

My Demons, Born From Obesity

DIANE HWU



WRITER'S COMMENT: When my UWP 104F instructor, Karma Waltonen, asked my class to write a case study, I half-heartedly considered taking it as an opportunity to discuss my struggle with obesity. Knowing that I would rather simultaneously wrestle a bear and an alligator (among many similarly arduous tasks) than discuss this intensely personal experience, I finally forced myself into believing that there wouldn't be a better chance to reflect upon this experience, and that I should seize it when I could. And I'm still so glad I did, because this opportunity helped me close a dark chapter in my life and hopefully reach out to others who may be in a similar place as well. As much as I would like to credit the completion of this piece to my own hard work, the completion of this piece would not have been possible without the first person to have ever read my essay—Ellen Abrams. Thank you for non-judgmentally and sensitively editing my numerous drafts while I bawled—tears dripping and snot flying—from revisiting the content of the essay during the editing process. I couldn't have seen myself bringing this piece to a final draft and subsequently submitting it to Prized Writing if it weren't for your encouragement. While the thought of having my personal struggles publicly divulged still frightens me, I hope this piece can not only contribute to the ongoing conversation about the psychological effects of obesity, but act as a reminder to anybody who may be experiencing a similar struggle as well—you're not alone!

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: I usually discourage students from writing about themselves or someone they know well for their case study essay in 104F: Writing in the Health Science Professions because they already find their problems interesting and don't necessarily do the work to make the audience care. The essays also often suffer from the curse of knowledge—the author knows so much that he or she has difficulty filling in necessary gaps for the audience. Diane is an obvious exception, having written a beautiful piece about her health issues. Most people will see this as a piece about mental health and obesity. This piece is actually about bravery. The bravery to tell the

truth. The bravery to expose oneself to an audience. The bravery to admit to some of the things our society still attaches shame to—imperfect bodies and depression. The bravery to confront demons.

—Karma Waltonen, *University Writing Program*

Looking down, I saw what most people refer to as a “muffin top,” rolls of fat spilling over my hips, slightly jiggling as I moved. On a good day, this did not bother me whatsoever; however, on a bad day, I let massive waves of self-deprecation and self-hatred roll over me, and I would have no will to rescue the drowning, flailing voice that reminded me, “You are worth something. You are loved.” On these bad days, I moseyed over to the kitchen to peruse the knives, pondering which one I should use to slice off my rolls of fat. Thinking about the mess I would make for my parents would always help me stop here, at a contemplation that would come and pass without manifesting into a strong, deep obsession. However, some are not as fortunate as I am. Several studies show that obesity is positively correlated with depression and that obese women report higher instances of suicide ideation, or thoughts of suicide, and suicide attempts as well (Klinitzke et al. 277). In fact, those with a forty to fifty BMI are reported to have an 87% higher risk for suicide attempts in comparison to the general population, while those with a BMI greater than fifty have a 122% higher risk (Klinitzke et al. 279).

While I logically knew that in this country, my city, even, there were women who felt the same way, I believed I had nobody I could reach out to for emotional support. Just as research has shown that obese women report being more lonely than their thinner peers, I believed I was alone, deeply entrenched in a battle that only I could understand (Schumaker et al. 1147). Instead of gathering the courage to talk to close acquaintances and family, I shuffled my emotions away into a tiny yet aggressively spreading corner within my mind, out of fear that I would be misunderstood or ridiculed if I even cautiously peeled back a portion of my cheery disposition to reveal my inner struggles. I was part of the reported 29% of girls that are mocked about their weight (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, and Story 733); while I knew that my parents and relatives loved my spirit and personality, I suffered from their harsh disapproval of my physical appearance. My relatives only thinly veiled their criticisms of my body and passively but consistently reminded me that I was obese, a disgusting and unacceptable characteristic in society.

While my relatives never explicitly mentioned it, I understood that they wanted to protect me from the negative stigma towards obese people. Research documents pervasive weight-based stereotypes that “overweight and obese individuals are lazy, weak-willed, unsuccessful, unintelligent, lack self-discipline, and have poor willpower [*sic*]” (Puhl and Heuer 1019). Though I wish people didn’t apply these generalities to me, frequent encounters with people who discriminate against the obese led me to believe that I was the quintessential obese person. While recent estimates suggest that the prevalence of weight-based discrimination has increased to be nearly on par with the prevalence of racial discrimination, weight-based discrimination is much less frequently challenged than its racial counterpart (Puhl and Heuer 1019). A possible explanation for this is quite simple: people generally believe that obesity is a choice, our weight issues being a physical manifestation of weak character (Puhl and Heuer 1019). Furthermore, there is a misleading perception that stigma against the obese could be used to encourage people to adopt healthier behaviors (Puhl and Heuer 1022). However, the intended effects are generally the opposite of what people expect, as studies show that adults who experience weight discrimination are actually more likely to develop eating disorders and reduce their physical activity (Puhl and Heuer 1022).

