

PART I
PIONEERS OF EDA

FREE AT LAST

When this third member of EDA recognized that full recovery would remain out of reach until she rebuilt self-trust, she consciously accepted responsibility for addressing her own basic needs and began taking small risks to express emotions safely. As trust grew, so did love, joy, peace, and freedom.

Please allow me to start with a warm welcome to anyone new to the fellowship of Eating Disorders Anonymous. We are a group of men and women who have found a path to recovery and we are sharing our stories—and our process—so that others might find support, peace, and freedom from their eating disorders. If you have just discovered you have an eating disorder, or have been engaged in a lifelong struggle with one, do not despair. You are not alone. It took most of us a long time and a great deal of patience and persistence to find lasting relief, but we have! Whether you are new to recovery or strengthening and building on an existing recovery, we hope that you will find a sense of connection with us and feel the hope and joy in our stories.

Mine is not particularly remarkable. I had a normal, middle-class childhood in a small Midwestern town, loving parents, and an older sister who doted on me. I was never molested or mistreated. I was not especially overweight, nor was I very thin. I was not particularly attractive or ugly. Although I certainly had adversarial relationships with some children, I was not bullied, and I did not feel singled out in

any specific way. As a child and teenager, prior to developing an eating disorder, I do not think I was more anxious or depressed than my peers. I can find no primary “cause” that explains why I should have developed one, other than my own “childish” reactions to life as it unfolded for me. Yet I became severely bulimic.

I was almost sixteen when I first read about bulimia in a “Dear Abby” column. I was repulsed by the idea, but then realized that throwing up meals was a solution to other problems I was facing. I had just started a very restrictive diet (my first), because I had gained weight lying around for a few weeks after an exciting and active trip to Europe. My mother, startled to see me eat so little, put great pressure on me to eat “normally.” I felt typical adolescent rage at these attempts at control. I did not want her to worry, but I could not satisfy both my mother and my desire to return to what I deemed a healthy weight. More importantly, I was upset with myself because I could not stop eating more than I thought I “should,” even though I was losing weight. My diet was so restrictive that I binged when my body had “had enough” of holding back, and I was terrified of those binges—they made me feel absolutely helpless. I had never been so afraid of myself. Throwing up took care of all these problems. Then I discovered something really amazing: throwing up relieved my rage. It also relieved my fear, resentment, frustration, self-pity, and despair; in fact bulimia addressed all my disagreeable, unmanageable, over-the-top, adolescent emotions. With bulimia, I no longer felt out of control. Bulimia worked so well that it soon became my main method of coping.

I thought that putting my emotions “on hold” would let me behave like a sensible adult instead of the overly emotional, wretchedly awkward teenager I was. For a short while,

this seemed to work; and, from the outside, things looked great. I received a coveted appointment to the United States Naval Academy. I also earned a full scholarship to a State university. However, putting my emotions “on hold” meant I would remain emotionally stuck, awkward, and exposed during what should have been my development into a mature young adult. I do not fault myself for the escapist path I chose at sixteen, but the repercussions of that decision stretched well into my later years. Although I have regrets, I am grateful today to have a story of recovery to share.

While I lived at home with my parents, my eating disorder was active, but not yet completely out of control. I was a tough kid, and for the first two years, I did not see much impact from the destructive course I had chosen. There were *plenty* of repercussions, of course, but I refused to see them. I functioned well enough at school and work, and made plans for the future. I left for college with high hopes and big dreams. My life seemed full of promise.

Once I was finally in college, I had the whole complement of new and exciting experiences: freedoms and relationships and opportunities for learning I had only ever dreamed about. This should have been a delightful time of exploration and growth, and at many levels it was. But thanks to my eating disorder, I was *emotionally unprepared* for most of these experiences. I had become childlike: held hostage by my eating disorder and unable to trust myself to do the next right thing in any given situation.

When I first got to college, I had a meal card and could eat whatever and whenever I wanted. It soon became clear that people were suspicious that I was bingeing and purging, and they were willing to confront me. Embarrassed, I stopped using the meal card and learned how to steal from vending machines. What a great solution—now

I was a thief! Bulimia and lack of sleep meant I could barely stay awake in class. My grades slipped, but I was unable to stop behaviors that guaranteed they would only get worse. I lived in constant fear of discovery. The more horrible I felt, the more I binged and purged.

Before long, things began to get dangerous. I had started taking laxatives and one time nearly died of dehydration. I was afraid they would find me dead in a bathtub, too weak to lift my head to drink any liquids. I somehow survived, but only a few months later had a grand mal seizure and was hospitalized. You would think that these terrifying experiences might have woken me up! I did stop using laxatives, but was absolutely unable to stop bingeing and purging even though the damage was now horrifying and obvious. Bulimia made me oblivious not only to my own pain, but also to the pain and endangerment I created for others. I was too scared of my emotions to stop or change my eating-disordered behaviors, even for a day; I felt overwhelming shame, self-pity, frustration, and resentment. Ironically, despite the mortal peril, bingeing and purging made life seem almost manageable. With its help, I felt I could at least get up and do things that seemed purposeful. But in reality, I was a constant threat to myself and others. I could not be trusted. I lied, I stole, I cheated.

Bulimia is expensive. I pretended to deposit checks into ATM machines so I could pay for food that I would binge and purge. I lied when called into the bank on charges of fraud. Work and school served as a partial distraction from my ED, but I was constantly agitated and couldn't concentrate on anything for very long. I lost my scholarships. I started donating plasma, but still couldn't pay my bills. I moved in with my boyfriend. With each new defeat I became progressively more helpless, dependent, and shame-filled.

I discovered alcohol was much cheaper than bingeing and purging. Eventually, I began to prefer drinking to bulimia. After enough blackout drinking-and-driving episodes, I tried “controlled drinking.” I bought *just enough* alcohol every day to get numb, but not so much that I could not get up the next day. As with food, once started I could not stop until everything was gone. With controlled drinking I managed to graduate college and held a decent job for almost a year. But bulimia and alcohol left my mind and body so damaged that I could not walk down a hallway without hanging onto the walls for support. This was insanity—and I knew it. Finally, I sought the medical treatment I had so long resisted and was told I had liver damage at the age of twenty-three.

I thought I just needed to stop the behaviors and that everything would be perfect if I could simply dry out. But much to my surprise and chagrin, I was not accepted into any kind of treatment program. Clearly, I was not a good candidate anyway, but I was very angry when my counselor suggested I try Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). I adamantly refused. After a few more weeks with my drinking no longer arrested by work responsibilities, I had to admit I was beaten. I could not even drink much before getting the dry heaves, so that was no longer an option. I had no money or energy to deal with food at all. So I became willing to try AA, even though I was convinced it would not work for someone like me.

In the halls and basements where AA meetings are held, I found people who, despite sad sack stories like mine, were clearly happy, joyous, and free. These people—doctors, bus drivers, lawyers, and housewives—told stories shockingly similar to mine. But unlike me, these folks were sober and they were having a blast. Their lives were filled

with a meaning and purpose that mine had never known. This was darned attractive stuff. I began to believe that this dreadful program could work for me, too. I was willing to be honest and open-minded, and do what was suggested—at least a little.

A life-long atheist, I struggled with the spiritual aspects of the Twelve-Step program. People in meetings eagerly pointed out that the Twelve Steps required only that I find *my own conception* of God. I thought this suggestion silly; if I earnestly could not bring myself to believe in any God, how on earth could I invent one? But I knew my life depended upon willingness to find some Higher Power that could restore me to sanity. One fellow said he believed in G.O.D.: “Good, Orderly Direction.” I struggled even with that. Whose “good, orderly direction” was I to take? This sounded suspiciously like the “self-will run riot” I had come to understand as my fundamental issue. But I had to admit something was working for my atheist friend; he was sober and happy in AA. So I decided that my Higher Power would be “the life-engendering force in the universe.” I believed the forces of physics and nature would restore me to sanity if I let them. This worked surprisingly well, and the program’s spiritual angle was no longer a struggle for me.

Thanks to the grace of the Twelve Steps, the patience of hundreds of people, and a capacity to be honest with myself, I got and stayed sober. I worked hard in AA and it paid off. I have never found any reason to take a drink since. As of this writing I am delighted and grateful to have several decades of continuous sobriety.

As awesome as early recovery was for me, I knew right away that maintaining recovery would require sustained daily effort. Before the Twelve Steps, I thought I just had to deal with my drinking and eating problems, but

soon learned I had to deal with the thinking problems that *caused* these behavioral issues. For me, the emotional and psychological underpinnings of my eating disorder are *absolutely identical* to those of my alcoholism. When all my energy went into setting my relationships right with others and recovering through the Twelve Steps, I found a sudden and total peace with food. I ate when hungry and stopped when moderately full. I didn't eat when I wasn't hungry. Amazingly, this worked! *I found I could eat anything safely, if I was paying attention and working my Twelve-Step program.*

For the first four years, I had no issues whatsoever with food. I had recovered from my eating disorder thanks to working the Twelve Steps. At the core, I was humbly grateful to be alive, sober, and free. I was happy, joyous, and extremely grateful.

I would be thrilled to tell you my life just kept getting better, but that was not the case. You may have noticed that there is not yet one word about EDA in this story. That is because there was no EDA at all until the year 2000, and we are now talking about the year 1990. Here is the rest of the story, leading up to the formation of our Fellowship and the years since.

At about four years sober, I developed a serious resentment against a co-worker who was getting credit for something I thought should have gone to me. My eating became erratic; food helped me stuff my feelings. I knew what was happening, and it scared me. I did not want to return to bulimia, so I attempted to retake the Steps (especially focusing on Steps Four through Seven) to change how I felt. But I was powerless when it came to my emotions. Despite my best efforts, I had not worked hard enough to enlarge and expand my relationship with my Higher Power. The

laws of physics had not changed, and “the life-engendering force in the universe” had not changed, but *my ideas about my purpose in life still needed to change*. Without a personal and direct relationship to a Higher Power or a higher purpose, I was unprepared to cope with the anger and fear that overwhelmed every attempt I made to change my thinking. I felt as helpless as I had at sixteen. Everything intensified my resentment. Self-pity became a regular indulgence. I was as far from recovery as I had ever been in my life. I began to binge and purge with a ferocity I had never before experienced. My recovery quite literally went down the toilet. I was angry at myself, my life, and with the Twelve Steps.

I soon began to try to “control” my bulimia as I had formerly “controlled” my drinking. I would binge and purge at most meals, and tried to maintain a semblance of normalcy in between. But this was not working. I spent many days at home suffering from various “illnesses,” during which time I was up to no good at all. I again sought treatment, and this time I got it *because I was willing to go to any length* to regain the sanity I had lost. I started with an inpatient treatment program, ostensibly for depression and anxiety, though my therapist and I both knew we were focusing on recovery from an eating disorder. I hoped to emerge from treatment better, stronger, and fundamentally different. I tried to change my thinking entirely, doing everything that was asked to the full extent of my ability. I was rigorously honest. I did not try to hide from, or suppress, my emotions. I did not do any “behaviors” in treatment. I had hoped that a miracle of recovery would come to me upon surrender to the discipline of the center—but this was not to be. Unexpectedly, my failure did have one solid and positive result: it gave me near certainty that I could, and would, somehow find recovery through the Twelve

Steps. They had worked before, and somehow I sensed that they would help me regain the sanity, peace, and freedom I had lost. I resolved to try harder.

