

Staffer discusses her struggle to gain perfection

▶an opinion of Sarah Berger

I place a smile on my face, and make polite small talk as a seventy-year-old woman gushes over how much she has heard about me from my grandma. How I'm smart. How I'm pretty. How I seem perfect. The smile grows larger and faker. I laugh and thank her.

Perfect. I hate that word. I hate that expectation I have created for myself. I hate the way that word can make me feel like the biggest failure in the world. It's the word that has led me to lie to every person in my life.

Perfect is the word that made me stop eating.

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I was dreading this moment all week. It was Wednesday and I knew I had to go back to my mom's house. As we pulled into the driveway almost every part of my 14-year-old self didn't want to go inside. I didn't want to step inside that house with its dirt all over the floors or moldy dishes covering every inch of counter top. But I had to.

My mom's depression was at its lowest point and there was nothing I could do about it. For a while I tried to help her. I would try my best in school to make straight A's. I would try to stay home with her and spend extra time with her. None of it worked. All she would want to do is just lay in bed all day.

The days I was with her I would be stuck on the couch watching TV or in my room that was starting to overflow with the laundry she didn't want to do. The house was dark and quiet so I would turn the TV up as loud as possible to get some kind of noise going through the house. I avoided the kitchen at all costs. It was full of dirty dishes with half eaten dinners still on the plates. Garbage was filling the counters and falling off onto the floor since it hadn't been taken out in weeks. Our house looked like this and my mom couldn't care less. She was too depressed to get out of bed.

I thought that my perfection would actually make my mom happy. My brothers had called me the golden child for years because they thought I was perfect. It was always something I thought people expected from me. For as long as I can remember I have been a perfectionist. But with my mom's depression, things were too out of my control to perfect, no matter how hard I tried.

I thought I wasn't enough for my mom. Once again I didn't know what to do or how to deal with it. I couldn't admit that I could never gain perfection no matter how hard I tried. I could only perfect one thing: my diet.

I stopped eating. Again. This wasn't the first time it happened. Two years earlier when my older brother's drug use was its worst, I tried it as a coping mechanism. But this time, I stuck with it.

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I sit there looking at my full plate of food.

You can do this. You are strong enough.

I lift the fork and stab it through the macaroni noodle, but my thoughts are interrupted. That voice in my head comes back. It reminds me of everything. It reminds me of the time my dad called the police on my older brother and made him leave the house. It reminds me of when my mom was hospitalized for her severe depression. It reminds me of all the times anyone ever said something bad about me behind my back. Then it wins and I throw the food away and just go lay down.

The voice in the back of my head started out as my friend. It gave me a sense of stability and comfort when I thought my life was falling apart. It became a way for me to try to achieve the perfection I thought I needed.

This was becoming my routine at every meal I tried to eat.

I cut out breakfast completely, convincing myself that I never had time for it in the morning anyway. At lunch I would eat two cookies and that was it. Dinner was the challenge. With my mom, all I had to do was throw away whatever fast food she bought for me that night. At my dad's, it was not so easy.

I would sit at the table and make sure to talk as much as I could. That way I wouldn't have time to put food in my mouth. I would move food around the plate to make it look like I ate or I would use my left to hold my fork so it would slow me down. I would count the number of times I chewed my food before swallowing. Usually I would try for anywhere between 10 and 15 chews, that way I could slow myself down and reduce the food to being mushy and flavorless causing me not to want anymore.

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"Come to dinner with us tonight," my best friend Claire said. "We're going to Italian Delight."

I wanted to go. I wanted to eat a plate of fettuccini alfredo. But I couldn't. It was carbs. A huge serving of guilt. I wanted to spend time with my friends, but I couldn't. Going out to dinner meant eating which meant losing control.

"My parents want me to stay home," I lied. "They are making me clean my room."

A few months had passed since I went back to living with my mom and life was beginning to settle down and things were going back to normal. My mom worked hard on applying a new daily routine in our lives so I would feel more structured. She was back to the mom I was used to having around. My brother was becoming more mature and easier to get along with. Everyone in my family was getting better, but my eating problems were getting worse. I had become so dependent on the sense of control not eating gave me that I didn't know how to continue on without it.

Not eating started as my coping mechanism, but in the end, it just made everything worse and spun out of control. It killed my self-esteem. I would look at my reflection and only see my flaws. My self image had become so distorted because of my low self esteem. I would see big teeth and round



cheeks that I wanted to get rid of. I would look at myself for close to 30 minutes trying to pick out every single thing that was wrong with me. I would hook my feet under bed and do sit ups until I was on the verge of tears just to make the fat that I thought was around my stomach go away.

One night when I looked in the mirror, I didn't see myself. I saw a small, scared looking girl who was extremely pale and weak. I got as close up to mirror as I could to try to figure out what was happening, squinting my eyes and trying to look at my face from every possible angle. For the first time I actually saw what I was doing to myself. I knew that I couldn't continue this for much longer and I knew that at some point I would have to weigh more than 100 pounds. For the first time I realized how consumed and obsessed I really was. I saw how much I was hurting myself.

I stepped back and just stared at the reflection in front of me.

Is this worth it?

No. After looking at that reflection, I realized how much of my life I was wasting, how much I was hurting myself. I was doing all of this just to chase perfection. Perfection that I was learning didn't exist.

After that night I started to do little things to make myself better. I would try to go out to eat with my friends more. I would try to focus on the small things I could control rather than my family members.

I still struggle with the voice in my head that comes out every so often when I look at my food. I still strive for perfection in almost everything I do. I still think I owe it to my parents to be their golden child. But there is a part of me that knows I can't be perfect.

I know that starving myself was wrong. So why did I do it in the first place? Why did I skip that first meal back in sixth grade? Why did I suffer through constant headaches and pain? Why did I isolate myself from my friends? Why did I lie to my family?

Because I'm not perfect. But I am learning to accept that. Because I now know that even if I'm not perfect, I am enough.