 Kayla’s Story

My name is Kayla and I am recovered from an eating disorder. Let me say that again: after a struggle that consumed nearly half my life, I have fully recovered from Anorexia.

I must admit that I never thought I would say those words. There were times when I didn’t even really believe in this thing that people called “recovery.” Anxious and toe-tapping I would sit in the back of the room at talks like this one. I stared at the carpet and listened to peoples’ stories. I heard their rhythmic ways of speaking, the soothing voices, the sentences full of courage, of love, of success- but I didn’t believe them. I *couldn’t* believe them because to me, lost in the throes of my eating disorder and distracted by an endless stream of self-critical thoughts, these ideas were simply too far away.

So I want to start by saying this: if that is you right now, or perhaps someone you know, it’s alright. If you don’t think that you can recover or if maybe you aren’t sure you want to- I encourage you to try your best to keep listening anyway. Eventually the words you hear and the stories you let in may make a big difference. Mostly, I just want everyone to hear that recovery *is possible*, even if it doesn’t seem that way now.

As for my own story, I remember the time before my eating disorder very well. I was an adventuresome and loving child, with a flair for the theatrical and a characteristic stubborn streak that would sometimes get me into trouble at school. With a tight-knit family that lived locally for the most part, I grew up playing in the yard with grass-stained pants and a rag-tag group of cousins. My childhood was beautiful and lived with a spirit of wild abandon. I remember sticky summer evenings spent on the swingset with barefeet flying into the air, my Dad’s lullabies sung tenderly and off-tune from my bedroom floor and the comfort of reading picture books from my Mom’s lap.

So from the outside, given that I had a generally happy and supportive childhood, it would seem strange to some that I developed an eating disorder at all. But here’s the thing: eating disorders are not that simple. They are very real and very complex mental health problems. I am sure that a tangled mix of socio-cultural, genetic and biochemical influences played into my personal development of Anorexia.

As a start, it is hard to deny the wide-spread influence of the media in setting a precedent for distorted body image in all of us. Magazines, television stations, the internet- they are all full of messages telling us to shrink and pinch and improve our bodies. The rise in various social media channels and creation of endless apps for photo editing have allowed people to create and live in a totally unrealistic world at the click of a mouse. The images of people that we see everyday are unattainable. This is simply because most of them are actually fake—a trick of the computer, some kind of photo filter, a digital mirage.

But while I strongly believe that the body image messages in the media are wrong and more damaging than most of us realize, they are certainly not the whole story. Or at least they weren’t for me. I personally was never overly obsessed with pop-culture or wanting to be a model. I have found that the portrayal of Anorexia as a disorder caused by the media is an over-simplification. There is so much more to it.

I will say that my eating disorder was certainly encouraged in part by the ballet community in which I was included as a child. From the age of three into adolescence, I pulled on my pink tights and twisted my frizzy hair into a bun to go to ballet class multiple times a week. I loved it: the movement, the music, the stage. However I was also constantly being pressured to conform my body to a frail ballerina ideal. In class we were frequently barked at and advised to watch our food choices. I didn’t realize how destructive some of these comments were then; but I have heard nasty echoes of my dance teacher’s critical voice in my head for years, even though it has been a long time since I heard it.

Yet not every girl at my dance studio had an eating disorder either. So why me?

For a long time I blamed myself. I treated my fixation on food and weight as though it was some unfortunate decision I had made, and despised myself for not being able to fix it. However now, after years of self-reflection and research, I am confident that a lot of what caused my eating disorder was biological.

An abundance of medical studies today are showing showing that there are physiological underpinnings to many mental health disorders. Infections, autoimmune conditions, certain genetic combinations, imbalances in gut bacteria and vitamin deficiencies can all contribute to the development of Anorexia. So for me, when I experienced a relatively rapid onset of eating disorder behaviors around age twelve, I think many of these overlapping things were coming into play.

Late middle school was when my eating disorder really started to take hold. As an active, social and giggly middle-schooler, I developed a seemingly spontaneous belief that I was fat and lazy. For the first time in my life I hated myself. I suddenly didn’t like the way my jeans fit. I thought that I was the laziest, most untalented person in dance class. I felt as though my grades at school weren’t good enough, that maybe I was dumb. All of these ideas started to cause me a lot of anxiety, and I was embarrassed that I hadn’t noticed these flaws before. So I started to restrict foods and devise exercise regimens for myself. At first these things seemed like pretty good habits to have, a valiant effort at self-improvement perhaps. But soon they became compulsions and spiraled wildly out of hand.