I began to talk about my eating disorder with my AA sponsor. I continued to attend AA meetings and brought up the issue there. Several thoughtful people suggested another Twelve-Step program that focused on eating behaviors. I dutifully started attending meetings. At first it was exciting to discover that others were finding recovery through abstinence from specific foods and by following a disciplined pattern of eating, but I found no relief at all that way. As I had in the treatment center, I followed suggestions, eliminated specific food components, and weighed and measured. I found a sponsor, and then found another. I worked the Steps. I went to meetings every day. I went to Twelve-Step retreats. But nothing changed inside me, and I stopped going to those meetings after a year of earnest effort. I was miserable and exhausted.

For another year I continued to attend my AA meetings, where I was rigorously honest about my eating disorder. Although people were often horrified, my resentments and self-pity began to ease up. Gradually, my bingeing and purging also faded away, and I stopped having to talk about it. I was anxious about this newly regained recovery and afraid that the bulimia would resurface. But my life had improved tremendously, and I was deeply grateful.

My husband and I decided to have a child. Mostly free of my eating-disordered thoughts and behaviors, I rejoiced when we had a healthy baby boy. I was incredibly humbled to have been granted the delight and solemn responsibility of motherhood with first one son and then another. I opted to stay home with the children, while my husband agreed to shoulder the entire financial burden for

the family. I was happy. Occasionally, though, my husband would suggest new business ventures and activities, which I thought threatened our financial stability or my ideas about how things should be. Rather than hear him out, I usually resisted changes that might have better accommodated his needs: I was selfishly risk-adverse. He began to lose patience with me, and I began to feel ever more angry and helpless. Didn't he realize how hard I was working to raise the kids properly? I began to feel victimized, then resentful, and finally, self-pitying. The insanity returned. Sure enough, bingeing and purging followed quickly on the heels of resentment, self-pity, and fear.

At this point, thanks to sponsors and friends in Twelve-Step programs, I could better articulate what I was feeling. So I went back to the abstinence-based Twelve-Step program determined to do things "properly." I had learned a great deal in the intervening years and thought that surely there was something amiss with my application of that program's Twelve Steps. I worked with a series of sponsors, completing multiple 4th and 5th Steps. I became convinced that my conception of a Higher Power was inadequate. I became willing to surrender to the tenets of an organized religion if that was what it took. I spoke with pastors and with family. I attended Bible studies. I read the New Testament. Unmoved, I tried other approaches. I read books on Buddhism and began a yoga and meditation practice. I attended sweat lodge ceremonies and started a drumming group at my church. I tried my best to adopt and adapt other people's conceptions of God. At times, one idea or another seemed to hold promise, but the bingeing and purging did not fully abate. At other times, it grew worse. I discovered that I could even binge on the healthy food that I normally found completely unappealing. This

would have been a laughable insanity, except that my family's well-being depended on my solving this problem. I desperately needed a solution.

I grew weary of avoiding the foods my sponsor told me were my problem; I knew that when my emotional state was clear, I could eat anything with impunity. I urgently wanted that peace and freedom. So I stopped going to the abstinence-based Twelve-Step program and started to attend a therapy group for people with eating disorders. It was there that I met Gisele, who was struggling with alcohol as well as an eating disorder. Happy to be helpful, I encouraged Gisele to go to AA meetings—and she did. Soon after, she became determined to start something like AA for people with eating disorders.

Here is where the real story of Eating Disorders Anonymous began: Gisele started something altogether new. In her new meeting, there were no food plans and no commitments or references to “abstinence.” This was a Twelve-Step program with a difference. After about a month, Gisele managed to convince me to attend.

The early gatherings of what we began to call “Eating Disorders Anonymous” were small, generally including only three people: Gisele, Joanie, and myself. Each of us was trying to find a better way to live. We desperately wanted to make the changes in ourselves that would make the world a better and safer place for our children. At this point, every one of us was still engaged in maintenance-level, eating-disordered behaviors, so there was no pretense about having found “a solution.” For quite a while, we were not sure the “abstinence-free” approach would even work. Yet, within our tiny group, compassion and trust were growing deeper and broader. I knew that Gisele, a strong person with a huge heart and a great sense of humor, loved

her daughter as much as I loved my sons, and yet there we all were, stuck in behaviors we hated. We all felt silly and stupid. We all “knew better.”

As we examined what we knew to be true, we found our common experiences had remarkable alignment around a few key ideas. We were all in agreement that *food was totally beside the point*. We knew that *the emotions we were unable to accept and address* were thwarting our efforts to act sanely, despite our love for our children and all that is good and right in the world. We also began to see that *the mutual trust and respect* we built within our small fellowship were helping: as we became honest with each other, we learned to trust one another. And we began to get better.

Although none of us were completely well, we were relying less and less on our eating disorders to get us through each day. It was a hopeful time, but despite several months of improvement after joining our little EDA fellowship, I had to admit I was disappointed in my own slow progress as well as that of our group. I had good weeks when I was happy and never thought about food; I had terrible weeks when I could not stand living with my emotional baggage and binged and purged a great deal. I wanted more and better for my husband and my kids. The peace and freedom I had once enjoyed in recovery was elusive. The others in our small circle were engaged in individual therapy, so I decided to give counseling another try. A friend gave me the name of someone who was both in AA and recovering from an eating disorder.

Unlike my previous experiences, I quickly grew to trust this new counselor. I knew her experiences were similar to my own, and I had confidence in her recovery. This time I was not only willing to change, *I was willing to trust someone to lead me through the process of change*. She encour-

aged me to take a less harsh and rigid view of recovery, and I discovered something important: in all my previous efforts to work the Twelve Steps—and finding recovery in AA—I had failed to grasp that it was *my responsibility* to understand and meet my own needs, no matter what. I know that sounds obvious and simplistic, but somehow I had missed this vital piece of information. *Our commitment to take care of our own basic needs is the basis of self-trust.* It became clear that I had never fully understood the idea behind “First Things First.”

I learned I could be safe, even when letting myself think terrifying thoughts and feeling my most awful emotions. I learned to have compassion for myself. Outside of therapy, I began the Twelve Steps again, but rather than working them more rigorously, I worked them more gently, more patiently, with less judgment. I am intensely grateful for my experiences in counseling. It was there that I really began to see that only having trust in others or a Higher Power—without taking the action to build self-trust—simply could not work.

Trust turned out to be the key for me. Without trust I could not recover; with trust I could. Faith in my Higher Power alone had proved insufficient to overcome my eating disorder, but consistent and deliberate action motivated by the idea of serving a higher purpose—building a recovery so I could better serve my family, my community, and my fellow members of EDA—began to provide relief. I was never able to build a personal relationship with a spiritual entity, but I was able to build what was needed through my daily commitment to serve the greater good to the best of my ability. Before a year went by, I regained perspective and balance and felt more solid in my recovery than I had felt since I first broke self-trust. *It became clear to me*

that achieving balance and perspective was more supportive of lasting peace and freedom than achieving “abstinence.” (A brief discussion of the concept of balance can be found in Appendix B.) So in essence, my recovery from my eating disorder started in EDA, grew stronger through my work in therapy, then broadened and solidified through my work with the EDA program.

Slowly, our little group grew and got stronger. Together, we continued to get better. At one point, we early members contacted the AA General Service Office in New York and obtained permission to use limited excerpts (with citations and caveats) from the first 164 pages of AA’s text, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, in our EDA literature.¹ Applying what we had learned from our direct experiences, we developed some of the foundational documents for EDA, including the “Keep it Simple” version of EDA’s Twelve Steps. We built a website and left flyers at local therapists’ offices. We took our meeting on the road to local treatment centers. We started holding meetings throughout the Phoenix metropolitan area. More members began to find and sustain recovery. We formed a General Service Board to help EDA groups carry the message. We created brochures on each of the eating disorders, an EDA Meeting Guide, and a Starter Kit to help people get new EDA meetings going. The Promises of the program slowly came true for us as we carried the message of recovery to others.

We went through good times and bad. We experi-

¹ EDA’s program of recovery is adapted from the first 164 pages of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, the “Big Book,” with permission from Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc. Permission to reprint and adapt this material does not mean that AA has reviewed or approved this or any other EDA material. AA is a program for recovery from alcoholism only. Use of AA material in the program of EDA, which is patterned after that of AA but which addresses other issues, does not constitute endorsement by or affiliation with AA.

enced incredible delight and excitement as we banded together and bonded in the grand adventure of recovery, and also periods of doubt and struggle. Some people took issue with our less rigid approach. EDA's endorsement of balance (not abstinence) proved confusing to both newcomers and Twelve-Step old-timers. We had to remind ourselves—and each other—that recovery is a process, not an event. Some EDA members are granted an immediate reprieve from their eating-disordered behaviors, but far more find their recovery is gradual. As we practice new ways of being in the world that permit us to let go of old behaviors, they begin to lose their power, and we are gradually restored to sanity.

Thankfully, the simple truth of these ideas carried the day. EDA's position is that living in recovery is so much better than living with an active eating disorder that no one who has experienced both will go back to old patterns for long. However, they need to understand the key: *building self-trust and integrity for the purpose of serving the greater good.*

Some among us thought this approach too complicated for the newcomer. How could they know whom to trust if we did not have some universal measuring stick, like length of abstinence or sobriety? Some EDA members were adherents of a specific religion, finding other concepts of God troublesome and offensive. Some of our newer members cast aside anonymity in an attempt to carry a “more authentic” message of recovery. Leaders occasionally signed up for more than they could deliver and failed to show up for meetings to unlock the doors. One EDA sponsor took on hundreds of sponsees at once, starting something that resembled a cult more than a humble service. Our online bulletin board—a forum for sharing recovery—was overrun by disturbingly inappropriate spam. Lacking resources

to provide proper monitoring, we sadly shut it down. Not everyone kept coming back, and not everyone got better.

But more and more of us did get better, and we stayed better, too. As we learned what we needed to do to stay in balance, many of us began to experience full recovery—free of eating disordered thoughts as well as behaviors, no matter the situation or provocation. EDA meetings began to spring up around the country, and then overseas. Today, EDA has a foothold in forty states and ten countries. It is an amazing and wonderful thing to watch our Fellowship grow!

