

Unstoppable Thoughts

I was always the guy on the sports team panting heavily and throwing up in front of my teammates, but this changed my sophomore year of swim season; I went to eight practices a week, and I trained to be the best I could be. Soon, I looked and acted like someone who walked straight out of *Sports Illustrated*. That swim season, I changed my lifestyle. I spent a great deal of my time devoted not only to the sport of swimming, but also just as much to my diet and body image. At the end of that season, I was faster at swimming than my captain, I was awarded the “Best Abs” t-shirt, and overall I felt the healthiest I had ever felt. There seemed to be nothing in the world that could top that feeling.

From my perspective, I continue to ride this feeling over the next six months. After swimming season, I was afraid of getting out of shape; I was afraid of losing what I had achieved. Each day I would walk over to the YWCA, run on the track, lift weights, then swim. I then would come home and help make dinner with my parents. I wanted to help, so I could make sure it was a healthy meal; I was afraid if I did not help, that I may have to eat something unhealthy. I got into a pattern and I could not break it; there was not a time when I did not exercise or did not eat healthy foods. If there was a day I did not get my workout in, I would feel anxious and stressed. At that time in my life, I thought nothing of it, except I had become a better healthier person.

By the time it was summer break, my swim coach, whom I had not seen since swim season, commented on how unhealthy I looked and how slow I had gotten at swimming. Many other people were also commenting about how skinny and unhealthy I looked. I went to the doctor, and he told me that I almost had no fat, and that I needed to gain weight. Looking in the

mirror that night, I thought I looked good, I liked how my skin wrapped so tightly around my muscles, but I knew I had to gain weight.

I somehow developed the idea via the internet that protein would be the best way for me to bulk up without gaining fat; I would still not eat any junk food, sugar, and white flour. Over the summer, I spent my days running, biking, and swimming. I also started to eliminate more and more foods which I had deemed unhealthy my diet. I remember coming home after a three-hour swim practice, having a chicken stir fry in front of me with brown rice, but I to eat the rice-- I only ate chicken followed by a protein shake. Instead of gaining weight, I started to do the opposite, and it felt good.

This devotion to sports, new eating habits, and increased exercise eventually led to an eating disorder. My eating and exercise habits had gradually changed over the course of six months. But what changed the most was my mentality towards my actions. When I started junior year, I joined the cross-country team; I was not the athlete out of *Sports Illustrated* anymore. One day after school, having only consumed an egg and a yogurt, I went for a seven-mile run. Starting out, it was painful; I had no energy, my legs hurt, and my brain felt fuzzy, but I was so determined to keep going. Somehow, I ignored that pain; I had to keep going, I could not allow myself to miss a high-calorie-burning run, and I could not allow myself to get out of shape.

Going to bed every night was the time when I really felt malnourished. I had grown excess hair all over my body to protect it; I shivered in my bed, scared of what I was doing to myself. Nonetheless, those thoughts and feelings of malnutrition did not stop me; I convinced myself I was strong. In the gym, I could see my veins pop whenever I lifted weights. Since I had

less-than-essential body fat, the little muscle I had over my body looked so defined to me; it looked good to me.

I knew I should gain weight, but I was so afraid of gaining fat and losing what I had. After one run long run, I was brave enough to measure out one cup of pasta onto my plate; I told myself, this is it, I'm finally going to start bulking up. But as soon as I ate the pasta, I wanted to beat myself up; at the same time I wished I could just eat the pasta. I thought back to what I used to be like only a year ago. A year ago I had a strong friend group, I was just starting to get in shape for swimming, and overall I was happy. I wished I could go back to that time, but going for that run and obsessing over one plate of pasta were more important.

On one Friday, my parents and I were going to visit my brother at college; we were going to leave right after school and drive the rest of the day. I knew I would not be able to exercise, and it scared me. That morning I woke up, and instead of looking forward to seeing my brother whom I had not seen in three months, I cried. I told my mom how mad I was that I would not be able to exercise, and that I didn't know if I was going to be able to eat breakfast or lunch that day. I also cried because I was mad I had these thoughts; I told my mom I wished I could just eat and return back to how I used to be.

Through those months of cross country season, I experienced many situations and thoughts similar to that day I visited my brother. I found myself in a conundrum; I knew I should do something about what I was doing to my body and mind, but I did not want to change the addictive habits I had.

When the cross-country season was over, it was finally time for me to change my habits; I was finally going to be big and buff for swimming. I got into the pool to “prep” for swim season; I shivered the whole time as I watched elderly ladies swim faster than I did. I knew I was

not the swimmer I once was. Again, I wanted to change but I was still too afraid. Besides affecting swimming, my eating habits would upset daily aspects of my life. I spent hours measuring out and prepping my food; I would avoid social gatherings because I did not want to eat the food that was there. I thought about food all the time; as I did math homework, I would end up using the calculator to figure out calories burned and consumed.

