

PART III  
THEY LOST NEARLY ALL



(1)

## A MAN FINDS HOPE AND MEANING IN RECOVERY FROM ANOREXIA

*He once believed his purpose in life was to have an eating disorder; now, his purpose is to recover so he can reach out and help others.*

It is hard to believe that in comparison to where I was just one year ago, I'm writing down and sharing this story. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine there would come a day when I could take the necessary steps to improve my life while living with this horrible disease, or being in a state of mind where I would genuinely want to share my experience by reaching out to others who also may be suffering. I lived with my eating disorder for thirteen years, roughly half of my life. It's made living miserable at best, and nearly unbearable the rest of the time. There were three or four years in particular that felt as though nothing ever made a difference. Remembering how lonely and hopeless that felt, I couldn't be happier that the last year has proven me completely wrong.

For the sake of brevity, I'll share with you the highlights of my life with my disorder up until its climax a few years ago, which lead to my last round of treatment. I first started developing disordered-eating behaviors at the age of fifteen. I hadn't been a happy child for a long time, but entering high school my depression began to take a stronger

hold of me: I began engaging in self-harming behaviors. However, once restriction came into the mix, I felt so at ease all of a sudden. To me, it was the perfect solution to everything I felt about myself and it became a daily go-to outlet for my depression, frustration, and poor self-image. I committed to it as much as I possibly could—right from the start. Admittedly, my behaviors never exactly went unnoticed, but being a teenage boy kept the majority of my peers and family from jumping to the assumption that I actually had anorexia. To some, it was just a phase. Others just assumed I was one of the many other skinny teenage boys that would surely bulk up within the next few years when my metabolism changed.

It's weird looking back at those first couple of years and realizing how little I understood, or even knowingly engaged in, a lot of these routines I created for myself. There's something really cunning about an eating disorder. It has a way of keeping the severity of your actions entirely at bay. I can remember purposely going through the days with as little food as possible, sitting down to meals, barely picking at anything on my plate and obsessing over how I looked and what my weight was. But not once did the thought that I might be sick cross my mind. I was acting without thinking, and if anyone brought the subject up, I would become overly defensive, affirming that I did in fact eat. I'd insist that I ate consistently throughout the day, and I would believe every word I said. To me, I was eating more than enough, and no one else knew what they were talking about. This disease truly has its own survival instincts, and, right from the beginning, I fell victim to it.

By the age of twenty-three, I had been hospitalized twice, once my senior year of high school and again two years later. Both times I just went through the motions of

weight restoration, and after coming to terms with the fact that I actually did have a problem, would attempt to find a way to move on with my life. But in both cases, after a certain weight was reached and the doctors pushed me to do some serious soul-searching to discover what the root cause of all of this was, I retaliated. I became aggressively defensive, argumentative, and after my release I decided to go about recovery my own way. I wanted to rid myself of my behaviors without acknowledging where they came from. And I wouldn't let anyone convince me to do otherwise.

I developed a routine of doing fairly well for a few weeks, restricting a couple after that, getting back in the habit of eating more regularly, and so on. Never was my eating disorder voice gone completely, even during periods of eating moderately well. I would only eat because I knew I had to, and every time I would hate myself more and more because, deep down, I just wanted to give in and use my behaviors once again. My disorder would tear me apart each time I went against what it wanted me to do. This went on for years until I moved out on my own, to another state, and began to spiral out of control entirely.

Once I was left alone to my own devices, my anorexia finally had the chance to take total control, in spite of my best efforts. I would try to go food shopping, which one way or another, would be a disaster. I would either spend forever in the store, trying and failing to decide what I wanted to buy, or be in and out in five minutes, just grabbing my safe foods—and anything else I happened to see. I usually ended up throwing away half of what I bought, because I'd realize I would never actually eat it. This only furthered my constant sense of shame and guilt for behaving this way and wasting so much food and money. There would be days when I would be utterly starving; but all I

could do was stare at my pantry on the verge of tears, because I couldn't allow myself to have anything. I developed very particular safe foods and scheduled times I could eat. What I ate one day affected what I could eat the rest of the week; nearly every waking thought I had was what I would consume and when. I would obsess over it for hours, to the point I felt I was having a panic attack that kept me up more than half of the night; nothing could keep the thoughts from racing. In spite of all of this, I couldn't bring myself to get any help. I always thought, *I could be worse, so why bother?* Obviously, I was having a hard time, but I never thought for a second I was in a bad enough state, physically, to require help.

Eventually, I saw a doctor and couldn't believe what I was hearing. Apparently I was back to my lowest weight and I should go to an in-patient facility as soon as possible. This was so hard to wrap my head around, because when I looked in the mirror, I thought I looked completely normal. *How could it really be that bad?* I'll admit part of me screamed that I should agree to treatment right away; I desperately wanted help. But my disorder wouldn't let me. I had to make myself suffer at all costs, and getting treatment would undo everything I had worked for.

The months that followed pushed me to my utmost breaking point. Alcohol abuse had been a common occurrence for a while, but it became my main coping skill during this time. Many times a week I would get black-out drunk, which only led to bingeing. Then I would take laxatives to undo the "damage." After a few weeks of this routine, my body was a mess; and, with my health at such a horrible point, my dependency on alcohol only got worse. I started regularly going to work drunk and then going through withdrawals before my shift was over. Every day I

would try—and fail—to break the habit, but without even thinking about it I would already be on my third drink and wouldn't stop until I passed out. I lost all will to take care of myself. While the idea of suicide had always been a passive thought, it then became a near certainty. I have never been so scared of what I was going to do to myself. Every night I would cry, because there didn't seem to be any hope at all. I would think about how easy it would be to end it all, and how little there was preventing me from doing so. I can honestly say if it weren't for my family, I probably wouldn't be here today.

When I broke down and asked for help, my parents bought a plane ticket for me and I was back in a treatment facility within a few days. I swore to myself that I wouldn't take it for granted. From day one, I ate everything that was put in front of me. I opened up to every doctor about my thought processes and struggles, even going as far as to warn them how I would previously hit a wall and resist treatment. I didn't want to give myself any room to budge this time. I wanted to finish this once and for all.

In no way was any of it easy. There were countless times I fought back, arguing and rationalizing, trying to do things my way and not theirs. But somehow I managed to push myself further than ever, going through every step of the program. At first, when it felt like too much to handle or pried too insistently into my past, I resentfully came to believe that recovery was worth all of the struggles. But over time, I began to *embrace* the idea of a new life without this disease. I shared more about myself than ever before, addressing behaviors I had never discussed with anyone and events from my past I never thought another soul would ever hear. Every breakthrough only made my ability to fight

for recovery stronger, and I couldn't be more grateful to have been surrounded by such an understanding treatment team to help guide me through it all. I wish I could say things have been perfect since I left, but when I discharged I went right back to my old apartment and friends and fell back into some old habits. Once again, alcohol became a real struggle, but I'm proud to say that I'm finally moving past all of my self-destructive behaviors. I want to live and enjoy life for once and I'm taking every necessary step I can to make that happen. I'm attending AA meetings, no longer surrounding myself with unhealthy company, keeping in regular contact with family, and being completely honest with them about how I'm doing. I honestly love it.

It's so freeing to live without the constant torture of an eating disorder: no longer obsessing over every calorie I ingest, being able to tag along with coworkers to grab dinner regardless of where they're going. I can finally eat "treats" for the first time in almost eight years, which may not seem like much to some, but it's huge for me and I hope you can understand. I'm finally comfortable making sure I eat consistently throughout the day, even if I have to carry snacks with me everywhere I go and eat even if no one else is having something. Sure, there are days when my body image is terrible and I can't imagine being any heavier, but I trust those thoughts are not the truth. They're simply the start of a downward spiral I know I won't have the strength to pull myself out of again. Nothing about recovery is going to be perfect, and that's okay. If I struggle, I forgive myself and pick up where I left off, so I can continue to improve and ensure that the same mistake won't happen again. You can't be too hard on yourself when you're trying to beat something like this.

When it comes down to it, I think the best part of all of this is the possibility of what else is to come. I finally have goals in my life. I would love to become more involved in the EDA movement and even have goals to start my own EDA meeting in the city I live. For as long as I can remember, I've believed it was my purpose in life to have an eating disorder; I just misunderstood to what end. Maybe it's not to die from and be another statistic, but to struggle and survive in order to reach out to and help others. That thought gives me so much hope.

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## BREAK THE RULES AND ENJOY THE PROMISES

*Living with an eating disorder is not truly living. Moving from self-loathing to self-love, she is at peace through her sustaining relationship with her Higher Power.*

Living with my eating disorder was not really living. For years, I competed in numerous athletic events, because I thought a medal or trophy would make me feel better about myself. I surrounded myself with people who placed extreme importance on outward appearance and I purged and starved myself, because I thought I would be happy if I lost more weight. I felt good when others commented on my “self-discipline” and “motivation,” but the effects were short-lived. Even at my lowest weight, I hated my body and was still convinced changing it would make me happy. My eating disorder progressed when I developed a diet and exercise plan that combined a lifetime of coaches’ advice, articles, cleanses, and weight-loss challenges—all of which became “The Rules.” I set myself up for failure by adopting The Rules as a way of living. Each time I failed, I binged and purged and I swore I would never break The Rules again. I sought self-love in my eating disorder, which, in turn, only produced self-loathing.

At the lowest point in my eating disorder, I had over two years of abstinence in another Twelve-Step program,

but my eating disorder was negatively affecting my health, work, family, and relationships. I was passing out while driving due to lack of nourishment and exhaustion from intense workouts. Even abnormal lab results did nothing to curb my self-destructive behaviors. I was insanely immersed in my eating disorder instead of performing at work or engaging with loved ones. My life was completely unmanageable. I started working the Steps a second time with my sponsor, and we focused solely on my eating disorder. I was at a local diner having coffee with her when my Higher Power led me to the conclusion that I needed to seek help through a residential treatment program.

Recovering for my seven-year-old daughter was a huge motivation for me, because I did not wish for her to follow my example and encounter what I was experiencing. Ironically, I learned from her how to live a balanced life with food and exercise. After years of punishing myself, I allowed myself to eat all foods in moderation and enjoy movement. One of my favorite milestones was when I went on a lunch outing with my husband and daughter during my stay at the treatment center. I challenged my eating disorder by asking my family to choose a restaurant, and we ate a meal most children enjoy. For the first time in my daughter's life, I shared the same meal as her and I was proud of myself.

My stay in treatment was difficult, primarily because my family was allowed only a single three-hour visit per week. The three of us shared tears over painful telephone calls while my husband heroically managed the household and his work schedule. But these temporary difficulties resulted in long-lasting benefits. Both mine and my family's lives are so much better today that I have no regrets about

my decision to enter and remain in treatment as long as the center's staff recommended.