Like other members and EDA itself, I have grown and changed with time. I gradually learned to build gratitude and patience in much the same way as I learned to build trust: through conscious and deliberate action. In early recovery, gratitude seemed to come automatically when working the Steps. At other points, gratitude came haltingly, in a miserly trickle. Sometimes I could not seem to find gratitude or patience when I needed them most desperately. I went through periods when I struggled in my relationships, but I found great relief in a daily journaling practice that I still maintain. I find it well worth the time to write out my Step Ten, reflect on my many reasons for gratitude, and think about the day's goals. Despite years of consistent effort, I am still not a patient or deliberate person. But thanks to daily journaling, I now get to start the day in peace and with perspective—a positive way that feels so right to me. I also still find it absolutely critical to take some meaningful Twelve-Step action every day, for then I am happier, more purposeful and patient, more gracious, and less likely to suffer from fear, self-pity, or resentment.

My experiences working the steps are outlined in Appendix C: "An EDA Member Works the Steps." These days,

I have a regular practice. I take inventory throughout the day, and when wrong, I try to admit my mistakes promptly and without regret. I seek to understand and to do what is right in each situation. I still often fall far short of the mark, but I now trust that my best effort is good enough. I have gotten through some very difficult times without losing my sanity or obsessing on food, weight, exercise, or anything else. My daily Step Ten helps me deal with these difficult times effectively. It is amazing how a sincere effort to right a wrong can restore peace and balance!

I have had many years of solid recovery from my eating disorder, although I cannot claim a “perfect” recovery. I have engaged in old behaviors on rare occasions where I felt guilty of some wrong and helpless to address it. That is, without question, an irrational, irresponsible choice. Invariably, when I completely lose perspective like that, I find I have fallen down on some aspect of my program. At times, I have not kept up relationships with friends with whom I can be completely honest. At times, I have not been completely honest with myself about what I am thinking and feeling. I *always* find I have not troubled myself to think about how I can turn even the worst situation to some useful purpose. I *always* find I have not been focusing enough on how to best maintain balance and serve others. At least, I now fully trust the solution. I have had to forgive myself, try to understand what happened, and figure out what I will do differently should a similar situation occur. My friends remind me that I am still learning, still a work in progress. Losing perspective is frustrating, but each event reminds me of how much I have to lose and how much I still need to work my Steps.

I worried for years that my “imperfect” story would not serve as a bright-enough beacon of hope. Over the

years, I have seen and heard from many people who have never looked back, never repeated old behaviors, and never had any reminders—save their own stories and their work with others in EDA—of what it was like to be back in the dark days. I am grateful for and humbled by these wonderful people. Some of their stories are in the latter part of this book. I hope you find them as delightful and inspiring as I do. My good news is that I have never found myself mired as I once was. My “reminders” have been few, mercifully short-lived, and years apart. The work required for recovery is ridiculously easy compared to having an active eating disorder and living with self-pity, resentment, shame, and fear. I know the EDA program works; I live in freedom, not fear.

Full recovery is a blast. I’ve been delighted to be involved in the growth of the Fellowship of EDA. I am humbled and grateful to work with some amazing people. I am absolutely thrilled to be working with EDA members on our joint effort to share our experience, strength, and hope with others. I have been privileged to attend graduate school in a field I love, start businesses and work hard to see them succeed, teach archaeology and mountaineering to a lot of wonderful kids, backpack through the Grand Canyon, climb mountains in several states, and watch my children emerge into adulthood. I am still happily married to the same great guy, thankful for his patience, forgiveness, and love. I am grateful I was able to make amends before my father passed, and I am happy to have a wonderful relationship with my mother. I love my life and I adore my family. I have hope for the future. I am grateful every day for my recovery, and for the joy of others’ recoveries.

There are many paths to peace and freedom from an eating disorder, but the Twelve-Step program of EDA

works for me. If someone as stubborn, impulsive, frightened, untrusting, and rigid as I was can recover, there is hope for everyone! Please keep coming back. Take what you can use and leave the rest. Enjoy recovery, and share your story with others who may need to hear it. If you do, you will find that the old saying, "To thine own self be true," will bring you lasting peace and freedom.

(2)

A LIFE SOLUTION

Accepting powerlessness over her eating disorder and responsibility for her actions helped her find an answer that works in all aspects of life.

As far back as I can remember I struggled with food and body image. It seemed as though people close to me used food as a way to control my behavior, whether it was by forcing me to finish everything on my plate or sending me to my room without eating as punishment. I am one of four siblings, yet I am the only one who has an eating disorder. As I look back, instead of feeling the feelings and healing from them, I internalized the pain and used self-sabotaging behaviors to numb myself.

Growing up, we moved a lot; I have lived in three countries and five states. There was sexual, physical, and emotional abuse early on as a child, and later rape. I believe that the abuse was one of the main reasons I did not feel okay in my own skin. I was always trying to run away and numb myself any way I could. The first of countless times I ran away was when I was three and a half, and this continued through the years until I turned eighteen and was able to legally move out on my own.

I felt ashamed of my body and of developing into a woman. I was always trying to cover up my body by wearing tights over my legs or long sleeves, even during the summer. I internalized comments made by others, such

as, “You’re so flat you make the walls jealous” or “thunder thighs.” Instead of ignoring these remarks, I internalized them as truth and felt ashamed. These shameful feelings were relieved with sports and, more importantly, with alcohol; so began my journey as an alcoholic with an eating disorder. No matter how much food I ate, or how much weight I lost, or how well I did in sports, it never seemed to numb the pain permanently. Drinking and eating-disordered behaviors provided temporary release, but never the long-lasting kind I was truly seeking. In high school, I experimented with diet pills that caused me to pass out during heavy exercise. Although playing basketball and running track definitely helped me feel semi-normal, I found myself needing more and more to feel happy. I had heard of bingeing, purging, and restricting, but thought that I would never do such things. I was in total denial about the struggles I had with food and my body. I deemed bingeing acceptable during sports seasons, because I knew I would “run it off.” However, that fleeting comfort would come to a halt sooner rather than later.

During my sophomore year in high school, one of my best friends introduced me to purging. We were talking during a binge episode, and for the first time ever I brought up the sexual abuse I experienced as a child. I began to feel sick to my stomach from all the food I had just eaten, and my friend showed me how to make myself feel better instantly by “getting rid of it.” I felt like I had found a solution to numb both the pain and the never-ending internal disgust I felt for myself. A combination of drugs, alcohol, and eating-disorder behaviors off-season, along with a mixture of intense exercise, bingeing, and purging during athletic season got me halfway through my senior year. As soon as I turned eighteen, midway through my

senior year, I moved out of my parents' house. I had always blamed them for all of my problems and figured this would make me get better.

Unfortunately, with no constraints everything got worse: my eating disorder, my drinking, and my drug abuse. I nearly didn't graduate from high school. I had a college basketball scholarship opportunity that I completely avoided in order to remain in my vicious cycle. I stayed at a local college with roommates who had their own struggles, and this took the focus off of me. Near the end of my first semester, I was fully in my eating disorder, swinging between diet pills (and other drugs that took away my appetite) and drugs that would heighten my bingeing or facilitate my purging.

During this time, I was out drinking one night and went into the back alley of a local bar to induce vomiting. I became physically weak and unable to move when someone attempted to pick me up. He said he was going to "take care of me" and make sure I didn't get hurt. But this was not the case. After that night, nothing could soothe the pain and agony I felt. A few weeks later, I finally told my mother about the rape. We decided that it would be a good idea to get away from the people and the places that were causing harm in hopes of a fresh start. But even moving did not help, because once again I found the "partiers" and other people with eating disorders. It was all the same, just a different town.

Even though the other people I was around were engaging in the same behaviors, they became concerned. In fact the basketball coach, who had previously attempted to recruit me, didn't want me to have anything to do with the team, because I was in such bad shape and had lost so much weight. Since the season was almost over, she told me I'd

better get my act together before the next one, or I would not have another chance. This threat didn't slow me down one bit; in fact it fed into my eating disorder even more.

One evening, I started purging and found myself vomiting uncontrollably; I couldn't stop. I was choking on my own vomit and someone had to give me the Heimlich. You would think this would have scared me into recovery, but it didn't. I just figured I had eaten the wrong type of food. A short time later, when others saw that this near-death experience didn't change my behavior, someone contacted administration and a mini-intervention took place. I was sent to a facility that treated eating disorders for about three months (between inpatient, day patient, and outpatient services).

Back then, there was a lot of emphasis on daily weigh-ins and calorie counting to ensure each patient was eating enough. If not, the remainder would be made up at the end of the day with a liquid, nutritional supplement. Up to that point, I had not really obsessed over numbers on the scale or calories in my food, but since I was unable to act out in my usual way, this became my new obsession. For a few months, it worked. I did not restrict, binge and purge, over-exercise, or use diet pills. However, my great obsession with numbers soon gave way to my old methods. Why? Because when I was not using behaviors, I felt disgusting in my own skin and almost failed out of college. But once I gave in to the cycle again, I started getting good grades and even graduated. It became evident to me that I needed my eating disorder to survive: I didn't know how to live without it.

After college, I landed an opportunity to become a high school guidance counselor while the county paid for me to earn my master's degree. After two years of complete hypocrisy trying to get teenagers to give up their eating

disorders, drinking, drug usage, and promiscuous behavior, I couldn't live with such lies anymore and "no-showed" for the following year.

In the meantime, one of the many part-time jobs I worked while counseling became a full-time job at a restaurant/bar. This allowed me to drink and "use" the way I thought I needed to in order to survive. I lost my first home in foreclosure and had credit card debt "up the wazoo" due to all of my spending on food, clothes, and bars. My car was almost repossessed a few times, which I only avoided by hiding it down the street from where I lived. Eventually, I even filed bankruptcy due to the amount of debt I had incurred. I wanted to die. My family could no longer deal with me, because they could not stand to see me slowly killing myself any more. I would pray for God to just let me sleep and not wake up—and felt damned every morning when I would. Nothing could make me feel better, no matter how hard I tried. "Fortunately," I had discovered a certain substance that allowed me to feel a new type of numbness, and this became a daily habit as well. I was able to admit that I had a problem with this substance, along with any type of diet and mood/mind altering pill. I tried to stop drinking and drugging (while holding on to my eating disorder for dear life), but I always ended up back where I started. I simply could not stop. I could not get rid of the thoughts! I could not live! I would try to stop my eating disorder behavior, but then I would pick up a drink or a drug. They were so enmeshed.

Somehow, through a series of events—people trying to help others through their struggles with eating disorders, drugs, and alcohol—I found my way to the Steps.

I discovered a sponsor who took me through AA's "Big Book," chapter by chapter, paragraph by paragraph,

sentence by sentence. We used it as it pertained to each of my “-isms,” not only individually, but also as a group. Medical professionals had told me years before that I would never recover from my eating disorder, so I was doubtful about the effectiveness of the Step process. I had attempted the Steps previously for my drinking and drugging, but never for all three problems, which explains why I was unsuccessful. The purging stopped and I situated myself with roommates, family members, co-workers, and friends, so for the most part meals were with others. I would work all day, go to an evening Step meeting, eat dinner, and do Step work along with prayers.

