My challenges with eating stemmed from depression, lack of self-confidence, and struggles to adhere to how I thought society and my peers defined masculinity. Throughout my time in high school and college I experienced chronic self-doubt and feelings of fraudulence.

*Trigger warning: Descriptions of eating disordered behavior.*

In high school, many of my peers saw me as a gregarious and funny person; I used humor to hide how uncomfortable I was with myself. The majority of my male classmates in high school were athletes, surfers, and skateboarders. There was a dominant “SoCal Bro” culture that consisted of raised trucks, sports, and stereotypical hyper-masculinity. That wasn’t me. This caused a lot of internal discomfort – my personality and disposition wasn’t aligned with the masculinity that my peers defined themselves with. It made me feel uncomfortable with who I actually was. While I am cis-gendered and heterosexual, I still didn’t feel like I was the “typical guy” and always thought I was going to be rejected by the larger school population because of this. My school – like most – consisted of many cliques or groups of students. I was the rare person who successfully floated between most of the cliques. But, it was a defense mechanism. Outside of a small core group of friends, I was able to avoid letting people in. I was welcome anywhere but always an outsider. It allowed me to hide my sadness and fear.

My lack of self-confidence was magnified when dealing with girls that I liked. I imagine that many people felt awkward in romantic encounters at this age. My awkwardness felt more extreme. When I wasn’t being told, “You’re like a brother to me!” – which was often – I was undermining myself due to insecurity. I wasn’t the guy that I thought they would want. At my core, I didn’t think that I was worth loving or being liked. This lack of confidence and self-worth led to avoidance and I became petrified by the idea of rejection. It would confirm my fear.

My unhealthy relationship with food began when I was 16 and got a job. I worked consistently through high school. While most of that money was supposed to help our family with bills, I used the freedom and new income to indulge in unhealthy eating. I worked at a grocery store and could buy snack food, candy, and sugar-laden drinks whenever I wanted. Whenever something triggered my fear of rejection and failure, a fog of anxiety and deep disdain for myself would surround me. I comforted myself with food. The immediate gratification saturated the fog temporarily.

There was a moment in college, when a stranger stopped me on the street to ask a question and greeted me with, “Hey big guy!” When I was in high school, I was gangly – all limbs. I was used to people being amazed at my height and asking me how tall I was. But as I gained weight, due to destructive and emotional eating, I realized that people had stopped describing me as tall and instead I was “big”. I couldn’t imagine anyone being attracted to me. When I looked in the mirror, I hated what I saw. I dreamed of waking up with the abs and upper body of the men on the magazine covers or movies. I would have self-worth. People would think more of me. If I could just look like the men in movies or covers of magazines, it would fix everything.

There were stretches of time in which things went well – I was able to exercise or string together several days or weeks of healthy choices, but inevitably something would cause me to backslide. Lack of control over aspects of my life, perceived rejection, or failure of some sort would make my confidence and self-worth erode. Nothing could mitigate the self-
loathing and loneliness like food could. Food was a way to control something, at a time in my life in which I felt like I had no control. As time went on, the actual enjoyment faded. I was chasing the idea of comfort. I was addicted to the feeling of, “this food is about to make you feel better.”

During these periods of time I felt like I couldn’t get back on a positive path until I touched the bottom. My body and mind yearned to sink as quickly as possible to hit the ocean floor. The only way that I could be healthy again was to seek out wherever the bottom was, grasp it, and swim back to the surface. I routinely would use my time sinking to the bottom to have a “Check every box” day, where I ate everything that I normally tried to avoid. I thought, “If I just eat all of it today, I’ll reach the bottom and be fine again. I’ll be fine forever.”

At the time, I didn’t realize that some of my actions were common for people who struggled with eating disorders. During college I lived near two Jack-in-the-Boxes that were very close to each other. Jack-in-the-Box was one of the spots I would go to when I was emotionally eating and would order a large amount of food. Embarrassed by this, I would drive to one location to place half of an order, hide the bag in my car, and drive to the other to place the second half of my enormous order. Once a week, I would order a Wednesday Night pizza deal from a local chain - two medium pizzas and cheese sticks. I would rush home so that I could order and get it delivered before my roommates got home. I would hide the food in my room, petrified they would judge me. I would use “we” when ordering meals or getting goods at a bakery that I would consume individually. “We’ll get three chocolate donuts and... let’s see. We’ll get two crumb donuts, and...

My recovery has been a challenging process. My time in college and attempts at finding mental health balance and making better food and diet choices helped me learn what worked and what failed. I’ve been able to slowly build better habits that eventually become routine. Gaining distance and time from the toxic masculinity that prevailed in my high school helped me understand that being different was okay. But, even at times of my physically and mentally healthiest, I’m still disappointed when I look at myself. I’m in a healthy relationship but struggle to understand why my significant other thinks I’m attractive. Even when she tells me, I don’t believe her. I think that she settled for me.

My advice to those that are working to recover is to remember that you can’t do it all at once. It’s slow progress but each step is rewarding. Find people in your life that will help you be healthy and trust them to not judge you when you slip up. You’re worthy of being loved and appreciated. Mistakes happen and are part of the recovery process. And don’t let gender norms prevent you from seeking help if you have an eating disorder.

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For recovery resources and treatment options, visit the the National Eating Disorders Association website or call their Helpline at 800-931-2237.