Today, The Rules are being replaced by The Promises in my life. I am almost nine months free from bulimia and I am amazed that I am free from the obsession about my body, food, and exercise! Although being honest with myself and taking the necessary steps was painstaking, life in recovery is better than I ever imagined. Today, I am at peace with food and exercise. Also, I practice gratitude for my body, because it allowed me to bring a child into this world and it lets me hike and rock climb San Diego's trails and beaches. I am no longer in bondage, instead, "(I) know a new freedom and a new happiness," as The Promises state.

I sought recovery from my eating disorder because I wanted to stop obsessing about food and exercise, but my journey has led me on a path of developing self-love. I discovered that while the greatest gift in recovery is giving back, I have to love myself before I can truly love others. I started an EDA meeting a couple months ago and began sponsoring women. I also intentionally seek and develop skills to be a better wife and mother. Today, I am of service to others seeking recovery and to my family, because I actively work on myself.

For me, remaining in recovery requires attending Twelve-Step meetings, appointments with my therapist and psychiatrist, working the Steps with my sponsor, and working with other women in recovery. Incorporating these tasks can seem overwhelming, especially with family and work schedules, but I make it a priority because of The Promises that have already come true during my short time in recovery. Every day, I surrender to my Higher Power and ask for the willingness, strength, and courage to

do what He wants me to do. As a result, my Higher Power relieved me of my struggle and allows me to help others. My feelings of self-loathing are transforming into self-love and I am at peace. God is doing for me what I could not do for myself.

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## DANCING FROM DARKNESS TO DAYLIGHT

*Recovery is about honesty and willingness to grow—and experiencing that growth. Her life today wouldn't be possible if she hadn't stepped onto the road of recovery.*

My eating disorder began when I was twelve years old. I was a compulsive overeater, and at the time did not know it. I was young and having a love affair with food. It was my best friend and my worst enemy. I ate as a reward and I ate as a punishment. Despite my father's relentless teasing about the pounds added on, I continued to torturously eat (or non-torturously as the case may have been). I had already been self-mutilating since the age of nine, but at that age I didn't know that's what it was; I just knew what I was doing made me feel better after I did it. Little did I know I was in a downward spiral that would last through my teen years and into adulthood. I would go on diets, only to fail and beat myself up because of my failure. I didn't realize that my compulsive overeating was the start of something big—bigger than me, bigger than the food, bigger than anything. I was out of control and I hated it.

I don't know what happened, but one day something snapped, and I went on a diet with a friend. We decided we were going to rollerblade after school every day and we were only going to eat certain foods. I don't know what made this time different, but it was. I stuck to my regimen,

and the pounds started dropping off of me. It was the best feeling in the world. People started complimenting me on my weight loss, and on my gaining control. I was on top of the world. I realized I could eat less than I already was, up my exercise, and still survive just fine—so that's what I did. As time progressed, my friend dropped out of our diet, realizing that she didn't need to lose any more weight. But not me. I was almost down to "normal" weight and people were telling me it was time to stop. *Were these people absolutely insane?* I was having the time of my life! For once I *had* something. I was in control. I was doing something amazing, and I felt really awesome about myself. It was powerful and exhilarating. I didn't listen when they told me to slow down my dieting. I did the complete opposite. I continued to cut calories and fat. I became a vegetarian. I restricted even more. As I lost more and more weight, my diet turned into something I couldn't control anymore. It became an obsession. I was exercising many hours a day and I was becoming worn down. Thinner wasn't ever thin enough and people were very concerned, but I was still on a rush. I was also very hungry. One day I binged on Chinese food and I told myself I was going to purge, just this once. And I did. It was the most awful thing I had ever done, and at the same time provided such relief. But I swore I would never do it again.

The next six years of my life were filled with compulsive exercising, starving for weeks at a time, bingeing and purging (sometimes many times a day), abusing drugs and alcohol, self-mutilation, and low self-esteem. On the outside I tried to be perfect and I lost myself in the midst of all of the things I was doing. I was a high-functioning anorexic/bulimic/alcoholic/addict, or so I thought. I had finished high school and left for college, but dropped out because

“it was for the best.” I really just couldn’t admit I dropped out because I was sick and I couldn’t handle it. I was holding down a full-time job, supporting myself financially, and living with my boyfriend, and... I was lost in a whirlwind of addictions. I hit rock bottom at the age of twenty. I had developed knee problems that sometimes didn’t allow me to even walk (due to malnutrition and over-exercise), I had a borderline-to-mild heart attack, my teeth were in horrible shape, and my hair wasn’t so hot either. At times I lost the ability to control my bowels. I had rectal bleeding that sent me to the ER more than once. Physically I was knocking on death’s door. The prognosis wasn’t looking great—unless I was willing to recover.

My eating disorder doctor looked me in the eye and told me I was going to die the next time I had a heart attack. My electrolytes were all screwy, which triggered the first episode. At that point, I was referred to a residential treatment facility for eating disorders and women’s issues. I had already been in therapy for years prior to this, and my therapist (whom I still see once a week and love tremendously) said it was time for me to get the foundation built. Outpatient therapy was only doing so much for me and it would be much more meaningful once I was in aftercare.

So I went to treatment for several months. The whole process was NOT easy, but it was well worth it; and, to be honest, I would go back there in a heartbeat. It was the best thing I could have done for myself. I regained my self-esteem and I learned how to live. I learned so much about myself and my feelings. First, I had to learn I actually HAD feelings. I learned about my thought patterns, as well as my eating disorder, and about the dynamics of why I was doing what I was doing. I can hardly describe everything

that I learned about myself. I highly recommend a good residential program to anyone considering it.

Things haven't been easy since I have been back, either. While I am glad my experiences in treatment prepared me for the struggles I would face, inpatient care is just the foundation: aftercare is where the real work happens. Right now, I am just taking things one day at a time. I go to therapy once a week, attend three AA meetings a week, and started an EDA meeting where I live. For me it's about perseverance and realizing that I am only human. It's hard not to want to rush things, but recovery is a process, not an event. It is about honesty and willingness to grow, and experiencing that growth. I am happy to remember to enjoy life, because this is a life I wouldn't have had if I didn't step onto the road of recovery. And for that I am truly grateful.

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## DUAL DIAGNOSIS

*By learning to be comfortable with change, she allows herself to be guided by her Higher Power and the principles of EDA. And life is just amazing!*

My story has a dual aspect. On one hand, I was fully and completely immersed in my eating disorder that began when I was thirteen. On the other, I had given myself over to drugs and alcohol to quiet the shame and guilt from my eating disorder as well as numb myself to the depression and constant berating in my head. From the time I began experimenting with purging until the day I fully surrendered to my Higher Power, I floated between these two addictions. Sometimes I was sober, but engaged in eating-disordered behaviors; sometimes I was using chemicals heavily, but my eating was more stable; and other times I was simultaneously using both in an attempt to escape from a life that felt unbearable.

I couldn't tell you when I started to hate myself. Some of my earliest memories include feeling fat, or stupid, or "not good enough." That isn't to say I had a terrible childhood. For the most part, I was a completely normal kid. My parents were still married and I had a little sister I usually got along with (when I wasn't being mean to her). I loved to play soccer, climb trees, sing, read, and eat normal food. But inside, I think I always knew something was different about me. I always felt an incessant need to show people I

was smart and a good kid. Although I constantly sought the praise of my parents, coaches, and friends, I never felt like anything I did was ever good enough. I always compared myself to my friends; this friend was a faster swimmer, that one had better toys, and another was skinnier than me. Kindergarten was the first time I decided I was fat. My best friend's family was all naturally very tall and slender, and I felt inadequate next to her. I would battle the thoughts of "coming up short" to my friends for years afterwards.

But I couldn't ever put a name to the "disease" I was feeling until the end of seventh grade. That year I first attempted suicide, and my life was forever changed. By the middle of eighth grade, I was chronically suicidal and kept copies of suicide notes in my desk drawers. I started self-injuring and got curious about drugs. I went on and off psychiatric medications during this time, often refusing to take them because they made me feel numb. I continued to see different therapists, but nothing seemed to help me break free of the depression controlling my life.

During this time, I also started experimenting with dieting and various methods of weight control. I hated my body and wanted it to suffer the way I was suffering inside. I vividly remember the first time I tried to make myself vomit after eating dinner with my family. I heaved and gagged, but nothing came up. Eventually, my insides hurt so bad that I gave up and cried myself to sleep because I thought I would always be fat.

Next, I discovered drugs. They were easy enough to get and made me feel less hungry during the day. They also gave me a rush of energy and level of focus I had never experienced. I began to take them daily and always carried them with me in my bag. I believe now the drugs served a dual purpose in my eating disorder. First, they gave me a

sense of control over food and my body, and second, they introduced me to the intoxicating feeling of an altered state of mind. Granted it was mild, but something changed in my brain, and I figured out that external substances could make me feel the way I couldn't feel on my own.

As I entered high school, my world became a dark haze as I looked at it through the lenses of depression. I began to experiment with more drugs to give me the high I wanted. I continued to play around with purging off and on, but on the outside I looked fairly normal. All of that changed when I reached my junior year. At that point, I had begun a slow transition towards more alternative lifestyles and clothing. I traded in my jeans and t-shirts for baggy pants and oversized trucker shirts. I started a punk band and began dying my hair different colors and wearing black makeup. I wanted to exude an air of confidence and standoffishness. I used this as a protection to keep everyone at arm's length and as a way to start making friends who thought and acted more like me.

My drug use became significantly heavier. I started to rely completely on chemicals to take me away from the feelings of loneliness and sadness that consumed me. I dropped from an honor roll student the first semester of my junior year, to failing almost all my classes the second. In order to graduate on time, I was forced to transfer to an alternative school, but there my pattern just continued; the only change was that my classes were easy enough I could pass without attending much. So, instead of going to school, I went to friends' houses and used drugs or alcohol. My life became a constant search for drugs. At this time, my eating was stable enough that my weight did not change much, and I didn't put too much effort into changing it. I was still consumed by moments of hatred for my body and wishing

I could lose weight; but I had found that as long as I was on drugs, I didn't have to think about it.

Complications with my eating disorder didn't begin until I decided to take my uncle up on an offer to live with him in Manhattan for a few months to care for my cousin while he was in school. Coincidentally, just before leaving, I stepped on a pay-scale at the mall. To my horror, I found I weighed a great deal more than I thought. Then and there I decided that while I was in New York, I was going to lose weight by whatever means necessary. I didn't tell anyone about my plan, but got on the plane dreaming about how much better my life was going to be when I weighed less.

From then on, it was a downward spiral. I began cutting my daily intake to dangerously low levels. I started exercising more by walking around the city and going to a gym that was nearby. I purged when I felt I had eaten too much and began, once again, to use drugs to quell my appetite. Much of my time in NYC was marked by the pant sizes I dropped and the sense of accomplishment I felt as each size grew too big on me. I also developed a taste for alcohol. I acquired a fake ID and began drinking profusely to escape the knowledge that what I was doing was wrong. The entire time, I was lying to my aunt and uncle about what I was doing and how I was feeling.

