

Haniyah's Story

It's interesting when I reflect on my eating disorder and where I am today. For something that once dominated my life, it's now like a distant memory in some ways. Most days I go about my day and don't take much time to reflect on the pain that I went through battling Anorexia. But there are those occasional moments when a certain song will come on the radio, I'll drive by a restaurant, or read an article, and it will trigger a flash back to when I was struggling with my eating disorder. In those moments I think about what I went through, and how lucky I am to have recovered and be where I am today.

As others who have struggled with an eating disorder know, an eating disorder is not something you just decide to have one day. For many, eating disorders and other addictions present themselves when the stresses of life become overwhelming and it seems like the only relief, escape, and control you have in life is in your eating disorder.

That was definitely what happened for me. I was twelve years old and starting seventh grade when Anorexia began to poke its ugly head into my life.

This particular year I was more anxious about starting school than usual. I hated middle school, mainly because of the separation of cliques which I had started to experience in sixth grade. I am a very sensitive person by nature and I had never been a popular girl. Like many other pre-teens my self-esteem wasn't particularly great which made everything that much worse. Watching kids get teased and feeling like everything was a popularity contest really got to me. To add to my anxiety and low self-esteem, over the summer I had been "going out" with a guy who broke up with me via email, by sending me a list of the ten reasons why he didn't like me. I was absolutely crushed because I really liked him, and it was so hurtful to me that he could blatantly say such nasty, heartless and superficial things. To make matters worse, my best friend who had been on my school team in fifth and sixth grade was now on a different team and therefore wouldn't be in my classes. She had been my crutch since third grade and I felt naked starting a school year without her by my side.

Between my poor self-confidence and anxiety I was definitely not starting the school year on a good note. I was by no means unlucky in life – I had a few close friends and a loving, supportive, and close-knit family so I was grateful for that. Unfortunately when I was in school I felt alone. I was stuck in classes without my friends. I was surrounded by girls who looked down at me for not wearing Abercrombie & Fitch and bullied me into giving them my homework to copy, since they hadn't done theirs themselves.

In between periods I would go to my locker which was located next to one of the popular girl's lockers. Almost every day she would swing open her locker while she was gabbing with her friends and it would often hit me while I was gathering my books for the next class. Her actions weren't intentional and sometimes she would mutter "sorry" but other times it was like she didn't notice me. I felt like I was invisible and it was so lonely.

When Halloween came, my best friend and I went trick or treating and I dressed up like a hippie. My belly was slightly exposed and for the whole night I was incredibly self-conscious. Every time I walked past a mirror I couldn't help but look at myself and judge every little curve. That night I decided to make some changes in my life to improve my body. I was tired of feeling bad about myself and invisible. In my mind, this was my opportunity to do something for myself that would make me feel better and look better.

After I made that conscious decision I started exercising regularly after school and I changed my eating patterns. Initially my parents were happy about the changes, since I had never been very active and didn't have the most balanced diet.

As the weeks went on I started feeling good about myself. I had more energy and felt more positive about life in general. To extend the “high” that I was feeling, I started eliminating more and more of what I considered “bad foods” from my life and increased my exercise routine.

It wasn't long before my friends started to notice the changes in my body. My close friends were worried about me and told me that they thought I might be doing too much. I would laugh them off and say I was fine because in my mind I was – what was wrong with feeling good about myself and looking good?

While my friends were concerned about my body, others at school commented on how good I looked. It probably sounds shallow on my part that I took so much pleasure in being noticed by the popular girls, but as someone who normally blended in with the background or was teased about my body, it felt good to be noticed. Up until now I never felt great about my appearance.

When I was five I had been diagnosed with Precocious Puberty, which is when puberty starts at a very early age. From ages 6-11 I received monthly injections to regulate my hormones and my growth. Even with those regular injections, I had still been the most developed and tallest kid in school for many years, which was uncomfortable for me, and I was sometimes teased by other kids because of it. So to be almost thirteen and finally feeling like I fit in was the best feeling in the world.