On the weekends, I would stay busy with the Step fellowship trying to learn how to live life in recovery while having fun. I attempted to be of service by carpooling people to meetings, calling those who were struggling, or taking on service positions such as setting up for meetings or greeting people. I was told that although I could not sponsor until I had gone through all Steps, there were other ways to be of service while trying my best to stay out of my self-centered thoughts. Although I wasn't bingeing or purging, I still found ways to over exercise while going to the gym, until it was pointed out that this was also part of my eating disorder.

It was suggested that I leave that up to God for now. I had to let my body heal from all of the damage I had done. There were many views, ideas, opinions, and perspectives I had to put aside. Through the Steps, I developed my own conception of God, setting aside the former God that I thought was punishing me from my childhood. I had to believe that He did not “give me” my eating disorder. One way I looked at it was I believed—and still do—that we are all given free will and we are not puppets in this world. I

chose to seek comfort and distraction through my different eating-disordered actions, instead of seeking professional help. I had to let go of resentments that were holding me hostage and keeping me sick. I saw my reactions to my life and past were my responsibility and I had to move on.

Today, my past no longer haunts me or holds me back from living life and interacting with people. Due to the spiritual awakening I found as a result of working the Steps, I neither act out in my eating disorder in any way, nor do I obsess about the symptoms, food, weight, or body image.

Now, I say I am recovered from my eating disorder and hopeless state of life. This is a result of remaining connected to a God of my personal understanding through working the Steps and helping others. My personal belief is once eating-disordered, always eating-disordered. This means if I act out in any way, I will not be successful. However, as long as I continue living Steps Ten, Eleven, and Twelve, and going to EDA meetings, I do not live in fear of going back to my old habits.

At times, I would have a gut-wrenching feeling I did not want to acknowledge and would consider acting out. But this fleeting thought was replaced with the truth: it would not be just one time. God has restored my sanity, meaning I am now able to see the truth about my condition—one I do not fear as long as I continue doing His work. There have been challenging situations in which I found it difficult to eat because of feeling so terrible, but since I know and accept I am powerless over my eating disorder, I do not want to ever go down that path again. There have been times I felt like eating everything in sight, but I know and accept that one incorrect choice may lead to another. In times like these I pray, meditate, or call a friend to join me for a meal, so I can eat despite the feelings.

I use food for its intended purpose, like air; I no longer use it to self-medicate or soothe/numb any pain or discomfort. I have lost relationships, family members, and friends through death and changing jobs, but I have never gone back to my eating disorder.

I did not know I could have a long-lasting, healthy and intimate relationship, but I found one. For my wedding, I knew I could not go on the typical diet of many brides-to-be. And after five years of recovery, I instantly got pregnant! I thought I had permanently damaged my body, but happily this was not the case.

During my first pregnancy, I was completely immobilized on bed rest for the last two-and-a-half months and gained a lot of weight. I did what I had to in order to take care of the baby growing inside of me, and left my body and its weight up to God. I also could not diet like some new mothers do to have their weight fall off quickly, because that could lead me back to the dark days. Once again, I had to trust God that if I continued trying to live His will, I would be taken care of spiritually, emotionally, and even physically.

I got pregnant again ten months later! And even though my body has not been restored fully to its original shape and size, I have accepted that it is a beautiful God-given gift for a thirty-seven-year-old woman with two kids. In fact, I have accepted my curves and consider myself sexier than ever. I'm even back into a bikini, which I never thought possible, and feel great in it! I also feel great in my own skin.

I no longer feel a victim to my past. I have healthy relationships with my family members, and have forgiven them as they have forgiven me. I have a loving relationship with a God I take everything to, and I desire that

connection continuously. When difficult things happen, I acknowledge and work through them, but do not make them bigger than they are. I no longer obsess about me, me, me—now I constantly look for ways to help others. I meet with others who have eating disorders to take them through the Steps as they are laid out in the “Big Book,” while still going to EDA meetings. I try to apply the principles from the Twelve Steps to all aspects of my life, not only in meetings. I am free to eat anything, go anywhere, and do anything without the fear of going back. This is all due to the connection I have with the God of my understanding, who is my defense against my eating disorder so long as I continue to do this work. EDA has provided me with a solution to life. Thank God!

A PROGRAM FOR PEOPLE WHO WORK IT

Going to any length for recovery is just the beginning of her story.

Standing in the kitchen of my tiny studio apartment, I stared at the food in the cupboard. I was starving. I had stuck to my rigid allotment of calories for the day, repeatedly using drugs to alleviate the hunger pangs, but my stomach still growled in agony. *Feed me*, my body begged. I shut the cupboard and went to bed.

I couldn't sleep. I was starving and wired from the drugs. I rolled out of bed and stumbled into the kitchen. I started eating. Just one at first, then two, then a handful, and then... the box was empty. What happened? I panicked, throwing the tainted box into the trash. *Well, I've already ruined my diet for the day, so I might as well go all out, right? I can exercise it off tomorrow anyway.* I proceeded to eat more.

I always wished I could purge. I would lean over the toilet, doing all the tricks I had heard of or read about on the internet, crying and pleading with my body to get out the poisonous binge, but I could never do it. Exercise and drugs would have to get rid of the excess calories.

I was fourteen when I went on my first diet. I was barely overweight and a very active kid. I played outside every day and took as many dance classes as my parents'

budget would allow. I loved to dance. I dreamed of becoming a famous ballerina, performing in front of hundreds of people in grand venues. *If I could only lose weight, then my dream could come true.* This was my mantra for many years. I dieted on and off throughout high school. I would gain weight, lose it, then gain it back, then lose it again. I wanted to be skinny like my dance friends, but an overwhelming depression often got in the way of my diet plans.

I took my first drink when I was seventeen. That same night I lost my virginity to a cute stranger. I had been desperate to lose my virginity—to be one of the cool kids—but I was terrified. Growing up in a strictly religious family, I feared I would be sent to hell if I had sex before I was married. The alcohol quieted those fears, and what could have been a special experience with someone I loved was instead a drunken plea to be part of the “cool club.”

By the time I got to college, I was drinking daily, or as often as I could get alcohol. I was lonely and didn't know how to live on my own. Because my dorm meal plan allowed me to eat to my heart's content, I started using food as a coping tool for my depression and loneliness. I blamed it on the “munchies” from the alcohol. The drinking and bingeing continued, with brief periods of desperate dieting to lose the weight I was rapidly gaining. When I was twenty years old, at the beginning of my senior year, a girlfriend introduced me to the drug that would quickly become my best friend. I always thought that people who used this drug were skinny, so I was curious about trying it. I was willing to go to any length to lose weight. So I took the drug and quickly felt a sense of relief. *This is it*, I thought. *This is how I can finally be thin.*

It worked for a while. I was able to work hard in school, exercise for long periods each day, hold down a job, and stick

to my restrictive diet. As long as the number on the scale was going down, I felt like everything would be okay.

Perfectionist that I am, I graduated college with two bachelor's degrees in three years. I immediately started graduate school, certain that someday I would go on to accomplish great things in the world.

The only thing standing in my way, or so I thought, was the bingeing. I was very successful at restricting and forcing myself to exercise each day, but when night fell and everyone else went to bed, I ate. It was my secret time: I could eat all of my forbidden foods and no one had to know about it. They would applaud me for my willpower to eat "healthy" during the day, boosting my ego and confidence. They didn't know what happened at night.

I grew concerned about my drug use. My extremely limited income during graduate school posed a problem for such an expensive habit. I decided to see a psychiatrist. The doctor prescribed a legal drug, which I used to replace the illegal one. I was relieved I could continue my restrictive diet and grueling exercise, and now my insurance would cover my diet drugs! But the psychiatrist also referred me to a therapist, with whom I agreed to work. I owe my life to that woman; I still see her regularly.

I told the therapist I had a problem with binge eating. "The problem is I eat so much at night that I can't seem to lose any weight. I follow a strict diet and exercise plan, but I can't stop eating at night!" I lamented. The therapist told me that in addition to a serious drug habit, I suffered from an eating disorder and needed treatment. She also told me she had been recovered from anorexia for many years, and that recovery was possible for me, too. I agreed to see a dietitian, who confirmed I had an eating disorder and helped me develop a meal plan to get started on the road to recovery.

I was overwhelmed. *I'm not skinny enough to have an eating disorder*, I thought. *I don't throw up my food. I just want to lose weight. There's nothing wrong with that.* I continued to see my treatment team, refraining from illegal drugs but still drinking heavily and abusing my prescription medication. I dropped out of graduate school, having failed several classes. I lost my job at the coffee shop where I had worked for two years, because I had failed to show up to work too many times. Nothing was important anymore except losing weight. My reason for living was to become as thin as possible.

A short time later, I entered my first inpatient treatment center, because I was out of options. Unemployed and unable to pay my rent, I thought at least treatment would give me a place to stay for a while. I completed inpatient, residential, day treatment, and intensive outpatient. I also went to AA meetings and stayed sober for a few months at a time, but never worked the Steps. I used the meetings as a place to find friends and hook up with guys. I wanted recovery, but I wanted to be thin more.

I went in and out of treatment centers for a couple of years. I would stay sober for longer periods of time (the longest being twenty months) and I took pride in my recovery, becoming an activist for eating disorder awareness and recovery. *I did it and so can you!* I would cheer. But I refused to let my weight go above a certain number and I continued to restrict and binge regularly. I was a fraud.

I ended up unemployed once again, living on a friend's couch, using whatever drugs we could get our hands on. I would watch my friends use certain drugs and then start eating, which terrified me. I refused to use those, sticking exclusively to ones that would suppress my appetite. The problem was that none of them worked anymore; there was

not a single drug out there that would quiet my mind.

My friend would get food from a charity program, which I refused to eat. *I will not be a victim. I don't need a f--ing handout*, I thought. But when the dizziness and physical pain became unbearable, I would give in and eat something. I felt guilty, knowing that the food was intended for needy families, not anorexic drug addicts like me. I disgusted myself.

I became so underweight that I could hardly move. I would get up only to go outside and chain-smoke cigarettes or drive to my drug dealer's house. I knew I was dying, but I wanted to die at the lowest possible weight. Although I was suicidal, I lacked the mental capacity to formulate a plan to kill myself. My brain and body were shutting down.

I had been to treatment. I knew what I needed to do. But the compulsion to restrict and lose weight was more powerful than my desire to live. Each night, I prayed for God to let me die in my sleep.

My Higher Power had a different plan for me. One day, I reached out to a woman I had known from AA. She worked for an eating disorder treatment facility. She listened to my problems and gave me the number to call for an intake assessment. I went to treatment for the last time, broken and desperate enough to go to any lengths for my recovery. Every day I thank God for that desperation.