In retrospect, I was guilty of being a part of this generality. After being teased about my weight in middle school, especially in Physical Education, I grew more reluctant to participate in sports and exercise. As I was one of the “slow ones” in my class, I developed a terrible fear of being laughed at for being in last place. Every Friday morning before a timed run, my heart clenched and dropped into my stomach while I experienced nervousness-induced gag reflexes. By the middle of the semester, I wanted to injure myself, because I thought it would be less painful than having to subject myself to this weekly torment. I never told my parents, however, as I couldn’t bring myself to tell others that the sole activity they strongly recommended to me to stay healthy was causing me intense misery.

My obesity not only created a strained and wretched relationship with physical activity but also destroyed any likelihood for me to have a healthy relationship with food as well. I began dieting at a very young age with backward results, and I became another statistic, a statistic showing that adolescents who diet are indeed at more risk for developing obesity (Stice et al. 971). After instances where people pulled food away from

me even before I began eating or stared at my plate asking why I took so much food (even when I had less food compared to everybody else), I steadily developed a strong hatred of myself for failing to fully control my eating. I ate “acceptable” amounts or skipped meals entirely if I really wanted to make my family happy and maintained a cheery and satisfied façade; meanwhile, I began eating secretly on the side, either by burying food wrappers deep within the trashcan or eating extremely late at night when my parents were asleep. I ate secretly because I was ashamed, and, even though I was ashamed, I kept eating to cope, to keep me sane while I believed that the entire world hated me for the person I was. I felt worse after I finished eating, however, and would feel an onset of a suffocating whirlwind of self-deprecation, generally resulting in bouts of self-harm as I would desperately claw and punch my abdominal fat, naively hoping that by doing this I would make it disappear, along with all of my problems. I kept my feelings of guilt to myself over the years and slowly lost the ability to confide in my family about my weight issues, instead letting my self-hatred and low self-esteem brew within me, slowly creating a dark, terrible concoction of sadness and loneliness that seeped into my entire outlook on life.

Only now, years later, have I realized the myriad of ways that obesity has negatively affected my self-esteem. Since I spent my entire life struggling with obesity, I developed a strong, but faulty, belief by the time I entered college that because I couldn’t win my battle against obesity, I couldn’t win at anything. I stopped challenging myself and would sooner accept failures to achieve my academic goals than to put in an effort to achieve them. I subsequently caught myself in a vicious cycle, where I would fail at a task, lose more self-esteem, try even less to achieve my goals, and fail again. I then reached my lowest, when I began my Gross Anatomy course in the 2013 Winter Quarter.

Under an extreme amount of stress, I quickly relapsed into my self-loathing tendencies and again used food to comfort myself. This time, however, I wasn’t satisfied by eating. I maintained an immovably hopeless state; while surrounded by schoolwork and unfulfilled responsibilities, I would sit in my chair for hours frozen, without crying, because I felt that I, the trash of the universe, didn’t deserve to cry because that could alert my roommates, and I didn’t deserve their unconditional love. I finally seriously contemplated suicide and delegated time each day to consider different locations and methods I could use to disappear, with no immediate inconvenience to this world.

When I began rapidly narrowing possibilities down, the hopeful voice within me, which I viciously smothered years ago, softly whimpered once more, "You are worth something. You are loved." The following thought processes were a blur, and I found myself standing in front of my roommate, doing something I deemed impossible; with my head bowed down, I finally admitted that I was planning to kill myself. She replied, incredibly raw and honest, "Diane, we've all felt this way." I never felt so relieved and was finally able to liberate the flood of terrible feelings I was holding back with an ironclad wall. When I finally stopped crying, she went downstairs and returned with another roommate. While I was initially scared and confused, my nervousness was completely erased when she began to speak; she consoled me and confided in us her personal struggles with suicide ideation. The rest of the conversation is cloudy in my memory, but by some alignment of the stars, or some narrow chance that it would be the three of us sitting in that room, with life experiences and choices leading them to say the *perfect* words when I needed them most, I had the courage to reflect upon and confront demons that had plagued me my entire life. I began to excel in my courses, put more energy into pursuing my passions, and, ultimately, accept my demons, because carrying their weight has made me a stronger person today.

Unfortunately, my story isn't unique. I was lucky to have the chance to write my demons into these pages, binding them firmly to each of these words so I can slightly release myself from their grasp for the first time in ten years. However, to support the emotional needs of millions of obese people suffering from psychological effects of obesity, more concrete research in this field is necessary to educate the general public to fight the disease, instead of the diseased themselves. While this research will not fully ease these psychological effects in the near future, I hope that one day, a kind, helping hand can be fully extended to the next girl or boy wallowing in self-hatred because of their obesity and will promise them that they will never have to suffer alone again.

Works Cited

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