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It's hard to build a positive self-image when you are constantly battling the effects of body shaming. Growing up in Portugal was not easy for me. I wasn't originally from Portugal, so my features and my size greatly contrasted the norms for Portuguese women. As early as my elementary school years, I can remember lamenting my color and my shape. Being bullied was a consistent part of my elementary years. I dreaded going to school, but I dreaded the way I looked even more.

As I grew older, issues I faced concerning body shaming caused me to cope in unhealthy ways. Transitioning into puberty made things even worse. I was still the only Black person in my class, and I had not been taught about the different body types inherent within different ethnic groups. I had more curves than my female peers, and I was much larger than they were. Being big and being black made me the center of negative attention. My self-concept was destroyed, and I developed an eating disorder. I became bulimic.

At the time I didn't know bulimia was an illness. To me, it was just common sense. If I wanted to lose weight, and food was stopping me, then I needed to get rid of the food. I lost 60 pounds in two months. When I went back to school in September, everybody started commenting, "Wow! You look amazing!" and "Wow, you're the prettiest black girl I know!" Fueled by the fast results, I kept doing it while also exercising at a high rate. Inevitably, this lifestyle was unsustainable, and one day I literally collapsed from malnutrition and exhaustion.

My health scare did spark a desire to stop. I successfully stopped for two weeks; however, I also began to binge eat during my two-week rehabilitation effort. I ate so much food that I felt the need to begin vomiting again. This began a dreadful cycle of abstaining for a little bit and then starting again. And throughout all the body changes I experienced during this time in my life, my mindset never changed. No matter how much weight I lost, I still hated the way I looked.

During my high school years at Shenandoah Valley Academy, I discovered that I had a mental illness. I didn't have the power to change on my own. I had the knowledge, but I still didn't have the ability to stop. I needed help, and I needed help fast.

For the first time in my life, I genuinely prayed to God. I remember my prayer: "Lord, I need your help." That was it. I didn't have much else to say. I only knew that I was tired of my disorder; I was tired of fighting it by myself, and I was ready to give my life to a God that I had questioned for so many years. I began to believe that He could help me, and I wanted to be made well. I was baptized that same year.

I graduated from SVA in 2012 and chose to attend Andrews University. By then I was not bulimic anymore, but I began to struggle with my unhealthy thoughts as I noticed all the beautiful and slim girls on campus. I started feeling insecure again, and I thought my chances of finding Mr. Right would increase if I lost weight. I became bulimic again.

Today, I am doing better; but honestly, I still struggle with my self-image and the temptation to cope through bulimia. I have not forced myself to vomit in a long time. I've tried to be open about suffering with bulimia, and I have been able to build a reliable support system of friends and professors who are willing to walk with me on my journey to recovery.

Andrews has taught me to be okay with discussing my struggle. The environment here has encouraged me to be honest and open with others. This culture is what I appreciate most about Andrews. I have learned that not all people will reject you or exploit you when you disclose highly vulnerable areas of your story. Sometimes, you meet people who will help you carry your burdens. I met a few of those people here at Andrews University.



Jessica Felicio