

# ***Running Helped Me Leave Disordered Eating In The Dust***

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Nothing feels better than conquering a hill riddled route or crushing a speed session. I inevitably feel accomplished. I can do this because, as my niece says, "I am a strong girl who can do hard things!" I am proud of my body; it is strong and healthy. But it hasn't always been this way.

The bathroom floor was cold, hard, and unforgiving, just like my thoughts as I laid there sobbing. *Why did I eat so much dinner!? I can't eat anything all day tomorrow or everyone in class will know what a cow I am!* I knew what I had to do. I had to be strong. *Just do it. If you make yourself, you can eat some fruit tomorrow.* On my knees I tried. I really tried, but I couldn't do it. My fingers wouldn't go far enough. I gave up, curled up, and cried some more. I was 14.

Since I was young, ballet has been a huge part of my life. I danced through grade school and professionally after college. Anything as physically demanding as ballet requires dedication, rigorous training and drive. Unfortunately, for me, it also took a toll.

*I'm so undisciplined. I can't believe I ate that entire salad.*

Even as an adult, returning to ballet was bringing back old body image baggage and eating struggles. *Is that a roll under my leotard? No breakfast or lunch for me tomorrow.* I lived like this for years. There were times, when dancing less, I allowed myself more food freedom, but when I put on a leotard and tights, everything came rushing back, even at 28 years old. Tears of self loathing had me curled up on the floor.

*I can't believe how fat I look.*

No matter how little I ate during the day, looking in the mirror at myself in a leotard immediately began the abuse. *I must have had too much water today; I look so bloated.* Most days I only ate a small snack then danced for multiple hours. I avoided carbs and anything I considered unhealthy. When I put on my leotard and tights I self criticized or felt like crying. I hated the way I looked. The last years of my 20s were spent frustrated and angry for allowing myself to overindulge. Even though I wore the smallest sizes in clothing, I believed I was huge.

During the COVID-19 shutdown, fearing weight gain and with nothing else to do, I started running. Slowly, running became my solace. When running, there was no judging myself. My clothes did not accentuate what I disliked. Running made me feel strong. After realizing I could jog a 5k, my husband challenged me to try a 10k. *I could never do that! I'm not capable of running six miles!* But I tried. And I did. And I was proud of myself and of my body. I conquered distances and paces I once believed impossible. I was strong; I was healthy. Unfortunately, I did not realize how much better I felt running until ballet opened up and I went back.

I put on my leotard. *I can't believe how much weight I gained! This barely fits me; how did I have so little self-control! I'm so out-of-shape...I can't eat so much anymore.* The body I had been so proud of immediately became a body I hated.

Finally, my eyes were opened to the severity of my situation when I broke down sobbing over a pair of pants that were too tight (skiing all winter toned my leg muscles.) I then understood the image for which I constantly strove as a ballerina was not healthy. After our *Nutcracker* in December 2021, I retired. And I went back to running.

I quickly realized the importance of fueling my body. After almost passing out a few times from undernourishment, I began to free my eating. *I just ran 12 miles and I feel great! That casserole last night really gave me energy!* Carbs ceased being the enemy when I realized how much better I ran after eating a grain like quinoa. Slowly, my view of my body and food was changing.

The inner dialogue is much kinder these days. My running clothes don't inspire negative self-talk. The muscle I gained from running doesn't induce sobbing. *My legs look awesome! There is so much definition!* I've let go of clothes that, due to muscle gain, didn't fit well.

I am strong. I am healthy. I'm less cranky, less tired, and an overall happier person. I still have hard days, but my sense of myself is so much better. Even my husband has noticed the change. "You are a lot happier when running than you ever were when dancing."