

## Eating disorders and depression:

### a story of survival

I was 20 years old when I realized that I had spent the previous seven years of my life mentally and physically abusing myself. It was a daunting realization - almost surreal. I was an educated, intelligent, sensitive and accomplished young woman, bewildered that I had ended up in such a predicament. I was also terrified.

This is the story of how eating disorders tore my life apart, and how I found the courage to put the pieces slowly back together and change my life for the better.

Although this story is unique to me, it is not uncommon. Hundreds of thousands of women across this country could tell you how they developed eating disorders while struggling with the cult of thinness in our culture, their battered self-esteem, and a need to control their turbulent lives.

#### Early Struggles

My childhood was happy and pleasantly uneventful. I was the youngest child by 11 years and grew up in a middle class family with loving parents and sisters. I was a good student, a strong athlete and a happy and well-adjusted child.

Somewhere in the middle of Grade Six, however, my safe and simple childhood world began to unravel - and I didn't know how to react.

Once puberty hit, it felt as if the game had changed but no one had explained the rules to me. Social structures at school became complicated, and peer pressure became unbearable. I regularly felt intimidated and belittled by my peers for not doing or saying the 'right things'. The pressures of fitting in and dealing with alcohol, drugs, appearance and sexual harassment swirled around me. The world in which I had once been so secure and confident no longer felt safe.

As puberty took hold and my body began to change and develop, I panicked. My body was getting bigger while the images in the media all around me were getting smaller. While Jane Fonda, the *20-Minute Workout* and *SHAPE* magazine were popular, I also watched Tracy Gold's character on the television show *Growing Pains* being constantly ridiculed about her weight.

My conscious reaction was to diet and exercise. At least, I wouldn't be fat, I vowed. I rationalized that if I could just be thin and perfect, I would be accepted and happy again. Unconsciously, I sought to regain some semblance of order in my life. I tried to control my body and, at the same time, suppress all of my emotions and feelings.

So began a decade of restrictive eating, bingeing and purging in search of my ultimate goal: perfection.

## My frightening secret

For months, my family doctor tried to find the cause of my plummeting weight during my early adolescence, when I should have been naturally gaining weight. I insisted that I simply couldn't eat because my stomach hurt, which was only partially true. Test after test came back negative, yet my doctor never recognized that I was losing weight on purpose. I was starving myself, and suffering from anorexia nervosa.

One of my most frightening memories was my pure delight after having been hospitalized for a week with a severe bout of meningitis: I had lost 10 pounds.

I plowed through high school full steam ahead, hiding my insecurities and obsessions, and became a top scholar at the school and one of the top athletes in the city. I would muster up enough energy to go to javelin practice in the morning, classes all day and volleyball in the afternoon, and then I would collapse in the evening, exhausted and famished. I started to hate myself with a passion, believing that I was a fraud.

By Grade 11, I was tired of everyone fussing over my eating habits, and I started to eat again - but then I felt as if I couldn't stop. I soon was in the full grip of bulimia nervosa. I hid my bingeing, purging and obsessive exercising behaviours from everyone and returned to what appeared to be a healthy weight. I hated myself even more.

By the time I reached university, my eating disorder had spiraled out of control. Living away from home for the first time, I began to drink alcohol heavily and experienced my first bouts of depression and panic attacks. I lasted eight months at university - enough time to tear the lining of my esophagus and flunk every course. With much fear and anxiety, I dropped out. I had never felt more incompetent.

## Road to recovery

Ironically, leaving university was one of the best choices I ever made. My pride and perfectionism had led me to keep my struggles a secret from even my closest friends and family, but I admitted that I had a problem soon after my departure from school. After years of struggling in silence, I had reached a point where I knew that the way I was behaving and feeling was neither normal nor healthy. I was mentally and physically exhausted.

For so long, I had heard a little voice inside me telling me that I was *ugly, fat, stupid* and *incompetent*. I thought that I could stop restricting, bingeing and purging if I really tried - I was just lazy and had to try harder. I would tell myself that *this year, this month, this week, today* - I would not binge or eat anything unhealthy. Of course, what I was really saying each time was - *today I will be perfect*. And I would continue to set myself up to fail.

Facing up to the truth was scary and overwhelming. I didn't really know who I was or how I felt. I was fortunate to find a therapist who worked patiently and diligently with me for many years. Slowly, like an onion, I began to peel away the layers of my eating disorder.

