

From: Binge by Tyler Oakley
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binge

I WAS ALWAYS A BIT PLUMP. My chubby cheeks didn't complement my short stature, and the bowl haircut topping it all off wasn't helping. My personal life was flopping hard, and between custody hearings to decide which family I was going to live with, moving cities, completely starting over in a new school district, realizing I was gay (but also unable to tell anyone), and my family's being poorer than ever before, I was a bit stressed for twelve years old.

For years, therapists would tell me that I coped with my anxieties by warping my relationship with food. They said that while I felt I had no say in the ups and downs I was going through, I could at least control my relationship with food—that is, until I lost all control. I'm still figuring out the how and the why of everything that happened, even a decade later, but what I do know for certain is that my eating disorder nearly destroyed me.

When things first got rough, I ate everything, and I was ashamed. I was heavy, and I felt heavy. I would wear a T-shirt

in the wave pool, and while I will say now that it helped with blocking out harmful UV rays, it screamed one thing at the time: fat kid is ashamed of being fat, but still wants to splash around at Dollywood for his family's first and only vacation.

I gained so much weight that gym class became my personal hell. I was reluctant to change in the locker room, and any physical activity was excruciatingly embarrassing. I felt that I was good at nothing, but the absolute worst days were when we had to run. The first time we had to run a mile in sixth grade, the classes I had leading up to my gym period were spent in a full-on panic. It was a timed event, and with the blast of a whistle, I immediately fell to the back of the pack with the rest of the overweight kids. We felt a collective shame as we were lapped by the fast kids with good builds. I developed an immediate and deep self-loathing when, halfway through, I couldn't run any longer. Heaving, I slowed to a walk. I heard the screams of my gym teacher, berating me for being physically unable to go on. The slowest in the class, I finished my mile at eleven minutes and one second, a time that was branded into my mind as embarrassing, pitiful, and disgusting. I hated myself.

In seventh grade, I decided that I was done being fat. I was 130 pounds at the start of the year, heavy for my height. I got a membership to the local YMCA, where I ran and lifted weights before school every morning. My parents supported me, thinking I was just getting in better shape, but what they didn't know was that while I was overexercising, I was also undereating.

Now I was bingeing on exercise and starvation. While I still packed a lunch every day in front of my parents, I'd throw it in the garbage as soon as I got to school. Every day I'd sit at the

lunch table with my friends, and in place of a healthy lunch, I'd eat a small pile of pickles from the condiment station in the lunchroom. I was attempting to trick my body into thinking it was getting a meal, for almost zero calories. With my skipped breakfast, before-school workout, pickle lunch, and midday gym class, I was consuming nearly zero calories while burning as many as possible. This is not a good idea.

At dinner, controlling my food intake at home was easy. With so many kids in the family, we ate only one meal a week together—a family movie night, buffet-style. I'd get up and get "seconds," but just rearrange my plate a bit. I was fixated on getting away with my diet, not once acknowledging to myself that it could in some way harm me. Looking back, I see the extreme precautions I took to keep it a secret demonstrate that I knew how wrong it was.

I was constantly exhausted and always dizzy, but in my head I was suffering to get to where I wanted to be in life. If I hated Fat Tyler, then maybe I'd love Skinny Tyler. I had no patience to become the new me in a healthy way, and in a little more than a month I lost thirty pounds and became a skeletal version of myself. Although my ribs protruded and my waist was smaller than ever before, all I could see were problem areas. I'd look in the mirror and cry, disgusted. Yeah, sure, I'd lost some weight, but I could still lose more. And if losing all that weight didn't make me happy yet, maybe if I lost five more pounds? That might work. It was worth a try. Every stomach gurgle felt like a cry of surrender from my body, but I wasn't here to show mercy to something that had caused me years of pain.

Then people started talking. During that month, I changed

my bowl-cut hairstyle and started to gel up my bangs—a popular look for kids my age at the time. I revamped my wardrobe and got rid of my glasses for contacts, thinking people might like me more if I looked less nerdy. I hated who I used to be, and I wanted everything about Fat Tyler to be destroyed. I transformed so much that one day my science teacher did a double take and told me she genuinely thought a new student had transferred into her class. I was ecstatic, at least for the moment, thinking Skinny Tyler was finally here.

