

Ben's Recovery from Anorexia

Background

I am a 30 year old male. I am professionally employed and degree qualified. I have also been suffering from anorexia for the past 3 years. During this time it has taken a devastating toll on my physical and emotional health, and my professional and personal life. This is my story.

I had always had a problem with my self image. Having been overweight (although far from obese) for most of my life, I always dreamed about being fit, toned, muscular, and attractive. In my late teens I made a conscious effort to lose weight, and simultaneously hit the gym, ate healthily and in moderation.

I was proud of my efforts to reach a healthy weight, but was increasingly concerned about putting weight back on. Some unorthodox eating habits crept into my lifestyle and eventually I started to make myself vomit after some meals if I felt that I had overdone it. This behaviour didn't last long, fortunately, and any unhealthy eating habits that I had temporarily taken up were gone and forgotten for many years.

The lead up

By the age of 27, I was making a lot of progress in my career, had bought my own apartment, had a wide circle of friends, and was in a steady relationship. However, I was still not happy in my body. Like many males my age, I didn't have a great deal of time or interest in preparing healthy food, and added to this I regularly enjoyed good food and plenty of drinks on the weekend. My weight had crept up gradually over the years. Standing at 1.78 metres, I was certainly above my most comfortable weight.

Around this time, several things happened which negatively impacted my life. My grandpa, with whom I was very close, died a slow, horrible death. My mum attempted suicide a few times, which affected me greatly. My relationship fell apart, as my girlfriend explicitly told me that she was no longer attracted to me due to my weight. My house got robbed. A drunk driver crashed into my parked car and wrote it off. I could have dealt with these incidents in isolation, however all these things happened over the space of a few months.

Falling into it

It seems strange to think about it now, but food actually became less of an issue for a while in the lead up to anorexia. I was far too busy dealing with the problems listed above, but found myself gradually eating less of the unhealthy foods, and less volume of food. Every couple of months I might weigh myself and found that I was losing a reasonable amount of weight. It was a bonus more than anything. When I had lost a number of kilograms I decided to take it a bit more seriously and started exercising.

I then bought some scales, and started weighing myself regularly. In hindsight, this was the beginning of the end.

From there, my life degenerated extremely rapidly. Food started dominating my thoughts and feelings. Losing weight became an obsession, a very dangerous one. I restricted my food intake, eating very little throughout the day. Within a

few months, my life consisted of a severely restricted food intake, compulsive exercise after the few meals I actually had, and weighing myself many times per day. .

Life had become a set routine. I never had to think about what my next activity was, it was all planned out for me. I knew what I was going to eat, when I was going to eat it, when I would exercise, and when I would weigh myself. Nothing was left to chance. After several months my weight had dropped further. I was so focussed on my weight loss that I didn't even realise how my life was falling apart. Being overweight was all that I had known, and having now lost a large number of kilograms, I would literally do anything to jealously protect the weight loss I had achieved.

The effects professionally

Eating now dominated every part of my life. Almost every waking moment bore some relationship to eating. I had to eat on my own, and couldn't stand eating with people. Considering that I had breakfast and lunch at work, and that a lot of 'working lunches' were required as part of my job, this was highly stressful. Also, as I felt the need to compulsively exercise after mealtimes, I would never schedule meetings around the times that I ate. If someone else scheduled a meeting, I would be very restless.

Once or twice a day, I would leave the office and walk next door to the building which adjoined my workplace and run from the basement to the top. I would sometimes do this twice in one session.

Work trips away were par for the course, but I actively avoided them for several reasons. It was difficult to take my scales with me, I would have less control over what I was eating (as food was arranged at the conference/hotel), and my compulsive routine would be broken.

I was chronically fatigued due to my lack of energy, and whilst putting in as much as I could, it was severely hampering my efforts at work. Also, although it took around 18 months to take effect, my immune system finally gave up on me and I would get sick frequently and have to take days off work. My lack of energy meant that I was intolerant of other people's issues and problems. It was a less than ideal situation.

The effects personally

My social life dissipated very quickly when anorexia took hold. My routine didn't allow me to vary my food or drink consumption outside of my set plan, so I refused almost every social invitation that was extended to me. Even if I did attend a social outing or function, it would be to 'make an appearance' for an hour, and then to retreat back to my secure comfort zone which I knew so well. Friends, after making several attempts at getting in touch with me, understandably started to drift away. I would take the phone off the hook to avoid having to speak to people. I was unable to visit my dad on Father's Day as it would have interrupted my routine. I was a slave to the routine.

