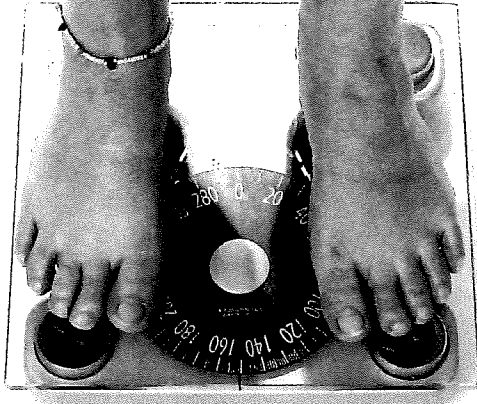


Eating disorders: When the scale is your mortal enemy

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Since I've recently started a new health and wellness business, I've found myself talking to a variety of health care professionals. I start by explaining my passion for the field, which stems from my personal experience battling anorexia and an exercise addiction. The question I am most often asked is, "So, what is it that made you finally want to recover?"

To answer this, I think back to a beautiful fall evening six years ago. I had come home for the weekend from Virginia Tech. To be honest, I was in town to spend time with my boyfriend more than with my family. After I loaded my car in the chilly fall air, I stopped to chat with my mom and kiss her goodbye. After releasing me from a hug, my mom asked, "Are you sure you don't want anything to eat before you go?" As I looked up at her, I saw lines of worry etched in her face. "No, no thanks, mom, I'm good," I quickly responded. The lines deepened. Although this is a

common question for a mom to ask her college daughter, it was more than that. This conversation had become a common one between us. Her question and my answer were always the same. However, this time, when I looked in her eyes and answered, I hesitated as something tugged at my soul.

I had been "dieting" and exercising a lot that fall. As a sophomore, I was trying to drop the infamous "freshmen 15." My diet seemed to be working well; with each new day, I ate less and worked out more. At first my new habits felt so cleansing and healthy. But now, I wasn't so sure. Was it normal to eat just a piece of fruit a day? To work out two or three times a day for hours when consuming only that piece of fruit? At first I felt so good, but now my energy level was waning and the dietary supplements I was using were playing funny tricks with my heart.

The tugging inside me continued, so instead of just kissing my mother goodbye, I reached out my hand and whispered, "Mom, I think I need help."

During the coming days, it quickly became obvious that I could no longer function on my own. I moved home to Harrisonburg so that my parents could take care of me and I could seek professional treatment. I was able to finish the fall semester at Virginia Tech from my parent's living room couch. My Virginia Tech professors were wonderful and emailed me all the material I needed. James Madison University graciously allowed me to transfer mid-year and I completed my spring semester there.

For three years, the eating disorder continued to gain more and more control over my thoughts and behaviors, even as I tried to get help. I con-

tinued to severely restrict my food intake and even though I still thought I was "fat," to others I looked like a walking skeleton.

None of the eating disorder treatment programs I was participating in seemed to help. I was at a point where I could only function for a few hours at a time. The rest of the day I slept, trying to give my body as much energy as possible.

I knew this was my rock bottom. I could feel my body shutting down; the constricting chest pains as my heart tried to keep pumping, the throbbing muscle cramps and my excruciatingly low body temperature. Downy hair began to grow all over my body in an effort to keep my body temperature regulated. My menstrual cycle had long since stopped. I was so weak and light-headed that many days I thought I would faint walking to class or into Walmart to buy lettuce. I was tired, physically and emotionally, of the eating disorder. I was tired of counting every calorie I ate, tired of counting every ounce I lost and tired of counting every step I took. I had no will, no desire, to continue on with my life.

But in a brief moment of clarity, I felt that same hesitation, that same tugging at my soul from years before and I realized I wasn't ready to die. At this point, I knew I wanted to recover. Even though I had no desire to choose life for myself, I wanted to recover so that when I was well, I would be able to help others battle this miserable disorder and find wellness. Now I had a choice to make: I could continue along the path to death or I could choose to eat and to live.

I crawled out of my bed and walked down the hallway into the kitchen. I opened the first cabinet I came to and pulled out a bag of

cookies. Ripping open the container, I headed to the couch and ate the entire bag.

Starting to eat again was just the beginning of the recovery process. Refeeding my body what it had been deprived of for all those years took time. It was a painful process as my body learned to accept nourishment again. However, reaching a normal weight was only half the battle. I also had to deal with the emotional issues that had contributed to the eating disorder. After all, eating disorders are not really about food and weight. Getting to the root cause of my anorexia was like peeling back layers of an onion and was just as hard as learning to eat again. Unfortunately, setbacks are par for the course in recovery. Sometimes it feels like two steps forward and one step back. But the setbacks are where I gained my innermost strength and learned the biggest lessons.

Everyone's journey differs. I was very fortunate to have a wonderful team of treatment professionals and a loving family to help support me along the way. The length of a person's recovery is affected by the amount of time spent in the eating disorder.

Here and now

Now I am happier and healthier than I have ever been. Recovery was a long and painful process that took a lot of hard work. The emotional recovery involves analysis of the issues which allowed the eating disorder to manifest (examples include childhood abuse, sexual trauma, self-esteem concerns, etc.). True recovery takes commitment and commitment doesn't always come right away. It may take hitting rock bottom. The good news is that true recovery is possible.

Helping others

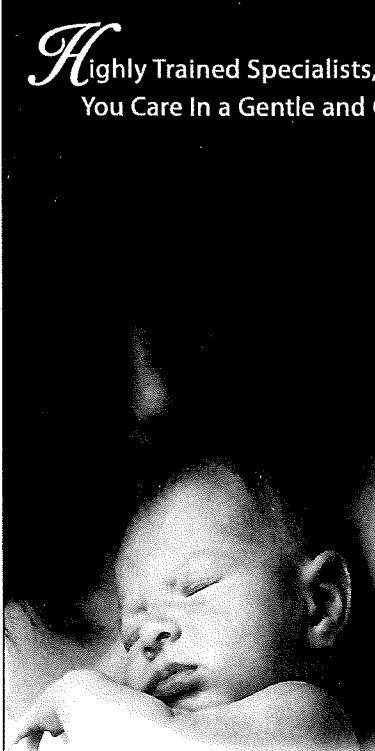
Everyone's journey with an eating disorder is different and not all eating disorders look the same. As many as 10 million women and 1 million men in the U.S. suffer from an eating disorder, according to the National Eating Disorders Association. Some of the important things to remember when helping someone with an eating disorder are that eating disorders are not a choice (but recovery is!); it's really not about the food but the underlying emotional issues; and the No. 1 thing you can say to someone suffering from an eating disorder is "I love you no matter what. Period." Eating disorders are complex and have ways of twisting what the person hears and sees — but the one thing the eating disorder cannot distort is unconditional love.

When I was in the midst of my eating disorder, I know my parents wanted a quick fix. Unfortunately, eating disorders require more than a simple bandage. My family and friends would often tell me, "Just eat." This was not helpful. In fact, it could be harmful. What really helped me was hearing that they loved me. Even though they didn't understand, it was wonderful to hear that they cared about me and believed that I could get better. It can be challenging, but it is imperative that family and friends learn to separate the eating disorder from the person in order not to direct anger or anxiety at the person with the eating disorder.

Remember, there is help available and hope for a brighter, healthier future. If you or someone you know is suffering from an eating disorder, please seek out professional health care providers. ☼

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