What started out as a newfound interest in education, health, and diet, rapidly became a deep and dangerous obsession. I became addicted to controlling my food. To me, every meal became just a heap of numbers on my plate, waiting to be tallied up and compared to my daily standards. I wanted to, needed to loose more weight. I had to exercise for longer and work harder for improved grades at school. Everything I did, I was counting, counting, counting; constantly trying to see how I measured up. The numbers became all that mattered, and yet somehow they were never good enough. The closer they became to what I thought was “ideal”—the lower the weight, the higher the grades—the more I felt compelled to do better and achieve more.

In the meantime, my body starting failing. My plan was backfiring. I was getting weak and restless. I was finding it difficult to sit still and concentrate at school. I could barely make it through a dance class and I was freezing cold all of the time, layering on sweaters and fleece robes even though the New England winter was finally easing and the sun was peering out.

My heart started to do funny things too. The beat was sluggish and I was experiencing frequent palpitations. I slept curled next to my Mom at night, huddled close because she was afraid my heart would stop in the middle of it. Looking back I can’t imagine how terrified and desperate my parents and sister must’ve felt watching my body slowly fade away like this. Yet I didn't care. I didn’t think I had a problem with food. I was just focused on the numbers: one more pound, one more rep, one more hour of studying.

Then my mind started to go too. It is amazing what a malnourished mind will do. I became even more paranoid and anxious. I developed bizarre behaviors. Tapping things, whipping my head around; counting, counting, counting the whole time. I couldn’t be left alone or I would get “stuck” doing one of these rituals. I couldn't do school work because I would write nonsensical words and numbers all over the page. It was such a scary time. I felt completely out of control and I definitely was.

My family struggled for a long time to help me at home like this, trying everyday, every moment to break me free of this number-obsessed trance. But they couldn’t. Soon I was off to my first round of treatment; I was so young.

I remember the trip to the hospital well. It was an hour long winding drive and I cried the whole way. I told my parents they couldn’t leave me. I buckled my seat belt and twisted it into a knot so that it wouldn’t release, thinking maybe if I stayed strapped in I wouldn’t have to get out of the car. Having these symptoms of my eating disorder was terrifying, but the idea of staying in a strange place and working to reverse them sounded even worse.

And to be honest, it did seem that way at first.Being in treatment is difficult. It felt strange to be watched all of the time. To be weighted, pocked, prodded, monitored in the bathroom. Following the protocols was challenging. I had a tough time with every meal and every snack. But I got through it, and when I was released from the hospital for this first time there were balloons and cards waiting. I didn’t much want them at the time because I still felt so miserable. But I put on a smile and accepted them graciously. People thought I was recovered, that this was it!

I must say, there have been many more times in my long recovery journey that I have wished for balloons and cards. So much of the rest of the work in recovery is invisible and a lot of people don’t understand.

For many years after this initial treatment I was considered a “healthy weight.” By all insurance and medical standards I was a-okay. I graduated as president of my high school class and the drama club. I went to college, got into a challenging educational track and made some incredible friends. From the outside I was vibrant and happy. But inside everyday was so hard. My thoughts were impossibly loud and self-critical. I clung to my meal plan like it was the only thing keeping me going. I was constantly counting exchanges, thinking about the next meal, fighting urges to skip it altogether. I was so sick, so distant, still so focused on numbers. Anorexia ground me down day after day.

I was a distracted and small version of myself, with my guard up always. I didn’t want people to know about my eating disorder; I didn’t want them to see how dark and depressing my emotions and self-critical thoughts could be. I was ashamed of my mental struggle. I only let a few people in and I missed out on so many moments and connections with others because I was living largely in my head. I still hold a lot of sadness and regret in my heart for some of what I missed during these years because of my eating disorder.

I met one guy in particular in college who I *really* liked. He was sweet and understanding and made me laugh all of the time. We dated for a few months while working as campus tour guides for a summer. I felt refreshed and hopeful again with him- like maybe I could live the life of a “normal” college kid. But we started to get too close and I couldn’t handle it. I knew he would see too much about the severity of the eating disorder that I was still hiding and try to help. He was caring like that and would’ve done anything for me. But I choose to protect my eating disorder instead and broke up with him. I watched him march down my stairs, slam his car door and pull out of the driveway. I saw him speed away down the road, speed away right out of my life.

To me I thought this is what recovery looked like. Full of long hard, lonely days. Along the way someone had told me that my thoughts and urges may never go away- that I would have to learn to manage them. Well I was “managing” and it felt awful.