Over the next few months I continued to enjoy my new look, but my compulsive behaviors and habits increased and strengthened. I started isolating myself so that I could meet the demands of my diet and exercise regimen that I had set for myself. There would be times when I'd skip out on doing fun things with my friends if it meant that it would interrupt my routine.

By the early Spring I was hiding behind my oversized clothes, which had fit me perfectly 6 months before. I avoided eating in groups. What I didn't know, was that what had begun as a lifestyle change, had spiraled into a dangerous eating disorder. It had completely taken over my life and the elation that I had felt over the past few months was starting to fade. I began feeling weak and tired and unfocused. When someone asked what was wrong I would come up with an excuse that I wasn't feeling well.

On Easter we went to my great aunt and uncle's house for Easter Dinner. I felt really weak and cold and my mom was concerned. The next day she took me to the doctor and was shocked when the doctor told my mom how much I now weighed. The doctor looked concerned and asked me if I was trying to lose weight. I said that I wasn't but had started eating healthier and exercising. She told me to make some changes to my regimen and to come back in two weeks to make sure I had improved.

I was surprised by my weight but was happy to see that I had been able to achieve such a drastic change in less than 6 months. I left and felt like I was fine and the doctor shouldn't be worried. My mom was clearly concerned but I promised her I would make some changes and everything would be fine.

Those next few weeks I acted like everything was fine, and reassured my mom that I was taking care of myself, but would sneak in exercise sessions when she and my dad went out and would skip lunch at school.

When I went back to the doctor, my weight had further declined. My doctor looked at my mom and I sadly and said, “Haniyah, you have Anorexia.” My mom started crying and so did I. I was sad that my secret was finally out in the open, and that my doctor and mom were upset. I felt like I had disappointed them.

While I felt badly for my mom and doctor, I accepted my diagnosis as my identity, and had this uncontrollable need to live up to that diagnosis. After that appointment everything went downhill as my ED took complete control. I dragged myself through the school halls, often in a catatonic state. The teachers

knew something was wrong – probably because my mom had called them. They always looked at me worried and asked if I was OK. I'd put on a fake, forced smile and say that I was fine.

I had always been a good student but I was so weak and caught up in my own head that my grades started to suffer. Spanish was my favorite subject and I had always done well in my classes. One day our teacher asked us to hand in our projects. Everyone but me handed in a thick packet of papers. I looked at her confused and went up to her after class and asked her what the project was. She looked shocked and explained that these were the projects we had discussed over a month ago and everyone had been working on. I was upset and shocked that I had sat in class every day, completely consumed in my thoughts and oblivious to every discussion or mention of this project that everyone else had been working on.

May came around and my energy depleted more and more every day. My mom and I would have battles at the kitchen table. At first she would be angry and scream at me and then she would burst into tears and I would cry with her.

I can't imagine what it was like for her to watch me disappear right in front of her and feel helpless. It made me sad that she and my dad were so scared, but I couldn't bring myself to try and get better – I was too consumed with my eating disorder and it scared me to try and stop it. It had been my life for more than 6 months and had been a source of fulfillment and control over my world.

One Friday night there was a school dance and I begged my parents to go. They didn't want me to go because they were worried about my health, but I begged and begged and they caved. That night was one of the most depressing nights. I felt so run down and tired and my friends could sense that something was wrong. I ended up crying in a corner, and my parents came and picked me up.

That weekend was my last weekend before I had to finally give in to treatment. The following Monday morning I woke up. I tried to get out of bed but collapsed on the floor – my eating disorder had taken the last drop of energy out of me and I could no longer walk. My dad carried me out of bed and put me in the car and they took me to Children's Hospital.

When we arrived at the hospital I was taken to a room. I felt like I had to tell ten doctors the same thing over and over again. I was so tired. It was so much effort to talk. My mom stayed there with me. She looked tired and scared. I was kept in a regular room for two nights. The doctors said that as soon as there was room in the inpatient, psychiatric facility I would be moved there. When he said this, I didn't connect that inpatient meant that I would have to stay there for an extended period of time.