My behaviors only continued to worsen as junior year progressed. Although I tried to stop them, my efforts seemed to have no effect. Eventually I knew I needed to get help; I knew if I did not do something, my eating disorder would only get worse and worse, consequently being harder to escape. I went to numerous doctors and got myself enrolled in an eating disorder program. At that time, I thought I would go along and continue to work out and train for the approaching swim season and be back to normal in a month.

Then the moment came when I received a phone call from the doctor explaining that I was severely ill. I was told to stop all physical activity for at least two months. I reacted to the phone call like a five-year-old responds to a timeout. I was mad at everyone, including myself. The year before, I would have laughed at the thought of developing an eating disorder, but I did, and there was no rewinding the past year.

It soon came to my attention that the effects of an eating disorder cannot be altered in just a month or so. It takes time. Besides regaining weight and improving my heart, liver, and muscle function, I had to heal my psyche as well. As much as I wanted to, I could not stop and drop the obsessive and compulsive actions involved in my eating habits. I refused to eat any carbohydrates, and I was in the habit of measuring out all my food, counting all my calories.

When swim season started again, I watched as my friends, my teammates, got into the water and swam. That day I did not swim; I sat trapped on the pool deck. This is when I realized

how much I had changed myself. Over that year, it didn't seem like I had changed, but trying to live a healthier lifestyle and to become a better athlete had led me to obsessive, addictive, and unhealthy behavior. My goal had changed from being a great athlete, and had evolved into an obsessive addiction of eating all the right foods, and exercising to be able to purge my food. But now it had backfired at me. I knew then if I did not change what I was doing, I would always be the guy trapped on the pool deck.

Through the next few months I often thought, why had I done this; I hated myself for it, and wished I could be like other people. As I watched my teammate down a 12-inch sandwich, I would feel sad; I wished I could just eat like that, not worrying about the calories, fat, and whatever other “unhealthy” things were in a sandwich like that. However, every time I would eat, I would have thoughts about what was in the food. Just how at one point in my life, I had forced myself to eat healthier and work out, I now had to force myself to not work out and to reconsider the way I thought about food and exercise.

When I would be at swim meets seeing my teammates swimming in the water, I would often think of how badly I wanted to swim with them to burn calories and have that addictive feeling of unexplainable satisfaction that came with exercise and my eating disorder. But I began to realize that, if I ever got to exercise again, and these thoughts dominated my actions, I would be no better off than I was before. Therefore, I started to focus on other aspects of being able to swim again. I thought of how happy I would be to socialize with them, play in the water with them, be tired and exhausted together, and compete together.

I soon learned to stuff myself with food--and not to count calories. Of course, I probably subconsciously counted calories and thought about how healthy the food was. However, I made these thoughts not dominate my thinking process.

Most of swim season instead of working at swimming, I worked at trying to alter my habits and to get “healthy” for real. I challenged my eating habits and my thoughts that exercise was not just about cancelling out calories. I began to learn not to count and measure my foods, and I started to eat more foods. I went to pasta parties for my swim team, rather than avoid social gatherings because of food. I got off school twice of week to visit the doctors and therapist. I did not like what I had to do, but I knew it was the only way to get better. Most of the swim season went by and I continued to change the way I thought. Eventually, I could do some easy swimming, not intense swimming like my teammates. By the end of the swim season I was allowed to swim in a race.

The rest of my winter and spring was spent going to doctors and slowly allowing exercise and sports back into my life, as well as making sure I ate enough and did not resort to old habits of eating. I continued to have thoughts similar to those I had during my eating disorder back in the fall, but I was committed to regaining a life back I had lost--a life in which I was not going every week to the doctors who would tell me how much exercise I could do, a life in which a nutritionist was not telling me what to eat. I wanted a life in which I could happily exercise, be a great athlete and eat healthy, but not have it control my life.

Through those few months of recovery, I was surprised and the doctors were surprised at how smoothly and quickly I recovered. During those months, though, a doctor once told me that I would always struggle with an eating disorder and that it's never fully curable. I hated hearing those words; I wanted to deny them, but throughout my life, now they echo truth. I now run marathons, but instead of thinking of those as a way to cancel out what I eat, I participate in them because I enjoy doing so.. Today I still eat healthy foods--I will never be that guy who eats cold

pizza for breakfast--but I now consider healthy eating as only one aspect of my life, and health is not measured in calories.

Thoughts do trickle back to me though. One day I will maybe forget to eat breakfast, or not eat after my workout, and the joy of feeling of hungry, feeling light, and feeling underfed will come back to me. The opportunity may present itself for me to measure calories and count out my food. Sometimes I will go for a run and realize my actions were sparked by the food I had consumed that day. It may feel good at the moment, to not eat or to measure my food, but then I remind myself of how inescapable and painful an eating disorder is. I now live happily, food and exercise not tormenting me; I am the athlete I want to be. I do not consider myself to have an eating disorder but the thoughts will forever challenge my persistence.