

Kim's Story

Revised January, 2015

I always considered myself to be a shy person before my eating disorder. I have come to know that I was not shy; I was just insecure. Through recovery, I have gained the security and confidence to be myself. I would tell a person I hardly met my life story....as I am doing today.

I am recovered from anorexia. It was exhausting and alienating to be dealing with it. I experienced lots of anxiety. I had very minimal self-worth and didn't feel like I deserved to eat. I was reading my first journal, which was written just prior to the start of my long road to recovery. It said something like, "If only I could just eat normally again, I wouldn't feel so depressed and my life would be better." That statement strikes me in such a profound way. At the time, I knew that I had problematic eating behaviors and I knew that I didn't feel good emotionally. However, my understanding of the link between the two was completely backward. I thought that if I could just fix my eating, then I would be cured. I had a long way to go to realize that my problems went beneath the problematic eating behaviors; that my feelings were so buried beneath the eating behaviors; that the eating behaviors were my way of coping.

Looking back, my eating disorder had several voices. It was saying:

"I am angry."

"I am afraid."

"I want to disappear."

"I give you a sense of control and accomplishment."

All of this will make a lot of sense as I tell you my story.

I was a smart kid with my little eyeglasses and a bowl-shaped hair style; my workbooks were always in hand. You see, I would like to do homework before I even got to school. My older brother had assignments to do at home, and I wanted to as well. Mom liked to work on them with me. It was one of the few happy memories I had with her. I was her best friend and talked endlessly about the tasks and happenings of the day. I remember Mom being very angry (although I couldn't articulate it as such at the time). I just knew she was not like other mothers, and she knew it, too. She would get upset, and naturally so, if I compared her to my friends' mothers. I know now that she was carrying many years of her own family strife and anger, and on top of that, she was basically raising my older brother and me by herself. My father worked two jobs (one as a police officer and one as a mason). He needed to work in order to provide for the family; Mom stayed at home. I was very spoiled – I had all the latest electronics, all the clothes I wanted, gold jewelry and diamond earrings. Somehow deep down inside I knew this wasn't right and felt guilty about it. We weren't wealthy – we had a decent house but were probably lower-middle class family. But, since Dad was never home, I almost felt entitled to SOMETHING for it all.

After all, I have almost no memories of him before the age 13. Once as a family we went to the zoo and once bowling. We also went to a car show. That's it. 3 things as a family in my entire childhood. We didn't go on vacation together and we didn't have special family time or even special traditions that wouldn't have cost money.

It was a strained family. As I mentioned, my mother was harboring a lot of unresolved anger and sadness. Mom was, and continues to be, a very loud person. It is just natural for her, and I

understand that today. She yelled at my brother and me a lot! She would, however, listen to me talk endlessly about my day. If I got to some difficult things, like problems with friends, she would not know how to respond. She would try to blame one party or the other, or just sweep it away. All I ever wanted her to say was, "Gee, sounds like you had a bad day." I guess the point I'm trying to get across here is that there was not a lot of affection or emotional support in our house at all.

When I was going through recovery, she really wanted no part of it for herself. Now that I am healthy, and she seems to value my opinion, she began therapy with my begging a few years ago. She discovered that she has obsessive-compulsive disorder and a clear history of depression. When I was a kid, I do remember her repeatedly checking the stove settings, windows and locks every night. I now know that was just one minor facet of her problem. She was going through life in a very stressed and angry manner. It was for those reasons that she didn't give me the love and emotional support I needed and wanted. In recent years, she broke down and cried while she revealed her extreme guilt at "taking her anger out on her kids."

When my father "resigned" from the police force, I always believed he did so in order to spend more time with the family and salvage his marriage. Mom and Dad seemed to argue non-stop. Even I knew it wasn't a healthy or happy relationship. I learned the prior summer, when I was 12, that he had been having an affair for many years. This came straight from my father. It was very unfortunate that he didn't protect me from this information. Mom asked my father to leave. It was a very strange time for me. When my father left, I do remember feeling so terribly sad for my Mom. She cried a lot, and it was at that moment (although I didn't really know what was happening) that I began to feel like I had to be more than just a kid. That came at a very inopportune time: just as I was entering puberty. I was scared to death to develop. Nobody ever sat with me to tell me about sex, my period and the like. I did get a book when I was 8. It was a thick, yellow pamphlet titled, "A Doctor Talks to an 8-Year Old."

The truth surrounding my father's resignation from the police force is still unclear to me. It doesn't really matter to me at this point. The whole thing was just a disaster. Money became incredibly tight. Our house was in foreclosure for quite some time. It was an extraordinarily stressful time and there were moments in late high school that I worried that I wouldn't have a place to live.

