

Starting Strength

The Price of Control, The Cost of Discipline

by

Emily Socolinsky

Eating disorders affect millions of women nationwide. Among ballet dancers this statistic is even higher. In today's society, the pressure for young girls to look a certain way in order to be considered attractive is crushing. In ballet, the pressure to be very thin is not only limited to improving their appearance, but also their performance. Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa, Binge Eating Disorder and EDNOS (Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified) are all classified forms of eating disorders that can result in life threatening consequences.

“Eating Disorders Among Ballet Dancers” from CoachUp, Inc.



Emily (second from left), age 12.

Imagine this scenario. You are a 13-year-old girl, a freshman in high school, a young dancer. You have spent seven years of your life studying the art of ballet, standing in front of a mirror in a leotard and tights, staring at yourself for two hours, 4-5 days a week. You work very hard and push yourself each and every class. You focus on nothing but dance, and your dream is to become a professional ballerina.

Then one day, you are performing a combination at the barre and your teacher walks by. Without even stopping, she glances over at you and utters these words:

“You could stand to lose a few.”

“You could stand to lose a few.”

I was that 13-year-old girl, a freshman in high school at the Baltimore School for the Arts. This teacher was not even my regular teacher, just a substitute. My *real* teacher – the *only* reason I had even decided to continue studying ballet in the first place, who knew me inside and out, was not there to help me.

I froze in mid-tendue. To this day, I can still hear those cold, demeaning words. My mind was racing. What did she mean by “lose a few?” Was I fat? Am I fat? At this time in my life, I was about

5'6" tall and weighed 110lbs. I had always been the shortest one in my class and was just beginning to develop. Two years previously, I had no breasts, no hips. I did not even have my period.

Until this day, no one had commented about my weight. *Ever*. I still think back to that moment, and wish that she had never said those hateful words. Most importantly, I wish that this thinking did not exist in the world of dance. But it does and always will. My world changed forever that day in the dance studio. And for over 20 years, I struggled with EDNOS (Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified) and Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD).

I was 13 years old when I was first told to lose weight by a dance teacher. It marked the beginning of a 20-year battle with food and body image. The past five years have been the happiest I have been about my body. I am now 41.

A Long Time To Hate Yourself

That day in 1989, the rose-colored glasses fell away, and I saw the true world of dance. We took laxatives and talked about *not* eating and vomiting. I would pull my leotard down to make my legs shorter and wear sweatpants so I would not have to see my body in the mirror. Food was the enemy. I tried to throw up, but it never worked. *Not* eating was hard too. I *had* to eat. I felt stupid. How could I *not* throw up? How could I *not* eat? Things that were obviously harmful to me made me feel bad about myself for *not* being able to do them. That year, I became part of the statistic – and my own worst nightmare. But I did not breathe a word about this to my parents for almost a year.

A year later, I received a scholarship to dance that summer in upstate New York at a ballet intensive program. Before I went away, I had to have a physical. My mom took me to her gynecologist for my check up. After a brief talk, she had me step on the scale. I looked at the number and immediately broke down into tears.

"I can't weigh more than 120 pounds," I wailed. "*He* said so."

I sobbed. Somehow, I had gotten the idea that the head of our dance department had instituted a weight requirement for the dancers (he had not). My mother was scared. Watching me cry hysterically in the doctor's office about my weight was her first real glimpse of my problem. Suddenly, she realized that I was going away from her that summer for five weeks, five hours away from her.

"Promise me you will eat, Emily," my mom pleaded.

"I promise," I told her. But honestly, I wasn't sure what the hell I was going to do. I wasn't sure what my reaction would be to the other girls, to my dance teachers, to being away from home for the first time. There was so much to think about that the last thing I really thought about was eating. I was just as scared as she was.

My dad drove me up to Skidmore College that summer. I cried as I watched his truck drive away and ached for home. But as the days went on, I made friends, got wrapped up in my dance classes and settled in for the summer. Most importantly and surprisingly, I *ate*. I did not even think about it. It seemed the most natural thing to do. I was dancing all day, two-hour classes a couple times a day, and I was hungry.