When I was brought over to the inpatient ward, I was informed that I would have to remain there for at least two weeks. I asked if my mom would be there with me. They said that my parents could visit on occasion but they could not stay there. I started panicking. I cried for hours. I was already feeling so terrible about myself, so lost and out of control. The thought of being left in a hospital with a bunch of doctors, psychiatrists, nurses and people I didn't know was more than I could stand. I didn't know what I was going to do without my parents.

My parents looked so sad and tired. They didn't want to leave me alone but they realized that I needed help. Saying goodbye to them was so hard. I thought about my two younger brothers. It broke my heart to think about being away from them. I felt bad that they wouldn't understand why I was here. I didn't want them to think that something was wrong with me.

That first night in the hospital was miserable. I stayed up the entire night sobbing. Some of the night nurses would come by and try to comfort me. Others got irritated with my behavior because other patients were

sleeping. I felt like screaming at them: They had no idea what I was going through. They had no idea how hard this would be for me.

The next day I was introduced to the other teenagers in the facility and began my official treatment plan. There were some eating disorder patients. There were others who suffered from other mental illnesses. I was scared of the other patients at first. I didn't know what to expect.

Some of the girls I bonded with immediately. It was difficult because we were constantly comparing ourselves and our different situations. At the same time, it was comforting to talk to someone who understood what I was going through and could relate to how I was feeling. When one of us was feeling down, we always had someone to talk to.

Eventually, I fell into a routine there. Every day we had to get up at the same time, go to our meals at the same time, got our vital signs taken at the same time. There were different organized support groups and activities throughout the day.

I frequently received letters and phone calls from friends and family. Many would stop by and visit. I was homesick at times but overall I became used to living at the hospital. It was a safe place for me. I didn't have to face my teachers or peers at school. I didn't have friends and family always there to watch me and judge how I was doing.

I was assigned a therapist to talk to everyday. She was very kind and I felt relatively comfortable with her. However, I've never been someone to completely open up. Over the last six months I had been living in my own world; a world that I didn't share with anyone else; a world that no one else could understand. So despite the comfort level I had with my therapist, I never fully expressed what was going on or what I was thinking.

After a couple of weeks I was allowed to go home for day trips. It was nice to spend time with my family but I felt like a fish out of water. They loved me so much, but never could really understand what I was thinking or going through. It became clear to me that the hospital was where I felt safe. I was surrounded by people who shared similar problems to mine. I didn't have to face my classmates at school, who I felt would all be staring at me and judging me when I came back. Every day at the hospital was pretty much the same routine. I always knew what to expect. The same people were always around me.

After four weeks I was discharged – my therapist, doctors, nurses and parents all felt like I was in a good enough place both mentally and physically, to continue treatment at home. While I was excited to be able to go home and see my brothers and friends, I was incredibly anxious about having to take what I learned in the hospital and make decisions for myself. The thought of not having the set schedule and strict rules scared me.

When I got home, my parents, family & friends were all so happy to have me back. I felt like I had to be happy or I would worry them or disappoint them. I plastered a smile on my face. Despite how hard it was being home and back to school, I pretended everything was fine. I went to my regular doctor, therapist and nutrition appointments and followed their instructions – pretending like recovery was easy. I had a few weeks left of the school year and went back to school part time. Everyone was really nice to me; probably because they knew I had been in the hospital and the teachers had spoken to them about how I should be treated when I was back. Even though everyone was nice, the teachers weren't strict with me, and the weather was warmer, I didn't like being back at school. Instead of participating in class discussions my mind would wander and I'd think about my ED.

As those few weeks went on I became more and more depressed. I hated that I wasn't happy and that I was pretending everything was fine to please everyone else. The school year ended and my dad and mom were working so hard to accommodate all of my appointments and treatment regimen while still caring for two younger children who were now on summer break. I felt depressed and like I was a burden to them. I started wondering if they would be better off without me. I felt like I didn't belong home. I wasn't safe anymore. I was exposed and living in the outside world. I was no longer surrounded by people who shared my problems and understood how I felt.