Returning home did not mean really changing my thoughts and behavior, though my habits changed a bit to accommodate being around more people who might ask questions. I started exercising in secret, usually leaving work early so I could get a run in before I was expected anywhere. I added yet another drug habit to the mix and fell further into the pit. Each day was measured by the numbers on the scale: good if it went down, bad if it went up. I'd make multiple trips to the bathroom to see if I had lost

any more weight. I became obsessed with other measures to see if I had lost weight. To me, anorexia was the answer to all my problems. As long as I could lose weight, everything else in the world didn't matter. For months, I lived in the denial, thinking I had control over my eating disorder and my drug addiction, that I could stop when I wanted to...I thought I just didn't want to.

The realization that my beliefs about the eating disorder were all a façade came harshly one day, and in a matter of minutes my ignorance was shattered. I was at work and felt the familiar hunger pangs in my stomach and the light-headedness that came along with restriction. I quickly tallied up the calories I had consumed that day and decided I could eat something. I walked down to the cafeteria, my mind racing with thoughts of what I should or should not eat when I got there. But when I stepped into the cafeteria, the entire room seemed to close in on me. My heart seemed desperate to break out of my chest as I walked from station to station looking at the food and wondering if I could eat it. As I circled for the third or fourth time, I realized I wasn't the one in control anymore. I had to ask permission from my eating disorder to let me eat—and the eating disorder always told me no. There were *no* foods that were safe anymore; each time I put something in my mouth I was a failure, and the eating disorder was sure to make that clear to me.

Within a few months, I checked myself into a hospital-based treatment program. But my desire to recover quickly subsided as the eating disorder convinced me that I would be losing ground if I let go of it and gained weight. My journal from the time I spent inpatient is filled with self-hatred and anger at myself, my body, and everyone around me. When I gave in to the eating disorder, I began

to do anything I could to subvert the treatment I was receiving. I hid food, found ways to purge, and would lie in my bed at night doing leg-lifts or sit-ups. I knew when I got out I wasn't going to mess around anymore. My low weight going into the hospital wasn't good enough; I needed to go below it. I didn't need to delude myself anymore with thoughts of stopping my weight loss; rather, I was going to lose weight until there was no more weight to lose. At this point, I couldn't even be distracted by drugs and alcohol; I decided to quit chemicals in order to devote all my focus to the eating disorder.

The next year-and-a-half of my life was a blur of hunger pains, vomit, and food. I resorted to methods I would have previously found appalling to avoid eating, to steal food, and to purge. As my body reached a critical point of starvation, the primal instincts of survival took over, and I began to binge and purge—many times a day. Because my denial about my condition was obliterated, self-loathing and disgust now consumed my mind; each time I binged and purged was a simultaneous accomplishment and punishment. I pulled away from everyone and soon had no friends left. I had alienated myself from my family. My ability to have emotions other than sadness, hatred, and anger disappeared, and I spent most of my time numb to the world.

Eventually I wanted out. I was so filled with hatred for the eating disorder that I wanted to cast it off, but the fear of gaining weight kept me chained. As much as I hated what was happening, I still loved the eating disorder in some sick way. I loved feeling light-headed. I loved the bruises and pains. I loved being small. In truth, the eating disorder had me convinced that I loved these things; what was really happening was that these were the times

my mental anguish subsided, because the eating disorder stopped berating me for a few minutes when I had accomplished a goal it wanted. However, my desperation to escape the disorder continued to grow, so I tried what I thought would be the key to getting away from it: I was going to relocate myself to college, and everything would be okay. I would stop the cycle and get on with my life... but I was still going to control what I ate enough to stay thin.

What happened was the exact opposite. My cycles of bingeing and purging grew worse, and I became more miserable than ever. A few weeks into my first semester, I overdosed and had to take a medical leave. I was out of school for over a month. The saddest part about the experience was that by this point I was so disconnected from everyone, including my roommates, that I had to walk myself to the emergency room. But I returned to school and finished the semester, doing exceptionally well in all my classes. I found I loved school, but with the eating disorder I couldn't put my energy towards it. So, next, I tried moving into my own apartment for the summer to regain my footing. What I hadn't realized at that point, though, was I could never move away from my problems as long as I was "taking myself with me." Drugs began to sneak back into my life, and I started to steal medications. But I told myself that I wasn't a drug addict because I was only stealing medications to help me focus on things, and I wasn't using them because I needed a chemical to alter my mood.

I reentered treatment that summer when I finally hit my first bottom. My bingeing and purging had escalated even more, because I was living alone and my weight continued to drop. I had received blood work from my doctor saying that my electrolytes were off, and I was in danger of

a heart attack each time I purged. I couldn't lie to myself anymore that I would be okay doing this. I knew I had to go back to treatment or I was going to die. While I prayed every evening for my heart to give out in my sleep, something in me wasn't about to let me die. I believe now that my Higher Power ultimately stepped in when I couldn't do it alone. I realized I finally had something more important to me than my eating disorder, and that was school. Having to take the medical leave and almost not finishing the semester felt terrible to me. I returned to the hospital and was determined to get past my eating disorder and move on with my life.

Treatment this time went great—too great. I took everything seriously and fought through my bad days. I regained weight, and my body stabilized itself. I worked with the treatment team and was completely honest. I thought everything was going to be great from then on. I returned to school that fall and began to reconnect with a friend from elementary school. I told her about my struggles and how hard I was working on getting better, and she supported me through it all. Life seemed brand new. Everything was glorious as I awoke each day with my new resolve to be healthy and have a “normal” life. Unfortunately, my “normal life” included drinking like a college student, or at least how I thought a college student was supposed to drink.

Within a month, I was drinking almost daily. I would get drunk when my roommate wasn't home and buy new bottles so she couldn't tell. I would drink with her and her friends on the weekends and spent many mornings very hung over. Two months into the semester, I was raped twice while intoxicated. The rapes were exactly one week apart and were completely unrelated—except for the fact that I had been drinking and blacked out.

My idea of the world being perfect and the sense all would be okay was shattered. Almost immediately, I began to focus on food again in order to avoid thinking about what had happened. The eating disorder happily came back into my life and settled into my head. This time, I was convinced I was going to do it right. I would lose weight through eating less and exercising more. I would control food and my body, but I wouldn't go "too far." I didn't want to end up like I had last year, so I'd just take it a little easier.

The next year was a series of bouts with the eating disorder and chemical use. I spent the summer exercising, restricting, purging, and losing weight. I had sworn off alcohol at this point, but still made a few exceptions (not seeing anything wrong with resuming my pilfering of drugs in order to help me study). In the back of my head, I always knew it couldn't last forever and I tried many times to stop my destructive patterns. I'd last one or two days, but ultimately I'd return to the eating disorder. What I didn't realize was I was trying to give up parts of the eating disorder and keep others. I thought I could give up bingeing and purging, but keep restricting and my low weight. I wasn't fully ready to completely surrender to recovery; the eating disorder still had me convinced my life would fall apart if I did.

I hit a bottom again when I realized my credit card was nearly maxed out from buying binge food. I had heard about the Twelve Steps from some friends who were in Alcoholics Anonymous and thought maybe I could apply those to my eating disorder. I started doing research and found Eating Disorders Anonymous on the web, but there were no meetings in my state. Disappointed, but not dissuaded, I resolved to do the Twelve Steps by myself. I printed off the worksheets and began to do more reading. But my commitment quickly

diminished as I had no one to share it with and was easily beaten back into submission by the eating disorder.

About a month later, I wandered back to the EDA site to try to learn more. To my surprise the first meeting in my state was starting that weekend, and it wasn't too far from where I was living! A new feeling came over me. For the first time in a very long time, I felt hopeful that something might be the solution. Although I was scared, I mustered up my courage and went to that first meeting.

What I found was amazing, and it carried me through the next difficult months. The people I encountered fully understood me. They knew my struggles and my desire to recover. They accepted me despite the tearfulness and fear I displayed those first few meetings. These same people that suggested I take a look at my chemical use. They pointed out recovery can't come in certain parts of our life and be excluded from others. If I wanted to live by the principles of the Twelve Steps—honesty, open-mindedness and will-*ingness*—I had to look at my entire life.

I wish I could say that my behaviors stopped right then and there, but they didn't. The process of letting go of my eating disorder took a long time, but what mattered most was that I never gave up. I held on to hope that I could recover and did what I could each day to move forward. In my persistence, my life slowly began to change. I started doing what members of the group told me to do in order to better my life, and I started taking tips from AA and applying them to my eating disorder. Finally, as my thinking changed, my behavior slowly started to follow.

After about nine months of trying recovery on my own, I made the decision to go back to intensive outpatient treatment. I felt I had stalled and even hit a point

where I teetered on the brink of full relapse when my cousin went through a terrible accident and almost didn't survive. During this time I continued to attend EDA meetings and was living in a sober program at my school, surrounded with students who were also in recovery from chemical dependency.

I believe the precursor to stopping my behavior was the moment I started getting fully honest with myself and with others. I opened up to staff and peers in my sober program about my eating disorder and my attempts to recover. I asked for help with accountability and support when I was struggling. To my surprise my peers responded splendidly. Many had also struggled with food and understood where I was coming from, and those that hadn't were still supportive and wanted to help in any way they could.

I didn't even realize I had stopped engaging in my eating disorder until the end of the fourth day of abstaining. I was attending a Monday session of intensive outpatient, and we were supposed to report on how our weekend went. As I sat on the couch listening to the others in my group, I started thinking about my weekend and was surprised to recognize I had been behavior free. *I had been so immersed in my life outside of my eating disorder that it hadn't crossed my mind.* At that moment I felt genuinely happy.

Recovery hasn't been easy. At first, I had to take things day by day. I worked with a sponsor, kept close contact with my Higher Power, and did my best to live the Twelve Steps; the support I kept close around me helped me persevere. The moment I reached thirty days was one of the proudest moments in my life and I knew at that point, by the grace of God, I wasn't willing to give up my recovery for anything.

Slowly, I started to live a normal life again. As I began consistently nourishing my body, I found I could think more clearly. I began to make friends and learn how to have meaningful relationships. I also started to tackle my fear of men that had resulted from my rapes and I eventually fumbled my way into a wonderful relationship with a man whom I love deeply.

The hardest part about recovery has been learning to be comfortable with change. Life stops when we are immersed in our eating disorder, and to fully recover we have to realize change is inevitable—even desirable. The person I was becoming through my work with the Twelve Steps was beautiful, inside and out. The going was tough. Learning to experience and understand my emotions and life situations was terrifying, but each situation I made it through showed me more clearly that living a full life meant keeping the eating disorder out.