My parents divorced several years ago after having been together for almost 40 years!!! In fact, I was the one to find my father at a restaurant with another woman. It was in Rhode Island and almost unbelievable that I'd run into him. It definitely triggered the old trauma. I told my mother, who took matters into her own hands, it was a tough time. I didn't speak to my father for about a year. I had written a letter to him asking for a general apology for the pain he caused the family. He refused to apologize, which was why I didn't speak to him. I decided that I would have a relationship with him, but it was on my terms. Throughout all of this, I didn't resort to eating disordered behaviors. I went back to therapy to get the support of a professional. She was an amazing help. She helped me to look at the past and put it in a place in my mind. She also worked with me on the concept of acceptance. This concept has helped to transform my adult life. My natural instinct will probably always be to want to control things, but with the concept of acceptance came the understanding of letting go; building new relationships with my mother and my father in new ways....individually, rather than together.

Enough of growing up/family.....

I probably began to show signs of my eating disorder when I was 9. The real problem came in high school, but when I was 9, a girl called me a “fat pig.” I was a little bit pudgy at that point and hated myself for it. This girl beat me to the cheerleading team, as she was a skinny gymnast who was loved by the squad leaders. I was devastated, and that summer (the summer I turned 10), I severely restricted what I ate and lost a significant amount of weight really quickly. I began my unhealthy rituals with food at that point. Dieting and rituals ruled me for several years. They seemed to subside for a while, but returned full-fledged in high school.

Dieting was easy to me, even as a kid. Mom was always struggling with her weight, and we had low-calorie foods in the house at all times. Fad diets or specifically named food preferences (paleo, vegan, low-carb) had not yet started, but thin of course was very “in.” I learned from Mom different diet foods and patterns. She chose this path rather than treat her body right with a balanced diet. In addition to not having an example of balance eating to model, I was allowed to eat whatever kind of food I wanted. I mostly chose food and snacks with no nutrients. When it came time for dinner I didn’t want any. I hated myself for that. During my years of anorexia, certain foods became forbidden. Today, I do still love the forbidden foods, and enjoy them when I want to. I mention them because I found a way to enjoy them in a healthy way. It is so striking how forbidden they became during my years of anorexia. I had taken an all or nothing approach to food. It was either good or bad.

I used to want to be like and look like the popular kids: athletic, naturally thin, long locks of hair. I used to also watch beauty pageants every year. I would record them and watch them over and over again. This actually made me feel bad about myself. Since I had no sense of self-esteem from internal factors like my sensitive/caring nature, I was striving to find a way to feel better about myself and focused on external characteristics like my physical appearance and my performance at school.

Much of my story revolves around school and studying. Good grades were just such an enormous part of who I was. It gave me a sense of validation and it felt good to get that constant good feedback at school. I had rigid standards, almost like an addiction, to get A’s. I felt good about myself for working extremely hard and for getting the external validation from my teachers. Also, my father used me as an object to brag about to his friends. I guess I felt like he was living vicariously through me, and once I started to get the good grades, I couldn’t slip. The addiction to good grades can’t be entirely attributed to the pressures of teachers and parents. It was also my issue; my way of escaping from life. It was a vicious circle, though, because while it felt good it was also exhausting. I didn’t even retain much of what I learned in those classes!!!

I was very bright and very hard working, but I truthfully feel like there were many students who were brighter than me. I graduated as the valedictorian by working incredibly hard and neglecting all other areas of my life: friendships, extracurricular activities (dance class, S.A.D.D., student council). My parents did not have the wherewithal to help me obtain a balanced life. They, along with my school guidance counselor, were by my side as I slipped into obsessions about my weight, my appearance, and my grades.....nobody was able to stop it.

The killer was that I was always teased about being smart. Teachers said very little as my peers relentlessly made fun of me. I know now that these kids were probably jealous and most likely just very petty. At the time, it was extremely hurtful, and I still have unpleasant feelings when I think about my high school experience. I would hate the teachers for calling out quiz grades (“Oh, Kim got a 98...” etc.). I would sit in my chair and want to disappear. Junior and Senior years were particularly

hard. I was one of the first in my extended family to attend college. Talk about a lot of pressure without much guidance. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I would just get A's for the sake of it, and got A's in everything. How could I know what I was particularly fond of doing? It created a lot of stress because I couldn't pick a remotely possible career path or college track. I was stressed and frightened.

I started to diet between the summer of Junior and Senior years. I was full-figured but not medically overweight. My friend used to go to the gym and invited me to join. I was hooked!!! I ended up working out excessively and decreasing the amount of food I ate. I experienced a dramatic weight loss over the summer and was complimented everywhere I went once school was back in session. I just couldn't seem to stop losing weight at that point. Nobody noticed me before. Now, all of a sudden I was being noticed. Once I kept going on the weight loss track, it took on a life of its own. I became extremely withdrawn and felt very depressed. Even my closest friends seemed to turn on me. They no longer called me, and I certainly couldn't reach out to them. My only guess was that they just didn't understand what was happening to me. Or quite possibly they weren't real friends.

