an early age. None of my friends liked coming to my house because we never had "good" snacks – our fridge held Smart Balance instead of butter and Crystal Light instead of Simply Made. In fifth grade, Nutella became popular among the children at my elementary school, and my mom bought a jar of the Italian hazelnut spread at my request. My dad walked into our kitchen one day to find me eating Nutella on toast, picked up the jar, and promptly began to read me the nutrition label – which listed sugar as the first ingredient. He then whisked the Nutella jar away, stuck it onto the top shelf of the pantry, and returned with a jar of all-natural peanut butter, which he plopped in front of me with a little sing-songy chant: "Pea-nut but-ter! Not Nu-tell-a! Pea-nut but-ter! Not Nu-tell-a!" I never touched Nutella after that day. Over my childhood, I began to realize when I ate healthy foods and avoided sugar, my dad acted proud of me in a way that made me feel valued. When my dad bragged to his friends his daughter didn't have a "sweet tooth," I glowed with validation.

Everything changed when I went to middle school. My best friends from elementary school abandoned me for different friend groups, my grades began slipping, and I felt everyone around me had something they excelled at – whether art, soccer, or gymnastics – while I had no hobbies at all. With my self-esteem at an all-time low, I began to seek validation in the only way I knew how – through my eating habits. My relationship with food, while restrictive throughout elementary school, became increasingly unhealthy over the course of my sixth grade year. More often than not, I brought an empty lunchbox to school; eventually, I also began skipping breakfast. To make matters worse, I developed an affinity for exercise; when my dad went to the local YMCA, I accompanied him, where I spent hours training on the treadmill whose handles I could barely reach, or climbing on the Stairmaster whose steps were altogether too high for my scrawny eleven-year-old legs.

Sometimes a classmate would voice concern I didn't have anything in my lunchbox, or one of my sister's friends would exclaim my body looked unhealthily thin, but I just used these concerns as validation – a sign of hard work paying off.

The summer after sixth grade, my mom grew concerned with my skeletal appearance, and on August tenth, 2016, she dragged me to the pediatrician. My doctor weighed me. She measured me. She made me walk on my toes and my heels. She showed me my stagnated height and weight charts. And finally, she sat me down in a short plastic chair and said the words “anorexia nervosa.” I reacted to the diagnosis like an accusation – and a ridiculous one. “Every girl I know is on a diet,” I argued. “Why am I the one getting picked on?” The situation felt like a bad joke, and the gravity of the diagnosis didn't hit me until the doctor told me I couldn't exercise until my weight returned to normal. At that point in the appointment, the short plastic chair became uncomfortably small, and the fluorescent lights became uncomfortably bright, and I rested my chin in my hands and began to cry. Never in my life have I cried like I did at that pediatrician appointment. I continued to cry as the doctor gave my mom a list of nutritionists and therapists who accepted our insurance. I cried as she recommended PediaSure Grow and Gain shakes as a nutritional supplement, which we could pick up from any grocery or drugstore on our way home. I cried as a display of grief, a mourning for the imminent loss of the body I had nearly killed myself to construct.

The next several months proved the hardest of my life. My doctor had warned my parents I needed to gain weight quickly or else get sent to an inpatient facility, and my well-meaning parents responded by springing into action – acting as Eagle-eyed enforcers to ensure I followed the daily three-meal, three-snack meal plan derived by my nutritionist. Maybe my dad's passionate fight to see me recover stemmed from the guilt he felt for his own role in shaping my anorexia, or maybe he never realized the extent to which his obsession with healthy eating played into my behavior at all – I've never asked him. Either way, I still feel guilt for the effect my eating disorder had on my family during those long months. Crying at the dinner table became a nightly occurrence; I often took breaks from meals to curl up on the couch with a heating pad pressed into my stomach, because after a year of near-starvation, my body had forgotten how to digest food. Refusing to believe I had an eating disorder at all, I balked, sobbed, and resisted every snack, PediaSure, and bite of food my parents served me. On one occasion, after my mom and I got into a screaming fight over my morning protein smoothie, I locked myself in my room and refused to come out for school. My mom attempted to remove the lock from my door with a screwdriver, but accidentally took the entire knob off the door, effectively barricading me in my room. After a long Facetime call with her architect brother, my mom finally figured out how to replace the knob and extract her daughter.

