

## **Colleen's Story** - *submitted by Colleen*

Ugh I thought, staring at what I believed to be a grotesque reflection grimacing back at me. No matter which way I turned bended and twisted I couldn't escape the terrifying image. I could do nothing. It felt as though all the blood sweat and tears I had shed in school life, home life, as the ever constant supporter for my friends, my countless extracurriculars, had all amounted to nothing because of the dull blue eyes that stared back at me out of what I believed was a flabby face. I was dizzy with disgust and the fear and the scream I was dying to release. 'I will fix you' I whispered to the child. 'I will fix you'.

At 12 years old this was how I treated my body; like a thing to be conquered. At the time though, I thought that was how everyone viewed their own countenance.

From age 24 months I was already incredibly careful with my body. My mother affectionately dubbed me 'velcro baby' after a fall at that age requiring stitches sent me to doctors. After receiving the stitches I was so terrified of relinquishing the safety of my mother's shoulder that I would latch on to her like Velcro--she could walk around without holding on to me and I would refuse to fall off. Maybe that should have clued my family in then about how anxious of a child I would be.

Along with this anxiety, several things happened as I left middle school—puberty and thyrotoxicosis. Now what on earth do these have to do with my eating disorder? A LOT. I was devastated by the natural weight gain that females experience when they hit puberty because I already relied on my appearance as a measure of how 'good' of a little girl I was.

Gaining weight meant that I had failed in some way, that I was no longer this perfect and little girl. I felt that I was no longer young, but instead was growing up, and that realm was completely unknown to me. And boy was I TERRIFIED of the unknown. From a young age I was anxious. I constantly twiddled my thumbs and brushed my hair out of nervousness and was well, Velcro baby. THIS is how scared I was to leave the safety of what I knew. Throughout my life it has been hard to trust people—I used to always ALWAYS put up my walls and played the role of 'SUPER-HAPPY-EVERYTHING-IS-FINE-DON'T-WORRY-ABOUT-ME!' while I wrestled with anxiety and severe depression in silence. This Colleen was a façade that began in elementary school and lasted WELL into my high school years.

The innate anxiety I had, terror of the unknown, and the failure and fear I felt surrounding my natural amount of pubertal weight gain was only exacerbated by the hidden existence of Hashimoto's thyroiditis. The disease disrupts hormone regulation and in my case, caused weight gain. I had never specifically seen my weight as a problem, that is until I was looking through pictures one day and examined myself from 2 years ago versus how I looked at the time. There was never a conscious choice to have an eating disorder—behaviors just began happening without me realizing what they were. By age 14 I was engulfed in the world of dieting. By age 14 I was silently suffering from cycles of anorexia and bulimia. I had heard of Eating disorders only in vague terms; my perception of who struggled with them was of a female with some ill placed vanity. I believed that eating disorders were about appearances and how important thinness was. I was SO WRONG. In my case, very nearly dead wrong.

From my early years through the beginning of high school I was painfully shy, introverted, and incredibly self-aware. I perpetually compared myself to others, particularly on my gymnastics team. I could never perform with the same grace as Brittany, do back bends like Elizabeth, or splits like Tracey. I looked up

to my gymnastics teacher in awe, yet I received little praise from her. In movie terminology I thought of myself as B rated—I was always ALMOST there.

I felt estranged from my classmates. While my peers were gleefully throwing mud or shoving each other off the playground's metal slide I distinctly remember sitting on the swings every recess pondering the existence of god and the composition of the soul. I thought, what little kid does this?! I felt I couldn't connect to anyone, didn't fit in or get the unwritten social rules that everyone else my age seemed to so innately understand. My behavior was seen as terribly uncouth by my fellow elementary and middle school students and it was one of the reasons why I suffered so greatly at the hands of the school bullies. I was tormented on a regular basis, everything from name-calling, to being thrown in the mud, to receiving taunts and death threats on the bus ride home.

