

Chapter 26: The Only Way Out Is Through

One of the most challenging periods of my life weight-wise was the year after I returned from living in Ecuador. In the year I was away, I had gained almost 35 pounds.

Since I had only packed a suitcase and a lot of “travel” clothes (shorts, sweatshirts, t-shirts, yoga pants, and stretchy clothes), I was aware that things were tight, but wasn’t fully aware of just how much weight I had gained. I did have to buy some jeans and tops while living there, so I knew old stuff didn’t fit, but it wasn’t until I arrived home that I realized that *none* of my clothes fit me.

I was also having my fair share of intestinal issues, which contributed to the weight gain. Coming home was a nightmare. I felt embarrassed and ashamed. I wanted to hide under a rock until I lost some weight. I was afraid of people seeing me, of their first thought being, “Wow, Jenn gained so much weight.”

About two weeks after I got home, I was at the gym on the treadmill. I had gone to the same gym before I left for Ecuador, so I knew a few of the people who worked out there. One of the trainers I knew hopped on the treadmill beside me and asked how my trip was.

Embarrassed, I mumbled something about my trip, wishing he would just hurry up and leave. I went to the gym to run for 30 minutes, hoping I wouldn’t see anyone I knew. I was mortified and ashamed of how I looked and didn’t want to make small talk with anyone.

And then he asked me the question that seemed to stop my heart from beating for a second: “*Are you expecting?*”

“What??!!! Did he just ask me if I was PREGNANT?!” I thought, flabbergasted and speechless.

I panicked. Tears welled up in my eyes. My cheeks turned a crimson shade of red. I felt a sudden tightness in my chest, making it hard to breathe while I was

running. I gripped the treadmill to keep me from falling, as I felt like I was about to curl up into a ball and die of embarrassment.

The only thing I could do was shake my head. If I had tried to talk, I would've started sobbing. And what was I supposed to say, anyway? *"Oh, I'm sorry, I'm working through some eating issues, some weight gain, and also dealing with some intestinal things"?*

A deep sense of shame filled my entire body. I was mortified that I had "let myself go," embarrassed that I felt out of control, and ashamed with the shape of my body.

I couldn't even finish my workout. As soon as he got off the treadmill, I bolted out of the gym and into the safety of my car. Before I even sat down, I was shaking with sobs.

I could not believe someone had asked me if I was pregnant. It was my worst nightmare coming true. I mean, I had gained weight, but did I really look pregnant?!

I was asked this two more times in the next two weeks: once in line at Starbucks and another time at the gym again. Each time sent me into the same panicked hysterical state of self-hate and shame.

The third time it happened, I went home and holed up in my room with my journal. Through my heaving sobs and shaking hand, I wrote to myself:

Jenn, you know you are going through a process. Healing takes lots of twists and turns, but you know deep down that you are on the right path. You know that dieting doesn't work. You want more than that for yourself. You are healing from the inside out and that is not easy. Be with your feelings. Be with the emotions, the tears, the anger, the embarrassment. The only way out of this is THROUGH it. I love you. You are enough. You are always enough. This is just one point on your journey. You will look back on this in a few years and realize why it unfolded in this way. In the meantime, remember always that you are more than your body, always acceptable simply because you are here right now.

Getting through those first few weeks was one of the hardest, most embarrassing times of my life. Each time I saw someone who hadn't seen me in the last year, I allowed myself to be in judgment of myself, the shame, the criticism. I allowed the tears, I allowed the emotions, and most of all I allowed myself to repeat one thousand times a day: you are more than your body.

The first time I felt these emotions, I was terrified they would swallow me whole. I had bottled everything up inside of me for years. I was terrified at what

would come out when I took the lid off. I wasn't sure the deep sadness that was inside of me had an end. I was afraid that if I let myself cry, I would never stop. But what happened was that I did cry for a while. And then it ended.

Emotions may feel intense and powerful, but I knew after the first time of letting myself experience them that they wouldn't kill me.

I gave myself permission to go through these new emotions. I was working with a natural health care practitioner to heal some of my intestinal issues and it was SLOW going. I would remind myself constantly that healing takes time and patience. Healing from the inside out is never a quick fix. But it's where the lasting results are.