The first time we all went to breakfast, I knew I was going to be able to keep my promise to my mom. I watched the other girls in line pick up an orange juice, maybe a piece of fruit. One night at dinner, I observed one dancer eating only a bowl of rice. I looked down at my plate of chicken, rice and green beans, and realized that *I* was the healthy one. Right there, I told myself that I would eat all of my food. I looked at their hip bones poking through their leotards, and I knew that was unhealthy. I would be better than *that*.

Food: The Good, The Bad, and Emily

When I returned home, my food obsession returned, as well as my BDD. My junior year of high school, I did not get my period for months. I am sure this had to do with my eating habits. I was definitely underweight for my height and was dancing 5-6 hours a day, five days a week. I was slowly developing a love/hate relationship with food. I was so afraid of being *fat*. I wanted to eat, but at the same time I was mad that I could not tell myself to *not* eat.

College was spent not eating, being happy with the way I looked one minute to sobbing uncontrollably. I could never predict how I was going to feel about my body from one day to the next. I would make myself feel so guilty for eating. During those four years, I had no eating plan. Fruit seemed to be my main source of energy. I can remember going to the store on campus and buying a bagel, a banana and a Power Bar. This was my breakfast, snack and lunch, all rolled into one. I drank tons of soda.

I remember sitting in my doctor's office telling him that everything I ate made me sick. He looked at me and told me that I was crazy like my old man. And he was right. I *was* crazy. There was nothing wrong with me physically – it was all in my head. But I did not want to believe it. It took me almost 20 years to finally understand the extent of my obsession.

At the end of my sophomore year of college, I attended a three week dance program in Maine at Bates College. My excitement turned sour when I began comparing myself to the other dancers – not good enough, not thin enough, not muscular enough. And my stomach was a wreck the entire three weeks.

"I am so screwed up," I wrote. "I don't see any thin bodies here, but everyone is toned w/ fabulous muscles...This stomach of mine – it's driving me nuts! I'm afraid to eat anything. Tomorrow, I am going to avoid fruit and vegetables. I'll stick w/bread and peanut butter and jelly." Made a lot of sense at the time.

In addition to dance classes, there were also educational classes. I took a class called "Issues." One day, we watched a video on anorexia and ballet dancers. The film was made in 1981, but it is still relevant today. That night, I wrote about it in my journal:

"I sat there [watching the movie] disgusted, but at the same time wishing I could control my eating the way those girls did. It's hard for me to not eat. I have to eat, and yet every time I put something into my mouth, I regret it...I wish I didn't have to eat. I don't like eating. It makes me nervous and fat. My stomach kills me after lunch and dinner...I did well today, I think. I didn't eat much at all. Actually, I'm very proud of myself. I really don't need a lot of food...I hate my body. I hate my body. I hate my body. My ideal weight is 125-130. I weigh 145. I need to lose weight."

I was 19 years old. It was not a good summer. Who was I kidding, I thought? I would never make it as a dancer. I wasn't good enough or thin enough. I returned home from Bates very depressed, and hinted to this in my journal:



Emily, age nineteen.

Price and Cost

"I've been depressed. I'm tired of it. My mother freaked out on me and really scared me. I'm going to try not to think about my body. I'm just going to dance and work out. And not try to eat a lot. Which I haven't been doing."

A Way Out? The Few, The Proud.

Then one morning, towards the beginning of my junior year, I was walking through the student common area and I passed by a Marine Corps Recruitment table. Something inside of me snapped. Maybe *this* is what I needed to do. My father was a former Marine, and I had always admired him for this. I was so disappointed with myself as a dancer that I decided to turn all of my attention to joining the Marine Corps – Officer Candidate School to be exact. I made an appointment with the recruiter and started the process.