I now see when I try to control my life, whether through food or chemicals, I end up unhappy and sick. But when I surrender fully to my Higher Power and live life the way God wants me to, things are better—and life is beautiful. When I was in the middle of my eating disorder it didn't matter if things were good or bad, life still sucked. But when I live under the guidance of my Higher Power and the principles of EDA, it doesn't matter if circumstances are good or bad. Life is just amazing. For that I am truly grateful.

## FOLLOWING THE LIGHT OF RECOVERY

*After twenty-six years with an eating disorder, she wanted to lead a normal life. Recovery was about faith, hope, and a willingness to accept and love herself—inside and out.*

Thank you for reading my story of recovery and discovery. To those of you who have an eating disorder, an addiction, or some other form of self-harm or abuse: just under three years ago, I was in the very same spot you are in right now. I was weak, frail, hiding, using symptoms excessively, getting away with shoplifting, stealing, lying, manipulating, and entrenched in a disease in which I felt helpless, misunderstood, and a lost cause. I firmly believed that I was meant to live in suffering, completely hopeless. At the age of thirty, I was certain one of three things would happen: that I would live my life in a residential home for the mentally ill, that I would be committed to a state hospital, or that I would die.

I felt like I had nowhere to go, that there was no way out. And frankly, all I wanted to do was continue using the symptoms that kept me imprisoned, stuck, selfish, and sick—even though there were some fleeting moments where I did want something different. But those moments never lasted, and before long I was again face to face with avoiding food, bingeing, purging, self-mutilating, and then repeating the whole cycle over again. I was constantly

suicidal. I wrote letters to those I wanted to say goodbye to, and I was even planning my own funeral.

Today, thinking of each of you who may be feeling hopeless, I can honestly tell you that having an eating disorder is not a death sentence. While I am well aware that it is an incredibly powerful disease to overcome, I know firsthand that it is possible to lead a different life.

Being in recovery for the past three years has been the most fulfilling, wondrous, adventurous, and remarkable story I could ever tell. What has happened in the past couple years isn't anything that I could have ever comprehended when I was sick. There wasn't even a small part of me that could have imagined it or dreamt it, and yet it has become my life. The real me has emerged. I can now handle life on life's terms without resorting to using symptoms to cope. Even with so many incredibly wonderful things happening, there are still difficulties that I face. Life is hard, it is challenging, and living the life of a responsible adult, well, comes with real responsibilities.

I'm sure everyone has already heard, probably numerous times, that "Being in recovery takes work and dedication." But even though it is a constant job, I wouldn't trade it in for anything. I would never choose to go back to the darkness in which I fell asleep in a never-ending nightmare that became my life. Those days were ruthless. They were torturous. But at the time they were the only thing I knew. I became a pro at my eating disorder and I became a master at a lot of negative things even though I never wanted to be that way. Despite how good I became at living the secret life of an eating-disordered woman, I can look back and tell you that being healthy and in recovery is ten times more gratifying in terms of feeling accomplished.

I now feel worthy, I have self-love, I am loved by others in positive and fulfilling relationships, and I'm independent—all in a way I've never experienced before. When you have an eating disorder that rules your every thought, decision, and action, there is very little time for anything else. There's no time to be happy or sad, there's no time to care about yourself, or care about others, and there's no time for a real job or relationships.

Eating disorders are all consuming and all powerful. Today, in recovery, I am not a prisoner any longer. I have the freedom to live, to choose, and to be. Most of my time, I don't think about the obsession that I once could not escape. I don't constantly think about food, calories, my weight, my shape, the extra fat on my body, my stomach, my thighs, the impression others see of me, or have time to think about what others may think of me. My mind is clear and productive. My body is well nourished. I am not starving, and therefore I am free to live without the fears and angst and obsessions that once ruled every second of my life.

Maybe you're reading this right now and thinking, *She couldn't possibly have been sick like me*, or *She wasn't really on her death bed*, or *She didn't cut herself like I have*, or *Her hair wasn't falling out like mine*. But I was doing all of those things, experiencing all those things—and more. I was desperate for things I could not figure out; I was ashamed, lonely, and waiting for my life to end. The toilet bowl filled up with vomit when I swore the previous time was my last; my body bled from me cutting it; my fingernails and lips were blue, and I was constantly cold; I spent days and months inside the hospital, inside treatment facilities, and inside therapists' offices. I screamed and scared even myself when I didn't have the words to express my frustra-

tions and anger. I cheated my way through many systems, planned my own suicide, planned my funeral, and said my goodbyes.

But today I am here to tell you that it doesn't have to be that way. Your story doesn't have to end like that, with an eating disorder, living within the walls of a treatment center or a hospital, trying to learn how to eat, how to care and love yourself, and how to self-soothe and cope. It just doesn't.

I firmly believe that no matter how young or old you are, how few years or how many years you have suffered, *everyone is completely capable of a full recovery*. I'm sure you have told yourself many times before, *Others may be able to, but I sure can't*, or maybe you've heard that message indirectly from others. I did too. Everyone under the sun, at one point along that hellish journey, told that me I couldn't recover. My message to you is that no matter what you currently think or what others may think, I say, "Yes, you can recover!"

After twenty-six years of having my eating disorder, which began when I was seven, I found my recovery because of the determination I had for a different life. I wanted it to be done once and for all. I had to make that choice and I had to "do life" differently. I wanted real friendships and relationships in which I didn't have to tell them I was going back to the hospital or treatment again. I didn't want to disappear from life any longer. I wanted a job I felt good about and my own place that I could call home. Those desires are what helped me find my way to recovery and stay there. The change did not happen overnight. It was like a teeter-totter of good and bad days, with fewer instances of bad hours, and then the food obsessions became less frequent, until I was riding my own bike and the training wheels came off.

People always ask me about the one thing that helped me find my way to recovery. I can't say it was only one thing, but I do know of two very powerful things that happened that helped me step onto the path to recovery—and stay there. First, I remember looking out the window so many times while I was in treatment and in the hospital. I would watch cars driving by on the road below my window; I would see people crossing the street; I would watch people walking their dogs, people talking on their cell phones, and couples holding hands taking a walk. I longed for that normalcy. I would think to myself, *I want to be able to lead a normal life. I want to drive my car and not use symptoms on my way from one destination to the next. I want to find my soul mate and hold hands walking down the street. I want to stroll leisurely on the sidewalk without thinking about food and my body. I want to drive to work as the sun rises and drive home at night when the sun is setting.* I desperately wanted to experience what that life was like, what others seemed to be doing so effortlessly, while I could only watch from my hospital window. I was miserable.

The second thing that helped me tremendously was attending Eating Disorder Anonymous groups, reading Twelve-Step literature, and working the Twelve Steps of the EDA program. The first step of EDA (*admitting I was powerless over my eating disorder—that my life had become unmanageable*) was something I could not deny any longer. My life *was* completely unmanageable and I *was* powerless. My eating disorder had a hold on me and the grip was stronger than I could release on my own. That's when I started to realize that only *a power greater than myself could truly restore me to sanity* (Step Two) and that I had to put my trust in "God" to help me through. I had to reframe my mindset and reset my beliefs, from *God is making me suffer,*

to *God wants me to heal and recover. So I turned my will and my life over to God's care* (Step Three) and I remember feeling relief. It was as though a weight had been lifted. I was no longer fighting against myself or fighting with my eating disorder. I gave it to God, and He gave me strength I never knew I had. As I worked Steps Four through Twelve, I came to terms with all the wrongs I had committed and all the people I had hurt. It was painful at times and yet, as I worked the Steps, I uncovered my true self. I came to believe I was a good human being, and that I deserved a life worth living. Attending EDA groups helped me to stay motivated, to be honest and authentic, to remain symptom free, and to face the new realities of daily life. Early on I remember counting the days that I abstained from symptom use. One day, then two days, and later three days, everyone at the group congratulated me and was so happy for me. Months later I lost track of the days that I was symptom free, and it was as though I was truly standing on my own two feet. That was an incredible feeling I will never forget.

When I found my new self in recovery, the label of “disabled” that the State of Minnesota gave me was thrown away, the food stamps were stopped, the food charts and the food plans were ditched, the scales were destroyed, my binge shopping bags were shredded and put into the dumpster, my jobless existence was over, my social security benefits fell by the way side, and my commitment was dismissed. I never have to be escorted by the police or see the inside of the courthouse again. All that was left was *me*, completely exposed and in plain sight, to live each day head on and fight for my recovery in each moment.

I want to switch gears a bit and give you a few lists that I have jotted down. I would like to remind you that what

works for me, or for any one person, is not the same recipe that will work for someone else. Remember your recovery is your own journey of self-discovery, and it may look very different.

**First, a list of challenges I faced:**

- Comparisons of all varieties have always been a huge trigger for me and very difficult to stop. I really needed to work hard on not comparing myself to others.
- For me, one of the hardest things that I had to stop was comparing my body to others who were thinner, thinking that I should be that thin, without hips, or thighs.
- Boredom
- Transitions during the day, life transitions, and seasons
- Holding back my feelings
- Not sharing my honest thoughts
- When other people are telling me what to do or making decisions for me
- Inappropriate boundaries
- When feeling like using symptoms, I needed to remind myself that by using symptoms I would decrease the amount of time I had to spend with people, and that spending quality time with others was what I really wanted

**Second, how I went from my eating disorder mindset to a recovery mindset:**

- Disconnecting from people who viewed my chances of recovery negatively or who reinforced eating-disordered thinking
- Limiting mirror time
- Getting rid of small clothes (some I donated, others I cut up and threw away)
- Buying appropriate-sized clothing
- Knowing my performance in life does not depend on my weight
- Reducing my time on social media
- Surrounding myself with normal eaters
- Participating in life
- Staying on a schedule
- Asking for help
- Looking for patterns, such as triggers, hard conversations, questions, and times of day that are more challenging (when I am most prone to challenges and symptom use)
- Finding a therapist
- Refusing to refer to myself as unable, eating-disordered, and hopeless
- Realizing it is okay to be on medication: it does not mean I am a failure or any less capable than others who are not on medications

- Expressing emotions instead of burying them, neglecting them, or telling myself they are not important
- Being with people who are respectful of me and nonjudgmental
- Embracing my worthiness, and letting go of old negative mindsets and belief systems
- Being in charge of my own life and my own decisions

**Third, the benefits of being in recovery and living fully:**

- Being present in the moment—in my own life and in the lives of those around me
- Traveling
- Having my own home: I look forward to coming home at the end of the day
- Living with a man I love, who loves me back, and building a life together
- The ability to work again and maintain a full-time job
- Getting off disability and food stamps
- Not being irritable, dysregulated, or constantly triggered
- Rebuilding friendships and making new friendships
- Realizing my confidence and my own light that I have to shine out onto the world

So with all of that, let me tell you what has happened in the past three years, as a result of making that life-changing decision to work the Steps and get better:

- I have achieved a healthy weight for myself, which allows me to be active, explore, and engage in adventures like I have always wanted.
- I am the Director of Nursing at a home care agency, a position in which I am respected and for which I have great responsibility.
- I have fallen in love with a man who shares the same interests and passions for life that I do: I have blessed his life and he has blessed mine.
- I have traveled to Hawaii and hiked.
- I have camped and canoed in the boundary waters.
- I have jumped off cliffs into the Temperance River.
- I have set appropriate boundaries with people who were emotionally abusing me.
- I have spoken at eating disorder recovery rallies in Minneapolis.
- I have taken and responded to phone calls and emails from people seeking help with their eating disorders, as well as from parents looking for guidance for their kids: I have been able to help others as a result of my experiences.
- I am happy, smiling, full of laughter, and stable for the first time in my life.
- I am engaged to be married!