If there was one thing I learned from bullying when I was younger, it was that I should believe that I would always be in some kind of pain. I realize now how untrue this is, however, at the time my ED latched on to this and certainly made me feel that outside forces didn't conquer my life. I could control what I thought was an inevitable pain that I was going to feel from one thing or another by being perfect. I could not fail if I was perfect at something—and that something was my ED. I believe now that perfection is a painful and IMPOSSIBLE goal to set. It's unachievable and only results in failure, which perpetuates the ED cycle.

It wasn't until high school though that I began to mistakenly think that through my ED I had shut off my ability to feel pain. Since I was hurting myself so much physically, through ED behaviors that caused bodily pain and self-injury, I had become inured to emotional pain. Over time, because of my ED, I simply did not feel emotional pain as much as I had before. However, since I had numbed myself to feeling bad, I had also numbed my emotional ability to feel good. This is because emotions are so interconnected. You cannot truly feel unbridled joy until you have felt immense sorrow, and because I had turned to behaviors instead of allowing myself to feel emotional downs, I never felt the glorious extent of how positive I could feel. All that I was left with was a hollow feeling. Apathy and depression.

At the time however, the loss of emotion paled in comparison to what I thought my ED was offering me. I was caught up in the whirlwind of its false promises.

One of the most important promises my ED made to me was that I could escape from life as long as I had the eating disorder. Through treatment I learned about my addiction to the 'sick role'. The sick role is simple enough and yet devastating to a person's quality of life. Basically, in my low self-esteem, I did not give myself enough credit. I believed that it was impossible for me to handle the responsibility and stress of everyday life from school, to being a perfect daughter, to eventually getting a permanent job, and everything in between. I thought of myself as utterly incompetent. However, because of my ED I was always physically sick, and this gave me a break from life.

Let me explain. People perceive you differently when you are ill—they see you as in need of care and susceptible to stress, and this causes people to lower their expectations of you throughout the duration of your sickness. This was too PERFECT for me. I thought that it solved all the anxiety of having to face life and the emotions that came along with it. I could avoid everything that scared me (the responsibilities of growing up) and get the attention that made me feel that I was loved but only so long as I was sick.

I also believed that My ED promised a guaranteed sense of accomplishment. Despite being a straight A student, an active participant in my school, and being surrounded by friends, I felt that I was never good enough. I could not be perfect and this drove me insane. However, as long as I was constantly setting new goals that took my body closer to 'purity' and perfection, my ED validated my self-efficacy. My ED, I thought, was the one thing that I could be better at than anyone else.

Unfortunately, while these promises were incredibly effective in the short term, in the long term they have all been broken and only left my life in shambles. By being sick all of the time I missed out on so many opportunities. I never went out with my friends, using the excuse that I was sick, and even lost two of the most important friends I had, my two horses, to being too ill to ride anymore. And while it may sound obvious now, having 'she was the best at dieting' written on my tombstone was not the legacy I wanted to leave behind in this world. Yes I could feel accomplished in the short term by being the best at having an eating disorder, but is that really something I would be proud of my life culminating in?

So why have myself and so many others become ensnared in this world of the eating disorder? It often makes no sense to supporters why anyone as intelligent as their loved one would subject themselves to this kind of what they might consider 'avoidable' suffering. To many sufferers, however, me included, their ED can be likened to an abusive relationship.

My relationship with my ED became everything. In the throes of my ED, my very existence was hopelessly intertwined with its existence. It felt as though if my eating disorder ceased to exist, I would cease to as well. When someone is in an abusive relationship, the abuser forces the person to become dependent on them. Once someone is unhealthily dependent on their significant other, that person has the upper hand in the relationship. They have pushed you into thinking that you cannot function without them or are worthless without them. They have you terrified that he/she will abandon you and the only way for your world to stay in one piece is to do anything and everything to please this person to keep them with you. THIS is the leverage that most abusive relationships use. Including the relationship with my ED.

I was in a verbally and emotionally abusive relationship myself several years ago and I felt all of what I just explained. For quite some time after I had terminated the relationship I thought of myself as pathetic for having been with this abusive person and for continuing to miss their presence so much—that I was of weak constitution and mind. I thought that I had forced my significant other to abuse me and even that I should have been treated that way. This is one of the most common and damaging misconceptions people have about abusive relationships; that the abuse was the victim's fault, they were asking for it, or they deserved it somehow. This is what we call a 'blame-the victim' mentality.