Having grown up in a family where I felt religion had been shoved down my throat (no pun intended!), I was reluctant to seek a Higher Power. I didn't understand what God had to do with recovery. My sponsor suggested I think about the morning sun. "The sun comes up every morning and gives us life. We wouldn't be able to live without the sun. Why don't you start by thanking the sun for rising

each morning?” I thought she was being ridiculous, but I was willing to try anything. So I did. The beautiful thing about the Twelve-Step philosophy is that I have the freedom to meet God however I understand God. My Higher Power is whatever I make of it. And for me, nature’s beauty is God as I understand God.

Not everyone reaches the low point I did. The truth is, I could have recovered sooner, but lacked the willingness to let go of controlling my weight. I insisted on associating my worth with the number on the scale. So the most important and freeing thing I have done for my recovery has been to hand my weight over to my Higher Power. At first, that power came in the form of a dietitian. I trusted her to monitor my weight. I gave over my most prized possession, my body, to something greater than myself.

My sponsor took me through the “Big Book” of Alcoholics Anonymous. We read it line by line, and when we reached a Step, she taught me how to work it. I had known for years I had an eating disorder, but now I admitted I was powerless over it. I looked closely at my resentments and character defects. I made amends to the people in my life whom I had hurt. I wrote a letter to my former boss, who had been a wonderful mentor to me, and whom I had failed incredibly, leading to the end of our relationship. She never responded to my letters, which was extremely disappointing, but I am entirely willing to make amends with her if I see her someday.

I restricted and binged for several months into my recovery. Unlike drugs and alcohol, I couldn’t simply cut food out of my life; after all, that had been the problem in the first place! But I started to use my behaviors as learning experiences. After each slip, I asked myself, *What happened that made me feel like food was the only way to cope? What can*

I do differently next time? It has now been a couple of years since I've used eating-disordered behaviors. I've made peace with food and I have never felt so free.

I started an EDA meeting where I live. We have grown and blossomed into a beautiful fellowship of love and support for each other. I wish there were more EDA meetings in the area, and we often talk about starting them.

I went back to school to earn my master's degree in psychology. Today, I work as a counselor for the same company where I went to treatment for the last time. It has been made abundantly clear that I can only keep my recovery by giving it away.

Many women come to me for help working the Twelve Steps. I take them through the "Big Book" of Alcoholics Anonymous, just as my sponsor did with me. When we finish Step Twelve we start over at Step One. What a blessing it has been to watch other women recover and be a part of their journeys. Working with others has been one of the most rewarding experiences I have ever known.

Many of us come and go. Some aren't ready and others aren't willing. I pray they realize there is no need to become as completely hopeless and desperate as I was before seeking recovery. The old-timers in AA used to tell me, "This isn't a program for people who want it. It's not even a program for people who need it. *It's a program for people who do it.*" And so I do it, day after day, whether I want to or not.

And this is just the beginning of my story.

(4)

ONE DAY AT A TIME

True honesty has her showing up for life—one day at a time.

I am a recovering anorexic, bulimic, compulsive eater, emotional eater...well, you get the point. I've been all over the board with abusing food. I began my battle around the age of eleven and am now almost twenty-two. I have wasted about half of my precious life on this awful disease, and I am not willing to let it have another minute. I have been actively seeking recovery for about a year.

So many things contributed to my eating disorder that I don't know exactly where to begin. There wasn't one magical moment when I decided that I was a piece of crap, fat and useless, and therefore I was going to starve myself. I was never a thin child. I was always a little chubby, though very strong in mind, body, and spirit. I was tall for my age, towering over everyone in school. I developed early, when I was about 10. I got my period and breasts that were all of a sudden a very large cup size. I wasn't uncomfortable with my body at that point, but I did become uncomfortable when people close to me began pointing things out. My stepfather remarked that I was "busting out at the seams" of my jeans, which had been handed down twice. For reasons unknown, my "best friend" put a picture of me in a bathing suit on an envelope that contained an "I hate you" letter, and wrote that I didn't just need a ThighMaster, but a tummy master too.

Around this time, my stepfather left, leaving my mom with three kids to support. We moved in with various relatives until we got government assistance to have a place of our own. For privacy, I turned the walk-in closet in the master bedroom into my room. Bed, nightstand, and dresser—it was huge! My mom worked nights at a local bar and I watched the kids. I felt guilty about eating at this time, because I knew my mom was skipping meals so there would be enough food for us kids. I started skipping meals too. I also stole food for us from my friends' and family members' homes. I thought it was the least I could do. Besides, I was fat enough; I didn't need to eat with all the reserves I had built up. My uncle, who was helping to provide for us, was also molesting me. Through all of this, we moved and moved and moved. There was not much stability in my life.

I continued to starve, skip meals, and exercise excessively. I went to the library to research eating disorders so I could be better at it. I didn't start purging until about age fourteen, when I caught a friend doing it and thought, *Aha! Now, I don't have to be hungry and I can get even thinner—like her!* It didn't register that we were already wearing the same size clothes, and she was many inches shorter.

When I was sixteen, I had a weird condition with my spleen that caused my stomach to shrink. I lost a lot of weight before and after surgery. I went several years without being acutely active in my disease. Then, when I was about nineteen, I went to a psychiatrist for help. He told me that it was obviously a control issue and that I didn't have an eating disorder because I hadn't lost "enough" weight.

I was in an abusive relationship when I started purging again. This was my first experience with overeating; our whole relationship was based on food. He was so controlling. Sometimes, the only way to get away from him was

to make myself throw up, because he couldn't stand the sound or smell. I lost a lot of weight when we broke up: food wasn't my only outlet anymore. When our relationship ended, I was free. It felt fantastic.

I went another year before the obsession crept back in yet again. I began restricting and purging everything I ate. I would spit out food. I lost a great deal of weight very quickly. I confessed the situation to a guy at work with whom I had a really great friendship. As a result of this admission of truth, I went to a treatment center. Unfortunately, I left after just a few days—I hadn't seen a nutritionist, a therapist, or an internist. I knew it was a mistake to leave, but I was frustrated because I did not feel like I was getting any help at all.

And now for the real recovery story: I've always known that God has me here for a reason, so in times of desperation, when I wanted to give up, throw in my towel, and even end my life, I have never given in and instead always plunged forward. My brothers and sister were also a great source of strength for me. A laugh, a thank you, even to see them sleeping, these little things really kept me going in hard times. The guy at work I mentioned is now my husband. He's a member of another Twelve-Step fellowship. He suggested I look for an Anonymous group and I found EDA. Now, I attend face-to-face meetings, online meetings, and do service work.

Honesty has been the biggest difference for me. I used to lie and manipulate; now I show up, shut up, and do the next right thing. I am honest with myself and honest with others. I pray daily, journal, and eat real food. Sometimes not enough, sometimes too much, but that's okay, because the difference is that now I notice—and I am able to deal with it honestly.

I work a program of progress, not perfection...every day. One day at a time. Perfection is what got me into this mess. Only God is perfect. I am not God. He brought me to it; He'll bring me through it. Reach out! Help is up there, out there, and in there.

(5)

ONE STEP AT A TIME

By taking and working one Step at a time, she found a power greater than herself and said goodbye to her eating disorder.

I grew up in a suburb of Philadelphia in an Italian-Irish household. My father liked to drink and my mother was always on a diet. As a result, I grew up with a lot of rigidity around food. There were certain foods I wasn't allowed to eat and certain foods my mother made me eat. I couldn't leave the table without being scolded to finish my plate. I had no idea what a balanced diet or what freedom around food looked like. Whatever diet my mother was on, so was the family. My parents were strict and wanted us to achieve in school and sports. They were also very protective about the friends we hung out with and what we were wearing.

I am the middle child with two sisters. My older sister has cerebral palsy and is physically handicapped, while being extremely smart. My little sister was very beautiful and also smart. I was the middle child and felt kind of disregarded, but not because my parents disregarded me. They were actually very loving. I believe it was just that my parents had a life as well as two other children to take care of. I was troubled and needed more attention. My sisters were blonde-haired, blue-eyed, and frail; I had curves and was definitely not fragile at 5'10". My older sister couldn't walk well because of her cerebral palsy and was falling all

the time, while my younger sister was the baby who could do no wrong. So I was mommy's little helper, and there wasn't a lot of extra time for my parents to spend with me. We went to church and got a lot of religion, but I couldn't connect with spirituality. My father's nickname for me was Chubs. He used it in an endearing way, and it never bothered me until puberty.

At the beginning of high school, I had beautiful friends. They would put on their bikinis and get all the attention when we would all walk down in front of the lifeguards. I was in a one-piece and didn't look like them. I was taller, and while it's not an issue now, it was then. I was big, brown-haired, brown-eyed, and insecure about all of it.

So I went on my first diet and lost weight. I'll never forget when I went on a vacation with my parents and family friends. My father's friend was telling me how good I looked. I was wearing bikinis on the beach and that was when I realized there was something to having a flat stomach. However, because of my body type, maintaining it was a struggle. I wasn't naturally that way. So that's where my eating disorder started. I was fighting to be something I wasn't. It didn't seem like a big deal in the beginning, but it turned into an obsession, affecting every day of my life.

I graduated high school and moved to Florida to go to college. That first year I made a friend, and after freshman year we moved into an apartment together. She had an eating disorder and over-exercised, restricted, and abused laxatives. Slowly, I started exercising more and more and eating less and less. Then, when I did eat, she would say, "Here, have this," and give me a laxative. I started taking them. I would barely eat and when I did, I would purge with laxatives. I was in bad shape.

I went back home for the holidays, and, by this time, my older sister had been diagnosed with anorexia. My mother took one look at my thin body and stated that I was not going to go back to Florida; she was afraid I was also anorexic like my older sister. This was too much on my mother. Despite her best efforts, she was powerless to help us and powerless over our addictions. She wanted me to get help and I said, "No, I'm just going to stop." So I put on a little weight and went back to Florida. But my eating disorder continued.

In my late twenties, I discovered drugs. I had graduated from the University on the Dean's list and was excelling in my career. I was in a serious relationship, hoping to get married, and had bought a house with my longtime boyfriend. Actually, I wasn't really "in" the relationship; I was "around" the relationship. I wasn't eating. I was restricting and drinking at night. I was weighing myself *at least* once a day. I was sick physically, spiritually, and mentally. For all those years, I had body dysmorphic disorder: I would see something different than what was actually there.

Then I found drugs, and in less than three years I had lost my family, friends, car, job, and apartment. I wasn't eating, so my disorder was happy. I decided to get clean from drugs and alcohol. I remember as soon as I did, I went on a diet and started exercising. I started by walking, then running, then running further, then running many miles, then running many miles many times a week. This was how I was living in my sobriety. (Despite my eating disorder, this year I have earned a fifteen-year medallion through Alcoholics Anonymous.)

