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### **How it Feels to be Fat**

Imagine being in 8<sup>th</sup> grade towards the end of middle school and you're making friends, staying active outside, and playing sports, not worrying about a thing. Then spring break starts and just like that, a year passed, and you've been hit with the biggest pandemic of your life. You've gained 50 pounds of fat from sitting inside all day playing video games and eating junk food. At this point, I knew I had issues I needed to fix. At first, I wasn't too worried about how I presented myself, but as I reintegrated into a more social life, I noticed things clearly changed. I couldn't help but notice a different type of look others gave me which had me feeling uncomfortable and quite honestly, self-conscious. This in itself was enough to weaken my self-esteem but as time continued, I began to notice much more judgment from others than I thought was possible.

Once everyone began going to school again, that's when I started to be more conscious of my physical shape. I faced many issues but the largest ones for me were part of the social aspect. I struggled to fit in with others due to how I appeared. Some of the kids from my gym classes would subtly target me by going out of their way to avoid being paired with me for whatever activity we had going on that day. I wouldn't consider this bullying, but more of a type of ostracism, this exclusion didn't feel great, and it definitely didn't help my self-confidence. Another way I found my weight was affecting my life was with trying to fit in with my friends, primarily the physical activities which I was never as good at. Even in more comforting environments like being with my friends, I found that I was different than them. Most of my

friends were athletic growing up, but even the ones that weren't exclusively in great shape didn't have my lack of fitness. I struggled in more ways than just competing with other active people as well. My parents and brothers would make it somewhat obvious that I needed to cut out some of the food from my diet that would mainly consist of coke and pizza. Though I was vaguely aware what I consumed, my mom and dad would try to hint to me that I wasn't making good decisions and I needed to fix my life up. Coming from those people, it felt a little more impactful as I trusted their opinions. Trying to understand what other people might be thinking about me, especially in environments where my weight would influence it, created a very unhealthy mindset that impacted my grades, and relationships with people.

Looking back, gym class was my first real eye opener to how quickly people can misjudge you based on your appearance. In spring of 2020, I was a freshman in high school where I was taking my first steps into maturity. I was easily influenced by the social aspects all because I wanted to fit in, this is because I had somewhat of a negative idea about high school even before I started going. I think I got this from the depictions in shows and movies, as well as the crazy stories I was told from my older brothers. This is what put me into the nervous headspace when I started going in person. I would just try to match everyone else's moody, angsty attitudes so I didn't catch too much attention. I acted this way throughout the day, just remaining relatively mellow. This is why I was so confused when other kids from my gym class would treat me differently. I honestly did do anything in particular that would cause me to be targeted. That's when I realized they were picking on me because of my lack of athletics. It started to become noticeable when we would all compete in basic sports like softball and track. How most activities in gym class would begin was by picking captains and they would choose the players for their team, and just like how it happens in the movies, I was always picked last, every time. It started to become the norm for me, always getting the short end of the stick. This

made me really start to question myself. I don't understand why I was always looked at in class as the fat kid who might slow your team down. My confidence started to really diminish from that point on and it was due to how others saw me.

As I started to hang out with friends again after being dormant for such a long period, I could sense a type of energy going around whenever I was involved in any sort of physical activities with them. I was never truly bullied around my friends, but I knew there was a sort of subconscious attitude they felt towards me. Again, I still felt comfortable being around them, but I started to feel a little embarrassed whenever they wanted to play basketball outside and I was on an entirely lower skill level than everyone. In a lesser way, it was a similar situation as competing in sports with the kids in class, only it's my friends and they're less judging. It felt as if they had lower expectations for me, like they didn't think I could keep up, or maybe I was holding them back. This unspoken awareness sometimes felt heavier than direct words. I could sense the pity when I struggled to keep up with them. I knew my friends understood some of my qualities such as my personality, but regardless, I was still seen as the fat kid.

From the very start of my noticeable weight gain, my parents, particularly, would try to subtly comment on how I should manage my weight. They never directly criticized me or would make harsh comments, their intent of trying to get me to eat healthier, or exercise more made me feel very self-conscious. It wasn't exactly what they said that made me feel this way, it was more about the thought of how they didn't enjoy what their son looked like. This in itself really had a big impact because it came from my parents, which at the time were my biggest influences and who I looked up to the most. They would try to casually mention stuff like “have you been looking at gyms to go to?” and “you should cut back on the junk food”. I fully understood that they were trying to help me, but their undertone of disappointment made me feel inadequate at some points.

After junior year, the point of self-realization really hit me. At this point, instead of focusing on the negative aspects of my life, I began to think about how I can grow as a person. Out of seemingly nowhere, I grew this passion to understand when and why I used to think so negatively of myself instead of working on my improvement. Diving deep into my own psychology has helped me recognize what I can do to break the unhealthy mindset I struggled with for so long. Through this process I found that my weight was never the true issue, instead, it was my own negative thoughts which had caused so much unnecessary stress and sadness. After much self-reflection, I have grown to be less harsh on myself without losing the discipline of self-improvement.

Throughout high school, I felt my self-worth and confidence slowly diminish due to how I believed others only saw me as the fat kid and not much more. It was a little humiliating knowing that no matter what type of person I interacted with, Friends, classmates, family, they all viewed me in similar ways. The constant judgement from others made me very self-conscious of my weight, which in turn, made me forget about my other qualities. Now looking back, I begin to realize my own judgment towards my weight was most likely the biggest impact on my self-esteem. I feel that how others saw me was not as extreme as how I perceived it, and this realization changed my mindset. I have learned that I should not be so hung up on how others see me. I feel a lot better as a person now without worrying about external judgments. Since the end of high school, I've learned to embrace myself as well as help others become confident with who they are, internally and externally.

