Annals of Internal Medicine

My Nights Eat My Days: How My Eating Disorder Overshadowed the Autism No One Saw

I'm at the grocery store. A woman—all sinew and angles—glides from bin to bin. Her hand hovers, hesitating as if her brain can't will her body to pick up the scoop. A quick glance at the diet shakes in her cart and I know her story because it was mine, too. I remember myself, at 13, watching my body recede from curves and softness to angles and pain. I remember how it hurt to sit, with only the thinnest layer of flesh between my tailbone and the hard, plastic toilet seat in the girls' locker room. I'd perch there like a skeletal bird as I rationed out those exact same drinks. I'd try not to think about my friends. Try not to remember how the previous year, I used to sit at a sticky, circular lunch table, part of a boisterous group. How I could hold my place—a storyteller with the most biting, sarcastic commentary. The kind that made my friends snort milk and blame me for it in a twisted, appreciative kind of way.

Something shifted in me the summer of my 12th year. I had felt it building, a series of random assaults on my senses, but I could keep it under control. Until one day my world broke and I could no longer handle the lunchroom experience. All of the noises swirled together and flooded my brain with discordant sounds. Assorted smells clogged my nostrils: body odor and vinaigrette and pine cleaner. I couldn't eat. Not at school, not at home, not even at restaurants. My senses were in a constant state of high alert. Sometimes I swore I could feel the texture of my clothing trying to steal pieces of my soul one synthetic fiber at a time. No matter what I did, I couldn't turn off the sirens blaring in my head, numbing my ability to think. I swapped the usual teenage concerns for just one thought: *Whatever it takes, this has to stop*. So I isolated myself in my room, doing leg lifts and crunches, pouring over weight loss magazines. I lost 30 pounds before I received my official diagnosis: anorexia nervosa.

Once the anorexia nervosa box was checked, my doctors stopped looking for any other reason for my struggles with food and overwhelm. I was showing classic signs of autism; however, it was missed, overshadowed by my eating disorder. To be fair, in 1992 when I was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa, there wasn't a lot of research on the link between eating disorders and autism. Today, we know that autistic individuals report significantly higher rates of eating disorder symptoms than their nonautistic peers, with up to 88% eating a limited range of foods. From the eating disorder side, some studies show that up to 22% of children and teens with eating disorders are autistic or have elevated autistic traits. The connection is substantial enough that a 2025 study recommended that physicians screen autistic patients for eating disorders. I'd argue that we also screen patients with eating disorders for autism.

When I began treatment for anorexia nervosa, my treatment team was sure that with group therapy and refeeding I'd be among the roughly 20% who make a full recovery. They were wrong. The focus was on getting calories in. Gaining weight. Getting my period back. It was so much pressure. Too much. And so I cracked in another direction. I became bulimic and an exercise addict. I presented as "fine." Super fit and athletic, even. Nobody knew the truth. I wore a mask that slowly suffocated me; however, at the time, it just seemed like what I had to do. I was even proud of how hard I worked to look and seem "normal." Yet, the warning sirens continued to blare in my brain and I knew something was very wrong.

Then came the tipping point. In college my world broke, again. I attempted suicide and ended up hospitalized for 9 months. I was misdiagnosed with bipolar disorder. I was put on high doses of medication that caused me to gain an enormous amount of weight, way more than my body needed. I was in hell; however, my treatment team encouraged me, assuring me that it was a small price to pay for not wanting to kill myself. I acquiesced, but I knew that this was just another flavor of wrong. Nothing had been fixed. I faced the possibility that this might be my forever.

After my release, I began struggling with night eating syndrome. I'd eat very little during the day and then binge uncontrollably at night. I saw myself in a line from the 19th-century writer Guy de Maupassant, who describes the pain of an escalating haunting with the line "Ce sont mes nuits qui mangent mes jours." *My nights eat my days*. I was constantly exhausted, and performing the basic activities of daily living wore me out. I was diagnosed with myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome and struggled with mental health crises. I didn't have a language for the sudden, intense sensations I was experiencing. I later learned that they were called meltdowns or shutdowns due to sensory overload. These experiences are common among autistics, and, despite all of the treatment I'd received, I had no tools to fight them. I was as defenseless as Guy de Maupassant's character against his haunted nights, and it terrified me. Eventually, I relapsed.

I cobbled myself back together and doubled down on my attempt to minimize my struggles. I applied to and was accepted into graduate school. I traveled, studied languages, published stories, and made lifelong friends—the kind that made me laugh so hard I'd snort my drink. I completed a PhD and began working at an R1 university. I became a mom. Although my love for my daughter was never in question, her cries at night—the very normal cries of a healthy baby—sent white-hot bolts of pain up my spine, exploding my skull. None of the other parents in my parenting

classes complained of this sort of thing. I wondered—were they just being stoic? Should I toughen up and power through, too? I ramped up a long tradition of self-gaslighting. *Raising a kid is hard*, I'd tell myself. *Everyone knows that. Besides, you signed up for this, remember?*

One day, my world broke again—and by this point I'd lost count of how many times it had happened. Rocking on the floor, banging my head against the wall, and utterly ashamed, I thought, *This is what autistic people do—not me*. But my curiosity grew. As a trained researcher, I threw myself into exploring. I read everything I could find about autism, especially how it presents in women. Ultimately, I came across its link to eating disorders. Suddenly, my world clicked back into place and everything just made sense. I got tested and received another diagnosis: *autism*.

Finally, I experienced clarity. Once I learned who I was, things got infinitely better. I was able to design a life with far fewer crises. I advocated for myself, reframing my different communication style as typical, healthy autistic behavior. I realized how I tended to override early signs of hunger, thirst, and sleep; therefore, I incorporated cues and frequent breaks into my routine. I discovered what triggered meltdowns, and I retrofitted my house to minimize sensory and cognitive overload. These changes didn't just benefit me; my daughter thrived. She grew to know herself as I grew to truly know myself. My struggles with eating ultimately resolved as I learned to work with my autism instead of fight it. I no longer gaslighted or guilted myself but instead saw my actions or responses as expressions of neurodivergence.

To this day I live with the anguish of "What if?" What if that 13-year-old had been screened for autism? What if she had received eating disorder treatments that honored her autism instead of ignoring its existence? What if she had learned to self-advocate back then? What if so many health care dollars hadn't been spent in the wrong direction?

I will never have the answer to these questions. I've had to mostly DIY my own eating disorder recovery and my life as an autistic woman. Earlier autism identification is crucial for providing appropriate eating disorder support because most autistic people simply won't benefit from eating disorder treatments designed for neurotypical people. Much of the treatment I received was counterproductive, and some of it was downright harmful.

I lock eyes with the stranger at the grocery store as her hand flutters over the bin. I will my glance to convey all of the compassion and strength I've cultivated over the years. For a split second, both of our eyes water. And then we look away.

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