Through my sobriety, I continued to restrict, over-exercise, and abuse laxatives. I was in several relationships I wasn't present for...always having to keep my eating disorder

der a secret. Anxiety was a constant factor in my life. I was continually questioning myself as to why I was so abrasive and unsettled in my own skin. At this point I had become extremely thin. People would ask me, “How do you stay so thin?” I fed off that—just loved it. It was my deep, dark secret. The very fact that I am writing these words is a miracle in itself. I’ve been living with an eating disorder since I was eighteen. I’m forty-eight now, and until I got into Eating Disorders Anonymous I believed the lies that are fed to us through television, society, and social media: that having the perfect body and material possessions equal happiness.

I actually thought I was the only person doing what I was doing with no idea other people behaved this same way. I thought it was the way of the world: society tells women to be skinny and beautiful, no matter what it takes. My father was telling my mother to lose weight. My father was calling me Chubs. The lifeguards paid attention to me when I wore that bikini. My first love broke up with me for a thin girl. My perception was that I wasn’t a “pretty little thing,” and men wouldn’t want me for who I was. Everything was confirming I was alone; it was only me, going through life this way.

When I got pregnant with the man I was dating, I had the courage to stop restricting and abusing laxatives. I was not going to hurt the child inside me. That was seven years ago, and I was eight years sober. I don’t know where that willpower came from; I just decided I was not going to do it anymore. This baby was precious and a miracle to me. I had always wanted a child.

I made it through my pregnancy, had my son, and then told myself that I was going to get myself “together.” What happened was that I had so much time away from the ritual of exercising and laxatives that I didn’t go back

to them. But as the days went on, I was acting out in other ways: restricting all day, bingeing all night. I would restrict for a day and eat too much the next. I was told I had postpartum depression and was put on medication. It didn't help. The antidepressants hurt my stomach, but they did somewhat numb me out. This continued for two years.

Then, an AA mommy/baby meeting started that was open to women who had kids—childcare provided. This was great, because I had been struggling to attend meetings. I was very active in AA before my pregnancy, but now I was at home all the time with my son, depressed and crying, suffering with an eating disorder (not knowing I had one), and telling myself I was weak because I couldn't control my bingeing.

I met a great woman at this meeting. She would ask me if I was okay and I would say, "No, I'm not. I'm in pain. My body is in pain." She probably thought, *This girl has a lot of clean time; she should be happier.* When she would ask me, "Do you have an eating disorder?" I would reply, "No, my sister has an eating disorder, why do you ask?"

She was very gentle and would wait a couple more months before asking me the same question again. She suggested I go to an Eating Disorders Anonymous meeting to get help. I would tell her I didn't have an eating disorder. She would ask me questions like, "Do you weigh yourself?" I told her, "Every single day." She would ask, "Are you happy with what you look like?" I would say, "Not at all." She would ask, "Do you binge and purge?" And I would reply, "No, my sister does that." When in reality, I was over-exercising and abusing laxatives, which is the same exact thing. But I couldn't see it. Besides, I hadn't done it in five years, so I figured I didn't have that problem anymore. Then she

talked to me about rigidity around food. How I ate. Did I eat breakfast? Lunch? Dinner? It was very apparent to her—in fact it was loud and clear to her—that I had an eating disorder.

She asked me to come to an EDA meeting. It took me two or three months to actually go. I sat down and looked at everyone and thought to myself, *Oh, these people have eating disorders*. I would ask her, “I’m like a high bottom, right?” “No, you have a regular old eating disorder,” was her reply. I would ask that many times and her answer was always the same, “You’re actually worse than others.” The words resonated with me. She was reaching out to me, trying to share her experience and help me.

One day I binged and purged and felt terrible. The energy levels and the imbalances in my body were horrible. Now that I have recovered and feel so well, I realize just how bad I was feeling. But that day was a bad one; it was my bottom and it was low.

I finally texted her and asked if she was going to the EDA meeting. She said no and asked me why. I told her I wanted to talk to her and wanted to know if she would be my EDA sponsor. She said yes. She told me to write my eating disorder log, so she could know the manifestations of my eating disorder and my history.

She really drove the point of mental obsession home with me. She reminded me that I needed an entire psychic change—no human power, no doctor, no mother saying “please stop” would be able to help me. Unless I surrendered and admitted I had an eating disorder and worked the Twelve Steps of EDA, I would not get any better. I had done this in AA, so I knew the Steps worked. I decided to try EDA for six months, and if it didn’t work, I was out the door.

She asked me to read the Preface and Forewords in the “Big Book” of Alcoholics Anonymous and to continue on to the Doctor’s Opinion. She told me to replace the words “drinking” and “alcoholism” with the words “acting out” and “eating disorder.” She told me it wasn’t about the food, but about the feelings. She told me it is an obsession of the mind and an allergy of the body, that I needed to have a spiritual change, and that this would happen by working the Twelve Steps.

She also directed me to read Bill’s Story in the “Big Book” and provide examples of how I am powerless over my eating disorder: how I have attempted to control or moderate it without success, and how I tried to stop the thoughts but was unable. We focused on the progression of the disease in Bill’s story. She had me write about different areas of the unmanageability in my life and how my eating disorder was affecting the lives of everyone around me—my family, my child, my sponsees in the other fellowship, my personal and sexual relationships. Then we read “More About Alcoholism” and “There is a Solution” together. Again, there was a pattern of powerlessness and unmanageability, focusing on how the problem centers in my mind rather than in my body. Admitting I am powerless over my eating disorder and that I misuse food was just the beginning.

We talked about the concept of a Higher Power, and that I could believe whatever I wanted to believe, as long as I believed. We then read “We Agnostics.” We discussed how in the Second Step we had “come to believe in a Power greater than ourselves.” Now I could see and hope that God could restore me to sanity by removing the thoughts and obsessions of my eating disorder and stopping me from acting out. I wrote what restoring me

to sanity would look like for me. Then I read “How it Works.”

One of the tools I really loved was breaking down the Third Step Prayer into my own words: make it mine, talk about relieving the obsession of bingeing and acting out, take away the obsessive thoughts about my weight, my body. That prayer really started changing my thinking. I believe in the power of prayer. I remember my own version of the Third Step Prayer addressing my eating disorder went something like this: “God, I offer my eating disorder to you. I offer my bingeing to you, to build me and do with me as Thou wilt. Relieve me of the obsession of food, weight, and body, that I may better do Thy will. Take away my bingeing and restricting, that victory over it would bear witness to those I would help of Thy power, Thy love, and Thy way of life. May I do Thy will, always.”

Then we got to the chapter “How it Works.” We got on our knees and read the Third Step prayer together, and I made a decision to go on with the rest of the work. I was feeling better and had stopped bingeing. She suggested that I eat breakfast, lunch and dinner—balanced meals with snacks in between—if I was hungry, and I followed this suggestion. She told me to eat when I was hungry and stop when I felt full. She told me to listen to my stomach when I went to the refrigerator. If my stomach wasn’t hungry, walk away. I had to find balance in my eating, which I had not had in thirty years.

Then she had me write out my resentments: who I was resentful with and why. She was very thorough in this step. For each resentment, I had to clarify what it was affecting. I had to explain different aspects of each (self-esteem, ambition, etc.) and how they were affected. Also personal and sexual relationships and how they were affected. Before I started

writing, I read the resentment prayer for each individual on my 4th Step. I would get on my knees and pray for them.

I then wrote about my part in the resentment and talked about how I was selfish, self-seeking, dishonest, and afraid—either before, during, or after the event had occurred. I could see how I acted out against others, because different people had caused me to have resentments against them. I had done that throughout my life.

One of the biggest things my sponsor talked to me about was how self-reliance had failed me. Time and time again, I could not handle this. She emphasized that no human power was ever going to help me: I had to work and live the Twelve Steps to be free, keep connected to, and trust God; and that I could not “manage” my eating disorder, just as I could not “manage” my alcoholism. They are the same exact type of disease. The obsession drives me to act out; and, once I act out, I cannot stop.

It took my sponsor quite a few months to get me into the rooms of Eating Disorders Anonymous. I am so grateful to her, because she has helped me change my life. She taught me how to rely on God instead of my eating disorder and to stop depending on time at the gym, what my mother said, what diet my friend was on, or what this or that person thinks I should do, because none of that worked. It didn't work because it wasn't a power greater than me—it was human reliance.

Then I did my sexual inventory and I realized how much my eating disorder has affected those relationships and how it had spread into my drug and alcohol addiction. I wanted to be pretty, I wanted to be thin, I wanted to be noticed, I wanted to succeed, and I wanted to be popular. I thought I had to be thin to be worthy of love and attention.

I realized through this work that I had never truly been myself in any sexual relationship.

I have always been in one addiction or another. Now, I am finally free. I am able to love my body without hiding it, to run down the beach without thinking everyone is looking at me, to be happy and accept and enjoy my life, my body, and whichever person is in my life. I no longer surround myself with people who care only for material or social media ideals that society says we need to meet. I don't need to meet them; they don't make me happy. I have written out my own standards and ideals (just for myself), and I check them regularly. I also refer to them before I go on a date with anyone and have been lucky enough to meet some wonderful men since I've been in EDA.

When we got to my character defects, I was taught that by building up my character assets, the defects would lessen. I loved that my sponsor had me going around doing random acts of kindness: cleaning up bathrooms, picking up trash, helping others, being aware of the environment around me, and being caring and kind to others. This I continue to do on a daily basis. Integrating this simple idea and doing positive affirmations daily have truly changed my life. I've made some big amends that were long overdue. I am healing and happy.

Steps Ten and Eleven are powerful tools. I do spot-check and nightly inventories to keep my mind clear of resentments and clutter. This keeps my channel to God clear, because I have to constantly look at myself; and in doing this, I have become even closer to God. My sponsor has taught me how to meditate, which I do on a regular basis. I am so grateful for this suggestion. It changes my whole way of thinking. I have worked hard on promptly admitting when I am wrong and I have gotten really good at it.

Once I completed the Twelve Steps of EDA, I immediately started helping others. I didn't think I could help anyone because I had only ten months in. But I have more time in now and am working with a handful of people. I find my own recovery is strengthened when I sponsor, continue to make my amends, and continue character building. I have had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps. Carrying this message to others with eating disorders and "practicing these principles in all my affairs" is a way of life for me—and my life just keeps getting better and better!

OVERCOMING UNMANAGEABILITY

Taking responsibility for her commitment to balance and recovery led her to work through the layers...and find a life of richness and joy.

If I am going to tell you my story about my eating disorder, I am going to need to start at the beginning. I am the youngest of four children, although by only two minutes. I have a twin sister who was born just before me. You wouldn't think two minutes could matter, but it did. You see, my parents planned for only three children. But the last pregnancy got them a pair of babies, instead of just one. And while most couples would be joyful, I think my mother was probably already struggling with postpartum depression, or just depression, or perhaps just overwhelmed. Two babies were too much for her. I clearly remember, as far back as I am able, that she would tell me (in as many words) that I wasn't wanted. I was a mistake they didn't plan for. I was a pain in her butt.

