

Inside the Experience

Excerpts from the book, *Inner Hunger: A Young Woman's Struggle Through Anorexia and Bulimia*

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Personal experiences of suffering from an eating disorder are unique and vary widely from one individual to another. NEDIC is pleased to offer you a poignant excerpt from one young woman's account of her struggle with anorexia and bulimia. Although much attention is paid in our present world to the subject of eating disorders, we seldom have the opportunity to share in the painful and candid details of individuals' distress. Although no two experiences are alike, it is our hope that you, our readers, may find something here that will help give voice to your feelings or the feelings of those to whom you provide support.

Four years ago I started writing the book, *Inner Hunger*, not only to share my experience, but also to provide well researched advice to people with eating disorders, their families, and their therapists, teachers, etc.—advice that I wish I had been given when I felt trapped, alone, inside my eating disorder. Through this combination of personal story and clinical advice, the book will hopefully connect with women/girls on an emotional level, therefore helping them to accept the clinical suggestions and begin to feed their own inner hunger.

Starving: Inside the anorexic mind and body

“Everything related to food and exercise had to be the same from one day to the next. If I ate twenty flakes of cereal for breakfast one morning, I had to eat twenty the next day. If I walked up a flight of stairs five times on Monday, I became agitated if I walked up those stairs only four times on Tuesday. I told myself that any deviation from the routine would make me gain weight. I wasn't consciously aware of the real problem: that any deviation would take away all sense of control and order. So I walked up that flight of stairs a fifth time on Tuesday for no apparent reason.”

“The view of life through the prism of anorexia was distorting, but I needed that distorted world when the ‘real’ world—the world of boys and dating and cliques and schoolwork—was more than my body and psyche could handle in a healthy way. When I got into the anorexic headspace, I was in a self-constructed, rational world where I didn't have to feel embarrassment, social failure, isolation, or self-hate. When I was thinking about weight control, I could wipe away emotion and go straight to cognition—to the hardness and reliability of calories, fat grams, and numbers on a scale.

“My dieting, along with my schoolwork, gave me a measure of comfort, an island of safety where I could rest when I was drowning in the social and emotional sea of ninth grade. On that island, my social and sexual development regressed. In more and more situations, I couldn’t relate to my peers in their world because they were learning what it felt like to explore adolescence, while I was learning what it felt like to explore anorexia.”

“My body responded to the denial of food by telling me in every way that it needed fuel to survive. My stomach gnawed at emptiness, my dry skin flaked, my face grew soft hairs, my knees folded when I got up as if I would faint. My body was panicking. It’s as though it were screaming *I NEED FOOD! Give me food; give me food NOW because I’m starting to collapse! I can’t take this much longer, I won’t last much longer!* But my mind answered the hunger of my body with a firm no. *Ignore it. I’m not listening to it, I can’t feel it... No, I am not feeling it. Nope, uh-uh. No. NO! I’M NOT EATING!*”

Becoming bulimic: The eating disorder changes shape

“My mouth embraced the mound of ice cream on the cold spoon. That first taste was both delicate and violent—delicate in the sensual pleasure of tasting, violent in the declaration contained within the act of eating, the declaration that I was free from all outside expectations of how I should look, how I should act, who I should be. After all this dieting, all this lost weight, I still wasn’t happy. My weight loss hadn’t transformed my social life, my hate, and my confusion. By eating, I was saying that I wouldn’t play by the same restrictive rules when I knew I couldn’t win the game, when I knew I couldn’t get the happiness that thinness had promised. By eating, I was saying: ‘[Screw] this, [screw] you, [screw] everything, I won’t do it anymore.’ ”

“When the cup of ice cream was empty, the energy that had tickled my skin sank back into my body. I breathed deeply a few times, eyes closed, muscles relaxed, until... Panic. *What’s happening to me? Why am I eating? Why can’t I control it? I used to control it, why can’t I control it?* My thoughts were fast—calorie calculations, damage assessments, plans to undo the damage, fears that I couldn’t undo the damage, further calorie calculations, etc. I huddled on the wood floor of my room, arms sealing my knees to my chest, and rocked back and forth. I felt desperate to hold on to my evaporating control over my food, my body, myself. That’s when I knew the bingeing didn’t free me, when I knew the only thing I [screwed] by bingeing was myself.”

Being bulimic: Drowning emotion, muffling the screams

“I couldn’t ever get rid of my body. I couldn’t ever live outside my skin. My body became a billboard announcing to everyone that I was a pathetic, deviant failure. It became proof of my disgusting behaviour, my lack of control, and my abnormality. “My body became the

battleground where I played out my emotions. *Look at you, Marianne. Look at that gut. Disgusting. It blobs like cottage cheese.* I was naked in front of the mirror. *Look at those arms. My thighs used to be that big! Disgusting! Marianne.... Do some push-up; Marianne, get your arms small again. This is disgusting!* I looked in the mirror and saw flabby arms, fatty hips, rounded belly. I saw myself piece by piece by piece. I didn't see the connections. I didn't see a form composed of curves and straight edges, of soft tissue and strong muscles. I didn't see *me*. My body image reflected my self-image: I hated my body because I hated myself, I doubted my body because I doubted myself, I was angry at my body because I was angry at myself. Hate, doubt, and anger. That's what I saw when I looked in the mirror."

Looking Back: Viewing the eating disorder after two years without it

As I look back over those years of anorexia and bulimia, I feel still and heavy. My body does not feel sharp with anger; instead it feels full and calm, holding a fading but powerful sadness.

Despite the sadness, despite the wish that someone had helped me sooner, I know that this was my path; that I could not have gotten here without my eating disorder. I would not be this woman with this insight, this perception, and this compassion if I had not struggled through anorexia and bulimia.

I will do everything in my power to prevent other people from developing eating disorders, and to help them find their own path out. But I can't bemoan my path, and I can't berate myself for having traveled it. I deserve more. We all do.

Components of my healing

- Working with a knowledgeable, empathetic therapist
- Undergoing guided imagery and active imagination
- Taking an anti-depressant for one year, while in therapy
- Journaling
- Talking with friends
- Losing myself in long, slow walks
- Keeping a food journal
- Laughing, maintaining a sense of life's humour

- Dancing
- Practicing yoga
- Undergoing shiatsu and massage therapy
- Taking risks, when I felt ready
- Crying
- Camping and being in nature
- Forgiving myself
- Giving myself compassion

For me, the process of healing was long and surprisingly subtle. After two years of exploration in therapy and in life, I looked back over time and saw the distance I had traveled. I saw myself standing strong, grounded, absorbing the light and beauty around me. I was in a different landscape without having been aware that I'd moved. During those two years, I was able to let go of my eating disorder—let it go, not expel it, not run away from it—because I had brought myself to an emotional place where I didn't need it anymore, where I could let it slide silently from me.

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