



THE NEW A.A. NORMAL: Videoconferencing, Eating Disorders, and Body Dysmorphia

It goes without saying that the Coronavirus pandemic has disrupted everyone's life and what the future holds isn't exactly clear. But as the "stay-at-home" order and social distancing continues I find myself longing for some semblance of human contact. Yet in order to do that and participate in my usual meetings, visit with family and friends, attend yoga classes, see my doctor, and yes, even go to work—I'm been forced to venture deep into the dreaded world of videoconferencing.

For the most part I've avoided such things as Facetime, video Skype, and Zoom. The idea of staring at someone's face on the computer screen as we conversed was never that appealing. Whenever colleagues or a friend suggested we communicate in this manner, I would lie and say my camera was broken, or the app wasn't working on my phone, or anything that sounded vaguely plausible. The one time my work required me to participate in a videoconference, I again opted out of the video capability and my screen was the lone black square with my name in a horizontal line of little white letters across the middle.

But all that was, of course, before Covid-19 turned everything upside down and the world collectively shifted into isolation mode. Within the first few weeks of social distancing all my meetings were put on hold and then overnight Zoom became the platform of choice. Now don't get me wrong. I'm totally stoked that AA rose so quickly to the occasion and meetings all over the globe were suddenly available online with the simple click of a mouse. But as I sat in my living room "attending" my Monday night home group I realized I was the only person not showing their face, and for some inexplicable reason this made me feel even more isolated. An intense wave of FOMO triggered a rush of anxiety throughout my nervous system. My hand slowly crept across the laptop. When I clicked the "enable video" option I was immediately assailed by my image amongst all the other little faces in their rectangles that filled the entire computer screen.

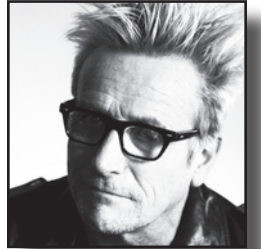
Unfortunately what happened next was not what I had expected. Instead of concentrating on the speaker, I became obsessively preoccupied with my image. When I discovered the "pin video" feature—a function that allows you to view a single person in the meeting—I pinned myself to the screen and scrutinized every one of my physical flaws. I know, you're probably thinking, what a narcissist. But I'm also recovering from an eating disorder that causes me to experience body dysmorphia—a mental health disorder where I can't stop thinking about all my perceived physical defects. And I'm thinking, does my face look bloated; why is my stomach so large, is my head really that abnormally huge, are my arms that undefined? In less time than it takes to call my sponsor, my somewhat dormant eating disorder and negative body image kicked into full swing. "I gotta stop stress eating all those snacks," I proclaimed out loud. Thankfully the secretary had muted everyone's audio.

Now there have been numerous studies and research of the brain regarding why we humans see things the way we do. There's the psychological phenomenon "mere-exposure effect" which essentially means we're used to seeing our reflection in the mirror, which is reverse, and when we see our face un-reversed it seems weird and unappealing. Another is "confirmation bias," where our brain searches for proof of our shortcomings. In other words, we see beautiful folks and then look at ourselves in comparison, and our self-esteem jumps out the window. But for those of us with eating disorders, anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem our body dysmorphia is way more ingrained. We're carrying around the baggage from any of a number of things including growing up in dysfunctional families, our childhood trauma, those damning "bad" genes, or being overly influenced by society's messages of what beauty means.

I can pinpoint the first time I discovered purging food. It felt like it relieved my anxiety and depression. I was twelve years old, an unwanted fat kid, lost in an ongoing and turbulent divorce between two narcissistic parents. I felt unseen and abandoned and I found the comfort I wasn't getting at home in food—eating until I felt ill and then throwing up. I didn't even know there was a name for what I was doing. But then even an unaware twelve-year-old figures out that if you eat too much junk food you get even fatter. By fourteen I became anorexic. And then I discovered drugs, more specifically heroin, and food didn't matter any more. I existed on the occasional candy bar and maybe a Coke for breakfast. Fast forward twenty years and I'm a strung-out junkie weighing a hundred and twenty five pounds. I was rock star thin and I thought I looked good. Prison, parole, and a couple of long term residential rehabs and I was in recovery. I was going to meetings. I had a sponsor. I was working the steps. I had a coffee commitment... I was eating everything in sight. Before I knew it I'm standing over the toilet throwing up again and my future was suddenly filled with OA meetings, therapy, and antidepressants—and gradually my obsessive thinking subsided.

Over the last 20 years, depending on life circumstances and the level of involvement in my program of recovery, my body dysmorphia has come and gone and I've made it through some very difficult times. Yet for some mysterious and naïve reason I just didn't think I'd ever have to deal with it again. especially not from such an unassuming and impersonal source as an online meeting. But what really scared me was my obsessive urge to log off of Zoom and hide. It's not like I can just stop going to meetings. I know too well where that will lead. But what I also know is there's a solution, the same solution that has always been there for me—and in order to get through these strange times I have to go back to the basics of my early recovery. I need to start working Steps 1, 2, and 3 on a daily basis—because I'm powerless, my negative body image is unmanageable, and I need to believe in, and turn my will and my life over to, a power greater than myself. And since "acceptance is the answer to all my problems" I can find the solace I need in the simplicity of the serenity prayer: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

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