



Conditioned

Gymnastics conditioned me from an early age to suppress emotional pain, do whatever adults ask and completely ignore physical boundaries.

I mastered the one-legged twirl on a metal bar in my elementary school play yard after working my way up from a failed long swing that ended with a bruised ego, two scraped knees and a mouth full of sand. I was eight years old when first introduced to gymnastics and was all about the sport for the next few years. The first two years of my training were amazing, I made friends instantly and picked up many foundational skills very quickly.

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The classes were all about having fun, playing group games and the best days were when our class had full use of the large blue floor to play crab tag. Every session ended with a bounce on the big trampoline, a high-five from your teammates and a great job from the coach! That all changed when I became part of the competitive team as there was little time to spend on the activities I had once enjoyed. The gym was no longer a fun place. We were expected to push our bodies to exhaustion and work off an extensive checklist of tasks during our three-hour training sessions.

Being able to do the splits was no longer an accomplishment since the flexibility standard in the competitive program was to master the oversplit which meant lifting your leg into an over-extended stance that came with a grueling training program.

When the whistle sounded, we rushed to line up on the floor and were ready to work. Oversplit drills were conducted every class with gymnasts being asked to place their front leg onto a raised box and then told to slide down into a split position. Unlike the other girls, I struggled with this skill and kept putting my hands down on the floor to support my body weight. I was immediately and repeatedly corrected each time I did this with the instructor roughly pulling my arms back into position over my head. To ensure that my flexibility caught up to the rest of my teammates, I was sent to the flexibility station and positioned on a manual stretching machine that slowly spread my legs apart with a crank-style knob controlled by the coach. This process was excruciatingly painful and when I showed discomfort, she would punish me by cranking the knob a few more times and resetting the timer.

I was eleven years old when my oversplits were achieved and no longer needed to be strapped into the manual stretching machine. The truth is, I learned some pretty damaging lessons from the extensive hours spent in the gym. Gymnastics conditioned me from an early age to suppress emotional pain, do what adults ask and completely ignore physical boundaries.