I want to reiterate that although my life today is better than I would have ever thought possible, it was not so long ago that I saw no hope for myself. I told myself I had been living with the eating disorder too long, that there was no alternative, and that I had no choice but to live at the bottom. And yet, I have come to live on the other side of it all and I am in full recovery. I believe this is possible for anyone who is still struggling—no matter the circumstances or where you are along your journey.

Full recovery is possible. It is worth it, it is incredible, and life is and can be a remarkable story of triumph and success that each one of you is capable of living and sharing with the world. I hope you each will join me in the adventure of living!

## MAKING THE MOST OF EVERY MOMENT

*Her dedication to therapy, determination to stop bingeing, and EDA support have given her a life of love today. No longer dependent on an eating disorder, she shares her “Steps to Happiness I Now Know.”*

I would like to share with everyone a part of what I’ve learned about myself in the past year. I’ve lived with bulimia for over twenty years. It began when I was only fourteen years old. I had a period of recovery, but relapsed. When this happened, I found out that having insurance coverage doesn’t mean you can receive the care you need. I was denied coverage for treatment in an inpatient facility. I fought with my insurance company for six long months and got nowhere. By the time I reached the end of those six months, I was emaciated and knew I had to do something to get back on track.

One evening, I spent the entire night on the internet searching for self-help books. I was determined to find one that would help me help myself. The one I decided on had a chapter on how to stop bingeing and I’m here to tell you this book honestly saved my life. It also made recovery—through therapy and EDA—possible.

Not long after I discovered that book, I began therapy, grateful that the Expanded Psychiatric Services in my insurance contract covered every penny of my outpatient care. I also began following the advice in the book and was able

to stop bingeing completely. My dedication to my therapy, my determination to stop bingeing, and the EDA support I rely on have paid off.

I want to share with all of you what I've learned about myself. I hope it will help you to start on, or remain on, your journey to recovery.

### **Steps to Happiness I Now Know**

I can't be all things to all people.  
I can't do all things at once.  
I can't do all things equally well.  
I can't do all things better than everyone else.  
My humanity is showing just like everyone else's.

*So:*

I have to find out who I am and be that.  
I have to decide what comes first and do that.  
I have to discover my strengths and use them.  
I have to learn to not compete with others  
Because no one else is in the contest of "being me."

*Then:*

I will have to learn to accept my own uniqueness.  
I will have to learn to set priorities and make decisions.  
I will have to learn to live with my limitations.  
I will have to learn to give myself the respect that is due.  
And I'll be a most vital mortal.

*Dare To Believe:*

That I am a wonderful, unique person.  
That I am a once-in-all-history event.  
That it's more than a right, it's my duty to be who I am.

That life is not a problem to be solved, but a gift to be cherished.

And I'll be able to stay one up on what used to get me down.

I'm now almost a year into my recovery from bingeing, bulimia, and anorexia. I'm reading more than ever and worrying less. I am now able to sit in the yard and admire the view without fussing about the weeds in the flowerbeds. I'm spending more time with my new friends in EDA and less time working.

Whenever possible, life should be a pattern of experiences to savor, not to endure. I'm learning to recognize and appreciate and cherish the moments. I'm not "saving" anything; we use the "good" dinnerware every day. I wear my big smile to the market. My thought is, *If I look at binge foods and not put them in my shopping cart, I can shell out the same money for a bag of healthy groceries.* Also, I'm not saving my good perfume for special occasions either—I wear it every day.

I'm learning that if something is worth seeing or hearing or doing, I want to see and hear and do it—now. I used to take so much for granted. Now I feel like every day is new adventure. Life may not be the party I had hoped for, but I might as well dance while I am here.

I think about what those who lost their lives to their eating disorders would have done if they had known this day was their last. I think they would have called family members and a few close friends. They might have called a few former friends to apologize and mend fences. I like to think they would have gone out for whatever their favorite food was and, just maybe, enjoyed it. It's those little things left undone that would make me angry if I knew

my hours were limited; angry because of all those letters I had intended to write and sorry that I didn't tell my family and friends often enough how much I truly loved them. Now I have a chance at really living. I'm trying very hard not to put off, hold back, or save anything that would add laughter and luster to my life today. Every morning when I open my eyes, I tell myself my recovery process is a special journey. Every day, every minute, every breath truly is a gift from God.

I treasure my EDA friends, because their hands are always ready to reach out to the newcomer. I want everyone to have a miracle of recovery like I have found. I don't believe in miracles: I know I *am* one!

(7)

## OFF TO THE RACES

*She thought the mirror, scale, and measuring tape were her Holy Grail to becoming happy, joyous, and free. But when she got to EDA, she learned that she had it all wrong—and started living in the solution.*

At a very young age, I developed a sense of entitlement. I began to think, act, and treat people in my life like they owed me something. I had the belief that I deserved special treatment. I strived for perfection and expected to be rewarded for it. The many honor roll awards, trophies from dance and athletics, and playbooks highlighting my name as the school star were all living proof. I set very high standards for myself and was quite competitive.

Perfection became the theme of my youth. I felt powerful knowing that I could control my flaws and shape them into assets. The furthest back that I can remember feeling powerless is when I was six years old. My father went missing in a boating accident. I was in first grade and already feeling different than my classmates. I recall people having sympathy for me and being overly kind. I took comfort in protecting my feelings of despair in solitude. The hole in my heart was just too big to share with anyone.

I constantly had my head in a book and excelled in my studies as well as my elementary school acting career. Being on stage took me out of myself; it seemed like the perfect

cure to my broken heart. I could not bear to feel a thing. Acting made me temporarily forget who I was and enabled me to be a completely different character. My family and friends gave me unconditional love and support.

I can recall being thirteen years old and sitting on my bedroom floor reading a story on eating disorders. The story outlined various types with comments from the youth in our nation who were acting out. I can remember a feeling of what I thought was hope wash over me. I had also recently discovered alcohol and the effects that it had on my psyche. Alcohol had made me feel in control of my feelings. It enabled me to successfully numb them out. I decided to take my experimentation to the next level.

Memories of my first purge still haunt me from time to time. I distinctly remember the feeling of control that I felt: like I could fly. My home life was becoming more and more abnormal and it made me feel lost, empty, and alone. My bulimia won every time in allowing me to numb these feelings of despair. I dreamt of running away and finding my father. I was stuck in a home filled with little joy and lots of anger. I did not feel important. My eating disorder gave me the comfort that I craved. I no longer felt that I needed attention from my loved ones.

I like to think that I hid my relationship with bulimia from the outside world. I had a nice year-long run with my eating disorder before it started to ruin my life. I began to feel dizzy and, quite often, weak. I lost color in my face and my weight was dropping drastically. A routine yearly physical revealed that my electrolytes were low, and that I was severely dehydrated. My doctor warned me of what my teeth might look like if I continued purging. Naturally, I started using whitening toothpaste and disregarded the true meaning behind her concern.

I was medically directed to take calcium chews and drink electrolyte-packed drinks. I told my mother that I was on my way to being “cured,” but secretly kept engaging in my eating disorder behaviors. I experimented with laxatives—they seemed to work just fine too! I was only fourteen when I began drinking with the intention of blacking out. I started feeling too hung-over in the mornings to eat anything, so skipping meals sounded like the sensible solution.

In the middle of my high school years, my family moved from New York to Florida. This was entirely too much for me to handle. Within a short time, I began to implement drugs into my daily routine. They were love at first sight for my anorexia. I felt thin, looked thin, and strived desperately to be invisible. I would go days on end without eating. I became depressed and anxious. I sought medical treatment for magic pills that helped me get through my days of misery.

When confronted by others about my weight and how sick they thought I looked, I became very angry. I was defensive, because, by this time, my body dysmorphia had completely taken over my mind. I was obsessed with my shape and the way that I thought I could redesign the way I looked. I honestly thought that the mirror, the scale, and the measuring tape were my Holy Grail to becoming happy, joyous, and free.

I somehow managed to graduate high school while in the midst of becoming an alcoholic, a drug addict, and an anorexic. Nevertheless, I went off to college to become a fashion mogul. I protected my anorexia by lying to the people I love. I did everything in my power to ensure that my eating disorder was taken care of. If hungry in the morning, I would make hot tea. If dizzy in the afternoon, I would have a cigarette. Alcohol was typically on the menu for dinner and, in the end, for breakfast and lunch as well.

When I drank enough, I became full. When I became full and continued drinking...well, that was the real treat—I threw up automatically. I started incorporating a few small snacks into my daily routine and drinking more to rid myself of the shame. I thought about how invincible I was and decided to take my eating disorder back to New York City with me. I had out-lived Orlando and was in dire need of a geographical cure.

I landed my dream career in the fashion industry. At the time, I thought that a requirement of getting hired was how thin I was. I worked through lunch while eating small snacks at my desk so nobody would question me. I drank lattes for lunch and had champagne for dinner. I was just another twenty-something living the dream in the big city. I worked all day and partied all night.

From the outside, my life seemed to be completely glamorous. On the inside, I was broken, tired, and extremely sick. I felt as though my world was falling apart. I began toying with the idea of overdosing. I did not yet think that I was powerless—that came a few years later. I moved out to California. I traveled frequently and ate around other people, because I was ashamed for them to know about my struggles. My weight began to fluctuate and I fell into another deep depression. Thoughts of suicide were becoming more frequent. I did not know where to turn to for relief anymore. I had exhausted all my options.

The last time I ran my life on self-will, I woke up in the emergency room from an overdose. It was not the way I had imagined it would happen: my daydreams of overdosing ended with me not waking up. This was not the first overdose that unexpectedly left me very much alive. I had my first spiritual experience in that New York City hospital. I had nothing left in me to give to my eating dis-

order. But I didn't have the willingness or honesty to seek treatment either. Something intervened with my pain and hopelessness that night.