## **Learning how to feel again**

I had been out of touch with my true feelings and emotions for so long that I didn't know how to express them without hurting myself. I believed that showing my emotions, especially crying, was a sign of weakness or that I was not in control. As strange as it may seem, I had to re-learn how to cry, like I did when I was a child and hurting.

Once I started, I would cry and cry until I thought that there was no way I could ever shed another tear. And then I would cry some more. I came to understand that crying for me was an emotional release and a sign that I was learning how to feel again without fighting it. My therapist gave me a prescription that said, *Karin is to cry whenever she feels sad, wherever she is no matter what anyone says*. The prescription had unlimited repeats which I continue to fill to this day.

## **Accepting responsibility**

At first, I thought that taking responsibility for my eating disorder meant that it was my fault. I felt like a failure for having let it continue for so long. Over time, I began to understand that responsibility meant something different - that I could choose to recover. I realized that recovery was within my reach and that there was no one who could stop me from getting there.

Gradually, I learned that I couldn't blame anyone else for the way I felt - it was all about how I chose to react. I had the power to change my behaviours. Instead of feeling frustrated that someone had *made me feel guilty*, I learned that I had *chosen to feel guilty* and that I could *choose* to react differently next time.

## **Appreciating my sweet imperfections**

Perfectionism pervaded every aspect of my eating disorder, my bouts of depression and my anxiety. It was, and continues to be the most difficult issue that I have had to deal with.

For years, I had lived with the irrational belief that *nothing I ever did was good enough*, which I translated into the belief *I was never good enough*. I always wanted to be the perfect child, the perfect student, the perfect athlete, and have the perfect body - I had thought if I could be perfect that I would feel adequate. Ironically, the more I tried to be perfect, the more inadequate I felt.

Even when I began my recovery process, I was determined to recover perfectly. In the crazy-making world of perfection, I dreamed that once I had recovered, I would never have a negative feeling about my body. I would always eat complete and healthy, balanced meals and would never binge or restrict my eating in anyway. Of course, in reality, this was impossible.

It took me a long time to adjust my idea of recovery so that it was realistic and attainable.

## **Changing the *little voice***

As I learned more about myself, I found that whenever I became anxious or nervous about a certain situation, a *little voice* would take over. This was the voice of fear talking, telling me that I was stupid or unworthy. Over time, I learned how to stop that voice dead in its tracks by asking one simple question, "*What's the worst thing that could happen here?*"

As a competitive volleyball player for many years, each time I would try out for a team, my inner voice would begin to scream. To get to the root of the problem, I would ask the question, "*What's the worst thing that could happen if you go to this tryout?*" The little voice would answer, "*What if you don't make this team? What if people don't like you? What if they make fun of you?*" As I learned more about myself, I realized that my real fear, as always, was that I might not be perfect. Once I understood that, with a deep sigh, I would head out the door. And my little voice would say, "*It's okay*".

## **A work in progress**

I cannot tell you the exact day that I recovered, because it was a process of change that happened over a very long time. It took many years, a variety of methods and a myriad of environments.

Recovery for me was not about reaching a certain weight or size. It was about learning to accept and appreciate myself the way I am. It was learning that I can enjoy the pleasure of eating without feeling guilty. And it was learning that I can be healthy and beautiful without having to be a 'size 6'.

Today, I continue to work toward my goal of being a more balanced and mentally healthy person.

I've learned to accept that my life has ups and downs and that even the most difficult situations can provide me with opportunities to grow spiritually and mentally. Today, I have a new inner voice-- one that encourages me to celebrate myself as an imperfect work in progress.

## What helped me recover?

- *Time*
- *Tears*
- Writing in a journal
- Learning to release anger in health ways (my foam bat and pillow got quite a workout!)
- Setting up a support network of caring family members and friends
- A therapist and treatment program where I felt secure and respected
- *Time*
- *Tears*
- Learning to see things in shades of grey rather than only in black and white
- Learning to be assertive
- Learning to validate myself
- Understanding and decoding the media messages I saw everyday
- Understanding that language can be a positive or negative force
- *Time*
- *Tears*

Reprinted with the permission of the [Canadian Health Network](#) (CHN). This article was prepared for the CHN by Karin Davis, Program Coordinator for the National Eating Disorder Information Centre.

NEDIC 2006 [www.nedic.ca](http://www.nedic.ca)