

Kellie's Recovery from Anorexia and Bulimia

I've always been an independent person. I have never been comfortable asking for help or showing any sign of weakness. So when I began feeling depressed at 15 years of age I tried to hide it. There was nothing in particular that set it off – a need to be accepted, a need to be wanted, a need to be in control of my life. I felt that I wasn't very special – that I wasn't a worthwhile person. Despite my secure and happy upbringing I felt lost and confused – as though I didn't fit in anywhere.

I began skipping one meal a day – running to school without time for breakfast, throwing my sandwiches away...I enjoyed the emptiness I felt inside – it felt powerful. Slowly over the months I began to lose a little weight and enjoyed the compliments. I'd never been grossly overweight, but was always a little chubby and it felt great to be noticed for what felt like the first time in my life.

What began as a small habit slowly became an uncontrollable addiction. Whilst it felt like I was in total control of my body and my life, I was in fact, totally out of control. By the time I reached 17 years of age I was eating minimally and also throwing up. I had lost a substantial amount of weight but was also drowning within a world I couldn't handle.

My family and friends knew something was wrong, but they weren't sure what. They had lost their happy, carefree daughter, sister and friend to a moody, depressed, angry girl who hated her life. I tried to tell everyone I was ok – they didn't believe me but there wasn't much they could do – I wouldn't let them in. I was so terrified of being forced to eat and gain weight that I pretended everything was ok.

I saw psychiatrists, started anti-depressants and tried to educate myself on the illness. Unfortunately it had progressed too far and all that mattered was losing one more kg. I weighed myself constantly and was making myself sick every hour.

I struggled through Uni and although I had friends, I didn't socialise a lot as I was occupied with other things like finding a toilet to throw up in or exercising. I felt like I was a useless, insignificant person who never had been, and never would be, special. I added up every calorie that went into my body and tried everything to lose weight. I cried and cried at the nightmare my life had become.

Although my friends and family tried to help and understand, they were frustrated at how irrational I had become. They didn't understand that I had no control over what I was doing and some even thought it was deliberate. People couldn't understand how such an intelligent, attractive, friendly and popular girl had "done this to herself" – and that had made me more upset. I wanted to yell and scream and to tell them that I was out of control – but that would be showing an emotion I kept for behind closed doors when everyone else was asleep.

Eventually I was so tired and so desperate that I thought I had nothing to lose – 4 days after my 21st birthday party I checked myself into hospital. The only thing keeping me going was willpower, and once I lost that willpower I would die. I was hospitalised for nearly 4 months and it was a battle. I tried everything I could to fight against getting better, but gradually as I made small changes I started to realise that I had been missing out on a lot. I started to take risks – whether it was eating something small and not throwing up, trying not to exercise for hours a day or looking at myself in the mirror and not being repulsed – it was all making me stronger.

In counselling sessions I learnt to try and face my feelings of anger rather than keeping them inside.

Instead of throwing up from the inability to release my tension I began to tell people how I felt. I realised that to regain control of my life I had to have respect for myself and had to believe that my thoughts were as relevant and important as everyone else's.

As I put on weight it was difficult dealing with things like not being able to fit into my children's' sized clothing anymore and having people make well-meaning comments such as "wow, you've put on weight". It was tough learning to eat again – learning to feel again. But it was also exciting. It was exciting to get my energy back, to find myself smiling, to find my little stomach attractive and to regain the confidence I hadn't felt in many years.

I attended family therapy where we talked about anything and everything – it helped bring us closer together and we are now more open with each other than we've ever been. After leaving hospital it was probably another 4 years before I could call myself 'recovered'.

I slipped back into old habits at times, but never, ever did I fall far enough to lose grip. I loved my 'new' life – I had trouble finding my identity – I experimented a bit, as it had been many years since the 'real Kellie' had surfaced. After a while however, as I began loving the person inside, it wasn't difficult and I had the confidence to simply be myself.

I'm now nearly 35 and have been fully recovered for 10 years.

Having an eating disorder takes a lot of energy – if you have the strength to starve yourself or be bulimic, then you certainly have the strength to get better. I still take antidepressants and see my psychiatrist perhaps once or twice every couple of years, but I have never been happier.

An eating disorder is dark and strong and cruel, and it tears at your insides without care or consideration for anything but itself and it takes strength to fight back. I can't say I'm glad that I was sick, but I have learnt so much about myself and about people. I love that I'm an emotionally raw person – I love that I'm sensitive and in touch with myself. Sometimes people don't understand and see my emotion as a weakness – but I'm the strongest person I know and I wouldn't change that for the world.

I see my anorexia and bulimia as a step in my life to become the person I am today. It was so hard, and I will never say that recovery is anything less than an immense uphill battle – but it's also an exciting one – one of discovery, unexpected pleasures and the realisation that we all have flaws and we are all capable of dealing with them without having to turn to food.