

Rachel's Recovery from Anorexia

It's hard to identify the true beginning of an eating disorder. When I look back on mine, it's almost impossible to pick a spot to start the story. The influencing factors, the random triggers, the little decisions that fed my eating disorder are all intertwined in the past and my memory of it. It's like trying to find the end of a very tangled knot.

My mother has had body image and eating problems as long as I have known her. As a child, I thought that dieting was just what grown-up women did. Growing older, I began to understand that my mum dieted because she didn't like the way she looked. She called herself fat and ugly, and she gave very detailed descriptions of how hideous each of her hated body parts were. She would verbally contemplate her inability to understand how my father could love someone as unfortunate looking as she. And I believed her. I trusted her. Looking back at pictures, it's only now that I realise how thin she was. I went through primary school feeling ashamed of having such a fat mother. Now I realise how skewed her perceptions, and my own, actually were.

I began to diet in grade seven. The more I eliminated food from my life, the more I began to crave it. I would come home from school before my mum was home and poke around for snacks, and get up late at night trying to sneak something tasty while everyone was asleep. I then made a startling discovery. Snack food disappeared from our house at record speeds - my mother was bingeing. My mum, who ate salad every time we went to McDonalds and skipped lunches regularly, was bingeing on the junk food she bought for us. The anger I felt upon this revelation was almost violent. In my very narrow mind, I felt she deserved to be overweight for doing this. It all made sense.

So sometime around the beginning of high school I decided I wouldn't let that happen to me. I had already eliminated anything I considered remotely unhealthy, so I took the next step: I started eliminating meals. For the next five or so years of my life, I skipped every meal that I could. I ate only when my mother, or someone who might threaten my lifestyle, was paying attention. I was good at hiding my eating disorder, and I started to lose weight. Eating periodic meals to keep my mother happy slowed the process enough that no one noticed anything drastic.

Now as all this was going on, my father was terminally ill with cancer. The emotional trauma present in my life over these few years was immense. My mother was preoccupied with caring for him, and after he died sank into an intense depression accompanied by severe weight gain. For the first time in her life she was alone. She gave up on life, on my sister, and on me. I felt the cruel unfairness of life without my father, and angry at a mother I felt had abandoned me in a time of need. This made it really easy to move full speed ahead with my eating disorder.

I don't know when I hit rock bottom, because it seems like it happened so many times before I sought help. I would gain weight at times to keep my coaches and friends suspicions at bay. The eating disorder had become a way of life. I couldn't risk anyone finding out. Finally, something changed. I was in college and was miserable. My social life was suffering. Meals are a social gathering in college and I was isolating myself to avoid eating. I fought endlessly with my mother. I remember going to bed at night and hoped I wouldn't wake in the morning. That scared me so much that I worked up the courage and called the counselling centre.

At my first appointment, I was fidgety and anxious. I wondered if I could get better without gaining weight. I realise now how deeply my eating disorder was rooted in my thoughts. Even when I accepted I had an eating disorder, I didn't want to let go of it. I might gain weight, and in my fragile world, that was the worst possible thing I could imagine happening. Despite all the pain in my life I had endured, I wasn't sure I could handle that.

The first year or so of my treatment, I focused mostly on behaviours. I tried to eat normal meals, in a regimented way that felt like a diet. I continued to weigh myself, hiding the scale for a few weeks and then frantically taking it out of the closet, unable to accept myself without knowing my weight. Truthfully, I was just going through motions. I still had to make sure I didn't gain weight. At the time it felt so useless, to be eating and doing healthy things but still feeling miserable. When I left my outpatient program, with supervised meals and group therapy, I was scared. I had eliminated most of the self-destructive behaviours, but I still felt a driving need to be thin. And I was terrified I might relapse.

My recovery was (and still sometimes is) a slow, plodding process filled with relapse. Possibly the hardest thing for me to accept was that I would never be finished with recovery. I understand now that it's ongoing, and I will continue to recover throughout my life.

The good news is, the deeper I delve into recovery and challenge my old beliefs, the more rewarding the journey becomes. Some days it's still frustrating; some days I still feel that my eating disorder is in full swing; but when I truly sit down and contemplate the past few years, I can see my progress and I am proud. The triggers are still there, sometimes as strong as ever, but I'm more positive and I have developed a repertoire of coping skills. When I relapse hard, which happens only infrequently now, it is much easier to get up and keep going. I accept that relapses and setbacks will happen, so I don't have to live in fear of them.

I know that my initial reactions to stress continue, even today, to be those of my eating disorder. An eating disorder is a type of coping skill and it was the first one I ever developed. Mine developed in response to the pain of my young life. I was trying to help myself, and I made a mistake. I can forgive myself and keep trying. That's a normal, healthy process. Treatment, recovery, and even relapse, are ways to build positive coping skills to replace the eating disorder.

Throughout this process, I learned to ask for help. I learned to be honest about my needs and feelings, even when it might upset the people around me. When I told my mother the truth, she called me stupid. I have called about a million therapists and treatment programs, and I will probably call about a million more in my life. I have been to group therapy, psychotherapy, behavioural therapy, recreational therapy, supervised meal programs, and much more. We owe it to ourselves to try a variety of coping skills, make mistakes, and identify the ones that work for us.

Here are some of mine: I distract myself with colouring books and friendship bracelets when I feel triggered. I call friends for support during relapses. I avoid people and places I know I can't handle. And I challenge myself to take risks and test out new coping skills in potentially tough situations. I plan meals and grocery shop for delicious and healthy foods that will nourish my body. I participate in physical activities to strengthen and nurture my body, not change it. I keep a special journal where I list all the good things in my life, and I read it when I'm bummed out. I don't own a scale and I turn around and face the other way at the doctor's office. When people around me talk about fat and calories, I politely ask them if I can enjoy my food in peace.

But they don't develop overnight. I learn them one at a time and then I practice. I still make mistakes. And beyond changing the actual habits, beyond putting regular meals in my body, participating in healthful exercise or throwing my scale out, I had to change the way I look at the world.

The behaviours are the most threatening part of the eating disorder, so simply concentrating on eating regularly will allow the body to heal. That's where I started, and it's not a bad place. If you can get to this place you're doing awesome. But when you are here, relapses are devastating. They knock

you off your feet and you get angry because you've worked so hard to get better and you're still struggling. And when I reached this point, I realised I had to challenge the beliefs about food, weight, and body image that kept convincing me I needed the eating disorder.

I didn't want to hear this and some days I still don't, but this I believe is true. We have to learn to love ourselves, and our bodies, the way they are. We have to know that we are beautiful souls that are capable of loving and being loved. And we have to believe this unconditionally, no matter what happens or what we look like. We have to want to nurture ourselves: by feeding our bodies a variety of delicious and healthy foods, by participating in activities that strengthen us body and soul, by using positive coping skills when we are struggling, and by reaching out to positive people for support.

When I relapse, the first thing I try to do is sit down and breathe. I try to picture an ideal moment. What would I want to do, right now, if I had the perfect body, if I wasn't stressed, if I hadn't just relapsed, or if I wasn't trying to lose weight? What is it that would bring positive, healthy, passionate joy to my life? And then I do everything in my power to do whatever that might be, right then and there. You don't have to wait until you are thin, or are cured, or are in any particular stage of recovery to experience joy. If you are willing to let go of the ideals of the eating disorder and accept the passion and pain and beauty of life as it is, you can enjoy today. And if you just take one today at a time, you will heal.