One night my emotions became too much for me, and I made a decision to try and end my life. My thought process was that if I was successful then I would no longer be a burden to my family, and if I wasn't successful, then I would end up in the hospital for treatment again. In the back of my mind, I was hoping that I wouldn't be successful; and would end up back in the hospital where I felt safe and in control. When I reflect back on how I felt it makes me so sad. It's painful to think that I truly thought that the best solution was to end my life. I don't wish that feeling on anyone – and can't be grateful enough that I wasn't successful.

The next day I awoke to my mother screaming and calling my father to call an ambulance. I was immediately rushed to the local hospital where I was found to be stable, and they transferred me to Children's Hospital. I was admitted to the psychiatric ward where I had been for my inpatient care the month before.

My parents were heart broken. They had really thought that I was getting better. I was in a deep state of depression. I felt guilty that I was putting my parents through all this again. I felt like a failure. I was in a very dark place when I was admitted to the hospital this second time. To my surprise and disappointment, most of the other patients who I had befriended were no longer there as they had been discharged.

This time was different than my first hospital stay – I recognized that my eating disorder and depression were not simple viruses that could be remedied with antibiotics. I came to terms with the fact that recovery would be a long haul and would not be easy all the time. While this was disheartening in a lot of ways, I finally had a realistic view of what recovery entailed. It wasn't about simply following a meal plan, listening to my doctor's orders and answering my therapist's questions at appointments. It was about handling life on a day-to-day basis and learning how to make hard decisions. It was about forcing myself to avoid compulsive, unhealthy behaviors and replacing them with new healthy activities like going clothes shopping without hating myself; enjoying ice cream with friends and not feeling bad about it; and more importantly learning to be happy with myself.

During those two weeks I was honest with the staff and my therapist and focused my energy on getting better. I didn't look at the hospital like a permanent solution. I knew that I needed to take what I had learned and bring it home.

After two weeks, I was able to go home. This time I was determined to never return to the hospital again. I had a different outlook on recovery then I had after my first inpatient stay. I knew that it wouldn't be easy and it wouldn't always be rainbows and sunshine; but I knew that it was worth it. As I became healthier I started having more energy. My mind was clearer and I started remembering what life was like before my ED; when I was able to enjoy the moment; whether it was laughing at a joke, getting wrapped up in a book, singing to a song on the radio, or enjoying dessert at a restaurant. I was motivated to work hard so that I could enjoy those moments again.

After the summer ended I started my eighth grade year with a lot of anxiety about what would happen. Surprisingly, my first day was pretty normal. My friends were glad to have me back and I was in a much

healthier physical state. I was able to participate in normal activities. I signed up for the Cross-Country team which practiced a couple of days a week. I liked my classes and got good grades. I struggled at times, and my emotions would get the best of me. However, on most days my eating disorder wasn't dominating my life like it had the year before. I attended therapy regularly and learned a lot of coping mechanisms to keep my eating disorder in check.

As the school year progressed I participated in a musical, and also started taking Tae Kwon Do classes with a friend. For the most part I was doing well. The close friends that had supported me throughout my eating disorder were still there for me, and helped me through a lot of my hard moments.

My parents, brothers and I attended several family therapy sessions to gain insight into our relationships and ways we could all improve our relationships to help in my recovery. The sessions were painful in some ways, since a lot of hard issues were brought up. But in the end they made us stronger and brought us closer together.

I went on to high school where I continued to do well and enjoy life. I was part of the honors program and a strong runner on my cross-country team. My friends and I were closer than ever and spent a lot of time together. Despite all my successes, my eating disorder would still rear its ugly head from time to time – although never close to the low that I reached when I had to be hospitalized. The times that old habits presented themselves, were due to the fact that I was trying to take on more than I could handle. I was somewhat of a perfectionist and on top of striving to achieve good grades I'd joined lots of clubs and activities. When I slipped it was because I was so busy and stressed out that I grasped for control and sometimes my eating disorder would temporarily become that source of control.

Fortunately, the times that I slipped in high school I was able to catch myself and get myself back on track. It wasn't always easy. Sometimes I needed to take time off from an activity or skip out on something. Sometimes my doctor had me take a break from running. But I started identifying patterns and realized that if I took on more than I could handle then my eating disorder would resurface, and I needed to take a step back. I really enjoyed cross-country and other activities which motivated me to take care of myself, so that I could participate in them.

