

Performance-Based Identity

Madison Wright | December 2015

I was probably the most stressed out twelve year old you would ever meet. To all of my mom's Facebook friends, I was a talented swimmer headed to the Olympics--a verdict proven by the more than six years' worth of photos on my mom's profile page, ranging from five year old me wearing goggles that were too big for my head to pictures of twelve year old me in oversized t-shirts holding newly won medals.

But, beyond the pictures, something was definitely wrong. Over time, my devotion to swimming had turned into something destructive--my self-worth became linked to my swimming performance. Before races, I had intense anxiety, chronic nightmares, massive mood swings, and a constant dread of going to practices and racing.

Recently, I was talking with a group of friends about our experience with sports, and as I was listening to one of my friends, Clara, talk about her struggle with soccer, it struck me that this wasn't an issue that I alone had dealt with.

Clara: I found so much of myself in that sport that I couldn't separate my identity from that and I would start seeing my like...goodness, I guess, only in soccer. When I got injured and I started to, obviously not play, and then even later on when I, like, could start playing again and I was behind everyone by a lot, I really started to beat myself up and dislike myself and...just kind of not be so happy anymore.

And my friend Kelley, who swims competitively at a national level, talked about how closely performance and sacrifices are linked, and the tension that results from it. She says that when she does well,

Kelley: *It makes you feel like all the hard work you're putting into it is worth something, and that the amount of sacrifices that you're making in order to be at practice and be at meets...it makes it feel like okay, this is worth it. And when it doesn't go as well, you sit there and you think well, I sacrificed all of this cool stuff in order to achieve nothing.*

Realizing that I was not alone in this performance based acceptance struggle made me wonder why this issue is rarely talked about in society, especially *our* society, where competition is interwoven into our business, lifestyles, and culture. I became even more curious when Kelly Wright, a family counselor, shared her experience helping others through struggles with self worth based on performance.

Kelley: I worked with a teenage boy several years ago who had school anxiety, who...felt like he was only as good as how he could perform at school. So if you can imagine, a test or an assignment was going to be really, contributing to how he was going to feel about his self worth. It was almost like he was on a hamster wheel of performance that never really satisfied his worth.

So, clearly this problem isn't exclusive to athletes, or to me and my friends. So why don't we talk about it? Maybe because the solution to this problem takes more vulnerability, and creates more of a personal risk than running scared through daily life, hoping that our actions and performance will be enough to make others accept us.

Kelley: There's a huge difference between performance based acceptance versus having self worth based on who you are. What I feel like is most important is being accepted and loved based on who you are. Your being versus doing.

It seems like such a simple solution, so why is this such a problem? Maybe we are afraid that if we take away all of our accomplishments, we won't like who we are as people. I know that I

was terrified that no one would like what they saw underneath the medals and the oversized goggles.

Eventually, the pressure of year round competitive club swimming became too much for me. Now, instead of swimming competitively year round, I swim for my high school. After taking a few steps back, i've learned I am more than just a time in an event or a first place medal or a broken record. I'm a teammate. I'm a friend. I am kind and outspoken and I laugh too hard at jokes that aren't funny. Now I can see that, no matter what I do, I am worthy of acceptance, especially from myself.

So, I challenge you, and I challenge myself, to change the question from, "What have I done with my life?" to "What kind of person was I? What kind of person do I want to be?"

For Making Waves Youth Radio, I'm Madison Wright.