

Gill Ryan – My Story

I have had a lifetime of what I think can be best described as 'eating distress'. When I was 18 in 1962 I first began to binge and purge. I also stole food from friends at College and was constantly preoccupied with food and concerned about getting thinner. I couldn't understand my behaviour because I knew I was kind, cared about my friends and I was an A student. What was this 'madness' which compelled me to lose weight by any means? I was always popular with boys so why, when I was severely underweight, did I have no boyfriends at all? My reasoning was that the thinner I became the more attractive and 'good' I would become. Obviously this was completely disordered thinking and finally I couldn't carry on at such a low weight and had to be hospitalized.

At that time eating disorders were unheard of outside the medical profession. I was well educated if nothing else but still had no idea what my psychiatrist meant when he told me I had Anorexia Nervosa. No one took the trouble to explain it to me. I tried to find books on the subject, to no avail. I did find a book translated from Italian about 'Self Starvation' which included the word bulimia. This word was not defined and I couldn't find it in any dictionary medical or otherwise. However, I gathered that I was bulimic as I ate food and then vomited. It was a bad book to read because it ended with the story of a sufferer who delighted her whole family by eating a hearty meal with them one night. The following day she committed suicide. I could understand how she felt but it wasn't helpful!

Eight months in hospital did little for me except prove I wasn't as sick as some but was sicker than others. It also gave me respite from home life which had always been tough. My pottery was said to be the angriest ever seen but they took no clues from that and the psychotherapy given during the 60s did not involve much two way communication! At last I was discharged but was little better - as they had no idea what to do with me.

Once on the outside again I began to lose weight again and for a while lived on a few tomatoes a day. However, I did get some work and met some kind, loving colleagues and this somehow helped me to keep fairly well by increasing my food range a little. I began to socialize a little and met the man who was to be my first husband. I married and reached a reasonable weight but remained bulimic in secret for the next 23 years. I seemed to constantly be battling weight gain but in a different way to when I was much more anorexic.

Eating disorders do seem to blend into each other and sometime you can be more anorexic and other times more bulimic. Basically the problems are the same. It was expensive to be bulimic and I denied myself new clothes and personal things to offset the guilt of all that wasted food. My marriage crumbled, not because of the bulimia but in spite of it! It was yet another abusive relationship; in my 45 years I had learned nothing about looking after myself. I had managed to bring up my three children but I am sure I was emotionally unavailable to them much of the time. Now they know my story I have been able to say sorry to them and have been rewarded with much love and understanding.

I then trained as a Marriage Guidance counsellor, ironic but true. People had always found it easy to talk to me about personal matters, so I thought I might as well use this 'talent'. At this point I realized I had to sort myself out before I could help others. So I was lucky to find someone who specialized in 'eating disorders' and she helped me over 4 years to untangle the sorry web of my life. It was a complete revelation to me and how I wished I had been given the chance of such help earlier. However I have to ask myself honestly if I would have been ready to take such help - probably not.

Gill Ryan's Story

I have since spent a long time counselling young women with eating problems. I soon realized that each person has a different story and their own individual path to travel to find good health. Small wonder a definitive 'cure' has not been found yet. I am certain that the finest resources we have are people like me and other younger women who have recovered and who can offer hope and understanding to sufferers.

So there it is - over 30 years of 'eating distress'. Do you ever really recover? Well I still get bad patches but I don't panic as I have strategies on board now to help me cope. These bad patches are always associated with unresolved feelings. I seek them out, talk about them and somehow food doesn't seem so important.

There is so much to be done to educate young women today to ignore the media pressures and dare I say peer pressure about body shape and size. There is much that can be done by parents too. Ask your girls how they feel, listen to their concerns and worries, make them feel heard; tell them how proud you are of them. This makes them feel valued for what they are inside and this will strengthen them for all the challenges that lay ahead in their lives.