When senior prom came around, I was really excited. High school would be over in a few short weeks and the night would be a time to dance and celebrate with friends. I couldn't wait to get all dressed up. I tried on dresses and I was able to find one that fit me beautifully. I didn't focus on the size or measurements. I got my nails and my hair done. I danced all night and laughed with my friends. I felt so beautiful. I had never felt like that before about myself.

I graduated high school and felt nervous about going to college in the fall. I knew that college would be a big transition for me and that there was a chance I might slip back into old habits. I chose to go to a college nearby. I commuted for my first year so that I would be able to adjust more easily rather than starting off with living at school away from my family.

I surprisingly enjoyed college. Initially it was a challenging adjustment but I met a lot of new and interesting people and I was able to keep up and do well in my classes. I continued to see my family and stayed in touch with old friends. I worked part time on the weekends to make some extra money. I felt so empowered to be able to be so independent and free without slipping into old habits.

Of course like any college student there were several times when I was overwhelmed with school. There were times I stayed up for most of the night studying. Sleep deprivation would make me cranky and look at the world in a negative light. Even though my stress level wasn't always ideal, I managed to not slip back

into my old ED habits. Sometimes I needed to cry, sometimes I needed a quick walk outside or to just get out and see a movie with a friend.

In 2007 I started dating a wonderful man and good friend named Jonathan who I had met at my part time retail job. After a two year friendship we had started hanging out more and very quickly fell in love. It was amazing to find someone who I could be myself around. We shared the same sense of humor, same love of Food Network, and enjoyed watching cheesy horror movies together. We truly enjoyed each other for who we were – the only things we expected out of each other were honesty and respect. I knew that I had found someone who I was not only compatible with, but also shared my values and treated me the way I deserved to be treated.

I graduated college in 2008 and enjoyed a fun and exciting summer before I started working in the “real world”. I traveled to Hawaii with my best friend and went to Mexico with my family. It was amazing how throughout this big transition of graduating college and travelling around the world I was so happy and enjoyed the moments for what they were. My ED used to control my life and now I was able to enjoy new experiences and meet new people without my ED interfering.

After a fun summer I began working at a technology company in sales. I did well in sales and after some time moved into marketing which I was more passionate about. I still lived with my family so that I could save up some money to eventually move out. My relationship with Jonathan continued to strengthen and we spent every weekend together. Even though working full time was draining sometimes, I really enjoyed having a full time job and making my own money.

In 2009 my boyfriend proposed to me during the fireworks on the Fourth of July. It was one of the best moments in my whole life. I have never felt the pure elation and excitement that I felt that day. It was a truly magical moment that I’ll never forget. I of course said yes and we quickly shared the news with our friends and family.

In 2010, after over a year of detailed wedding planning we moved into our first apartment and shortly after had our wedding. We had a big fall wedding with lots of friends and family who were excited to celebrate our day with us. The day was perfect. I wore a gorgeous gown and had our close friends and brothers as bridesmaids and groomsmen. Most of the guests spent the night out on the dance floor with us. It couldn’t have been better.

The first year of our marriage seemed to fly by. We both worked full time and enjoyed our nights and weekends together. I still had several close friendships from high school and college and got together with them from time to time. I took Zumba classes after work and started cooking more.

In 2011 we bought our first home. No sooner had we settled into our new house when I found out that I was pregnant.

While we were both really excited to be parents, I was somewhat anxious about the changes that would happen to my body. When I was struggling with my ED, pregnancy absolutely terrified me – not because I didn’t want children. I’ve always loved children and looked forward to having my own family. But the thought of my body changing so drastically over a short period of time and having no control over it was scary. But at this point in my life I knew that I was healthy and had the strength to carry out a healthy pregnancy. It’s always a little scary and nerve-wracking for any mom-to-be when you have no idea what to expect, so I didn’t feel like my feelings were threatening or a warning that my eating disorder would make an appearance.