Once I made up my mind to pursue this more, I threw myself completely into it. One of my most memorable days that junior year of college was the day I went down to Quantico and spent the day with the other students, tackling the obstacle course, crawling under barbed wire and running through the woods. I came home that day wet and muddy and grinning from ear to ear. My mother looked at me as if I had truly lost my mind. I was elated.

It was actually the first time that my *strength*, not my appearance, was the focus of attention. Instead of worrying about what I was eating or what I looked like, I focused my attention on my training for the Physical Fitness Test, the PFT. It was the first time I realized that I had absolutely *no* upper body strength. It was pathetic. I could run, and I could do sit-ups, but the hang portion of the test was ridiculously hard for me. I knew strength was important. I just had no idea how to get stronger. And no one knew how to help me.

But I continued to train. I ran. I did my sit-ups. I was determined to attend OCS. And once my focus shifted from dance to the Marine Corps, dance became so much more *enjoyable*. My junior year became my most memorable dance year. My classes were fantastic. The guest teacher gave me a lot of undivided attention. I was at the top of my department.

Suddenly, I was now "training" for performance, not for aesthetics. I did not care what I looked like for the Marine Corps. I wanted to be strong. I *needed* to be strong. I was now in "training" for the PFT and my dancing began to improve, as well as my mental state. I viewed my body as a source of power and strength. From September to March, I focused on only passing the fitness test.

However, when spring rolled around, I began to realize that I could not dance *and* be a Marine. As a result of my new focus on strength, my confidence was back again as a dancer. I loved dancing. Why would I give this up? And when a complication arose during my physical evaluation, I knew this was a sign to not pursue OCS. I was crushed. After much deliberation, I decided to end my pursuit of enrolling in OCS. That spring, I received a scholarship to dance at the Harvard Summer Dance Program, and I decided to once again dance that summer.

Dance was once again my focus, but so was the desire to be stronger, thanks to the training I had started doing in preparation for the PFT. However, it took almost 15 years until I really understood what "training" and getting stronger really meant.

Unfortunately, my senior year of college did not start off very well. Once I was back home and at school, I fell right back into my old routine. In November, one week before my senior dance concert, I injured myself very badly, an injury that I never let heal properly and which would plague me the rest of my dance career.

Old Habits

After I graduated from college, I decided to take a break from dance and move to New York City to do an internship in production administration at Juilliard. I tried to focus my attention on my internship, my work, and living in a new city. But my obsession was still there. My journal entry from August 19, 1996, my last day in Baltimore, reflected this:

“Things will happen....I do need to help my brain about my body. I don’t like it anymore. I’m working out, I’m eating the right foods – no candy, no chocolate, chips...Yes, I have had Coke, yes, I do allow myself dessert, but only once a day. And some days I don’t have it....I don’t snack. I don’t eat nearly what I used to eat, but for some reason, my body is not changing the way I want it to and I’m getting frustrated.”

This struggle between eating, not eating and my love/hate relationship with food tore me apart all through high school, into college, into my 20s and my early 30s. I hated getting my period. I hated my breasts. I hated my hips. I “hated” being female.

My stomach issues continued to plague me too. Everything made my stomach upset, or so I thought. I spent my time in New York talking to GI doctor after GI doctor. I had a colonoscopy. I took Citrucel like it was going out of style. I took laxatives. I convinced myself that I had some sort of Crohn’s disease after reading a book, and I was finally diagnosed with Irritable Bowel Syndrome.

I would understand years later, that *all* doctors diagnose their patients with IBS when there is really nothing wrong with the patient but the patient wants some kind of label. So here ya go – IBS. In my case, this was absolutely true. I had no IBS. I had no stomach disorder. I had no Crohn’s disease, no Celiac. I had no gluten allergy. I had an Eating Disorder – a bigger problem indeed.

I spent countless hours in the gym, trying to burn off the calories I had consumed – the few calories I ate. I would spend up to four hours a day at the gym, doing nothing but cardio. My goal was to eat as little as possible and burn the rest of it off on the treadmill. I wanted to look like the volleyball player Gabrielle Reece and have arms like a basketball player and legs like a swimmer – muscular, strong arms and legs.

