

My story is not that different from most people with an eating disorder. My struggle with bulimia fits the textbook definition and the similarities between my story and others are uncanny. But to me, it is unique, it is different and it is extremely personal. And my recent journey into recovery has been the proudest, most difficult accomplishment of my life.

I am currently 25 years old and I have had issues with my weight and my self-esteem since junior high. I was your typical, awkward pre-teen. Chubby, braces, glasses, acne and a sweet, yet painfully shy, personality. I was self-conscious about everything, including my weight.

As I entered high school, the concern I had about my body grew stronger. Then one day, I was home after school watching a talk show. The topic was eating disorders. I watched several young girls discuss their struggles with anorexia and/or bulimia. I listened intently as one girl described exactly how she made herself sick. A light went off in my head. I made my way to the washroom in a daze. I looked at myself in the mirror, still not entirely sure what I was doing. Then I pulled my hair back into a ponytail, knelt over the toilet and made myself sick.

I wish, with all my heart, that I could tell every young girl or boy who is contemplating that very action for the first time (or the action of skipping a meal) – not to succumb. That it may seem like a great way to control your weight, but instead it wreaks havoc on your body. That you may think you'll only do it once in a while, but like any addiction it will become your life. I wish I could tell them to say NO to that first, not so powerful, urge. To get out while they still can.

My on again, off again relationship with bulimia throughout high school and university was not something I considered serious – at the time. It was my coping mechanism - something I could fall back on when I was feeling fat, stressed or upset. I would go for weeks without making myself sick, the pattern was incredibly sporadic. I was in complete control of my bulimia.

When I was 22 – bulimia gained control over me.

I had just graduated from university. Society was expecting me to 'go out and get a job'. Along with a job, I was supposed to get an income, a place to live and to support myself completely independently for the first time in my life. I was terrified. At this very time I was busy feeling rejected and worthless. A serious boyfriend had dumped me, for the second time in my life. It was not a great phase for me.

I sank into a very depressive-like state. I didn't eat, I didn't sleep and I spent my time either crying or listing reasons why I shouldn't exist. As a result I began to lose weight. I didn't even realize at first that I was getting smaller. My friends and family did. Everyone kept telling me how great I looked, but I couldn't see it. It wasn't until I was at work one weekend that I finally realized something was going on. My weekend job involved respite care for four elderly ladies. I was in the kitchen baking cookies for them, when one walked in and asked if I had lost weight. A question I had grown accustomed to hearing, but never from a person with dementia.

Once I realized how much weight I had lost – I also realized I could never gain it back. When I had been heavier, I had been deemed 'unlovable'. This is when I started seriously making

myself sick. Every time I ate or drank I would be sick. I would also ‘compete’ with myself to see how long I could go without eating. Each day I would wake up, determined to beat my record from the day before. If I succeeded I would reward myself with a bowl of cereal (which more often than not, would lead into a binge and purge because I had starved myself the entire day).

This behaviour was not only a way to control my weight; it was a way to control my emotions. I had so many overwhelming feelings at this time in my life, and no idea what to do with them. Bingeing and purging was a temporary release for me, although I realize now that each bulimic episode was only intensifying my feelings.

I continued spiralling downwards, constantly finding new methods of self-torture. I often scared myself with the intensity of my abusive actions. I consider myself a very loving, caring person and would never inflict harm on anyone. But I was certainly capable of inflicting harm on myself. I reflect back to this time as a very painful, lonely period in my life. I had no ability to look toward the future; all I knew was that this ‘behaviour’ was my life. This began to change during one very remarkable weekend. Two important things happened that weekend. One was that my mother stumbled across my ‘secret’. The second was that I met someone. That someone turned out to be my rock. He has been so supportive and affirmative throughout my entire journey.

After several heart wrenching talks with my parents, sister and then-boyfriend (he is now my fiancée); I began a roller coaster of a journey. I explored several therapists and support groups before finding a good fit. I worked with an amazing dietician who helped me to rediscover the importance of food. I had intense sessions with a counsellor who assisted me in confronting my issues. I went up, I went down. I had days when I felt on top of the world. I felt in control, healthy and happy. I also had days where I hit rock bottom. I would scream at myself in the mirror not to succumb to the urge, and end up in a puddle of tears on the bathroom floor.

I continued on this path, but each time I caught a glimpse of recovery I would grow slightly stronger. And ever so gradually the time period between relapses would increase. Last fall, I had an opportunity to make a big life change. I left the hectic, rush of a big city to move to the small town where my fiancée lived. I accepted a job that allowed me to work four days a week. I began to make time for myself. I learned the importance of self-care and began to let go of self-abuse. And since we were finally together, my fiancée and I did something we’d always talked about. After a generous Christmas present from my father – we went to the local SPCA and adopted a cat. I will never underestimate the value of pet therapy.

Today I am entering my fourth month of recovery. To some, that may not sound like a big deal. To me it is my greatest accomplishment. It is the longest stretch I have ever had. And though I still have far to go, this is the first time I have ever felt hope. Hope that my life will continue this way.

I have learned so much from my battle with bulimia. I have learned about my own personal strength, which is more phenomenal than I ever would have realized. I have also learned the importance of a healthy lifestyle. These days I eat nutritional, well-balanced meals and

incorporate healthy exercise into my day. And I enjoy this. I enjoy taking care of myself and living my life. I have also realized that the people in my life are more supportive and understanding than I could have ever known. My family, close friends and fiancée were by my side through each phase of the journey – never once casting judgement or anger my way.

The most important thing I have learned is to appreciate myself as a person, not as how I look. My mother's catch phrase 'beauty comes from the inside' does not fall on deaf ears anymore. I no longer measure my self-worth with a scale or tape measure. I feel beautiful because of who I am, how I treat others, and most importantly how I treat myself. Beauty is not a pimple-free face, or a tiny waist, or shiny hair, or any other airbrushed quality we witness daily in the media. It is who you are on the inside. And though I am proud of discovering who I am through my struggle, my greatest hope is that others will never have to work through an eating disorder to discover who they are.

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