However, despite the tantrums I threw over every morsel of food, my parents never gave up on my recovery. My dad stopped taking away my Nutella; instead, he crafted homemade milkshakes for me every night. My mom packed my lunch each day for school. I couldn't have recovered without their support, and I realize not everyone who struggles with anorexia is lucky enough to have had a support system like mine. Today, I forgive my parents for how their behavior inadvertently led to my unhealthy relationship with food. My dad was only trying to instill healthy eating habits, and it's not his fault he wound up doing the opposite. I also forgive myself for the monster I became in recovery, because I've grown to realize the monster wasn't me at all. A popular

anorexia recovery quote reads “Things tend to scream when dying.” The tantrums “I” threw were nothing more than my eating disorder resisting extinguishment — an infestation in my brain, fighting a losing battle.

My recovery process had a definitive beginning – the teary day in Dr Roitmen-Geller’s office – but didn’t have a definitive end. Over the next three years, I slowly became less resistant to getting better, and I realized my doctor diagnosed me with anorexia, not because she had a vengeance against me, but because I had anorexia. By ninth grade, my relationship with food had stabilized. Even better, because I got diagnosed with anorexia so young, I had an arsenal of body acceptance strategies from recovery that helped me ignore the diet messaging that began bombarding my teenage peers throughout high school. When my friend fretted that she gained three pounds on her vacation, I didn’t let her words trigger me, because I remembered the long talk I had with my therapist about separating my worth from the number on the scale. When someone in my math class proclaimed she only ever drank iced coffee for breakfast, her boast didn’t make me feel guilty about the stack of pancakes I ate that morning, because I remembered my nutritionist telling me a balanced and nutritious breakfast gives me energy to get through my day. Recovery proved torturous, but in a way I’m grateful I went through the process so young. At eleven years old, I learned tools to maintain a positive relationship with food that many women never learn in their entire lives.

In the depths of my eating disorder, I turned to one quote more than any other for motivation to continue overexercising and undereating: “Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels.” I see the quote, attributed to supermodel Kate Moss, plastered across social media platforms even today. Moss’ words imply people, especially young women, should strive for society’s ideal, thin body type despite any potential costs to their physical or mental health, because to be skinny is to be valuable. I’m grateful recovery taught me the falseness of her sentiment. “Skinniness,” when caused by overly restricting food, doesn’t feel “good” at all. Chewing on a cup of plain ice at the harvest festival didn’t feel good. Hiding wrenches and hammers in my pockets before getting weighed at the nutritionist to create an illusion of progress didn’t feel good. Letting thoughts of calories, meal plans, and Stairmaster workouts consume my brain didn’t feel good. Skinniness didn’t make me fulfilled or happy; it made me a tired, empty shell, too busy fixating on my body to focus on the parts of my life that matter – like caring for the people I love, especially my parents. Although I may always feel guilty for the way my eating disorder hurt my family, I’m beginning to reconcile with the fact that the poor decisions I made when sick didn’t reflect my own personality; they stemmed from a disorder that I couldn’t control and didn’t ask to have.

Today, I have a strong – but not perfect – relationship with food. Sometimes I become stressed when there’s no whole-wheat bread option available at a sandwich shop, or I check the sugar content on the back of a juice bottle before allowing myself to drink it. When my old eating disorder habits resurface, I don’t get frustrated or assume that I’ve lost progress, because escaping diet culture entirely is a near-impossible task. The emergence of social media has made this task even harder; I cannot scroll on Tik Tok or Instagram for more than a couple minutes before I see a girl detailing her 20-pound weight loss journey or a gym goer ranking top protein powder brands in terms of grams of protein per calorie. The recipients of society’s messaging about how to eat

restrictively to maintain a desirable physique are largely targeted toward women and teenage girls. Only by discussing the misogynistic implications that a woman should prioritize physical attractiveness over physical health can we begin to see the holes in diet culture. I hope my story contributes to that discussion.

At the end of the day, a slice of white bread won't put me in the hospital like my eating disorder did. A Capri Sun won't send me to years of therapy. No food can cause me the physical and emotional turmoil my fear of food caused me for the first eleven years of my life. The year 2023 marks seven years since my eating disorder diagnosis. Because of my experience in recovery, I now see food, not as a punishment or a source of validation, but simply as fuel to live my fullest and most joyful life. "Fulfilled" feels much better than "skinny."

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