

Op-ed: A Gay Man's Voice in the Eating Disorder Conversation

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Eating disorders are prevalent among gay, bisexual, and transgender men, but it isn't always easy to find help.

Eating disorders in our society are not viewed as male diseases. But they should be. According to [one study](#), more than 15 percent of gay or bisexual men have experienced anorexia, bulimia, or binge-eating disorder in their lifetimes.

I started having disordered behaviors around food when I was 21 years old. I remember it distinctly. Just before a family vacation to England, I had started to gain a little weight. Our family in the U.K. immediately noticed my weight gain and mentioned it. This caught me off guard, as my sister had always been the one with a little more meat on her bones, leaving me to identify myself as the thin sibling. Looking back, I can see that was the trigger.

I didn't think anything of it at the time and made a mental note to start working out. Gaining weight was embarrassing, and going to the gym where people could see me did not feel like a comfortable option for me. So I started running. I would go out into the desert and run until my body couldn't take any more. During this time I was living in Las Vegas, where there's plenty of room to run in the middle of the desert and no one looks twice, a blessing for runners and a temptation for someone suffering from poor self esteem. Mentally, I was just losing unhealthy weight and getting back to my "skinny" identity, but physically it was much more than that.

At this point the person I was seeing in the mirror wasn't a reflection of reality and I was fixated on body image. I soon stopped eating regularly.

It was easy for me to restrict food. The ADHD medication I was taking at the time suppressed hunger, so instead of taking one pill a day I took three or four, and I didn't crave food for days at a time.

Breaking my fast every few days only allowed my body minimal nutrients, as I took a laxative with nearly everything I ate. When my digestive tract did get relief from laxatives, if you could call it relief, I would drink alcohol to hide the hunger.

My unhealthy eating patterns materialized in so many different ways. I never thought that obsessive working out could lead into an eating disorder so quickly, or be an eating disorder in

itself. There's such a wide range of ways that it manifests itself and too many easy ways to keep it going.

Unfortunately, at that time I didn't see my self-consciousness as a clear weakness. There was so much going on inside my head that the last thing I was concerned about was being overly body-conscious. I hadn't come out yet and didn't realize the extreme stress that my psyche was under. My actions and food restriction became more severe with the rise and fall of stress — something I must monitor to this day.

At age 30 I came out, broke off an engagement to a woman, and embraced the LGBT community. During one of the most stressful periods of my life, my eating disorder raged on more intensely than ever.

Thankfully I had incredible family support. My sister provided tremendous encouragement and love. But even though they were right beside me, no one in my family knew how to handle it. My weight became a joke within the family. People would mention that my clothes were hanging off me and laugh. It was like having an alcoholic aunt whose issues the family ignores. Everyone can see it, but they're all too close to the situation to step back and think, *That's really an issue and we should get help*. No one could see my eating disorder clearly, including myself.

But I couldn't stop. Constantly worried about how I looked so I could maintain my "skinny" identity, the eating disorder took over. Very early on after I came out, the community labeled me a "twink," which only perpetuated my obsession with my natural physical characteristic of having a small frame.

Most social groups of young people categorize each other based on physical characteristics, and the gay community is no different. Youthful individuals are placed into a certain box that they'll identify with for years. There are all these images of popular body types from different time periods floating around. The issue is being brought to light specifically for women, but there's also a vast population of men who are subject to the same social pressures. People don't think men have these kinds of issues with body image, so it's not talked about. These pressures and categories greatly contributed to the way I viewed food.

It sounds cliché, but to get over something like this you've got to be secure with yourself. Full recovery will never happen when the concern about what other people think is still prevalent. My eating disorder came in waves for roughly 10 years until I was truly happy from the inside out. When stressful situations arise, I'm still susceptible to disordered eating, and I keep that in mind. I'd like to say that if my life suddenly fell apart I'd be able to stay strong, but seeking help from a therapist would be necessary.

Thankfully, with age comes maturity, which helps maintain a positive body image. However, with eating disorders being an incredibly deadly mental illness, it's important to get help and not to try to wait it out with age. If I had reached out for help from a specialized eating disorder

treatment center, the esophagus damage, digestive struggles, overly sensitive gag reflex, and stomach harm could've been minimized.

Seeking help as a gay male is intimidating. Looking for resources can also feel discouraging because many of the support systems are designed for women. Still, there are places that offer support for men, like the Center for Hope of the Sierras, for example. If we could spread the message to every body-conscious man that help is out there, so many gay men like me could be spared the physical, emotional, and psychological toll of battling an eating disorder alone.

JOSEPH HOLTOM lives in Las Vegas with his boyfriend and proudly hasn't had an eating disorder relapse in nearly five years.