When I allowed myself to be IN the experience of weight gain, to feel the emotions that came up, to confront the demon I had been hiding from for so long—the fear of my weight spiraling out of control—it was incredibly healing.

I lived through my worst fear: I gained a ton of weight and the people I knew saw me before and after. I lived through it and am still here to talk about it. It is liberating to look back and see that allowing myself to go through it is what enabled me to truly heal. Yes, the weight eventually came off bit by bit as I healed. But facing those demons—not shying away from those mortifying, shameful emotions I felt—was one of the hardest yet most transformational things I went through on this journey.

In fact, one of the most terrifying parts of recovering from the battle with food is facing uncomfortable feelings. We've used food for so long to numb ourselves, to zone out, to escape a situation, and to not have to face whatever it is that's in front of us. This may not always be a conscious decision, but food becomes how we deal with life. And once we put down the food, well, we now must figure out how to work through our emotional world.

For so many years, we've used food to cover up any emotion we ever have. We are devastatingly lonely, so we sit on the couch with a bag of chips. We hate the way we feel in clothes, so we stand at the pantry spooning peanut butter into our mouths to feel better.

Frustration, sadness, depression, or any emotion at all sends us into the food. Even happiness, joy, and contentment can cause us to eat. We don't know how to deal with the "bad" feelings, but we also don't know how to receive all the good things in our lives.

When I stopped using food to stuff down everything, I seemed to explode with feelings so intense, I wasn't sure how to experience them. I had terrifying outbursts of anger, uncontrollable fits of sobbing, sadness so deep it cut through my chest, and fear so great that I was afraid it would consume me.

That's the hard part about healing. You go through this period of transition, where you're trying not to use food, not engage in old behavior and patterns, but you're not quite adept at having mastered the new tools either. There is this time where everything is messy.

You essentially let the lid come off and you uncork all the feelings you've stuffed down over the years. And you're re-learning (or learning for the first time) how to deal with emotions.

Remember that this journey is allowed to be messy. You're allowed to lose your temper because you're not quite sure how else to express your anger. You can burst into tears for no apparent reason because you don't know how to deal with an unforeseen change of plans. You can throw a temper tantrum because you didn't get your way.

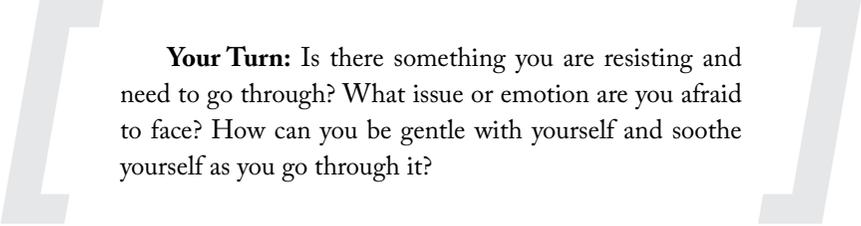
You are permitted to let the emotional process be chaotic and messy. This is a part of the rebuilding process. This is where you aren't using your old patterns, but you aren't quite certain how to use your new ones yet either.

It will look chaotic. And that's okay. You learn as you go and you learn from experience. You can't ever learn how to express anger in a healthy way if you've never done it before. The first time you may have to apologize for your outburst. But you'll learn and move forward.

Know that when you put down the food and start to feel your feelings, you are right in the middle of healing. For so long we've wanted to escape, to run from our "stuff," to not have to face this head on. But that's not how this process works. You can't run from it. You can't go around it. You can only go through it. And that can look messy.

But it is the way to lasting healing. THIS is how you tackle your food issues: by having the courage to face your challenges head on. It takes courage and determination, but staying the course is always where you will find the way out to the other side.

The only way out of our war with food is to wade through the muddy waters to get to the other side. We take a deep breath and go through our "stuff," as that's where the big changes happen.



Your Turn: Is there something you are resisting and need to go through? What issue or emotion are you afraid to face? How can you be gentle with yourself and soothe yourself as you go through it?