

## **Bullied by Addiction**

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It's sort of embarrassing to have an eating disorder. It seems like such a silly problem to have. "Just stop it!" Well, unfortunately, it's not that easy. In fact it is not easy at all. Other addictions can be avoided, not easily, but one can live quite successfully without smoking or alcohol or drugs or gambling or even sex. But one has to eat to survive so there is no avoiding it. I hope my story will help others find ways of overcoming eating disorders and gain some freedom from the preoccupations that rob us of a full and meaningful life.

Like most addictions, an eating disorder serves to buffer us from tough times that come our way - first by comforting us, but then by preoccupying us with compulsions that are usually more painful and frustrating than the reality we hoped to cushion. Worst of all, we can't make it go away.

How did this happen to me? Well, that's a good question. In my case, I don't know what came first, the devastation of depression and the disabling effects of anxiety, or the eating disorder that has haunted me and bullied me for most of my life. I'm guessing the depression and anxiety came first and I began to use food as a way to comfort myself and remove me a step or two from painful situations.

As far as I can tell the preoccupation with food started when I was 10 years old. It was a tough year. My brother was born; I started my period, had my tonsils out and was sexually abused by someone close to me. Whew. This was also the year that I went from being a happy go lucky skinny little kid to a chubby prepubescent girl - moody and worried and sad.

When I was the skinny kid, mom always tried to get me to eat more- I was her only kid and since she had barely survived the great depression, food was a symbol of many things for her - love, health, wealth and wellbeing. If you ate what she fixed, that meant that you loved and respected her and that you accepted her gifts of food with gratitude. So, I began to eat a lot to please her, and pleasing her became very important since my new baby brother (who I later came to love with all my heart) was soaking up all the attention. Also, when I was sad and worried, mom's prescription was always, "Eat and you'll feel better". So, I took her at her word.

Soon I was chubby and feeling self-conscious and ashamed because I was fatter than the other kids. This is when I first felt the effects of the double edged sword: I could eat and feel the immediate comfort of being really full and make mom happy. Or not eat, make mom worried, but at least feel like I had some control over what was happening to my expanding body. Eating actually did make me feel better. I know now that it was because of the high doses of carbohydrates flooding my system that elevated my mood. But these temporary elevations soon dropped below the line when I felt fat and ashamed.

Yoyo dieting, diet pills, and a string of diet plans later, I became a fully fledged food addict. I was one of those people who do not meet the specific criteria for the two defined disorders, Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia. When this happens people like me are given a diagnosis of an Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (EDNOS). Over one-half to two-thirds of people diagnosed with eating disorders fall into the category of EDNOS. More people are diagnosed with EDNOS than Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia combined.

EDNOS is not less serious than the specific disorders. We have all the same negative psychological, social, and physical consequences as people who are diagnosed with Anorexia Nervosa or Bulimia. The only difference is we bounce around with a broad range of symp-

toms that may change in degree and duration. This unpredictability makes us jumpy and provides many opportunities for false hope of recovery.

So how does this affect my life? The affects are pervasive, but perhaps the most disabling aspect is the obsession with all things related to eating - what I ate, what I plan to eat, what I hope I don't eat, what I can't wait to eat, and how bad I feel after I eat due to weight gain. This takes up a lot of brain space and makes it hard to concentrate. I have had high level jobs most of my career, and many times I've sat in meetings where important decisions were being made. It's often been a struggle to participate from my most intelligent self because of the preoccupation with what I ate, what I hope I don't eat, what snacks are still left.

There are self-help groups for people like me and the one that has helped me the most and has had lasting effects has been a 12 step program known as Food Addicts in Recovery. The things that make it work for me are the spiritual aspects, plus the camaraderie of people who understand and who are also recovering from this disorder. I've learned a lot about how to survive this disorder, but it has been a cruel teacher. Like most addictions it is too powerful to battle with willpower. Furthermore, I've learned that I can't do it alone.

Overcoming any addiction is not for the faint of heart. It takes a lot of courage. I am not faint of heart. Over the course of my life I have experienced and risen above many difficult things often under adverse circumstances. I grew up in a logging camp and lived my childhood in poverty. I've learned to live with depression and anxiety. I have survived unhealthy marriages and unfair divorces. People close to me have died. I've earned a couple of Master's degrees and a PHP. I've managed large complicated behavioral health programs. So, I'm no sissy. Yet, nearly every day, I am faced with the challenge of overcoming this addiction.

One of the most valuable lessons this pitiless teacher has taught me is that when I have the urge to indulge in compulsive eating, it is usually not because I am hungry. It is because I have lost connection with my spiritual anchor. This leaves a void that my brain wants to fill with food. However, there is never enough food to fill that void. So, when I feel the pull to think about or indulge in compulsive eating that is a message I listen to with my third ear. It tells me to take a minute and reconnect to my true self and to re-anchor my spirit. This is not easy to explain, but it has to do with moving from my head to my heart, and then to connect with what's going on around me from that point. By "heart" I mean that place within me that is truly me.

What I just said in the paragraph above has sometimes been the basis of rooky diagnosticians labeling me with a borderline personality disorder. They are usually looking for evidence of this anyway since they think that eating disorders and personality disorders are close associates. Please don't discount my explanation of this struggle by labeling it. Just let it be. That is what I have had to do.

Another lesson that has been hard to learn is to stay away from highly addictive foods like flour and sugar. I have to remind myself that eating is about nurturing my body, not about having a party in my mouth.

I've alluded to this earlier, but just in case you missed it, I want to close with some advice I give myself every day. Don't fight it. When you fight it you give it power and it will win every time. Don't try to outsmart it. It knows your brain and will use it against you and you will lose every time. Don't deny it. It will continually produce evidence that it is ever present and you will be the only one fooled.

Surrender. Don't give up, but surrender the outcome to whatever higher power you can find. Make a food plan you like and follow it. There is freedom in this approach. Don't try to do this alone. Find kindred spirits who will understand your struggles and support you.

I wish you the best on your journey to wholeness and health.

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