

My Recovery

I can remember it so clearly. I was 14 and decided I needed to lose weight. I had just seen my reflection in the mirror and thought how much bigger I was than most of the other girls in school. I was a very impressionable 14-year-old. I compared myself to other people a lot and felt like I never measured up in any way. I wasn't really sure of myself and so I constantly sought approval from other people. I think I wanted to try and be perfect, so that other people would like and approve of me. I started to skip lunch, then breakfast and lost quite a lot of weight in a short time. But after about a year, I resumed 'normal' eating. I put all the weight back on and more, particularly during year 12. I comfort ate a lot during that year in order to cope with the pressure of final year high school.

As I'm sure is the case for a lot of people, leaving high school and starting uni was an incredibly difficult transition for me. I felt completely overwhelmed by the pressure of having to know what I wanted to do with the rest of my life, and university was so daunting - so many people, such a huge campus and such a contrast compared with the small orthodox private school I had attended. It seemed like my parents also found the transition difficult. It was hard for them to start letting go and extend the boundaries at home. This was hard for me to handle as well.

I actually thought at the time that that losing all the weight I'd gained was the solution to all my problems. Bulimia was really my way of denying what was going on, what I was feeling and experiencing. Bulimia developed into anorexia and back again over the next couple of years. This went on until I was about 25.

My recovery began the moment I admitted I had a problem. This was the first step in the recovery process; acknowledging the behaviour. I admitted that I had an eating disorder pretty early on in the piece. I knew that I was unwell within a few months. I felt so out of control of myself, and that scared me. I really needed to tell someone, and since I found it hard to open up to my family, I went to see our family doctor in secret and told him I had an eating disorder. He referred me to a psychiatrist whom I started seeing for the next 12 to 18 months. Seeing a psychiatrist was such a significant step. During these sessions I started to realise that the eating disorder was actually a symptom of much deeper issues. This was the next step in the recovery process. There was a 'reason' that this was happening. My behaviour was a reaction to my life, to my feelings and relationships.

In hindsight, I think I was so scared to just be myself. I was scared of my feelings and preferred instead to deny their existence. You can only suppress emotions for so long. Everything eventually comes to the surface. The thought of letting the behaviour go terrified me to no end at this point. I was no-where near ready to face the prospect of letting it go, but I continued with the sessions anyway, and took in as much as I was able to as a 19 year-old. I also started to borrow lots of books about eating disorders from the library. Reading about the illness and other people's experiences helped me understand more about what and why this was happening. I also began writing about how I felt. I wrote poems and did this particularly when I felt really down. This helped getting some of my feelings out as well.

Another thing I remember doing that was invaluable was sneaking off from my friends at uni and going along to listen to a talk about eating disorders at Union House. There was a woman who had recovered from bulimia who spoke about her experience and recovery. I couldn't imagine at this point how I'd ever recover, but this at least gave me hope. I could

see a speck of light at the end of the tunnel. Here was a real live person standing in front of me, who knew what I was going through; she was telling my story. And she got through it and was living a 'normal' life. I had never fathomed that I could ever recover before that day.

About a year down the track, it was getting harder to carry the load alone. I finally broke down in front of my oldest and dearest girlfriend Donna. I couldn't keep it all in any longer. I think for such a long time I didn't trust anyone enough to open up to them. I really wanted everyone to believe I was fine all the time. I remember Donna telling me that was the first time I had ever expressed that I wasn't fine and that I wasn't coping in the 14 years she'd known me. After a year, I gradually let go of the behaviour again. It wasn't really a conscious choice at this time though, it happened over time as I started to feel more in control of my own life. I had finished uni, I had a part time job that I enjoyed and was going out more. I was starting to live my own life. Life was the best it had been for me.

However, as I hadn't really dealt with any of the underlying issues yet, I would revert back to my coping mechanism yet again. By the time I was 22, I had moved out of home and before long I moved in with my boyfriend who was 15 years my senior. I felt completely overpowered in that relationship. He was very manipulative person. My family and friends were mortified at my choice and I lost a lot of friends at that time. I felt very alone, confused and very insecure. I was once again in a situation that I felt I couldn't get out of. That's how I felt at uni. I knew within a few months into my course, that I didn't enjoy it, but I felt like I was trapped once I'd started. I reverted straight back to familiar ground in order to cope with it all. I didn't realise what was happening though. Again I started to lose a lot of weight and friends started to notice.

Thankfully my close friend Donna approached me about her concerns. Since I had confided in her years before, she felt comfortable expressing her concerns. We didn't focus on my weight though, or even on my behaviour. She began asking me about my relationship, and how I felt in within it. I realised talking to her how out of control I felt. She also helped me understand that prior to starting this relationship, I had resumed healthy normal eating for a little while, and that it seemed like when I felt happier and more in control of my own life, this is what tended to happen. Eventually, once I understood what was motivating the behaviour, I was able to make a conscious choice that I didn't want to live my life that way anymore. I made a choice to let go of my well-worn coping mechanism. At this point, I was 25. Once I was conscious of what was happening, I couldn't pretend I didn't know and keep going. I've heard an expression that goes 'You can't go back to sleep once you start to wake up'. That's what it felt like.

Letting go of the behaviour felt so weird at first, it was such a huge adjustment to make. It's like I didn't know who I was without the eating disorder taking up so much of my days and thoughts. It's a role I played for so long, that I identified with. Of course I stumbled a few times. But each time I stumbled, I'd remind myself of the decision that I made, and these episodes became less and less frequent, because my desire to stay healthy was too important. So it was a gradual process. I remember about a year or so later, I noticed something. I noticed that for the first time in my life, I was eating whatever I wanted, when I wanted. I was also thinking about food as nutrition, as opposed to calories that I had to get rid of.

From the time I decided to let go of my crutch, I made some other decisions that were good for me and were significant as well. I decided to finally start singing lessons. This was something I had wanted to do for years but had always put off. Singing was as natural for me

as speaking was, it was how I expressed myself. I was so devoted to my lessons and my practise. I also started journaling again. I found writing helped me to get a lot of stuff out. It also helped me clarify and resolve a lot of emotions. I still rely so much on singing and writing today. I began going to yoga and meditation classes. Both of these practises opened me up to spirituality. I wasn't aware of that aspect of myself before then. During this time, I learned one of my most valuable lessons: that I have good instincts; that what I feel is valid and real even if my feelings aren't validated by another person. I never liked my feelings before then, let alone trust them. I learned to trust my feelings and to consider that maybe I was more worthy than I'd ever given myself credit for.

I still feel insecure about myself, but I don't buy into it like I used to, I definitely don't try to deny it. I haven't eliminated all of my hang ups, but now I'm not afraid to be real, to be vulnerable, fallible, imperfect.