Silencing the Harshest Critic – the Positive Effects of Exercise on Anxiety

I distinctly remember the onset of my eating disorder, though it wasn't something I was consciously aware of at the time. It appeared suddenly and immersed itself in my world, like a new friend that I didn't want to disappoint. I was 13 years old and my mum had just told me that she had cancer. I stayed overnight with her in hospital, sleeping on a chair beside her bed. In the morning hospital staff brought me cereal and juice but I was so heartbroken that I had lost my appetite. I stared into my soggy cornflakes and thought, "That's okay because if you don't eat, you will lose weight". At a time where I had very little control over what was happening in my life, this was my brain's fucked up way to take back some control.

We had to move in with my grandparents and throughout this time my grandmother cautioned me against crying – "Don't cry, you'll upset your mum" – so I only allowed myself to cry when I was alone in my bedroom. Two months after the diagnosis, my mum was gone.

Even then I still wasn't supposed to cry, although I'm not sure why. Maybe that's just how my grandmother was raised — to not show emotion. Perhaps it was considered a sign of weakness? Even when I told her I loved her or tried to give her a hug, she would look irritated and wave me away.

I had convinced myself that I was ugly, fat and unlovable. I constantly picked and pulled at the skin on my stomach and thighs and became obsessed with trying to be less and less. I skipped breakfast then made excuses not to eat at lunchtime so that my school friends wouldn't be suspicious. I took my dinner to my bedroom and emptied it into a plastic bag which I would hide in a drawer until I could sneak out to the bin. I would allow myself a piece of fruit or a few dry crackers every day and after every mouthful I would immediately go weigh myself as though I had suddenly gained weight.

Exercise was a punishment that I handed out to myself for hours every morning, beginning before my grandparents were

awake. I was about 14 years old when I fainted during a morning run and woke up to a stranger shaking me. At my lowest weight, I was only 37 kg but I was still disgusted by what I saw in the mirror. I actually laid awake at night with my fingers on my pulse because I believed I was going to die in my sleep and then somewhere along the way, I decided that the world was better off without me in it.

I spent two months in hospital, in a youth psychiatric ward. I could write a movie about the characters I met in there. Were they crazy? Maybe. Fucked up? You bet. But they were human and they were kind, and they deserved love and compassion. Did that mean I did too?

When I was discharged from hospital, I was so ashamed and embarrassed that I dropped out of high school. I couldn't bear the thought of facing people, I was sure they would all think I was crazy.

See that's the thing with mental health; if I had spent two months in hospital with broken bones no-one would have a negative thing to say about it, but when it's your mind or spirit that's broken…well that's another story.

I did end up completing school, recovering from anorexia and living a "normal" and happy life. But I guess I've suffered anxiety since these days, I just didn't know it had a name until recently. Uncontrollable nerves, persistent and unrealistic worries and the feeling that something bad is about to happen, dreading talking to people, meeting someone new or being looked at… I believed this was just life as an introvert.

Then one day at work, I was meant to go to a meeting where I would probably have to talk to a couple of people. I started feeling dizzy and clammy, my chest felt like it was being crushed and I was having trouble breathing. It was a mild day but sweat was dripping down my back. I went to the toilets and started bawling my eyes out. I had no idea what was happening. The entire duration of the meeting I felt like I was going to throw up. I didn't even have to talk, but I felt like everyone was staring at me and thinking how ugly and stupid and fat I was, how my hair was bad or my face was red or I looked awkward. This was my first panic attack. My first ridiculous panic attack. I've been in some pretty high adrenaline situations in my line of work but going to a meeting somehow caused me to have a mini breakdown in a toilet cubicle.

Susanna Kaysen said it best in 'Girl, Interrupted' — "Sometimes the only way to stay sane is to go a little crazy".

(Photo by Bayu Suharso)

Several months ago, I took up powerlifting and recently competed in my first competition. For someone with an intense fear of being looked at, here I was getting up in front of a crowd of people which was a big F U to my anxiety. Powerlifting is a form of therapy for me. Instead of being at war with my body like my former self, I can appreciate it for how badass it can be. Instead of trying to minimise myself and take up less space, I am adding weight to the bar and trying to be more. When you're under the bar with some heavy weight,

you need a certain degree of mental toughness so you don't get buried in the floor. No-one is going to lift that weight for you — it's all on you. There is something so empowering about that. The barbell has given me physical strength but much more than that, it has made me mentally stronger too.

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