But I was going about it *the wrong way*. And the more frustrated I got, the less I ate, the more I hated how I looked, the longer I stayed at the gym, the less I ate – a vicious never-ending cycle of not eating, exercising, not eating, more exercise. All the wrong ways to get the body I actually wanted or thought I wanted or did want.

Looking Inward

After two years in NYC, I made the move back to Baltimore. I missed dancing, so I joined a company a year after my return to Baltimore and started teaching at various dance studios. After about a year of running around like a headless chicken, I decided I wanted one job, not 10, and returned to school to get my Masters in Education to teach in Baltimore City Public Schools. During this time, I was always mentally on the edge with my eating, always teetering on the brink.

The social worker at school made me call a friend of his who was a therapist. This relationship would last seven years, the longest I had ever been in therapy. From age 15 to 23, I had tried many different therapists but I never stuck with one. I just wasn’t ready to face my problem. However, at this time in my life, something clicked, and during my time with her, we covered the gamut of my many issues.

Price and Cost

Looking back, I never really spent that much time talking about my food obsession or my body, at least not *specifically*. What I did come to realize during our sessions was that my obsession with food and my body was always directly correlated with how I was doing in my life – financially, physically, emotionally. If I was happy, my eating problems were not a priority and neither was my body. If I was unhappy, my eating problems would surface, and I would fall to pieces. Did this mean constant around-the-clock checking in with myself? Absolutely. But this is how eating disorders manifest themselves. You want control over some part of your life, and you always have complete control of what you will and won't eat.

Eight months after I started therapy, I met my husband. During our first four years together, I worked very hard to be happy with my body and I was – sort of. I was still eating like a fool. A yogurt and banana in the morning, a frozen burrito for lunch (I would just let it defrost in my lunch bag). I was also still convinced that cardio was the key to a “new and better” body and that weights made me “bulk up” too much. As embarrassed as I am to admit this, I was one of those women who believe that they can put on muscle really fast, and I was convinced that all the running I had done had put on “a lot of muscle.”

Then, in 2008, I hit another wall. For the past five years, I had been dancing with a modern dance company. Unfortunately, my back was bothering me again. I had already had an injury in 2005 – the MRI report had shown multiple herniated discs and arthritis, pretty normal wear and tear for a dancer. I jumped through the hoops and did the physical therapy. Once I was “better,” I began dancing again; I just pushed through the pain.

After my dance concert that spring, my back was really a mess. And in true Emily form, as a result of being in pain and having no control over my back, I decided to take it out on my own body. “You're not fit enough,” I would say to myself. “You're fat. How can you call yourself a dancer?” I was trying to eat well. However, I did not feel any different after my gym workouts. I did not like how my clothes fit. I would compare myself incessantly to other women. If only I had *those* legs. If only I had *her* arms.

My husband would ask me constantly, “Who do you want to look like, Emily?”

“I don't know,” I would say. “I just know I don't want to look like me.”

One day, he finally sat down with me. “So,” he said, “let's look at your numbers. Weigh yourself. Test your body fat. Then move on from there. Numbers don't lie. And crying about it is not going to help.” I got two choices: Either stop stressing about how you look, or make an appointment with a trainer and/or the liposuction doctor (yes, I had actually considered liposuction as a last resort). It was a wake-up call. Instead of constantly complaining about how much I hated how I looked, I needed to finally decide to actually get help, *whatever* that help may be.

I did. I made an appointment with a trainer at the Merritt Athletic Club, *and* I made an appointment with a liposuction doctor. Either I was going to lose the fat through diet and exercise or I was going to get it sucked out of me. I met with both the trainer and the doctor, who told me I was an “excellent” candidate for liposuction. Although I started with the trainer, I still went ahead and scheduled liposuction surgery for December. This was June. I never had the surgery.