The next morning, I hopped on a flight to Florida to enter a detox facility for a few days. I went with the intentions of fighting off all of my demons. I had no idea that my eating disorder was planning on coming along to sabotage my experience. Without alcohol or drugs to help me stay numb and thin, I was left with my destructive and progressive eating disorder. My thirteen-year struggle was at its highest peak.

I began to feel weak and hopeless again—feelings that were way too familiar. With no other way to cope while in rehab, I slipped deep into my disordered thinking. I was being hospitalized for dehydration like it was going out of style, and it became clear to me that being this dehydrated affected me mentally, spiritually, and emotionally. Nothing in the world gave me less pleasure than walking into an emergency room asking desperately for fluids to stabilize me.

Upon completion of my treatment program, I was referred to an eating disorder treatment center to work on my core issues. This was in South Florida, where I had just discovered Eating Disorders Anonymous. I struggled with the idea of surrendering to my eating disorder. I did not understand how life could possibly be better without it. It comforted me in times of need and ensured that I was never too alone, too fat, or too ugly. It made me feel great; my identity as a human being was solely based on what it told me.

I met my sponsor at an EDA meeting while I was still in rehab. It amazed me how much we had in common. I used to choose friends based on their social status, but I

was able to connect with my sponsor on a much different level. Not only is she a member of EDA, but she also carries the message of recovery to me for my Alcoholics Anonymous program. She is a true gift in my life today, as I feel I am right where I am supposed to be. I was so desperate to recover, and the people I met at meetings in both fellowships had this *je ne sais quoi* about them that I craved.

I listened in meetings, I raised my hand frequently to carry the message of recovery, and I worked the Twelve Steps of EDA and AA with my sponsor. I engaged in service work and I recently started sponsoring. I did everything that was suggested to me; and, today, I am in the best place I have ever been in my life. The first story I read in the AA “Big Book” was “Acceptance Was the Answer,” which helped me understand the extent of my alcoholism and disordered mind. It also helped me to understand that before I dive into my program head-on, I have to accept certain things first.

Honesty has been a major part of the solid foundation that I have built in my recovery. Before I came into the rooms, I did not know how to be honest. Through listening, connecting, and identifying, I was able to let go of everything that was keeping me sick. It suggests in our literature that we be fearless and thorough from the very start, so that is exactly what I did. As I mentioned earlier, I had exhausted all of my options, so I figured, *Why not try a way that seems to work?*

The first thing I surrendered to was my ego-driven mind. I continue to do this on a daily basis, because I need to remind myself that I am completely powerless over my eating disorder. Looking back on my experiences over the past thirteen years, I am able to see that my life

was, in fact, unmanageable. When I got to EDA, I was so broken that I would do anything that was asked of me. I had a complete willingness and open-mindedness about me that enabled me to take the Twelve Steps with honesty and integrity.

With that being said, the idea of trusting in a Power greater than myself was a bit difficult. I grew up with religion and lost it during my years of active addiction. My sponsor suggested I write a list of ideals of what I would want my Higher Power to look like. I listed endearing qualities that I thought would help me have more faith. I do not recall at what point in my recovery I actually started to believe in my Higher Power. The beauty of it was that I just came to believe. I ceased fighting everything and everyone, and the channel of spirituality and divine greatness just happened—with a lot of prayer and patience!

Once I began to have faith, I next had to turn it over. By reciting the 3<sup>rd</sup> Step prayer, I become free. I have to remind myself every day that I can no longer run life on self-will. When I give my questions, concerns, thoughts, and troubles to my Higher Power, the result is so much more rewarding. My second spiritual experience came after completing Steps Four and Five. I was told in early recovery that our secrets keep us sick. This is a great reminder for me that I am no longer running the show and that I need to stay consistent in holding myself accountable. I took pen to paper and did a thorough housecleaning. This was indeed an eye-opening experience for me, especially after I completed Step Five with my sponsor. I was able to sit back and truly take a look at my life: how having an eating disorder for so many years had affected me and the people, places, and things I care for.

Before I found EDA and AA, I did not know the true meaning behind gratitude. My entitlement and self-will-driven life up until this point had made me feel restless, irritable, and discontent. For me, it helps to bring gratitude to light by jotting down a few things I am grateful for on an ongoing list that I have kept since early recovery. It is truly amazing how long this list has come to be! Today, to be able to feel my feelings is a blessing in itself.

Through working the Twelve Steps, I have learned how to identify and embrace my shortcomings, make amends to those I believe I have hurt, and develop a tremendous relationship with my Higher Power—all while staying free from alcohol, drugs, and my eating disorder. I consider Steps Ten through Twelve to be my maintenance steps. These are things I do daily to ensure my recovery stays strong. Early recovery was no walk in the park for me. I have experienced a lot of trial and error, pain, and insanity in the past year. The silver lining, however, is that I walked through all of that fear without acting out or picking up a drink or drug.

After treatment, I decided the next best thing for my recovery would be to stay in Florida, close to my family. I am the most grounded I have ever been in my life. I am able to be fully present today. I used to feel confused when people in the rooms would mention that they were living a life beyond their wildest dreams. Now, I can whole-heartedly say that I, too, am living that same life. I have freedom from the bondage of self. I am free from all of my disordered thinking that kept me sick.

It is significant to my recovery that I carry the message of recovery to others with eating disorders; this is how I keep my freedom. I started an EDA meeting in my town here in North Florida. The feeling of lending a hand to

someone in need is the most rewarding emotion I have ever felt. My unhealthy obsession with being thin is something that lives in my past. Today, I know how to honor my body and my feelings—and take care of myself. I practice loving myself one day at a time.

## OWNING MY STORY

*Instead of letting an eating disorder speak for her, she now uses her voice to carry the message of recovery.*

There is nothing remarkably special or earth shattering about this story. It's really not that different from others about people with eating disorders and it's not unique in any way other than it is MY story and I own it—good and bad.

For as long as I can remember, food has been the answer to everything. Growing up in the South meant it was all about food, all the time. There were family dinners at my grandmother's house with generations and generations of relatives, and food always at the ready for whoever wanted what at any given moment. Food was an expression of love...for fun events, sad events, and every event in between. I grew up in the generation of eating everything on your plate, because "Children in Africa are starving." It took many years of clean plates to realize one thing had little to do with the other. Why didn't we just donate food to the other countries?

I started working at only fourteen. Our town was experiencing an economic boom thanks to the oil industry and had a serious lack of available labor, so, with a work release signed by my parents, I got a job at a national, fast food restaurant. While there, one of the managers would occasionally call me "thunder thighs." I had a serious crush

on him and let all the comments slide (obviously, in today's world his comments would never be tolerated). This only added to my struggling, teenage body image.

In high school I had a large group of friends. I got good grades, but wasn't a "brain." I was pretty good at sports, but wasn't a "jock." I never tried drugs, but truly tried to not judge the friends that did. I was in the band, but not really a "band-geek." I got along well with and knew many of the popular kids, but didn't really hang out with them. I developed my own primary circle of friends, but could float around the periphery of all the other cliques. It felt good to be included by almost every group of people—something that is rare in the world of high school. The big turning point of those years was that I had my first real boyfriend, who happened to be a cross-country runner and so had a naturally thin build.

All my friends wore single-digit size clothes and then there was me—barely squeezing into a size that was more than twice that. It didn't matter that I was anywhere from four to six inches taller than all of them, I just knew I never fit into single-digit size ANYTHING. Between this reality and the new thin boyfriend, my self-image and subsequent insecurities finally frustrated him so much that he ended our relationship, which devastated me. I know now my jealousy and neediness had to have been exhausting. I had seen pictures of old girlfriends who were curvy like me, so I shouldn't have been so insecure. But I just couldn't get past the fact that I was bigger than him.

In my early twenties, I began a two-year relationship with a man sixteen years my senior and completely, terribly, horrifically wrong for me—oh, and he was married. Again, my insecurities led me down the wrong path, because I didn't feel I deserved any better, and no one else wanted

me. I was flattered, all the while knowing it was absolutely wrong. In the midst of this fiasco, I admitted to myself that part of the reason I was willing to go against all of my moral foundations was that this man lived directly across the street from the same first boyfriend who had broken my heart. I wanted to show him I had moved on like him, as twisted as that may sound.

About this time I developed bulimic behaviors as an outlet for my disappointments in myself and my life. I had never been one for self-induced vomiting, but I started abusing laxatives to make up for the comfort I found through food. Off and on for the next twenty years, these actions, coupled with heavy exercising, helped ease my anxiety, self-loathing, and fears—but never truly affected my weight. After I stopped the bulimic behavior on my own, I became a compulsive over-eater, and my weight skyrocketed. Several years later, I had gastric bypass and dropped an extreme amount of weight in a very short time. People sometimes ask me if I think the surgery contributed to or caused my eating disorder, and I unequivocally say no. I had surgery over five years before my eating disorder came screaming back to unprecedented levels.

Perhaps surprisingly, there were many highly stressful events in my life when I *didn't* use my eating disorder to cope. In a time frame of only six months: we moved; my sister died; my grandmother died on the EXACT same day as my sister; my mother-in-law, step-daughter, and her boyfriend all moved in with us; I lost my job; started a new one; my wife lost her job and decided to start her own business; and I had to put my wonderful and much loved cat down because of kidney failure. Between all this and my parent's premature deaths, I had A LOT of unresolved grief. When this was pointed out in treatment I was like,

“Ya think?!” On any other day, my grandmother’s death would have been really hard, but she was 95 and had dementia. Her passing paled in comparison to that of my sister, who was only 43 and left behind a grieving husband and four-year-old daughter.

As a way to cope with the stress and anxiety of a new job that was beyond my ability, I started walking A LOT. It was a great way to decompress and kept me from obsessing over work so much. At first, it started as only a nice, reasonable walk and gradually morphed into spending hours “on my journey,” as my therapist would say. This was my routine five to six days a week, on top of working at least sixty hours and driving over an hour each way. It wasn’t like I simply decided one day that I was going to go on a diet, develop an eating disorder, or walk forever. In fact, I didn’t even recognize what was happening. I knew I seriously did not want to regain any weight I had lost; but, again, I didn’t see that as an eating disorder characteristic. The staff at my first treatment program told me I had an exercise addiction, which I didn’t even realize was something that could exist. I purchased a new pair of shoes and literally walked the treads off of them in six weeks.

After I had dropped a significant amount, I talked to a really good friend who is also a marriage and family therapist. One of the main things he asked was if I could accept being in a weight *range*. I said that I was not ok with that idea, and his response back to me was “Houston, we have a problem.” I had a low and very specific number in my head and was close to it when I started treatment that year at a part-time, cross-diagnosis, outpatient day program. I had to take a leave of absence from work for ten weeks.

