

PART I
PIONEERS OF EDA

(1)

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 people 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 process, explaining each Step in detail, 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.