I also lost out on a special relationship as a result of my eating disorder. I dated the same young man throughout most of high school and some of college. He said he couldn't cope with my problem. I gave up on all social contact. I just lacked energy and it was so difficult to be in a group setting. I felt like people didn't like me anymore.

My eating disorder also set me back at least a decade as far as developing into a healthy, functioning adult capable of making good decisions. Even after I started to develop healthier eating patterns, I still had a lot of development and growth to do. I married for the wrong reasons and ended up getting divorced. I didn't know what I wanted to do for work and career, so I seemed to go from job to job – many of which were bad fits for me. I will talk more about that when I get to life after recovery.

Transition to solutions!!!

Late in my senior year of high school, my gynecologist diagnosed me with an ovarian cyst and realized that I didn't have a primary care physician to manage my care. She sent me to an internist, who made an immediate referral to the therapist I'd see for the next 5 years. I did individual therapy with a therapist starting at 3 times per week and gradually reducing the intensity as my health improved. She was a critical piece in my recovery. I did not go to an in-patient treatment center because it was much harder to find specialized treatment like that at the time. I definitely would've gone if it was more available and if I was encouraged to go!!

Regarding college, I was excited about what I thought would be a fresh start after the not so pleasant high school experience. It was anything but. I felt like I was completely out of place at Holy Cross in Worcester. To me it seemed that everyone had money, dressed a certain way, and seemed generally snobby. I dressed nicely, but I was more stylish and individual, and most people there dressed straight out of the J. Crew catalog. I ended up being asked to leave an overcrowded room (3 girls in a dorm room meant for 2 because they over-enrolled that year), spent the next semester alone, and then the next year with a girl who was completely my opposite. It was just a disaster for me socially. I was making a 3.85 GPA despite my isolation, depression, and increasing consumption by the eating disorder. I would endlessly walk alone on the track. I would call home crying all the time. I really

can't believe I made a 3.85. I had so little energy. The doctors were baffled, too. I hung on medically, but barely.

By the middle of my second year, I knew I needed a change. I transferred to Bentley University in Waltham and was able to focus on my recovery. It was really the best thing I ever did for myself. I had a hard time adjusting at first at Bentley, probably because while I felt more comfortable and at home there, I experienced a lot of guilt and anxiety about leaving Holy Cross. I felt like I was letting a lot of people down and that, in some way, it was a failure.

School was a little bit easier for me at Bentley (less focus on liberal arts, reading and writing), and I really focused on my recovery and my social skills. Granted, I didn't make lifelong friends, but my overall experience was great and I look back fondly. I was able to take care of myself in an apartment setting (so I needed to grocery shop, do all of my laundry and get a part-time job). I was gaining independence from my parents in the process, which along with some other things I'll get to in a bit, was a key piece in my recovery. I joined a support group I found in Waltham and began taking medication. With these tools, I made great strides in recovery. I started moving away from denial to doing what my therapist would call "hard mental work." The medication seemed to take the edge off of my anxiety and anger, and I received the support I needed in group therapy.

Some activities that really aided in my recovery were reading about eating disorders**, journaling, exploring new artistic interests such as drawing with pastels and going to museums. It was at this point that I really discovered music. Some artists that spoke to me were Enya and Jars of Clay. Enya touched my soul – her ethereal and melodic music reached me on a new level: a higher plane of existence than my body. Jars of Clay was an emerging Christian band, and though I was not and am not a practicing Christian, I truly enjoyed their lyrics and musical style. When I listened to their music, I felt as though someone other than my therapist understood what I was feeling. I started to go for light, healthy walks, incorporating "forbidden foods" slowly into my diet, and watching myself eat. I can't remember who suggested that I watch myself eat, but it really helped me to "be in the moment" and to see my feelings portrayed in my body language and facial expressions.

**"Somebody to Love" by Leslie Newman – a book that can be found on Amazon; it contains a lot of writing exercises which I found helpful in order to connect my feelings to my body parts.

I had a lot of conflicting thoughts and feelings during recovery. I felt very protective of my parents. I didn't want to talk about them in therapy at first. Over time, I felt guilty that I was getting healthy and I felt like everyone else in my family needed help. However, my mother would not participate in support groups and was very defensive. She was not "going to do blame" at all. She almost seemed to get angry at times if I would express a need or call attention to something she was doing – she felt I was getting too deep in the "psych 'expletive'." She would take me to my therapy even while I was living at college – that was A LOT of driving - but she wanted NO part of it for herself. She flat-out refused to come to a Mother-Daughter Day at my support group session. My father used to repetitively and incessantly call me inappropriate pet names. It used to really bother me. It would, in fact, make me cringe. I would yell and scream at him begging him to stop. When I finally shared this with the therapist, she was able to help me through it. She knew it was inappropriate and I felt validated. I had a serious conversation with my father about it, and it worked to stop this unhealthy behavior. My father began to explore healthy food options at Whole Foods, which was really nice.