I hadn't yet met the clinical director of that program when one day a woman walked toward me with an uneaten lunch container that had my name on it and asked me if I was going to eat—and I said no. I had been weighed that morning by the nurse and freaked out over the number. Clearly, not a great first impression! Two things happened because of that incident: I started having to do “blind weigh-ins,” where I had to turn around or the readout was covered so I couldn't see it. Only an hour later, my group therapist told me I had to keep my body mass index and weight up or I would be referred to a higher level of care. Because I was so resistant to gaining weight in the program, the medical director started talking about “Plan B,” which I knew meant a specialized eating disorder program. “Plan B” scared me to death. In one conversation with him he asked me how I felt about my weight, and I told him I wasn't exactly looking to gain any.

I was discharged from that program just two weeks before Thanksgiving, because it was the only way to keep my job. Not even six weeks later, I completely relapsed—losing all the ground I had gained in the ten weeks of the program.

I officially resigned from my job and had every intention of going back to the same treatment program, but the medical director wouldn't readmit me. He enforced his “Plan B,” and that's when I entered a residential program about an hour-and-a-half from home. I would be there for nine months through three levels of care: residential, partial hospitalization, and intensive outpatient. These months would be some of the best and worst times of my life. I met women whom I will always consider friends, while at the same time I had to face the reasons I was there and learn how to deal with negative emotions in a way that did not include starv-

ing and exercising. I never thought we could afford private care, but fortunately insurance covered a large portion of the costs. And I sure couldn't complain about the location—it was a multi-million dollar house on a world-renowned golf course in southern California. In the end, the expense was completely worth it...that program saved my life.

When I was in treatment the first time, I developed a “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” policy (if you didn't ask, I didn't tell). I carried it with me to residential; my therapist learned to hate it. Like many people with eating disorders, I had food rituals and a case of OCD that had actually started in my teens. I weighed myself constantly and counted calories to the extent of including my gummy vitamins in the total. I also did NOT like eating in front of people one-on-one, but in a restaurant I was fine, as I felt no one was truly watching me. I also had “fear foods.” I've managed to work through most of them, leaving only one at this point. My dietitian would ask me why I let that particular thing have so much power and I just shrugged...I genuinely didn't know.

It's always said that eating disorders are not about food, but about the underlying, driving issues—as are all types of addictions. They are often used as your “voice.” I couldn't talk about my self-doubt and feelings of failure, anxiety, and depression. Eating disorders also often come with significant perfectionism, which is a fundamental part of my personality that has been with me as long as I can remember. The more my negative feelings about myself increased over time, the more I engaged in my eating disorder. It made me feel safe and accomplished; I was good at it. The hard thing for me to accept is that a central reality of being human means making mistakes, and my perfectionism goes completely against that.

One thing that took place during my stay at treatment included a family intensive weekend when friends and family come to learn more about eating disorders and ask questions. I had to leave the room during the medical portion of the presentation, because the topic was about necessary caloric intake. I started doing the math and calculated the number of calories and intended amount of weight gain expected each week. This number scared me to death! I had restricted for so long I couldn't even tell what a normal-size meal or caloric intake was anymore.

Another thing was I started hiding my medications. It was very easy to fake taking them, and then pocket them. I had collected a couple of weeks' worth of medications before telling the psychiatrist and explained how easy it was to do. In reality, I had only stashed enough to make myself sick, but it was still an embarrassing thing to admit. The psychiatrist was really calm about it, but right after our session he went to the rest of the staff and told them what was happening. Later that day at dinner, the head nurse came in and told all of us that there had been a medication policy change that made mouth checks mandatory—effective immediately. Supposedly, they had been discussing it, but hadn't implemented it yet. I knew without a doubt it was because of me...I felt so proud!

One of the last things that happened was when I stepped-down from residential to partial hospitalization. I took control of my medications, because at that level you are considered to be in transitional living. But when they handed me a brown grocery bag half filled with all my meds, I got completely overwhelmed. Because of my high levels of suicidal ideation, the next time I saw the doctor I asked him, given my history, if I was really the best person to be given all those meds? I also said that I had already

looked up the toxic levels of one of them and was being handed twice that amount. It's well known that anorexia has the highest mortality rate of any mental health issue. One third of those deaths are from suicide. Obviously, the doctor was not happy with what had happened. The staff promptly took back the medications and had me start going to the main house every morning to get them.

I'm not exactly what you would call a humble person. I struggle with willingness to *not* rely on my eating disorder to navigate things that happen in my life. While there have been really stressful times when I didn't cope by using behaviors, other things that I think should be easier sometimes send me into a complete spiral. I struggle with surrender. I frequently think I only need to give up "this" part or "that" part and not every piece of the disorder. I am still resistant, thanks to my trust and control issues that started in my teens. I even want to control my surrender. I want surrender on my terms and, obviously, it doesn't work that way! Many times I feel my disorder defines who I have become. Eating disorders are loyal enigmas; they don't leave you, you have to leave them.

I am currently working on my third round of the Steps and I am now on Step Six. It talks about insanity, and the second time I was in residential treatment for what my therapist friend called a "reset," I found myself doing completely insane things such as stealing food and even picking the lock to the bathroom that was attached to my bedroom. Neither of these are things I would have ever imagined myself doing, just like I never would have imagined myself hiding medication.

I was lucky enough to find a wonderful sponsor through the EDA online meetings. She is strong in her recovery and very good at helping me see things in a different light. She

truly inspires me to work towards something more productive than living in the turmoil of my disorder. When I had the opportunity to meet her in person, all I could see was a confident, secure, powerful young woman; I wanted that for myself.

I was encouraged to start service work to help strengthen my recovery. I took the advice and not only started the first face-to-face EDA group in my area, but also began helping the EDA General Service Board with literature development. All of this has helped me stay focused on the right things and keeps me from being so self-absorbed; I have discovered life really isn't all about me.

I want recovery and I am willing to trust that I can have more peace and freedom—if I just keep doing the work.

## RECOVER OR DIE: SICK OF SUFFERING

*Now a sponsor, she accepted that perfection doesn't equal happiness and she regained her purpose and spirit through EDA.*

I was sick of suffering. *Recover or die*, I told myself. My eating disorder wanted me dead, but the truth is it wants *everyone* dead. I try to remind myself of that fact every day. But for almost twenty-five years I held onto my eating disorder tightly. It was mine. I never thought I would be able to let it go....but I did. And so can you. Through EDA, a relationship with a Higher Power, a support group, sponsor, and faith, you can recover too!

My eating disorder was the first layer, the foundation, of all of my addictions. It was my baby. I started acting out at the age of ten. I felt like an alien as a child. Overweight and shy, I never really knew how to express myself, or cope with life. I used food to “fill.” I come from a large European family, and food is the center of everything. I learned to eat when I was happy and when I was sad. It made things better for a brief time. It became my coping mechanism.

By fourteen, I hated that I was “fat” and not very outgoing. My older sister was thin, athletic, and had a lot of friends. She seemed comfortable with life, while I always felt like I wanted to crawl out of my skin. I wanted to be like my sister and didn't understand why I wasn't skinny

or happy like her. I didn't like myself, or the way I looked. Over the next two decades, I struggled with several ways of acting out trying to get outside of myself: bingeing, purging, over-exercising, anorexia, laxative and diet pill abuse, alcoholism, drug addiction, addiction to love and men, perfectionism, adrenaline addiction, poor body image and low self-worth, and several suicide attempts. Maybe you have suffered or do suffer from one of these. If you do, you are not alone.

For years, I covered up my eating disorder with a horrendous alcohol and drug problem. These two addictions allowed me to keep my weight very low: I barely ate. I was distracted by bad relationships, too busy doing drugs, and being in and out of jail to notice my eating disorder under it all. I was in complete denial.

In my late twenties, when I did get off the drugs, the eating disorder began progressing. I used to spend hours working out, counting calories, and planning meals. I thought I could "control" the eating disorder and I liked that. I lost a lot of weight, and people began to notice me for my great body and commend me for being so disciplined. But I was thin—too thin. It was hard to keep it up. This phase of my eating disorder was when I really felt the insanity. I was so strict: eating maybe once a day and killing myself at the gym. I was irritable, not sharp. My employer at the time even noticed how rigid I was with food and meal schedules. Nothing came before my eating disorder. It was number one.

I began passing out because my calorie intake and my blood sugar were always so low. One time I stood up too quickly and fainted, hitting my head on the dishwasher. Thankfully I was okay. I would pass out, then convulse. (I always thought it might have been a stroke.) *Who would*

*find me?* I didn't care. I hated life. It was exhausting and uncomfortable. The only time I felt safe and in control was when I was acting out.

The eating disorder demanded so much time. It destroyed any soul or spirit I had left. I was still drinking and this, combined with my ED, robbed me of becoming a woman. I didn't know *who* I was. I destroyed several relationships. I could only "let others in" to a certain point, always afraid they would discover I had an eating disorder. I was dating someone, and we were supposed to go to Mexico together. But I ended up breaking up with him, because I didn't know how I would obsessively exercise—or not eat—with him around all of the time. If I went away with him he would find out how sick I was, and I just couldn't let him know that. Later, when I was working my EDA Steps and made amends to him, he told me how hurt he was, because on that trip he was going to propose to me. My eating disorder blocked me from a wonderful life. I had a miscarriage that was directly related to it—and alcoholism. I was incapable of starting a family or having a healthy relationship, because I put my eating disorder ahead of *everything*.

I caused so much stress in my family. I was always difficult about where we ate and what was served at holidays or parties. I was selfish, and if the world didn't revolve around me, you heard about it. I strived for perfection. I often wouldn't leave the house if my nails were chipped, or I wouldn't walk down the hall to put my laundry in if I wasn't dressed just right. I was insane and thought I would die that way. I couldn't see how I could ever let any of these disorders go. I was so ashamed. I thought death was the answer.

In March two years ago, by the grace of God I got sober from my alcohol and drug addictions. That was when

I began to see God was capable of saving me from a life of insanity. It was surreal. I began to love life. I found my Warrior Spirit again. I craved light instead of darkness. I knew God kept me alive and allowed me to recover in order to help other women. It was a gift, and I wanted to give it away.

I had made wonderful friends in AA—and was in recovery from drugs and alcohol—but I was still acting out and hiding in my eating disorder. I continued to think that as long as I held onto it, I was going to be okay. But deep down I knew that if I *didn't* give it up, it could lead me back to the drugs and booze—and that scared me. I didn't want to be sick anymore.

A friend I met through AA was also a member of EDA and I began attending a Sunday meeting with her. I didn't know what EDA was, but I was still drawn to it—she led me to this wonderful program. All I had to have was an open mind and hope.

When I first began attending EDA meetings, I was skeptical. *What do you mean these people are recovered?* I thought it was a lie. But the more I went, the more I listened. They were feeling and experiencing the same things I was feeling and experiencing! I didn't feel so alone. I was still bingeing and over-exercising, so I decided to get a sponsor. I wanted to commit to letting go of this disease. I was convinced that if others could recover, so could I.