I don't believe that I EVER deserved to be in the pain that I suffered at the hands of my abuser. As far as the victim being at fault—I have never heard anyone say, 'you know what? I think I would like to be abused today.' People do not CHOOSE to be victims. Although I had low-self-esteem and that predisposed me to abusive relationships, I was not weak. I did not give myself enough credit as a person, and turned to someone who seemed like a knight in shining armor to fulfill me. Abuse is about control-- physical, verbal, and emotional, and once a person or my ED had that control, often garnered through manipulation, leaving was impossible on my own.

This was why my Ed was slowly seeping into every facet of my life. I could not bear the idea of eating out with my friends, sitting down to dinner with my family, or leaving the house without burning off a

certain amount of calories. In the summer before I went into treatment I lost my best friend to my behaviors because she knew about them but was powerless to help since I let no one get close to me. IT is a loss I feel to this day. It was too much of a chance to risk losing my ED—the one constant in a terrifying world of responsibility and expectations. These expectations of work, school, and social life seemed unattainable to me because I was terrified that I would perform them inadequately, imperfectly.

I yearned for control over my life, but as ED ravaged my mind and body I was losing that life with every meal I forfeited. It was as though I was walking around in a dream all day. Or rather, a nightmare. I felt perpetually tired, nauseous, and in pain 24-7 to the point where I would shudder at the thought of having to just get myself up out of bed. I was completing an internship at a wildlife rehabilitation center when my ED truly deteriorated into chaos. I was told by my doctor that my body was on the brink of going into shock because of electrolyte imbalance and a dangerously low heart rate. I realized that organ failure would follow. I was dying. Well actually, I was allowing my ED to kill me. Yet I still couldn't let go of it.

I was psychologically ruined. My depression from my undiagnosed bipolar two and anxiety disorder, as well as the physical agony, pushed me to the brink of suicide, and I made the most difficult choice of my life upon the urging of my support team. To forgo a semester of school in order to enter treatment.

The decision of treatment however, had to be my choice. If I was forced into it I fervently believe that I would never have recovered. It was vital for me to learn that, while getting an ED is NOT a choice, getting help is.

On September 13th, 2010, at age 20 I entered into a residential level eating disorder treatment center. If there is one thing that I learned from treatment, it is that to recover you have to work your butt off. You had to fight for your life EVERY DAY. Imagine waking up every morning and being told 'today you are going to have to face the thing that you are most terrified of in the entire world'. Not the easiest way to start your morning. However, this is exactly what you do.

The best part is though, that I was not alone. In treatment I was with 10 or so other girls that were also waging war right beside me against the same opponent. All day every day. The tears were shed together. The joy and pride were collective when any of us made it through another meal.

I remember crying my eyes out, absolutely sobbing, on the first day when they told me that I would have to be eating my full meal plan by the end of the week. I was so weakened by my eating disorder that I thought it was impossible to perform such a basic daily task as eating. However, I came in and watched these women, no, these SUPER HEROES, doing it. So then it became, well if they can do it, and they've been fighting the same demon sometimes even longer than I have, I have to try it too. There were always good days and bad days, days where we were tired of fighting and wanted to fall into the predictability of our eating disorder. But alongside these women, I began to learn how to start fighting.

I had entered treatment because I couldn't continue living the way I'd been living. I hadn't been living at all—I had been surviving. And just barely at that.

At first I was fighting for the wrong reasons. The rigid perfectionism that had dictated my life with ED was trying to dictate my recovery too. I was terrified of disappointing my treatment team, so I tried to

ensure that I was the best patient I could possibly be. I was talkative in groups, social at meals, after day two completed every meal put in front of me, and was ever the polite good girl I had always been in school and with my family. I could do no wrong. However, this was akin to the pressure I always put on myself that had caused the severe depression I suffered in high school. Hence, the depression hit me with all the gentleness of an oncoming freight train, and I had none of my old defenses, such as the eating disorder and self-injury to protect myself. I had to rebuild my recovery back again brick by brick. I had to learn to recover for myself.

