

Shevaun's Recovery from Bulimia

I suppose I'm now what would be considered 'recovered' from an eating disorder, but I prefer to think of myself as 'recovering', mainly because it allows for moments of non-perfect recovery and little slip-ups along the way. But I've discovered that slip-ups, like all things in life that may go a bit off track, can be the very best way of learning about yourself and growing further.

I don't know if it's possible to pin-point exactly when or why my bulimia started. There was the usual school-yard pressure of being skinny, the obsession with magazine-thin models and being attractive to boys that developed about the age of 13.

I guess the obsession with my weight and food never really left me from then, but the grip my obsession held over me and the viciousness of the bingeing came and went in waves. Generally stress was the trigger for a big episode of weight loss, whether the pressures of year 12, an unhealthy relationship or my first big trip overseas.

For so many years I didn't see it as a problem. I was thin, I was (physically) healthy, I was forever receiving compliments from other people about how lucky I was to have such a great, naturally thin figure. But I felt like a fraud. And I was growing increasingly disgusted and angry at myself for my behaviour. Angry at the pain both emotionally and with increasing frequency, physically, I was putting myself through.

I felt so horrible for lying to people, so scared that people would find out what I was doing to myself. I was so scared that if I stopped, I would put on huge amounts of weight and be revealed as the hugely obese person that I thought lay await inside of me. In my mind, without a doubt no-one would/could possibly care about me then.

The desire to stop bingeing didn't happen in one cataclysmic realisation. There was no soapie-style 'caught in the act'. And it sounds strange even to my own ears now, but it took a long time to realise that I had a problem, that I wanted to stop the bingeing. I refused to think about it. I rationalised that I was thin, but not too thin, so I couldn't have a problem.

Even when I knew that I hated what I was doing to myself, I was too scared to tell someone about my behaviour and reluctant to acknowledge that I was important enough to warrant getting help. I was worried that those close to me would be disgusted at my behaviour and feel let down by my failure to live up to what I believed they expected from me. I was scared to acknowledge that I wasn't the super-controlled, super-responsible person that I had convinced myself I was and that I should be.

I had trapped myself not only in my own cage of bulimia but up on a pedestal of my own making which I was scared to climb down from. I felt so inadequate that I even doubted whether a psychologist would consider my bulimia serious enough for treatment. I mean I wasn't physically wasting away, I wasn't harming anyone else, why couldn't I just deal with it myself?

My first step after acknowledging to myself that I had a problem and that I wanted it to stop and stop now was to try to stop my bingeing, by myself, without assistance. I told myself that it should be easy. If I hated what I was doing, well, I was a person of strong willpower, surely I could stop all by myself.

I bought a book about treating bulimia and wrote lists of ways to prevent binges and what I hoped to gain from stopping my bulimia. But again fear got in my way. Deep down, no matter how much I was hating what I was doing to myself my fear of being fat was beating my attempts to stop. I saw my failure to stop my bingeing behaviour as yet another sign that I was a failure, too weak, too useless. In reality, my attempts to stop and my failure to do so had taught me: one, that I had a problem, and two, that I needed some help.

Finally, I told someone. I told my mum.

The world didn't end. Although neither did my bulimia. She was so understanding and encouraging that for a while I thought I could work through it just by discussing it with her. And at least I became increasingly aware of my problem behaviours. But it didn't stop.

So earlier this year, after 13 years of on-and-off bulimia and an obsession with controlling my food and weight, I started seeing a psychologist to try to get rid of my bulimia once and for all. I was so scared. I was torn between wanting and hoping that I would see her maybe for a few weeks, and then everything would miraculously be okay, and being so hopeless and doubting that I was convinced it would be useless.

I was also scared that something that had been part of my life and my companion for half of my lifetime, would be taken away and I would be left with a gap that I wouldn't be able to fill. My psychologist was, and is, great. She has been of more help than I ever thought possible. But as she likes to remind me, she hasn't done it on my behalf, I've done it myself. It wasn't easy. And it wasn't quick or painless. But gradually I started to unravel the reasons why I did this thing to myself, and to believe that yes, I could change and see that instead of bulimia being my companion it had really been my captor.

And I learnt, gradually, how sweet life could be being free from bulimia. And also how sour. Because I also learnt that I had been using my bulimia to protect myself from my feelings, from reacting to life with emotions, by blotting out my feelings both good and bad with my binges, and blocking real life worries with my obsessions about food and weight. So I have had to face up to being sad, and angry, and happy without running away straight into a binge. But it's gotten easier with time to accept that feeling these things is not something to fear, but something to embrace.

The gap where bulimia and bingeing has been filled with so many random little pleasures to cope with bad days; walks, trashy magazines, phone calls, baking, window shopping... It has allowed me to again enjoy things that I once feared and hated, like food and cooking and eating at restaurants. And it has allowed me to become closer to understanding myself and to other people than I ever imagined possible.

A large part of my psychologist's assistance has been in helping me to accept myself, as I am, with flaws and all. And to accept that other people can and should accept you for who you are. I'll never forget how convinced I was that my boyfriend would be so disgusted if I told him about my bulimia, how convinced I was that he would think I was weak and pathetic and shallow. But that was not only a gross under-estimation of myself but of him, and telling him has allowed us to become closer than I ever dreamed of being with anybody, because I'm no longer hiding a large dark part of myself away from him.

I've been amazed at how much self-disgust is lifted from your shoulders by being able to discuss an isolated binge for what it is; an aberration of eating that you can pick yourself up from, rather than feeling the shame that comes with keeping it buried.

Through my recovery, I have learnt to challenge not only my own thoughts about weight and eating but about myself as a person, and have grown so much through having to face up to my assumptions and those of other people. It has given me new faith in my ability to tackle difficulties, faith in other people and faith in myself. It has been hard to accept that there will be fallbacks along the way. After two whole weeks with not one binge - an unimaginable length of time even six months ago, I thought I'd made it. That was it. I would never binge again. But I did. And I picked myself up. I had a whole random week of bad binges and restricting food. But again, I picked myself up. I learnt to feel achievement at getting back on track, rather than failure at having fallen off.

Certainly, there are still times when I am tempted to binge and purge. But I have learnt not to berate myself for these urges, to accept that I may under pressure, occasionally have these urges (although they are getting fewer and fewer in between), but that I don't have to give in to them. And if I do, I'm not a bad person, just human. It's easy to underestimate the hard work that is involved in recovering from bulimia, how much strength it takes to face your fears. And there have been many, many times along my path to recovery that I have doubted whether it's worth it: feeling upset, stressed, anxious, putting on weight... but it is worth it. And to be honest, and as shallow as I berate myself for being, putting on weight is and was one of the hardest challenges. But like all other challenges, it can be overcome.

I just had to remind myself (admittedly, I sometimes still do) that wearing a bigger dress size is a ridiculously small trade-off for the freedom and enjoyment I get from not bingeing. And every so often I let myself enjoy that little bit of pride that I feel when I stop to think how about how far I have come (These days I can keep favourite foods in my cupboard, and not see them as something to fear! I can make a loaf of bread last a whole week! I can 'let' myself eat chocolate, or lollies, any day of the week, and not feel guilty!)

I guess from my perspective, what it all comes down to, is that like anything worthwhile in life, recovering from bulimia involves challenging your fears, a lot of hard work and tears, patience and persistence...but that the freedom, understanding and self-acceptance that comes with the recovery makes up for it a hundred times over.