

Orthorexia Nervosa

As I stepped onto the bathroom scale, I sighed. Three days of a juice cleanse and I had managed to gain two pounds. Reluctantly, I admitted to myself that, yes, I had perhaps caused some kind of harm to my body that went beyond my intention of simply becoming healthy. But what had I done? Being healthy was a good thing, so why had all of my efforts seemed to do more bad than good to my body and mind?

It's no secret that Americans are obsessed with the body. From eating disorders and plastic surgery, to cleansing and over-exercising, we are a society consumed by the need to uphold a standard of beauty that is mostly an unattainable ideal. We struggle to find the balance between gentle self-care and rigid health routines. In a nation that is plagued by an obesity epidemic, it almost seems like we could never be too healthy. Or could we?

It is becoming more common in our country for individuals to find themselves obsessed with being healthy. At first glance, these people are eating plenty of healthy foods, exercising, and abstaining from substances that harm. Many of them are truly just health-focused and seeking balance. If you look a little closer, however, there are a few that have become so consumed by their healthy lifestyles that they are no longer promoting health in their bodies or minds. This new eating disorder has been called Orthorexia Nervosa. Those with Orthorexia have varied beliefs about what it means to be

healthy, but the defining feature that links them together is a "maniacal obsession" with their specific way of eating.

In extreme stages, their dietary beliefs cause them to avoid social interactions with others who don't share their way of eating, and it may cause them to isolate themselves and turn down opportunities because they might interfere with their dietary regime.

I was raised by a mother who had (and still has) this eating disorder, and she passed down those beliefs to me. I ate whatever was put in front of me as a child, but as my teenage years crept up, body image issues showed up and motivated me in ways that weren't healthy. I suddenly felt "fat" and as though my body was out of my control and needed taming. Of course, I would be healthy about it! This evolved into an obsession with food purity and the "perfect" human diet. After a few years of a raw vegan diet, I found myself standing on that scale, wondering what on earth I had done. Two small children depended on me for their physical and emotional nourishment, and I couldn't stop obsessing about my diet, even as I comforted and loved them.

After that pivotal moment, it took me another year to figure out how to help myself. I went through a series of periods of bingeing, trying other extreme diets (such as the trendy paleo diet), and feeling like I would never be free of constantly thinking

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about food. The extreme and heavily-restricted “health” diet of my childhood had left my body with permanent issues, such as constant fatigue and a feeling of malnutrition. I decided that it was time to heal my mind, and embarked on a healing diet of eating nutritious meals from scratch, and not limiting the amount I ate. I simply ate real food, and as much as I wanted. It was very challenging to overcome the anxiety that accompanied this rebellion against my obsession. My mind begged for cleansing diets and purging. It complained about any weight that I gained, which made it difficult to continue eating. But after a few months, I realized that the mental chatter had lessened significantly. I was free.

In the years since then, my metabolism has recovered, my body has healed (and has even added a surprising amount of muscle mass), and my mind is calm and at peace with food. I feel freed from a cage that used to consume my every waking moment. It is not easy to recover from an eating disorder, but it is so worth it.

Doctors are still just becoming aware of Orthorexia, and it is not yet officially recognized by the American Psychological Association. However, it is very real to those who experience it, and also to those with loved ones who have this obsessive issue. It has the potential to be as dangerous as Anorexia Nervosa or Bulimia Nervosa, simply because those with it have a

tendency to continually restrict their diet until they are left with very little that they will eat. Being healthy is of utmost importance, but this also includes mental health and balance in self-perception. Physical health is only one part of the equation, and it is the ability to finally invest in healing ourselves mentally and emotionally that will lead us to better overall health.



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