So what did it take for me to leave this relationship with my ED? Distilled down to its basic components, I think there were five essential pieces to my recovery: 1) encouragement from my professional, nonprofessional, and furry support team, 2) self-love, 3) music, 4) medication, and 5) time.

My support team at the time of treatment consisted of my mother, father, brother, two very close friends, professional support team (which you cannot be without if you want recovery), my three dogs, and a barn full of horses. One day during treatment my mother rocked my world,

She told me that prior to treatment she thought that I would not survive through her next birthday. She almost had to bury her own child. I was in shock when I heard how deeply my ED had cut my family. It was a guilt that I had to sit with and work through with my treatment team again and again but one that made me realize just how important my life was to the people around me. They wanted and needed me in their lives. I discovered that I made a difference.

Self-love was probably the most difficult of all my recovery tools to really wrap my head around. After years of degrading myself, being bullied, and Cosmo magazine telling me I needed to be fixed, it was incredibly difficult to be more objective about my self-worth. I had to rediscover the personality that my ED had robbed of me. Since my life had been based around my behaviors for so long, I had to relearn what I was passionate about, what I like and disliked. Turns out just a few of the things I love are feeding the geese on the Charles River, horseback riding, rapping, anthropology, and psychology. Also I want to become a social worker.

Music and art were vital to my recovery. The most cathartic thing for me is rapping about my eating disorder and recovery. Yes, I rap. My favorite rap is entitled caskets and the main theme of it is that 'when you're dying to be thin only caskets set you free' something that has empowered me on the most difficult of days because it is true. Your eating disorder does not give you serenity, perfection and control. No. the only end that your eating disorder is leading you towards is the grave.

I also could not have succeeded in my recovery without the tool of medication. The overload of feelings that came out after I stopped suppressing them with my eating disorder, was overwhelming. Particularly when you have underlying psychological disorders accompanying them. My anxiety, depression, and Bipolar 2 were impossible to deal with on my own and medication was essential to helping me when I was in the process of learning how to handle emotions.

Time was also my friend in recovery. Recovery can be frustrating with slips, difficult days, and possible relapse, but knowing that recovery can take months, years, even decades, you realize that a key to recovery is patience with yourself. You are not a failure and there is no perfect way to recover. Many people consider themselves forever in recovery and that is perfectly fine. Recovery is a constant learning process and Ed does not just disappear. It is a part of me and an important part of my past, and I do not

regret fighting this battle against my ED. I would not be as strong a person as I am today without that struggle.

My ED has abused me, controlled me, and twisted my perception and sense of self and from time to time I still mourn all of the opportunities I've missed because of it. It continues to rattle me just how much my ED made me forget what I truly am passionate about and who I am. I never thought that an Eating disorder could happen to me. I thought I would be too strong or smart for that, but it's not about intelligence or strength. An ED hits you where it hurts, your fears. I used to believe Ed promised to alleviate what went bump in the night for me—whether that was being afraid to grow up, or afraid to fail, or whatever scared me the most.

I realize in my recovery that I never needed to be 'fixed' as I thought when I was 12 years old. I am perfectly imperfect and I love it. However, recovery isn't as black and white as most of us would like it to be. It's not a matter of, well now that I've been through treatment a magic wand was waved and I will never have to deal with ED again.

It's just like anyone with an addiction, except even more difficult. While an alcoholic just needs to avoid alcohol like the plague, someone with an ED must sit down and face food several times a day, every day. It's a long road. BUT not an impossible one, and not one that you have to, or even can, travel alone.

Recovery has enriched my life because now I can pursue a life that is mine. I am doing wonderfully in the school that I have transferred to and am able to balance academics with the close friends and family and thriving relationship with my partner that I have. I am even applying to graduate schools to earn my Masters in Social Work to become a Licensed Social Worker to work with children, adolescents, and families to overcome their own personal struggles in any capacity that I can. These dreams, this life could NEVER have existed if I was still suffering the way that I was; suffering in a way that no one ever deserves to.

So, please remember that getting an ED is not a choice, however, getting help is. And for me, recovery is a choice that I make every day. It is one that I have yet to regret.