With my sponsor, I began working the Twelve Steps. This is when the miracles started happening. I learned to truly get honest and trust my sponsor with my deepest eating disorder-related secrets. She shared similar stories, and I didn't feel so ashamed anymore. I knew I had to stop acting out. She taught me balance, not abstinence. I ate when I was hungry and stopped when I was full. I committed to

eating three meals a day. I reached out when I felt like acting out and you know what? The urges passed. I began to spend less time at the gym or in the bathroom and more time with people. When I struggled with comparing, my sponsor would tell me perfection doesn't equal happiness... and she was right. I was becoming a whole, NEW woman. I had to put fear aside. I was willing to do anything to stay in recovery from my eating disorder.

Today, I know that I don't ever have to go back to that life of insanity. I don't have to punish myself or stay sick. I am now sponsoring other women. I'm sharing the gift that was so freely given to me. Just for today, I don't have to suffer. Because for me, it was *recover or die*. And today, I choose life. I'm living a life beyond my wildest dreams. I'm free, and you can be, too.

## WICKED, HOT MESS TO ALIVE AND FREE

*She was in a halfway house when she finally found the help she needed to put her life back together. Her love for God now allows her to make use of her experiences to help others in similar circumstances.*

I grew up in a small, rural town. The first few years of my life were fairly normal, until my dad cheated on my mom and left with her best friend (taking her kids with them). Her son was my best friend. I was four at the time, I was daddy's little girl, and this left me feeling abandoned. I began to act out, seeking attention in any way that I could.

When I was eight years old, I was raped for the first time by my mom's half-brother. When she found out, she called my dad, thinking that he would come to the rescue and kill her brother. Instead, he came over and started yelling at my mom, my brother, and myself, saying to us that it was our fault that it happened. During this time, I remember clearly making the decision to start acting out in eating-disordered behavior and begin bingeing as a means of protecting myself. I thought that if I was fat and ugly, no one would ever want to touch me again. I look back now at that poor eight-year-old and realize how sad that was, but at the time, no one noticed what I was doing. My mom was a binge eater, so it just went unnoticed when I started putting on the weight. People wrote it off as genetics. I also

started self-mutilation around this time. I would do things that would distract me from the emotional pain going on inside of me. Less than a year later, when I was nine, I was raped again, this time by my mom's boyfriend. This drove me deeper into a pit with food and other behaviors.

I hated myself, and no one else liked me either. I had no real friends. Being a child of a single mom meant that we had no money and stood out in school. I was made fun of on a daily basis for not wearing the "right" clothes or shoes. Since I couldn't make human friends, food became my best friend.

Throughout my childhood, I attended a local church with my neighbors and found real peace in the idea of a relationship with God—even though I could not fully grasp it. I was raped again at sixteen; this time I became pregnant. I chose to abort the baby; and, in the end, hated myself for that decision. I felt that I had murdered the child that God had given me, instead of allowing someone else to raise it. Those feelings drove me away from the church and further into the eating disorder and self-mutilation. I didn't think that anyone could understand what I was thinking or feeling at the time, so I bottled it up as best as I could and tried to soldier on—like the rest of my family did with their problems. I didn't see that they, too, were using unhealthy coping mechanisms, like alcohol, drugs, and eating disorders, to deal with all the things that they weren't talking about or dealing with.

After I left for college the first time, a friend of mine and I were attacked in our dorm by a guy who was high on PCP. The school covered it up and gave us no support. I left shortly after on academic suspension. I couldn't handle life on life's terms anymore. I returned home and started a career. As I look back, I can see a change in the eating

disorder around this time. I started to restrict during the day while at work, and binge at night. I became a workaholic, working more than ninety hours a week. I was also back in church and running three church ministries in my “spare” time. Part of the reason for restricting during the day was that I didn’t want people to see me eat and judge me. Another was that I didn’t want to stop working and take the chance that someone else would pick up where I left off and get it wrong. My perfectionism was at the worst it had ever been. I did this for almost fifteen years before something catastrophic happened and I walked away from my church again; and eventually, without a connection to my Higher Power (God), I was lost.

A year later I was a wicked, hot mess! I was told by my pain management doctor that I needed a gastric bypass, which equated to death to me, since my mom had recently had one and nearly died due to complications. My primary care doctor was also telling me that everything that went wrong with me lately was due to my depression. And so, that same day, when I went in with a viral infection in my throat that was causing it to bleed and I got the same response—the problem was due to my depression—I lost it. I went home and stopped eating or drinking altogether. To me, it was a slow way of dying. I truly had no clue what I was doing at the time. I told everyone around me that I just couldn’t keep anything down, and they believed me. I quickly noticed the weight dropping off. I had hated myself for the damage I had done to my body, and here was a solution to that problem! Diets had never worked before. I could never stay on them, but this was working. A month in, I told my doctor about the massive weight loss. Her only response was that I “could afford to lose more.” So I kept going. I was also in and out of psychiatric units at this

time, but they had no clue what I was doing to myself. They continued to rehydrate me, but did nothing about trying to get me to eat. No one cared because I was “overweight” and “could afford to lose more.” I eventually attempted suicide three times and was sent to a drug and alcohol treatment center in Florida. I didn’t struggle with those issues, but because the treatment center also dealt with depression, my family felt it was the only way to keep me alive.

The treatment center also did not know what to do with the eating-disordered behavior or cutting and therefore did not address those issues either. I left thirty days later and moved into a halfway house in Delray Beach. After about two weeks, I finally came clean with one of my housemates about not eating. She gave me two options: (1) Go downstairs and eat, or (2) She was calling the house manager. I asked for a third. She called the house manager. I started getting help that day. I found out that God was doing for me what I could not do for myself: I had chosen the one halfway house in town that specialized in eating disorders. I was again given two options: getting help by being honest with my therapist, starting to see a nutritionist, and going to EDA—or finding a new place to live. Thankfully I chose the first option.

I remained a wicked, hot mess until I finally got a sponsor and started to work the program to the best of my ability. This was a hard thing for me to do. I had never been really honest with anyone before, and I did not feel like I could be at that time either. I met my EDA sponsor at an in-house EDA meeting. We immediately started the Steps. She asked me to write my eating disorder history. This was eye opening for me. I had not realized that the behaviors that I had been doing since I was eight were actually eating-

disordered! As I said, bingeing was normal in my family. I had very little trouble seeing and believing Step One, because I was obviously powerless over *everything* that I did, and my life was definitely unmanageable because of it. I was intrigued with the idea that I had a three-part disease: physical, mental, and spiritual.

I had a spiritual malady. I had a hole in my soul, which I tried to fill with everything *except* what it was made for: God. And when I tried to fill it with other things, I kicked off a physical allergy that made me crave more of it. When I put down those behaviors I obsessed about them. It was insanity! Next I did Step Two, which was also easy for me. I knew I needed God back in my life, and that He was the only answer for me. But Step Three was a bit harder. I believed in who He was, but to give up the control that I thought I had in my life was not easy. I still sometimes struggle with taking it back, so this is a daily and sometimes moment-by-moment action for me.

My first 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Steps were the hardest for me. I could not believe that God wanted me to share all the dirt in my life with someone else. I held some stuff back that I did not dare to share for fear of not being loved anymore once they found out who I REALLY was. I felt guilty for holding back and I was still suicidal, so I finally opened up. After I became thorough and honest, I found I had a new freedom. I was no longer hiding who I was and found God's complete forgiveness for my sins. The people that I shared with still loved me and did not judge me. I was amazed! They also helped me to unload all that extra baggage I had been carrying around for so long that was keeping me from God's true forgiveness. I was now able to see both sides of the street and begin to clean up the wreckage of my past. There was so much healing in this process.

Next I took Steps Six and Seven. By this point I started to see who I truly was, as well as all the shortcomings that made up who I was—and no longer wanted to be. I wanted (and still want) God to have all of that nasty stuff and mold me into the woman He wanted me to be. Next were Steps Eight and Nine. I kinda balked at this point. I was afraid of what people were going to think or say (one of my character defects). I made the easy amends quickly so that I could move on, but left the harder, more personal ones until last—until I had no other choice—because I was going to act out again if I didn't do them. I became miserable, which was worse than the fear of doing them. I found great relief when I finally spoke to my father and mother, because I finally was the adult and willing to face the real issues in these relationships. I also made amends to my stepmother, which I definitely was not going to do, but felt called by God to do it. We had a great conversation, and since then I have actually been able to spend time with her and laugh, not to mention the fact that I am now welcome in her house. That hadn't been the case for the fifteen years, since she and my father first got married.

After that, I worked the remainder of the Steps. Some people like to refer to them as the “maintenance Steps,” but I like to call them the “growing Steps.” They all grow my relationship with God, not maintain it. I need to live in them every day or I get miserable. First off is Step Ten, where I have to pay attention to things throughout the day, and take care of things as they crop up. Sometimes my character defects come out, and I may need to make an immediate amends to someone. Other times I start to get resentful at something or someone, and I need to see why that is—usually a character defect driven by self-centered fear. Next is Step Eleven, which calls me to spend time

dedicated to prayer and time in meditation every day. It is very noticeable to me when I skip this Step. My day usually goes much crazier than if I take the time in the morning and devote it to God. Then, last—but certainly not least—is Step Twelve, where I practice these principles in all my affairs. That means I need to live in honesty, equality, accountability, love, trust, and humility. I also need to take the message of hope and recovery to those who are still suffering. I've done this by sponsoring women, volunteering for an eating disorder awareness organization in West Palm Beach, working in a transitional living facility, and starting a new EDA meeting in the town where I currently reside. God is using me in mighty ways. I have found that He will recycle my pain to help others who have been through similar circumstances. For this I am truly grateful. All of this is happening because I took my eating disorder off the throne and put Him back on.

I have had bumps and turns along the way, but one of the lessons I have learned from them is that my path doesn't have to be perfectly straight. I may stray some and come back to the path, but I never go back to the beginning because I don't forget what I have learned on my previous journeys. I just keep learning more each time, no matter how far off the path I stray. I just need to keep coming back!

Another lesson has been that in order to maintain my recovery, it is important for me to keep balance in all areas of my life, not just in the areas of food. I need to be careful to keep my workaholism and perfectionism in check, and I can only do this by staying in fit spiritual condition. When I let any area slip, I tend to start to let the others slip as well.

The last and most important lesson that I have learned is that *recovery is possible!* It is amazing to live without “Ed”

whispering/screaming in your head constantly. The first time I realized that I wasn't obsessing over whether or not I was going to eat or how much I weighed, I freaked out! At first (I will be honest) I thought it was too quiet and had to play some noise in the background. But after that, I got used to just being able to think about other things and be present in the moment. It is amazing to actually "be there" during special events. Without "Ed"—his judgment, his negativity, and his misery—riding on my shoulder, I am free to create the life I've always wanted. I hope everyone has this opportunity. Good luck to you in your journey!

