

Learning to Love Myself was the Most Important Lesson I Ever Learned as a Lawyer

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I was eight years old the first time I remember bingeing. It was the early 90s, before the internet and smart phones. I had never heard of eating disorders and couldn't ask Google what I was doing or why. My body understood, though. It quickly learned that when I ate a large quantity of specific foods (high sugar/high carb) I felt better. I wasn't happy per se, but I felt less sad and empty. Time and again, I chased these feelings and quickly learned to hide what I was doing.

I learned to associate food with the highs of a binge and the lows that came after – the shame, judgment and guilt. I instinctively knew to protect my secret because others wouldn't understand and might even make me stop. The bingeing increased in frequency and, as I got older, became a normal part of my life. When I was fifteen, my dad moved out and the bingeing escalated to bingeing and purging. I didn't know how to deal with the big emotions I was experiencing and food was my shield, the only way I knew to protect myself. I was slowly dying inside, but did my best to pretend like I was normal. During these years I maintained good grades and played competitive junior tennis well enough to earn a college scholarship.

My junior year of college, my coach intervened and told me to get help with my eating issues. She was worried I was going to kill myself and refused to sit by and do nothing. She made me an appointment with an on-campus therapist who then referred me to a doctor about starting medication. Though therapy and medication offered some minor relief, my eating issues continued. I was bingeing and purging daily, sometimes multiple times a day. I didn't know how to handle my feelings and believed that at my core I was worthless and unlovable. I attributed any success I had to luck while taking full blame for all my failures.

In my mind I failed because I was stupid, ugly, fat, lazy – the list goes on. Every setback and hurdle seemed like the end of the world and only proved my worthlessness. I was always on edge, in survival mode, reacting out of fear and disrespect for myself, my life. Sometimes my depression and anxiety would overwhelm me and I would stay in bed for days, unable to get up except to find food for bingeing and purging. I would isolate myself from friends and family, ashamed and too exhausted to put on a happy face.

Over the years, I shared some of what was happening. I saw therapists who focused solely on my past traumas and nutritionists who talked to me about the importance of eating a balanced meal. Still, my feelings of helplessness and hopelessness grew, and I convinced myself these constant ups and downs and the ever-present issues with food were always going to be part of my life. When I got pregnant with my second child, I again fell into a serious depression. After sharing with the nurse during a pregnancy check-up that I was having thoughts of running my car off a bridge, medical staff forced me to get a psych examination at the hospital emergency department.

I remember sitting in the examination room, waiting for the doctor to come in, and thinking of the irony as I had spent a year of my career at the public defender's office representing individuals held on mental inquest warrants (MIW's). They had gone through the same process that I was currently enduring. I sat on the bed, in my hospital gown and socks with the rubber pads on the feet, and just felt numb. Luckily, the kind and experienced doctor recommended a medication adjustment and finding a good therapist. Although this offered some relief, the depression, anxiety and self-medicating with food never stopped.

Finally, in February of 2021 my body rebelled. I developed a horrible, uncontrollable itching which, upon scratching, produced hives. I got them all over my body and could only find relief with rest induced by multiple Benadryl. I saw numerous doctors and got prescriptions to control the hives, but they made me so tired that I often struggled to perform basic daily functions. As a final indignity, I gained almost thirty pounds in a year which increased my issues with food.

Then two things happened which changed my life. I was diagnosed with ADHD and started working with a life coach by the name of Leah Brown Waterman. My incredible, loving and supportive husband encouraged me to seek out this support by reminding me that I deserved it. I started taking medication for ADHD and learned more about how my brain works. I learned that I am not stupid, I just think differently. Now I embrace the way my brain works as a strength.

I met weekly with Leah and she helped me recognize that I have value, deserve good things and am strong enough to endure hardships in life, even without using food as a coping mechanism. Over time, I learned to understand my thoughts and feelings better. While it now sounds obvious, I had been using food as a coping strategy since I was eight years old. The realization that my thoughts controlled my feelings and not vice versa was life-altering. This realization has helped me claim control over my life in a way I have never been able to before.

Changing my thoughts about my own worth was difficult, but a turning point came when my oldest daughter turned eight. I would look at her sweet face, the same age I had been when I started bingeing, and I couldn't stand the idea of anyone saying the horrible things to her that I had said to myself. Leah suggested I carry a picture of eight-year-old me and look at it whenever I have negative thoughts about myself and try to say the horrible words while looking at the picture. I went further and

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carried a picture of myself at eight and my daughter at eight. When my thoughts turned negative, I looked at the pictures but I could never make myself say the words. Instead, I found compassion, empathy, grace and mostly love. Through this process I have learned to love myself. And, in turn, loving myself has allowed me to be more compassionate, empathetic and loving with others.

This is not a perfect process and I am nowhere near perfect in it. I work hard at it every day, some more than others. I mess up quite a bit – with myself and with others. When I do mess up I try hard to make amends to both myself and the others that I hurt. Without food as my shield, I often feel raw and exposed, like I am just now learning to adult at forty years old. But I look at those little girls' faces and know that they are worth it, no matter how hard it gets.

We are all deserving of love and respect. We are more than our jobs, more than this adversarial, often cut-throat profession. For the sake of ourselves, our clients and our profession, we have to find ways to be better to each other. Not to have unrealistic expectations of each other, but to find ways to communicate better, allow ourselves and others to show vulnerability without punishment, and to give each other grace. This is true not just among lawyers, but also between judges and lawyers. We should all remember that most of us are still carrying around that little kid inside of us, looking for acceptance and love.

I wrote this because I imagine there are other lawyers out there who could benefit from reading it. The idea of putting my personal experiences out there for others to read has made me sick to my stomach the past few days. I have had to fight my instincts to curl into a ball and self-medicate with food. I procrastinated and concocted reasons to avoid writing. But my husband reminded me that I am strong enough to deal with any negative response that might come from it and that if it helps one person it is worth it. So, I am trusting you to look on my story with kindness and ask that you show the same kindness to yourself. I know this is not an easy thing to ask because it took me decades to do it myself. But this is the work we do every day. We face hard problems and try to show compassion for those who need it. By accepting that sometimes I need compassion, too, I am in a better position to face and change the world.

A partner at Karem & Kleier Law, Jennifer has built an extensive practice in family law, criminal defense, estate planning and guardianship. She is actively involved in the LBA where she is the founding Chair of both the Gender Equity Committee and Health & Wellness Committee and currently serves on the Board as Secretary. The Health & Wellness Committee serves her biggest passion – promoting mental health and wellness for law students and lawyers. She believes transparency about our struggles is key to creating safe, supportive environments for others who are struggling to seek help and shares her struggles in the hopes of helping someone else. ■



The LBA Health & Wellness Committee invites you to contribute your personal narratives regarding mental health and/or well-being. Please send your submissions to Lisa Anspach at lanspach@loubar.org.

If you are facing challenges, support is within reach: LBA members and their families have access to an EAP and to KyLap.

If you are experiencing a crisis or thoughts of suicide please call the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline—dial 988 or visit <https://988lifeline.org/>.