Merely Acceptable

After meeting with the trainer at the Merritt, I breathed a sigh of relief, although to be honest it took me a few days to get over how much I weighed (142lbs – *gasp!*) and what my body fat percentage was (27% – *gasp!*). I stressed about my bodyfat for *days*. According to an online bodyfat percentage chart,

Price and Cost

I was “Acceptable.” *Acceptable?* I certainly did *not* want to be “acceptable.” I wrote about that day in my journal:

“I am acceptable. I don’t want to be acceptable. I want to be fit....I have decided – no, I am determined to make a change....No alcohol, no soda – diet permitted, no excess sugar – just watching what I eat a little more.”

And there I was again, writing in my journal at age 33, about what I *was* and *wasn’t* going to eat. Jesus. Would it ever end? Twenty years later, and I am still obsessed with my body? At least this time, I was leaning in the right direction. Or so I thought.

The trainer I worked with that month was worthless. She missed appointments. She gave me useless exercises like tricep extensions on the swiss ball, crunches, lunges with front raises using 5lb dumbbells – you get the picture. But, at the end of the month, I weighed 136lbs and had a body fat percentage of 23%. Whoo-hoo! She was a genius, right?

Well, partially. What had actually happened was that I had *eaten*. I *increased* my calories and started eating breakfast, more protein and vegetables. And what do you know? I lost weight and fat. I had gained no strength, but who cared? I was thinner, leaner, and I was happy. Right?

Pain Focuses The Mind

A year later, I was in agony. My back was killing me. I was determined not to stop dancing but the pain was becoming unbearable. Finally, I had a second MRI at the end of 2009 which showed more arthritis and herniated discs. I was diagnosed with degenerative disc disease. Once more, I found myself in PT and decided to “retire” from dance at age 34.

I was in pain and I was miserable, and so I returned to my own little hell known as BDD. *My body was never safe from my mind when I was unhappy.* I was smaller, yet I still looked at myself and saw someone *fat*. This was clearly going to be my own little hell for the rest of my life.

Three months after my MRI diagnosis, I was cleared from PT. Three months after being “cleared,” I was sprawled on my bathroom floor one morning, writhing in pain. My back had seized up as I was getting a drink of water from the faucet. Apparently, the PT hadn’t worked that well. It took all of my will to drag myself downstairs to call Diego. When he came home, it took him 45 minutes to get me off the floor and back upstairs to bed.

To say I was in agony is putting it lightly. I couldn’t walk, sit, drive or eat. When I was finally able to drive a week later, I pulled up in front of the dance studio where I was working and sat there, unable to get out of the car. I visited my doctor for a check up about two weeks later and weighed in at 129lbs, the smallest I had been in years. I should have been thrilled that I was finally skinny. You could literally see every vein in my arms, but I felt like hell. I was weak and in pain.

All of a sudden, my weight did not seem as important to me as it had been all those years before. The real turning point came after I saw a picture of myself taken during Picture Week at the dance studio. I looked so sick. Most importantly, I realized that *I had no ass*. Being able to take off my pants without unbuttoning them or unzipping them did not seem so cool after all. I asked myself, what the hell was the point of being thin if I hurt all the time?

My back doctor prescribed another round of physical therapy and gave me a prescription for a back brace. I threw *both* prescriptions in the garbage. No, I thought. There is no way in hell I am going back to PT, and I am not wearing a back brace the rest of my life. I knew what I needed to do.

Stronger People Are More Useful

I needed to get *stronger*. I was tired of being in pain. I had spent so much time and mental energy on wanting to be *smaller* that I had never spent any time on getting *stronger* – I had failed to learn the lesson the Marine Corps had tried to teach me. I was injured because I was *weak*. Being smaller just didn't seem like a good idea anymore.

When I was able to get back in the gym, my husband handed me a book and told me to *do this program*: Starting Strength. Diego had already started his linear progression about a month before me, and was feeling better than he had ever felt in his life. So once again, I listened to him, and that summer I started lifting. Every week I squatted, deadlifted, pressed, and benched. I started slowly and each week, I added a little more weight than before. I can still remember deadlifting 95 lbs one day and seeing stars. I looked straight at Diego and asked him if he was trying to kill me.