I relapsed and missed an entire year of school. While my friends were gallavanting abroad and experiencing rich, dynamic cultures from all around the world, I was in and out of local treatment centers. My eating disorder had taken over my life; something would have to change.

I remember one moment in particular as the time I made up my mind that I wouldn’t let Anorexia win. I was outside of a treatment center waiting to be picked up for a pass. Sitting on a low concrete wall, I was swinging my legs back and forth as they dangled off the side. It was dusk and the sky was turning a soft, chalky pink. The breeze had kicked up, and carried with it that spicy late summer smell. A flock of geese went flapping by in a great big V overhead, honking clumsily. The noise startled me for a moment from my ruminating negative thoughts and I looked up at the sky. It brought me back to a memory from my childhood, of watching the migrating geese with my parents in the front yard. And then I thought: would I have told that little girl all the terrible, critical things I had just been thinking? Would I have called her fat and lazy? Would I have denied her the possibility of following her dreams and meeting people just so that she could stay thin? The answer, of course, was no.

Committing to full recovery isn’t easy. It takes dealing with a lot of loss and missing out. It takes showing up to treatment programs and going through the motions, everyday. It takes an incredible amount of discomfort and perseverance and recommitting over and over again. But here is what we must always remember and never let go: the work is worth it.

You see, being recovered is also not what I used to think it was. It is not all about a number registering on the scale or getting to a healthy weight, although this is an important part of it. It is not about measuring cups, meal plans and food exchanges, but those may be helpful tools for a time. It is not about a calendar full of doctor’s appointments, therapy sessions and meetings with a nutritionist, however I have found that it is helpful to listen closely because these people are far wiser than we may know.

Recovery is actually the strong, spontaneous person waiting on the other side of all this. This person exists in all of us; we just have to search long enough and look hard enough to find them.

So today, to me, this is what being recovered looks like:

I eat good, tasty, nutrient-rich food freely and fuel my body when I need to.

I indulge in occasional rich sweets and desserts simply because they taste divine.

I move my body for the joy of moving it: to feel the air on my checks at the top of a mountain, to feel my toes in the sand when I walk on a beach, to stretch my spine and explore how my hips can move in yoga. I do not move my body to reach some goal or in an attempt to get “ripped.”

I take pleasure in learning things that I find interesting, just for the sake of it. I’ve let go of getting hung up on curriculums and grading scales and trying to prove myself to anyone else.

I am fully here, present for my friends and family when they need a hug or a laugh or a reassuring voice on the other end of the phone.

I work as a nurse advocate, researching and writing about integrative strategies for helping those struggling with mental health disorders, a cause I believe in with all of my heart because I’ve lived it.

I am also marrying that kid from college that I liked so much, because I finally realized that if I let him in we could beat this thing together. Now we are starting our own life without Anorexia tagging along.

So how did I get to be this person? To be honest, I’m not even entirely sure. I can’t offer a specific formula, but I can identify some key strategies that turned things around for me.

* I kept showing up. I attended programs and appointments even when I didn’t want to. I did my best to be honest with myself and my providers too, and found an incredible team who I connected with and now love dearly.
* I continually and ceremoniously threw out pants and shirts that didn’t fit me anymore. Instead I found new bright, colorful, flowing clothes that were more like an extension of my personality than some tight restrictive suit to squeeze into.
* Others helped me to start to appreciate food for what it is. Being involved in farming and gardening was helpful, because I began to experience the miracle of how foods grow from their humble beginnings in the soil, before they are labelled or divvied into exchanges and put in a box.
* I reconnected with my body in a gentle, non-harming way through yoga and mindfulness. The library was actually a fantastic resource for audio tapes on these subjects that I could listen to when commuting between appointments, or practice along with privately in my own time and space.
* My family and friends stood by me no matter what. They didn’t always say the right thing or do everything perfectly but they were there through it all. I can’t thank them more for offering their unconditional love and reminding me of who I really was outside of my disorder.
* Working with integrative practitioners helped me to tease out different nutrient deficiencies and other physical issues I was having and correct them. I also saw a bodyworker who helped me release places where I was holding onto tension and old patterns in my body. Although these things may sound alternative or “strange”, I do believe that these holistic approaches helped me to move on from my eating disorder in both in my body and in my mind. There is also an increasing amount of research to show that this is true.

I realize that recovery is different for everyone; we all have our own stories, our own troubles, our own victories. But there is one thing that I think truly applies to everyone, and I want to leave you with that thought.

Recovery isn’t easy, but hold on. It *is* possible, and there is so much waiting for you.