After the initial shock wore off I had a pretty normal pregnancy. The morning sickness was not pleasant but after a couple of months I was feeling great and really excited to become a mother. As my body started to transform I felt amazing. Unlike I had expected it was incredibly humbling and empowering to know that a little person was growing and developing inside me – one that completely relied on me for its nutrients and development.

I felt grateful that I was able to enjoy the pregnancy experience. I took pride in keeping myself happy, healthy, and rested for my baby. I loved when my little one would kick me or I could feel it having hiccups. As my belly started to grow with the pregnancy I actually felt kind of cute and enjoyed picking out maternity clothes. It was such a different experience than I had envisioned years ago.

My son Jacob was born on the last day of May, 2012. It was the best day of my life. Since then he has grown into a very busy and active toddler. He lights up our world and has completely changed my priorities and routine.

Becoming a parent has been an incredible experience and I've learned a lot about myself. I have a different perspective on the importance of taking care of myself. I take care of my body and treat it with respect, so that I have the strength and energy to keep up with my energetic child while working full time. At our house you'll often hear laughter – as we chase each other around the house and play hide and seek. Every day that he grows and does something new is another day that I'm grateful to have had the strength to bring him to this world and to care for him.

Throughout my eating disorder I've learned a lot about nutrition, coping strategies, medications and a lot of other educational information. But if there is one lesson that I will always carry with me it's the importance of self-love. We are only given one body and one life in this world. Life is a gift and our bodies were made to preserve that gift. For all of the amazing things that we do in life, we rely on our bodies and should treat them respectfully.

One memory that sticks out for me was the end of my 7th grade year, when the school year was ending and I had recently been discharged from the hospital that first time. We were signing yearbooks and one of my friends wrote a note to me. In the note he said "I still don't understand why you did that to yourself." I remember being taken aback and hurt. I was shocked that he had written something so blatant and insensitive. Now that I look back, I have a different perspective. From his perspective he had seen me hurting myself, and he couldn't understand why someone would do that. He didn't understand why I would disrespect my body the way that I did. It's something that will always stick with me – why do we hurt ourselves?

In this day and age we are often so cruel to ourselves. How can we harm or feel hatred towards something that allows us to breathe, and provides a vessel for our soul to live? How can we look at a wrinkle or a bulge and let that be a reflection of our worth? So many people pride themselves on their looks. While there's no shame in enjoying make-up, fashion, or fitness, it should not be how we define our value or our success. Going for a run, eating a new food, or buying designer shoes should be done because of the positive feelings that it brings – not because we're punishing ourselves or doing it to somehow prove our worth.

To achieve and maintain that love and respect for yourself, do the things that make you happy and surround yourself with positive people. Toxic relationships can sometimes be the difference between recovery and relapse. I learned that recovery requires support – not only in the form of therapy and medical support, but more importantly in the form of a good support system of family and friends. I've been lucky to have a lot of amazing friendships and a close-knit family that's always been there for me when I've needed it. But at points I've encountered unhealthy and negative influences in my life and had to

cut ties with those people. It's not that those people were bad or mean or unlikeable, but they inhibited my recovery which took priority. Those were hard decisions to make but I have never regretted making them.

This may sound strange and morbid, but sometimes when I feel like I'm losing perspective or having doubts about myself, I think about funerals; not about death, but about what people say at funerals. When you go to a funeral, people never talk about how much that person weighed or how great they looked in a bikini, because frankly their loved ones really don't care. What people do remember is one's character; love of life; and joy that they brought to those who knew them. I think about this from time to time when I'm feeling torn about a decision or down on myself.

I'm truly grateful that I overcame my ED and I'm hopeful that my story and my words can bring hope and encouragement to those who may be struggling.

Recovery is not easy, it's not final, and it doesn't come without hard work; but it is worth it. You will have good days and bad days. You may take 3 steps forward and 2 steps back sometimes, but that doesn't mean that you've failed. Be patient with yourself, be kind to yourself, and respect yourself. You will get through this and when you do, you'll be able to share your story and give others the hope and encouragement that they need.