

By Brittany L. Uhlorn

Making peace with imperfection

“I can eat 200 grams of sweet potato, 4 ounces of ground turkey, and 90 grams of lettuce for lunch,” I thought to myself. “I have to run 2 miles after my workout to make up for that chocolate chip I ate yesterday, and I need to check my weight tomorrow to make sure I didn’t gain anything overnight.” “Brittany? Brittany! Any suggestions for troubleshooting your labmate’s experiment?” My graduate school adviser was trying to get my attention during lab meeting—but there I was again, meticulously planning meals and obsessing over exercise, oblivious to the eating disorder I had developed to cope with the stress and anxiety that accompanied my quest for perfection.

It started 2 years into my Ph.D., after my comprehensive exam. I had always succeeded academically, aiming for a pedestal defined by others’ standards. As I stepped in front of my exam committee, I was eager to dazzle. But I was told my hypothesis wasn’t valid. I was chastised for lack of creativity. My simplistic sketch of the Golgi drew derisive snickers. Even though I passed, I believed I was a failure.

Suddenly, for the first time, I felt completely out of control. The result was debilitating stress and anxiety. Up to that point, I had never denied myself food, and I exercised for fun—not out of obligation. But the Instagram fitness influencer craze lured me into thinking I could take back control of my life by perfecting my physique.

What began as a seemingly harmless “lifestyle change” turned into orthorexia nervosa, an unhealthy obsession with supposedly healthy eating and exercise (but not body weight, in contrast to anorexia or bulimia). I spent my days using my research skills to methodically plan a restrictive diet complemented by a strict exercise routine. During lab meeting, instead of paying attention to the research being presented, my mind was fixated on the ideal ratio of carbs, fats, and protein. I spent more time weighing rice cakes and spinach than planning the experiments I needed to do to finish my manuscript. I often turned down social gatherings so that I could eat “safe” meals at home.

I had gained a false sense of control and suppressed my emotions, but the underlying problems were still there—and getting worse. Over 9 months, as my stress and anxiety increased, orthorexia developed into anorexia. I compulsively stepped on the scale multiple times a day and spat out food after chewing. I ate from the smallest dishes to



“There I was again, meticulously planning meals and obsessing over exercise.”

give the illusion of a full plate and denied my audibly growling stomach the food it needed. I bruised from sitting in chairs and would black out upon standing. I couldn’t sleep, and I jeopardized my relationships. I became a walking skeleton.

My family and adviser asked whether I was OK and suggested time away from lab, but my disordered brain made excuses for how I was feeling and behaving. I honestly believed I was thriving.

It wasn’t until I stumbled across an article about disordered eating as a coping mechanism for mental health issues that I put a name to the problem. After 2 months of spiraling deeper into my disorder, thinking I could “fix” it on my own, I finally sought the help of a therapist.

I learned that my eating disorder had nothing to do with food, exercise,

or weight; instead, it was about my desire to be exceptional. Through weekly sessions, I unpacked 25 years of needing to be perfect. I learned tools to acknowledge and process my feelings, instead of numbing them with calorie restriction and intense workouts.

Still, in times of stress the disordered part of my brain desperately clung to food deprivation. Restoring my weight took more than a year, as well as the help of a dietitian. Gradually I redefined food and exercise as sustenance for body and mind, not tools for suppressing uncomfortable feelings.

Now, a year and a half into my recovery, I am entering my final year of graduate school with a completely different mindset about the person I want—rather than need—to be. Yes, I still want to succeed. But I don’t want to be perfect. ■

Brittany L. Uhlorn is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Arizona in Tucson. Send your career story to SciCareerEditor@aaas.org.

Science

Making peace with imperfection

Brittany L. Uhlorn

Science **366** (6462), 274.

DOI: 10.1126/science.366.6462.274

ARTICLE TOOLS

<http://science.sciencemag.org/content/366/6462/274>

PERMISSIONS

<http://www.sciencemag.org/help/reprints-and-permissions>

Use of this article is subject to the [Terms of Service](#)

Science (print ISSN 0036-8075; online ISSN 1095-9203) is published by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1200 New York Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20005. The title *Science* is a registered trademark of AAAS.

Copyright © 2019 The Authors, some rights reserved; exclusive licensee American Association for the Advancement of Science. No claim to original U.S. Government Works