When my parents realized I had a problem, it was too late. I had spiraled out of control and was thinner than ever before. My face had sunk in, and none of my clothes fit me. Not knowing what to do or how to help, my parents sent me to therapy, where I sat in silence, refusing to speak. I was in control now, and I wasn't about to let anyone force me to go back to who I used to be. My parents took me to weekly weigh-ins with a doctor, and if that week I hadn't gained weight, I was grounded. Most weeks, I chose being grounded over gaining a pound.

All day long, I thought about food. At the same time, I felt that if anyone saw me eating, I'd be seen as the disgusting Fat Tyler I was terrified to revert back into. Sometimes after a long week of starving myself, I'd sneak into the kitchen in the middle of the night and lose control. With the rest of my family asleep, I'd silently remove the cover from a tray of cake and eat it bite by bite. I'd glide my fork carefully along the side of the cake, attempting to leave absolutely zero proof that I had eaten it. I'd continue this for the entire circumference of the cake, and while it would probably have been easier to just slice myself a piece, people would have noticed. If I was care-

ful enough, if I left no marks, nobody would know I had indulged the night before. My heart pounded with the thought of someone's waking up and finding me. The only thing worse than anyone's realizing the next day some of the cake was gone would've been being caught in the act, so I worked frantically in my surreptitious gluttony. In minutes, I'd devour small bits and pieces of leftovers in the fridge, snacks in the cupboard, and baked goods on the counter. Coming down from my frantic binge blackout, I felt excruciating shame. I had just undone all my hard work and discipline for the week, and I hated myself even more because of it.

The year I developed anorexia was the worst year of my life. I found that it didn't matter if I was Fat Tyler or Skinny Tyler. I still hated myself. While before I couldn't run because I was overweight, now I couldn't run because I got dizzy from exhaustion. I had gone from one extreme to another, neither bringing me any closer to happiness. To make matters worse, I felt that everyone was yelling at me about my weight, telling me how I just needed to eat more, or how I was going to destroy my body, or how I was acting out or causing problems. I felt that nobody understood what I was going through, myself included.

I was in a downward spiral of starvation, weigh-ins, and therapy, practically being force-fed, and hating myself. Near the end, I began to throw bulimia into the mix. I was addicted to control, to the point where I lost any semblance of it.

And then, my choir teacher saved me. Ms. Borton asked me to stay for a moment after class one day, and I instantly knew it was about my weight. Before then, I had generally tried to blend in among the rest of the choir, never trying out for a

solo or singing loud enough to stand out. When I went into her office after class, she closed the door behind me.

Ms. Borton was meant to be a teacher. She's who you hope your kids have when they go to school. It was because of her that I fell in love with music, and although I've never been incredibly vocally gifted, she gave me the courage to sing at all the karaoke bars I visit today (sorry, Koreatowns everywhere, blame her).

At the end of class every Friday, Ms. Borton would read us *Chicken Soup for the Soul* chapters, and she taught us the importance of random acts of kindness. We'd take turns giving shout-outs to people in class who had treated us kindly. Her mantra was Singing Produces Awesome Miracles, and she wore SPAM merchandise to constantly remind us of the power of music. She was goofy and hilarious, but intensely serious when she needed to be. She talked to us gently, and when you spoke to her, she heard you, in every sense.



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Her office was lined with school pictures of past students, hundreds of kids who had connected with her over the years. She was one of those teachers everyone loved, who made every student feel like the favorite. That day, when I needed it most, I felt like the favorite. She smiled at me with a pained expression that said she already knew the answer to the question she was about to ask.

"Are you okay?"

I immediately started crying. For what felt like the first time in the entire ordeal, someone had approached me with no judgment. Doctors scolded me for mistreating my body, and while I know my parents cared deeply for me, they also made me feel shame for what I was doing, and I felt that they just didn't understand. Sobbing, I didn't know what to say, and she got up, hugged me, and I cried into her shoulder.