My love life withered during this time. From a physiological perspective, I can look back now and understand why. Meeting people, loving people, becoming aroused, and all other parts of relationships take energy and effort. When you starve your body, it retreats into survival mode. The very little energy that you actually introduce into your body is used just to keep your heart pumping and your major organs working, and there is none left for other parts of your life which you would usually require energy, such as your love life and social life. Basically, your body recognises how little energy

you are receiving and devotes all this energy into keeping you alive, meaning there is no energy or motivation for any other part of your life.

Then, anxiety hit me. I can honestly say that I had never known fear like this before. I would not wish it upon my worst enemy. One day, as usual, I had parked about 10 minutes away from work so that I could burn up some energy before driving home. Upon reaching my car, I was struggling for breath. I panicked, and started hyperventilating. I thought I was having a heart attack or stroke, and literally believed I was going to die. This was my first experience of a panic attack. After that, although I learned to control them to some extent, the panic attacks have been a daily occurrence for the past two years. Fear is now a standard part of my day. You cannot imagine the impact that this has had on my quality of life.

Health

I almost died from anorexia. Some of the physical effects of anorexia include when your body has been starved for so long that your major organs such as your heart or liver basically give up on you as they become so weak. My heart became severely weakened by the years of starvation. I started seeing the doctor on a monthly basis as I was so scared by the consequences of what I was doing, but could not bring myself out of the habits, which perpetuated the health dangers. Several times my blood pressure was dangerously low, which was indicative of how little energy I had and how weakened my body was.

I could hardly drag myself out of bed in the morning, yet exercised compulsively throughout each day. Life had become an absolute nightmare.

My mental health suffered immeasurably during this time. Apart from the constant fear and anxiety, I was lonely and depressed. On many occasions, I had to ask myself whether I was dead or alive due to the fact that I was numbed to any thoughts or feelings. I gained no joy out of life. Due to my health concerns, the prospect of losing more weight terrified me.

The prospect of putting on weight also terrified me. Maintaining my weight meant that nothing would change and that my life would continue in such an unhealthy state, being constantly ill, lonely, scared, depressed and anxious.

Recovery

As I felt powerless to do anything about my situation, such was my fear of putting on weight or interrupting my routine, I was unable to be proactive in making changes to my life. Instead, I would only make changes when I felt that I had no other option. Examples of this would be when my body would regularly ache and be in so much pain that all I could do was lie on my bed and cry. I would be so sick that I felt I had to change or I would die.

Health professionals have since told me that it was sheer luck that I didn't succumb to the disease. Gradually, I learned to trust other people, particularly my doctor and my psychologist who were there to help me in my journey to recover. I could not trust my own thoughts and feelings, as instinctively my default reaction to any situation would be to avoid food, or to avoid the prospect of putting on weight.

Over time, my quality of life had deteriorated to the extent that I felt I had no choice but to recover. I increased my food intake, slowly at first, and then realised that putting on weight is actually hard to do. I have now put on a few kilograms and reached my first milestone in terms of weight gain, which is at the lower end of the healthy body mass index range.

My social life has improved considerably in conjunction with my weight gain. I have more energy than before, and more interest in going out and socialising. I am catching up with people I have literally not seen for years. My productivity at work is increasing. I am more flexible with my eating patterns. I am getting back into the dating scene. Life is improving, and I look better, feel better, and have hope for the future where previously there was none.

I still have a long way to go before I can consider myself recovered. Every day is still an huge struggle, filled with anxiety about my eating habits, putting on weight, and health concerns. In hindsight I wish I had been more proactive about making changes to my life. I only made changes when I felt that things were so bad that I had no choice but to amend the way I do things. If I had been brave enough to take more risks, I could have saved myself so much physical illness and mental anguish.

As I've mentioned, I would not wish this condition on my worst enemy. Anorexia is an extremely debilitating, distressing, and above all, life threatening illness. It will take away any quality of life that you have, and consume every waking moment of your life. If you recognise any of the symptoms that I have described, please arm yourself with a strong support network of health professionals, family and close friends. Without the assistance of these people, I am unsure if I would be writing this story today.