

Scoliosis. I never thought much of the word until it became my diagnosis--and then a part of my identity. Suddenly, clothing became a tool for camouflage instead of a personal statement. The mirror became my enemy as we battled over my unrecognizable figure, grotesquely accentuated by an ill-fitting brace. This brace, intended to help prevent my scoliosis from getting worse, caused damage to my mental health far beyond the physical help it promised.

Meet Helga: my brace made of opaque white plastic, with metal rings and velcro straps across the back. Ugly, pinkish foam oozed out of the top to provide "comfort" within my plastic prison. My eyes filled with tears and I struggled to contain my overwhelming emotions when I first put on the brace; my waist was pushed to one side at an odd angle in an attempt to correct my lower "S" curve, and the firm plastic flattened me into an unnatural rectangular shape. The car ride home was a blur of tears and painful silence.

The dread that had been building up inside of me about starting my sophomore year with a brace reached an all-time high as that summer drew to a close. I was paralyzed by the fear that someone would notice my odd new figure or accidentally bump into me and feel the hard plastic of my brace. In reality, the first day of school was nothing like this, but the constant feelings of worry and self-consciousness churned in my brain and blotted out the happiness I once enjoyed so effortlessly. After a few months of wearing my brace to school while my depression grew steadily worse, I was granted permission to wear it only at nighttime, for the sake of my then-crumbling mental health.

Despite this change, the sadness still enveloped me like a heavy gray fog. My body image had been tarnished by the brace; I had never wondered before if my body was “good enough” or if people would judge me. Now, I struggled to look at myself in the mirror or in pictures. The brace left in its trail of depression and anxiety a severe case of body dysmorphia. Negative self-talk about my body constantly looped in my brain, a toxic refrain. Finally, I began working with a therapist. She helped me process the lasting trauma the brace had caused me, and together we worked on ways for me to overcome my depression and keep my anxiety at bay. I learned that my creative imagination--one of my biggest strengths--was actually part of why my anxiety could manifest in big and scary ways, and in turn, allow the depression to creep back in.

I have been out of the brace for nearly two years now, but its invisible scars still linger. My brain knows that nobody notices the slight asymmetry of my hips and shoulders, but deep down, my negative self-talk still whispers insecurities that fill my eyes with tears and my heart with sadness. I would be lying if I said I have learned to fully disregard this internal dialogue, but I have changed how I look at my body. Instead of giving in to the spiral of despair that can be so easily triggered, or subconsciously comparing myself to “perfect” influencers on social media, I try to remind myself of all of the good my body does for me. I am now building and strengthening my muscles where the brace once contorted and constrained me.

I know it will take time, and I know I won't miraculously wake up one morning with all of my insecurities gone, but every day I keep working on accepting myself and turning negative self-talk into a pep talk. I am now stronger mentally and physically than I was before, and for that I am grateful.

*I can do this.*

*I will do this.*

*Nothing will stop me.*