The journey through recovery was foggy at first. I didn't really understand what was happening. I had never heard the term "anorexia" when my therapist gave me the diagnosis. She said it was just a term and that we would work through it. It was a windy road with different levels of commitment along the way. I don't feel that I took any major U-turns and for that I am truly blessed. I mainly plugged forward on a pretty long road. Recovering requires truly acknowledging that there's a problem and then being committed to change. I seemed to crawl at first, then walked with some steps backward, and when I was really ready, I ran. I knew that my parents wanted me to get better. In retrospect, I think that their lack of emotional support ultimately prolonged the recovery process. I don't blame them. They weren't purposefully malicious. They just had so much of their own stuff to deal with.

I can't really pinpoint an actual turning point when I became recovered. It was a process over time. I started to become more aware of my own feelings – journal entries started to be about my feelings rather than what I perceived to be going on with everyone else around me or what people were saying to me. The recovery process was a period of growth. Growth requires courage, strength, and persistence. For me, I came to believe in a power greater than myself. I struggled a lot with trusting myself: trusting in nourishing my body and then trusting in my decisions. Trusting in nourishing myself and recovering from the eating disorder happened by my late twenties. Trusting in my decisions and recovering from my family life and lack of self-esteem took much more time, but it is so worth the work. I still tend to internalize a lot (meaning that I think everything going on around me is somehow related to me or is somehow my fault), but I rely on my network of friends and my significant other to talk through those moments. I still keep very high expectations for myself, but not to the point of being unhealthy. I have developed some very good friendships, more hobbies; tap dancing, watching basketball, nature walks, cooking, listening to new kinds of music.

At one period about 5-8 years ago, I would occasionally still get the urge to skip dinner if I was feeling particularly upset or stressed, but then after a second or two of thought, I realized that it didn't work and that I was really hungry. Food just didn't work as a coping mechanism anymore. Today, I listen to my body and eat when I am hungry. I do not have any forbidden foods. I eat a lot of different things in moderation and it is sometimes hard to do this amidst so many people who are dieting or following some strict eating plan. I am actually eating in an intuitive manner; the very manner I yearned for during my life with ED.

A year and a half ago, I was diagnosed with Celiac disease. I had some digestive issues that became noticeable about many years ago. I ignored them. As things worsened, I finally got medical attention and the diagnosis. I was so relieved to have "figured it out"but.....OH MAN I had to then rethink everything related to food. I was angry and depressed about it. How could this happen after I spent my entire life working to NOT think about food? I slowly realized that it might have been a sign that I was still not thinking about food in the right way – I kind of went from defining myself by restricting to partially defining myself by eating whatever I wanted. However, I think what's best for me now is to not have food define me at all! The only forbidden food for me is gluten, and that is because my body thinks it is a foreign object and it damages my intestines. Please keep in mind that this requires a formal diagnosis from a doctor. The point is that, once again, my persistence and resilience were tested.

My eating disorder, recovery, and tumultuous family life were some factors that delayed my career progression. In the last several years, I have developed a positive relationship with my father and his new wife. I found a man with whom I'd like to share my life. I knew that I had one major area left to address in order to make my life the most meaningful it could be: career.

For a long time, I thought I might want to focus my career in the field of psychology, but I did some deep digging and found that I really wanted to explore the field of teaching. I always loved to play "school" when I was a kid (I, of course wanted to be the teacher) and, believe it or not, I worked at an early learning center when I was a Bentley business student and LOVED it. Why, one might ask, did I not pursue that?? Because I was moving in a direction driven by money and what I thought others wanted me to be. I worked with kindergarteners last year in an after school program and also as a substitute teaching assistant. I fell in love again! The children ground me in the moment and they challenge me! You never know what they might do or say! It is so fulfilling to guide youngsters in their early social/emotional development and literacy skills. I also love to see them smile and help them through their peer conflicts. While I'd like to teach kindergarten, I'm now working part-time in an early learning center as I pursue my MEd in Early Childhood Education. I started on my birthday last summer in an accelerated program, and I am more than half way through.

There is a wonderful life after ED. It is up to you to do the work and to shape who you want to be. It might be challenging at times; it might be sad at times; but most importantly there is so much joy and love to experience.

It is an honor to speak here today, and I thank you for listening. I would welcome any questions you might have. No question is too personal for me 😊