

Kate's Story

I don't ever remember an age where I was truly comfortable or unselfconscious in my body. There was an "exercise" in treatment when they would say "remember when you were little and felt fine about your body". I could never do it – there was no such time for me. I have had varying degrees of "dealing with it" – dependent on what was going on in my life. If I had a boyfriend – which was mostly how I determined my worth from about age 12 – I would feel okay and at times even attractive. But that was always short-lived and conditional and I would quickly revert to my natural insecure state of being. This started at a very young age and continued into adulthood. It wasn't something I talked about – and therefore never really had to deal with it head on or even acknowledge it. Even after marrying a wonderful and supportive man, I struggled with it daily. My weight fluctuated during all those years but I was always – at least physically – healthy and neither over nor underweight.

As an adult, I became very interested in fitness and eventually ran marathons and worked out almost every day but lived in reasonable balance and nourished myself well. My husband and I then began trying to have a child. It took two years for me to conceive, which was largely due to over-exercise interrupting my cycle – but eventually, with the help of hormone shots I was pregnant. When my son was born, I felt a level of love and sense of protection for him that I did not know existed. We had just bought our house and my salary was a necessity, but every time I even thought of returning to work and putting him in day care – I would cry uncontrollably. Thankfully, I was able to find a night job which allowed me to leave my son with my husband at night and be with him during the day. I was SO grateful and I would never change a thing – but it was a very difficult transition after 15 years of working in a busy office and 9-5 adult interaction to be home alone with an infant from 7 in the morning until 6 at night.

I spent all my time with my son – which I cherished – but it also provided me a tremendous amount of time to think and occupy my mind. My prior interest in nutrition and exercise quickly became an obsession. I lost the "baby weight" very quickly and got many compliments from well-meaning friends and family. I then continued to lose more and more weight, and the compliments dwindled and were replaced by looks of concern and eventually no looks at all, as those who cared about me found it difficult to look at me in the painfully frail state I was in. I felt so alone and judged. This continued, through various stages of denial on my part – for one and a half years.

We then decided to have another child. I knew I had to gain some weight and get healthier and I did so. With the help, again, of hormone shots, I was pregnant again. Oddly, the only time in my life when I didn't struggle so much with my weight was during my pregnancies. I knew it was a necessary and healthy thing, and since it wasn't just about me – I was okay with it. If I am honest with myself, it was also a freedom from the self-imposed responsibility to stay at a certain weight and could actually enjoy my food and rest when I needed to. I gave birth to a beautiful baby girl and that same fierce love returned to me once again. Unfortunately, by that time I had been laid off and wasn't working at all – and was home with my two year old son and daughter full time. This sent me right back to my unhealthy and obsessive patterns and again my weight plummeted. I had joined a stay at home Moms group and formed a group of friends – we met weekly with our children for coffee at one another's homes. At one

point, they staged a bit of an intervention to express how worried they were about my health. I promised to get help and went to therapy a few times but as soon as the necessity to gain weight was mentioned I quit. My Mom, sisters, brothers, friends, - essentially everyone in my life expressed their concerns and confronted me in various ways – in response to which I would either get mad or yes them to death with “you’re right” or “I’ll definitely get help”, promises I had no intention of keeping. Finally, one night at a dinner with friends, after spending the evening moving my food around on my plate and making well-practiced excuses that I had a big lunch or my food was too salty – I arrived home to find two very lengthy and quite angry emails from two of the women who were at dinner. They told me they were hurt and disappointed that I had lied to them when I said I would get help – and reminded me of my two beautiful children and my responsibility to be healthy for them. The thought that anyone was questioning my devotion to my kids at first infuriated me, and then broke my heart. This was the impetus for change for me – and I saw things much more clearly and knew I could not continue not only to abuse myself but to set this example for my kids.