I wasn't okay, but Ms. Borton did what she could to help. She got me more involved in choir and musicals, and although I was already friends with my Twister buddy Dolan, one of the best singers in choir and one of the most popular kids in my grade, she made sure we were always together. We became best friends, and I finally felt that someone other than an adult thought I wasn't half-bad.

Ms. Borton was the catalyst for my recovery, but I wouldn't have gotten out of the hole I'd dug for myself without the support of friends and family, as well as a lot of hard work inside my own brain. It all happened slowly but surely, and only because I was ready. I began to eat more regularly, exercise less desperately, and develop a routine that focused on health rather than shape or size. It didn't always work, and some days

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were better than others. I often hated myself and tried to talk myself back into starving, but those days became fewer and farther between, the longer I worked toward recovery.

Plenty of aha moments happened along the road. One of the most important was the realization that I will always be both Fat Tyler and Skinny Tyler. Both are a part of me and have shaped me into who I am today. My attempt to differentiate between them only negated a fraction of the complete me. Over a few years, I eased back into myself and was able to begin finding peace with my body as just Tyler.

My eating disorder never went away for good. As almost anyone who has ever suffered from an eating disorder can probably tell you, it makes a comeback when you least expect it. It wears on you when you try on clothes. It bobs up when everyone wants to get into the hot tub. It barges into the bedroom during sex. It begs to be let back into your life, and it promises that it's the solution for all of your moments of discomfort. And the hard thing is, in your mind, it seems as if it totally could be.

But an eating disorder isn't about how thin you actually are, it's about how you feel in your own skin. When I was starving myself, no number on my scale was ever going to feel like I was done. I'd pinch undetectable fat on my stomach and punish myself relentlessly. My parents would beg me to eat, and I'd look at them as if they were crazy—could they not see what I saw? That was the problem. Every mirror was a twisted fun-house mirror, reflecting not reality, but distortions from my insecurities.

Over time, your brain gets better at flattening out those warped mirrors, and you begin to see yourself for who you



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I hate my thighs. Note to self, this is why I dont go jean shopping.

25/10/2008 01:43



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god I love my thighs, they're so huge that I could crush anyone's head/dreams between them, thank you parents, from your genes to my jeans

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are—whether that's someone who has a few extra curves on their body or not. Your brain also gets better at caring less about what the mirror actually shows, realizing those few extra pounds aren't a matter of life and death. I still deal with this now a decade later, but I'm getting better at it.

In unpacking my self-loathing attitude toward my weight, I've also learned to unpack how I view body image in culture in general. Being larger is okay. Being smaller is okay. Neither will

inherently bring you happiness. Size does not always indicate health. Skinny people are not always happy. Fat people are not always lazy. Men are not exempt from any of this. I learned these things over time, despite the messaging in pop culture, media, and advertisements.

My overwhelmingly kind and extremely talented friend Hannah Hart has a piece of art in her office depicting a young girl walking through a forest, side by side with a wolf. Kind of looks like Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf. When Hannah first showed it to me, she talked about how she loved it so much because it depicted the idea of recognizing your inner demons and, instead of running from them, learning to live with them. I always get asked why the background of my phone is a picture of orange chicken; it's my reminder not to run from my wolf anymore.

anything for a dollar

GROWING UP IN A MIDDLE CLASS FAMILY WAS PRETTY SHITTY AT the time. I know that I've never thought it, I wouldn't change a single thing about it. My parents raised me to understand the value of hard work and saving money, and I like to think that because of that I've gotten to where I am today. I also slept my way to the top, so that helped.

From an early age, I had a weird relationship with money. My family always had financial issues; I grew up eating discount lunches, and back-to-school shopping meant hand-me-downs and off-brands. I didn't mind at first, but I eventually began to notice what my peers had, and I became very aware of where my family ranked on the community-income infographic.

To get what I wanted in life, I was raised to work hard and make it happen—starting at infancy. My sister Codi and I were always trying to come up with ways to capitalize on our community. Our eyes were on the prize: a few bucks, no matter the cost. Which is also the credo of a street hooker.