This was not going to be easy, I thought. But, I stuck with it. For the first time in my life, I had a real program, and I was seeing results. My body was responding to this type of training. I did not worry about “bulking up” anymore. Those days were long gone. I did not want to hurt anymore, mentally, physically or emotionally. All I wanted now was to be stronger.

By the end that month, I suddenly realized that my back pain was gone – no more spasms, no more pain down my leg. I continued to train. I also noticed that my bodyweight was slowly going up, and I was starting to fit better in my clothes. Something was happening with my eating and the way I was training: I was starting to get stronger, and a *little* bigger. Food was no longer the “enemy” but rather a source of energy for training, and I needed to eat well to perform better in the gym. Our Friday night chicken kabobs were definitely starting to pay off.

In May of 2011, I decided to dance again. My back was feeling better than it had in years, and I was ready, so I took my first modern dance class in almost two years. I also remembered the photo from the year before when I looked so sick, so I decided to do another photo shoot during Picture Week for an “after” picture. I wore the exact same outfit from the year before and posed the same way.

The difference was astonishing. I was now about 10 pounds heavier than I was a year before but my entire body looked completely different. I filled out my pants. I was standing taller. My face was fuller. I weighed around 140lbs. Roughly 10 lbs in one year. I was bigger, stronger, and out of pain.



2010 (left) vs 2011 (right).

A New Beginning

In August, I joined a new dance company. After almost two years of not dancing and the expectation that I would never dance again, here I was. I danced for two seasons. There is absolutely no way that I would have ever been able to dance again if it had not been for Starting Strength. When I finally stopped screwing around in the gym with worthless programs and decided to put my trust in the barbell, I “fixed” my body and my mind. Performance, not aesthetics, was the center of my attention.

Price and Cost

In order to perform, I had to be strong. And once I was stronger, my body gave me a second chance at dance.

Prior to joining the dance company, I had already opened my gym, Fivex3 Training. My goal was to get people stronger using the barbell – more importantly, to get *women* stronger using a barbell, and to help them embrace their bodies and understand that they can achieve a healthy, strong body by eating and training *right*.

I spent almost my entire teenage and young adult years feeling bad about my body, feeling worthless for not being thin enough or skinny. I spent almost 20 years trying my hardest *not* to eat, exercising in a way that was making me *lose* muscle, not gain it. Then one day, I turned it all around. I picked up a barbell and started squatting. I knew right then and there that I wanted to do this for other women. If I can do it, so can they.

Five years later, my goal is now a reality. I have women coming in and out of my gym on a weekly basis wanting to be stronger. Most have done the running, the barre classes, the Pilates, the starvation. Then one day, they walk into my gym, pick up a barbell and never leave. And although they may have to buy new shirts, their jeans fit better. They learn to accept the number on the scale as only a number. Many of them know my background. When they meet me, they meet a confident, strong woman who made a choice eight years ago to finally take control of her eating disorder, who can look at herself in the mirror and finally say, “I like what I see.”

Being stronger is a way of life for me. I officially retired from dance in 2013. My gym was growing and my new business was my first priority. I have competed in three Strongwoman contests and two Push/Pull Meets over the past three years, and this past August I started Brazilian Jujitsu. BJJ is yet another testament to how much stronger, both physically and mentally, I have become. It is my “new” dancing.

I spent almost 20 years trying to become smaller. I starved myself. I made myself sick. And then one day, I decided to get stronger, and my life changed forever. For the past six years, I have been slowly and steadily working to put *on* weight. And I am the happier about my body and my weight than I have ever been. At 155 lbs, 5' 7", I am finally a grown woman, comfortable and confident in her own skin.



Emily, 2016.

Emily Socolinsky has been a Starting Strength Coach since 2010. She has owned and operated Fivex3 Training, a strength and conditioning gym, in Baltimore since 2011. Emily holds a Masters degree in Education and a Bachelor of Arts degree in Dance from the University of Maryland at Baltimore County.

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