That started my desperation for approval. Early on, I learned that love in my world was conditional, and I started behaving to please, to earn love. Of course, I didn't know that was what I was doing; I just knew that perfectionism, people pleasing, and all that were things I needed to be doing all the time.

I suppose it didn't help that I was different. My siblings—and in particular my fraternal twin—were all very

slender, tall, and lovely. Although I can see more clearly now that I wasn't ugly by any means, back then I really believed I was. My sister was the pretty one, I was the smart one; even our parents and grandparents told us that.

By the time I was five, I had an older cousin who was molesting me. I am sure my lack of self-esteem didn't help—probably made me the perfect target. That lasted a couple of years, and when I had finally had enough and found the courage to tell my mother, she basically said it must be my fault, that I was ruined, and brushed it under the rug.

Although no one knew it then, I suffered from depression by the time I was seven. My pre-teen and teen years were no better. I struggled, and because I struggled I am most certain I wasn't easy to live with.

Those years were filled with angst and heartache. I was tormented at home for what I ate, what I said or didn't say, even how I looked. I was tormented at school for being smart and got attention from the teachers for being that way—attention I was desperately seeking. I left home at the first available opportunity and never looked back. I thought everything would be better once I was out of there. I thought I would be better, but I was wrong.

Leaving home didn't change anything for me. Those feelings of being inadequate and “not enough” followed me all the way through my university years and into law school. They followed me through a failed engagement and a lost pregnancy. Eventually, they followed me right into my career, marriage, and parenthood.

I remember even in those days believing—really believing—I was fat and ugly. Not long ago, I looked back at a photo of myself then and honestly, I was gorgeous. Maybe not model gorgeous, but I was cute—healthy looking, great smile, nice hair.

About the time I was twenty-two, I developed a metabolic disorder: a real, true medical condition causing me to gain a lot of weight fast. I was told it was incurable. All of a sudden I was heavier than I had ever been, and my self-esteem plummeted.

I worked with doctors, I tinkered with diets and food modification, I upped the ante on exercise. I spent a fortune I didn't have on the next miracle program. Nothing gave. So I tried harder. And harder. And harder.

Each time my doctor would suggest something new, some new drug, some new diet, some new food to avoid, and I would do it with the dedication of a dying woman. I knew I looked terrible and I felt terrible—so whatever it took.

I became obsessive. I was so focused on sticking perfectly to whatever the plan-of-the-day was regarding food and exercise that I stopped being able to focus on life. I pushed myself at the gym like there was no tomorrow, sometimes to the point of throwing up.

I didn't really see it happening; I just knew I was obsessed with controlling the "clean food." I stopped agreeing to go out or attend any event where eating was required, unless I could be sure I was going to be able to stay on plan. And if I did go, I rarely enjoyed myself because I was so focused on what other people thought of me and what I ate. Or, I was focused on having to eat at all!

Inevitably, a social situation would break my perfect streak and I would blame myself for not being able to "stick to it," therefore explaining why I wasn't losing the weight, wasn't feeling better, wasn't in control of the metabolic disorder. I was a failure. It was my fault I couldn't do this.

I was in a vicious circle when my husband and I discovered this same disorder was going to cause us to struggle

to get pregnant. Needless to say, I felt like even less of a woman than I already believed myself to be.

Five years of fertility treatments did nothing to help the situation. Doctors would say if I lost a certain amount of weight my chances of getting pregnant would go up. Didn't they know how hard I was trying to lose that weight? There was clearly something wrong with me. Despite a lot of ups and downs (and an eating disorder I didn't recognize spiraling out of control), we got pregnant. I was sure pregnancy would make me happy; after all, it was everything we had hoped and dreamed about.

Then came the news we were expecting twins, and I was likely to gain even more weight than normal (as with most multiple birth pregnancies). And *poof!* The joy of expecting was gone. All I knew was I couldn't gain *that* much—I had to figure out how not to. So, I obsessed some more.

Our babies were on their way, and I succeeded in keeping things somewhat in control during the pregnancy. It wasn't obvious to me then, but it sure is now, how ridiculous and unmanageable it was for me to “manage” my weight gain in pregnancy so obsessively. (I am actually surprised the doctor didn't notice the eating disorder behavior. However, I do wonder if medical professionals are even educated to look for it in pregnant women. The fact that I was actively orthorexic during that time was painfully obvious.)

The ensuing stress from having twins, a traveling husband, no family support to speak of, and not to mention my need to be perfect at everything finally came crashing down around me when the kids were about two.

I battled severe depression, but begged my doctors not to hospitalize me, because my husband would lose his job if he had to stop traveling to take care of the kids. Yet the crushing weight of my life and responsibilities was just too

much. I felt like my life was spiraling completely out of control. It was a battle to even find the will to live.

The only thing I still had control of was the food and exercise. So I got serious with that because I would get a temporary relief through eating-disordered behaviors. For a few minutes, they would take the edge off.

Life continued that way: obsessing not only about what I ate and how I exercised, but also what the kids ate and how they exercised. My deepest bottom came the year we took the kids to Mexico for a family wedding at an all-inclusive resort where food and drink was everywhere...*all* the time. I also could not exercise because I had hurt my back and didn't have the equipment to accommodate my physical recovery. It was a perfect storm.

On the third day of the trip I couldn't leave the hotel room. I sent my husband off with the kids, but was in complete and utter fear they would eat ice cream (again) and end up like me—a metabolic mess. I tried to make myself leave the room to remind him not to let the kids eat junk, but I couldn't force myself out. It was too much.

At the time, I was blessed to have been working with a life coach who was also a recovery coach and recovering alcoholic herself. Several times she had suggested that I had a problem, but my answer was that I had to do *something*—there was obviously something wrong with me. I didn't recognize the program language that day, but I was so desperate to change that I did what she asked. I didn't want to be the mother who had two beautiful, healthy children, but couldn't see it for fear of what they might eat. We have to hit bottom before we are ready to change.

I emailed my coach. I never expected what it would mean to send that email, but, honestly, it was the best thing that ever happened to me. She responded and asked me to

tell her why this wasn't working anymore, why it was so unmanageable.

I didn't want to miss a family wedding because I was terrified of the world outside. I didn't want to be the woman who couldn't look herself in the mirror. I didn't want to be the woman who judged herself for how she looked, instead of how big her heart was. I didn't want to feel bad all the time, because the control I got from the eating disorder wasn't making me feel better anymore. I was sick and tired of being a failure; I was sick and tired of being sick and tired. When I came home, my coach asked me if I wanted help. The most courageous answer I have ever given was, "Yes" at that moment. She told me I would need to be willing to go to any lengths to get well, and I told her I would.

We found EDA online and a meeting about three hours from home, so I got in the car on a January afternoon and took off. (A road trip on Canadian roads that time of year can be sketchy at best. But I know God was on my side, because it was an absolutely glorious, clear day.) My coach couldn't come with me, so I really had to do it alone. I went to the location only to find out that no meetings were held there anymore. I learned later that was my first step in being responsible for my recovery.

Initially, I was so discouraged. I wondered if it was a sign. But my coach, who had now turned into my pseudo-sponsor (there weren't EDA sponsors available at the time) talked to me on the phone in the car on the way home and said it wasn't about the meeting for me in that moment, but about understanding my willingness to go to any lengths.

I hung onto that courage. I started going to open AA meetings with her and attending the online meetings at EDA and a few phone meetings. I took the "Big Book" of

Alcoholics Anonymous and made it my business to study it. I wish I could show you my “Big Book” today—it is the most beautifully worn and marked-up book you have ever seen. And it gives me peace just to look at it. But things didn’t switch off for me right away; I didn’t have a sudden “spiritual awakening” by any means. It was meticulous, slow, steady work. Balance came a bit at a time. In some ways, it is still coming.

In order to get well, there were layers of recovery. My upbringing was a strict Catholic one, and the God I was raised with was punishing. Through working my first three Steps, I found a new and personal relationship with a God that is loving and forgiving. It had only taken some time with my sponsor and the “Big Book.”

I believed He worked in other people’s lives, so it was really the work of coming to trust (at first only because my sponsor told me so) that He would work in mine if I let Him. She told me I was worthy, and I knew I could trust that, because she was also in recovery and had had a similar belief about herself. I wanted what she had.

At first, that trust in Step Two—that God could and would if He were sought—was a leap of faith, the faith of a mustard seed for those of you with a faith upbringing. But it was enough.

Not long after those first meetings I found a willingness to surrender...*really* surrender. In the beginning, it was just surrender about the food and exercise. I had to let go to realize what was and wasn’t working. Deep surrender is an active thing for me, an everyday thing, and that was scary for me. More than once, my fear of gaining weight was almost the end of my precarious recovery, but I persevered by reaching out to my sponsor, finding contacts in the program, and going to meetings—lots and lots of meetings!

Even those open AA meetings, where all I could do was listen, helped; they helped me see the similarities.

When I started working Step Four, I realized how much resentment I carried. Although I was perceived by those in my world as a peaceful and loving person, beneath the surface was a raging, angry child/teenager/adult. As I wrote out those resentments, I saw the pattern of control, perfectionism, and expectation. It was like someone slapped me upside the head! I could see it. I could see how I held on to the hurt and allowed myself to continue to be a victim to my abuse, to my health problems, and eventually to my eating disorder.

My Step Five—sharing with God and another living person—was terrifying but empowering. I told my sponsor all these ugly things about me and her response was one of love and acceptance. I will never forget her telling me there was nothing I could say that was worse than some of the things she had done in active addiction. Such genuine love and caring.

So, I dug in. It felt like we talked for weeks about my character defects, my willingness to let them go. But doing that meant letting go of control, and I already knew my ED was based on a need to control.

Finally, I was ready to ask God to remove my shortcomings in Step Seven. I found the humility necessary to see that God was at the helm, and all I needed was to ask for His help. At times, I have taken back control of some of those shortcomings, but knowing how beautiful surrender and joy in recovery has been for me has made it easier to ask Him to take them back again.

When I hit Step Eight, I was finally experiencing joy in my life: a contentedness I had never known. I was “seeing” my children for the first time. I was “hearing” their

laughter in a part of my soul that had been closed off for so very long. Making the list of people I had harmed was a daunting task, but it was made easier by the reward of peace and joy in my life.

By then, I was fully committed to balance and recovery. Humility was my cloak as I made amends. I also began to live some amends to my family by showing my children a healthy and content mother who no longer judges herself, or others, by a standard of perfection about food or physical beauty.

I had learned about the Step Ten daily inventory long before I got there, but I made it my mission to never let a day go by without looking at my thinking and my choices, and making immediate amends. I had seen how resentment made and kept me sick, so today I keep a vigilant eye out for any sign of it in my daily affairs.

Every day I am living Steps Eleven and Twelve. Today, I know a loving God who, when I seek His presence, is *everywhere* in my life. He works in my business, He works in my family, and He has worked in my social circle to help me align with more like-minded people.