That night, I booked myself for a two week program at CEDC in Cambridge. My husband took two weeks off of work and I took the train daily to attend the program from 8:30-2:30. I was still resistant and mad but from the beginning of the first day, I committed to change and began to eat three meals a day (I have stuck to that promise since) – and though I made some progress through the program but I was still terrified of gaining any weight. I continued my therapy/nutritionist/doctors appointments that entire year. I also attended weekly MEDA support groups on Monday night to keep my focus on recovery. What surprised me most about these meetings was how I felt about the other women there. As I listened to them – I heard so much of myself – but as I looked at them I saw smart, exceptionally kind, beautiful women with so much to offer the world. I wanted better for them – but had trouble translating that to myself. So much of therapy is the “why do I have an eating disorder?” – or “how did I get an eating disorder” – I spend a lot of time on that. I grew up in an amazing loving family of eight children – my Mom did diet quite a bit and looks were clearly considered important – but no more so than many other women I knew and it wasn’t stressed enough to have “caused” such an issue in my life. I was never overweight or abused, none of the text book causes applied to me. So my therapy continued to focus on the why?

Three years ago I spent a typical fun Christmas Eve with my huge family, including my Mom and Dad. A few days later my parents left to drive to Florida for the winter. I returned home from the gym on the morning of December 27th to have my husband tell me that my folks had stopped off at my cousins’ house in Virginia. They had a lovely evening with them, and after dinner my parents stayed at their house. At some point during the night – my Dad had a massive stroke and was not expected to recover. I literally collapsed on the stairs in shock. I have always had a very special love for my Dad, it’s hard to describe what a sweet kind man he was and how I felt about him. All seven of my brothers and sisters and I flew down to Virginia that afternoon to be with my Mom. We met with the Dr. and she told us that my Dad would not recover and that we needed to decide whether or not we wanted to keep him on life support. As hard as this was, we knew he would never want to be kept alive by artificial means, and my Mom, with our blessing asked that life support be discontinued. All eight of us slept in his hospital room on the floor that night – and took turns spending a few moments alone with him to say our goodbyes. I

promised him I would recover, he had been so supportive of me and had written me a letter from Florida the previous winter to say he was so proud I was getting help and that he was proud to tell people I was his daughter.

Losing my Dad left a huge hole in my life, but also gave me a new sense of purpose for recovery. A reminder that life is precious and unpredictable. How much time had I wasted obsessing over the scale? What did I want to teach my own children about how to value themselves? Was I demonstrating for my daughter that it's what other people say you should be or what men find attractive that makes you who you are? Or to take care of and respect yourself in every way? I had that choice and I still do every day. I knew what I had to do but needed someone to keep me on track so I recruited the help of my friend Janie.

Janie is a trainer at my gym and is someone with a heart of gold but she is one tough cookie. I knew I was afraid enough of her that if I told her to hold me accountable, I'd be too scared to screw up. Whenever I would start to slip back into the old patterns she would remind me of my promise to my Dad. One day during a conversation I was pondering the "why" of my eating disorder. She said "maybe there is no why – we all have our struggles – if you feel fat some days just feel it and then get over it". She continued "alcoholics have to crave a drink – not have one – and move on – this is your issue so when you feel bad then tough shit for you – get over it." This sounds so harsh, but to know Janie is to love her – she always tells it like it is and it was exactly what I needed to hear. Every time I start to obsess or beat myself up now, I let myself feel it and then remind myself "tough shit for me" and I laugh and move on.

I still exercise for my health and eat well – it makes me feel good. But if I take a day off from the gym or eat something unhealthy I still wake up the next day and all is okay in the world. Can you sit with it instead of obsessing? Look around your life. Is something missing that needs fixing? I can guarantee you food or a lack of it or excessive exercise won't fix it. What would you tell your best friend or sister if she put herself down the way you do to yourself? I made a vow that I will not own a scale, will not criticize my body or anyone else's especially in front of my kids, and be healthy and active for the right reasons – not what magazines and TV tell me. Let other people be shallow if they need to – it's not your problem. They are missing the point, and you are here because you "get it" and just need to apply it to yourself. Judging someone by their weight is no different than judging them by their skin color or bank account. It has nothing to do with who you are. I am so very blessed in my life. My husband, my children, my Mom and my eight amazing siblings deserve the best of me and I intend to give it to them. I bet you are blessed too – we all have our crosses to bear – but we can help each other carry them.