What does recovery look like for me? Today, it is days filled with the busy-ness of being a mom to small children and a wife to a husband who travels. Recovery has given me the gifts of peace of mind, of courage to face my problems, of always knowing that God is my first stop and the program is next. With these support systems I know I can stay balanced.

No day is perfect. Life happens. My kids get into trouble, my husband and I disagree, we have money struggles and friendship issues. But nothing is BIG anymore because with God I can surrender all and trust Him to let me live my recovery one day at a time. It is how I deal with life that

is different. No longer do I need to numb or control to gain acceptance. I have also been blessed to continue having the same sponsor, and she has marked my life indelibly. I am so grateful for that.

I recently found the courage to test my recovery when I worked with a nutritionist and a naturopath to make amends to my body. The result of years of an eating disorder, fertility treatments, and depression was a body depleted of vital nutrients and in adrenal failure. Doing the next right thing meant I needed to work with these professionals to modify my foods, temporarily, to allow my body to heal.

As I started that program, I pulled close to my support network and slowly but surely I began the process of regulating those deficiencies. With that came the gifts of finding a weight that is healthy for me, and a return of my energy and clear head. Sometimes, it can be scary and challenging, but I have the tools to deal with difficult emotions in the healthiest way.

Today, thanks to EDA and my wonderful God, I have a life I could never dream of, one that is filled with joy and richness. What a gift of recovery that is!

RECOVERY IS A JOURNEY

Letting go of the need to be in control, she stopped judging herself and discovered self-acceptance, honesty, and the power of service.

For me, recovery hasn't happened overnight; it was, and still is, a journey. In my experience, recovery is ongoing, with twists, turns, peaks, valleys, and plateaus; but, on the whole, my life is improving. I owe this to the Twelve Steps and to God, and the more I follow the tenets of the Steps and rely on Him, the better I am able to see the improvements in my everyday life.

Growing up, I always felt different from my peers. I can distinctly remember being with other children and thinking I needed to keep the truth about me a secret, because it felt so overwhelmingly shameful. I was diagnosed with medical issues, and there was a lot of focus on treatment. By extension, there was a lot of focus on “fixing” or “improving” me. Somewhere along the way, I internalized that my feelings were not important, and that it was important to keep them inside. Although there was a lot of good in my childhood—I was extremely blessed with many opportunities and involved in many extracurricular activities, hobbies, and my childhood faith—I believe these may be the roots of my eating disorder.

My household was very structured, and we were allowed only “healthy” foods. I liked to eat as a child and

was given large quantities of vegetables when I was hungry. I am forever grateful that I learned early about the benefits of eating these foods; however, when I had the opportunity to eat “unhealthy” snack food, I didn’t stop until I got reprimanded or felt sick. This food had so much power over me that I would “sneak” it and lie about it to my parents. I even stole a dessert from a store once. My parents made me take it back in after eating part of it, apologize, and pay for it! Although I didn’t know it yet, food was my “solution” to my problems from a very early age.

As I got older, I continued to lie about what I ate, and when stressed I would eat a lot of desserts and even steal them from other family members. I knew the importance of staying thin, so I ate dessert instead of other food. I began dieting for the first time in high school and was astonished at the high I got.

I was a really good student and went to another state for college. Entering as a freshman, I felt as though I could start over and be a different person. I made many friends and I felt free. I was very social. I joined a sorority and started drinking alcohol. At the beginning of “Bill’s Story” in the “Big Book” of Alcoholics Anonymous, he talks about feeling as though he had “arrived.” That is exactly how I felt when I got to college. All of the things I was concerned about suddenly became less of a concern. I still felt I needed to hide my true self, but I thought less about it. At the end of that freshman year, my grades suffered, and I gained weight.

I decided I needed to lose that weight and began restricting certain food groups, losing all of the infamous “freshman 15” I had gained over the first year. When I had surgery for my medical issues, I kept it a secret and managed to lose even more weight. When school started again,

I was very focused and stopped eating almost entirely. Obviously this wasn't sustainable, and I ended up hospitalized and quickly regained the weight (against my volition). Thus began a cycle of overeating (later bingeing), and then restricting. If I ate a lot of food, I would then decrease what I ate the day after to "balance out" the number of calories. I also began to restrict eating during the day, so I could drink and/or eat a big meal at night.

After experiencing more health problems, I was forced to withdraw from college and move home. There, my pattern of overeating and restricting became more entrenched. If I found I was gaining a few pounds, I would eat less; when I lost the weight again, I would eat more. It was a never-ending cycle.

I got a roommate who kept copious amounts of food from a bulk-supply store and I found myself unable to stop eating her food. I tried to come up with all sorts of different methods to keep myself from doing this (often in the middle of the night), but failed. I found myself "buying back" her food in the morning and trying to disguise the fact that I had eaten it. During the day, I would not eat and sometimes used chemicals to help decrease my appetite. Needless to say, that living situation did not work out.

I got my own place expressly so I could control what was and wasn't in my home. I thought that control would solve my problem. As you might already guess, that didn't work either. I began to calorie-count more than ever and weigh myself repeatedly. I would stick to the "healthy" foods I chose to buy for most of the day, but then go on mini-binges, counting each calorie. If I went above my calorie goal, my task was to exercise and consume as many energy drinks as necessary to burn the extra calories. *It was insanity.* There were many other eating-disordered behaviors, as

well. I even counted my alcohol calories, trying to factor them in! If I failed to keep my calorie goal, or if my weight went up, it felt like my life was over. I would not leave my house because I was too ashamed of myself and how “fat” I felt. (If you haven’t heard it already, you probably will soon: fat is not a feeling!)

The eating disorder I didn’t think I had ruled my life. I thought people with eating disorders had to eat and throw up or starve themselves and be very thin with bones sticking out. I didn’t fit either description: I was at a normal weight and could rarely make myself throw up (although I certainly tried).

My family convinced me to go to treatment for alcohol, anxiety, and food. *My life had become unmanageable.* I was not working or going to school, and lived only to obsess about what I ate and drank, and to compulsively spend money. I was introduced to Twelve-Step groups, but managed to continue my eating disorder while in treatment. Soon after, I attended a specialized program in another state.

In that program, I learned what it was to eat food in a healthy manner and what is often behind an eating disorder. I learned new, more adaptive ways to manage feelings. I got involved in a Twelve-Step program and went to meetings. Although I had been making a lot of progress, I began to struggle with my eating disorder again. After a “binge,” I learned that I had “relapsed” and had to start the Step work over again. This became a constant battle—trying not to eat too much or too little.

I had a dietitian, but decided that I would listen to some of the “old-timers” in the Twelve-Step meeting I was attending and eliminate sugar from my diet. My life began

to revolve around checking labels for any sugar content; and, if there was, how many ingredients were listed before the sugar. *Insanity!* And despite all the restricting of sugar, I still couldn't stop bingeing at all hours of the night. The frustration led me to relapse on alcohol after a period of sobriety.

I moved back to my hometown, desperate to stop bingeing and restricting. I found the nearby abstinence-based, Twelve-Step meetings were not supportive. One local EDA meeting had recently disbanded, but another girl wanted to start a new one. I love to plan, organize, and volunteer, and I was eager to help get a new group started—even though I didn't know a lot about the program.

Getting involved in EDA changed my life. It gave me a sense of purpose. I publicized meetings, printed out materials, and made contact with the church where the previous meeting had been held. I found friends who were also looking to recover; and, best of all, I found a supportive environment where I was not a failure when I overate. EDA encouraged me to focus on the milestones and the progress that I did make.

I found it hard that there weren't EDA sponsors. At first I got a buddy, but that didn't really work out. Luckily, the woman who had been leading the last meeting prior to its closure agreed to sponsor me, and we began working on the Steps. In completing my Fifth Step in another Twelve-Step program, I was able to be open and honest about things I had kept a secret for twenty-four years. As I took inventory of myself and was honest with others, I found my bingeing got better.

Despite this, I experienced a deep, deep depression that led me to restrict for about two months. I was able to work closely with my dietitian and remain involved in

EDA. Although I felt ashamed—because I was someone who *founded* the meeting and still was in such despair—I *kept showing up* anyway. It took me a while to realize I needed to stop judging myself, and that *it's ok to not be perfect*. I learned this is fairly normal (both the judging and the setbacks). I ended up getting another sponsor in another Twelve-Step program who helped me work the Steps both for my eating disorder *and* for alcohol. I completed working the Steps with her.

- I realized my life didn't work the way it had been going and that I couldn't control my eating disorder.
- I started to believe there was something outside of me, and greater than me, that had more power than I did.
- I turned my life over to that Higher Power, as things weren't working the way I was managing them. I found that creating my own Third Step Prayer (as in the EDA Step workbook) and the God-box (where I can offer my struggles to God) to be extremely powerful.
- I inventoried my relationships, resentments, fears, and harm done to others.
- I shared these with my sponsor.
- I became acquainted with the shortcomings within me that were causing many of my problems and became willing to have these removed. I learned shortcomings don't mean I am an inferior or bad person; it just means I could improve on some things.

- I humbly asked God to remove my shortcomings—I needed His help.
- I went back to Step Four and looked for those to whom I needed to make amends. This didn't mean I just had to say, "I'm sorry;" it meant I had to try to make things right.
- I actually made amends. I found it wasn't as hard or as painful as I thought it would be. I also discovered that not everyone wanted to hear or accept my amends—something with which I have had to make my own peace.
- I continue the process of Steps Four through Nine on a daily basis by observing my thoughts and actions, turning them over to God, and making things right with others if needed.
- I began to pray in the morning and at night. I ask Him for help with not acting out through my eating disorder and also for the well-being of others. This step also involves meditation. I tend to struggle with sitting still, so I try to reflect on a prayer or reading.
- This focus on helping others was something I was able to do right away by starting an EDA meeting with a friend. This also involved sponsorship and service work with EDA. I have discovered that helping others really helps me! As someone already familiar with Twelve-Step recovery, I knew it was very important to start "working" Steps Ten through Twelve right away, just as I had the other Steps (although I waited to start sponsoring until I was done with my 9th Step).

Today, my life has completely changed. When I was in my eating disorder, I stopped going to work and school and had unhealthy relationships. In recovery, I have been able to return to school for both my bachelor's and master's degrees and am now a licensed counselor. I have been able to be a good employee and support myself. I have had friends for many years. I just got married to the love of my life.

I struggle with health problems but am able to walk through the struggles. I have a wide array of feelings—happy, sad, angry, and ashamed—that I never used to feel before. My life no longer revolves around food. I don't eat a perfectly “healthy” diet, but that is not the end of the world. Sometimes I eat more than I am hungry for and feel full. Sometimes I make choices that I later regret. Sometimes I eat something sweet because I feel stressed. Sometimes I eat a balanced diet full of nutrients. Regardless of the choices I make, they do not have to determine my day anymore. Instead, I can look to God and those I trust for an alternate, more lasting solution.

My prayer is that you may find the same solution in the rooms of Eating Disorders Anonymous as I did. There is a solution. There is a way out.