

Lindsay's Story

This month, January 2015, is monumental. For others, it may pass as another dark winter month in Boston, waiting for spring to arrive. But for me, it means **victory**. It means reaching a milestone that for years seemed so utterly unobtainable: it marks five years since I exited eating disorder treatment for the very last time.

Because I have become so vocal about my recovery in the last few years, I am familiar with the question: “what caused your eating disorder?” My simple response is: “I wish I knew.” Wouldn’t we all love to know. Perhaps it was a cruel combination of genetics, society, media and my natural responses to pain. However, I do remember our first encounter. Five years ago, I wrote throughout treatment. Unable to express my despair verbally, I typed my emotions into a keyboard with a vengeance. And this is what I wrote about meeting my eating disorder:

“In third grade, my mom took me to Fashion Bug—a local, cheap store—to get back-to-school gear. Typically I was excited to try on sparkly clothes, slip on shiny pants, and create fashion statements I cringe at today. As I perused the racks, something caught my eye: BUTTERFLY JEANS! I was hooked; I fell in love with the embroidered pants. I rushed into the dressing room, shimmied the curtain closed, and began to pull up the jeans. Yet the joyous melody hit a flat note: I distinctly recall lifting my eyes to the mirror and deciding, certainly, that I was fat. It’s my earliest recollection of hating my body: age 8. That day forward, I collected snapshots of self-loathing: not wanting to look at my dance pictures; obsessing over calories; hating to see my arms up against the side of the pool between laps because I thought they were flabby. At age 11, I stunted my growth. As my lanky body yearned for calories, I came to the conclusion that I would be an amazing diet coach as a future career. I crafted a competition: against the scale. My doctor told me that they would have to create a new growth chart because I was falling off the regular one; I smiled. As threats began about having to be treated for an eating disorder, I laughed. I didn’t know how people were ever crazy enough to have one of “those.””

I wrote those words five years ago, and when I recall the girl who typed them, my heart aches in the deepest of ways. My brain was so starved, my body so weak, my soul so crushed that my entire world was boiled down to what I did and didn’t eat. My mind was tormented by the internal battle of my eating disorder. Soon, the eating disorder voice nearly silenced me completely, and I became a skeleton of myself. My humanity and my life dimmed, and I lost an ability to experience a spectrum of emotions and daily decisions. Instead, it was all concealed by my eating disorder. The disease had already seeped into the spaces outside of my body, ruining relationships, career plans, and formative years. I loathed my body for invading too much space. The mental accusations of my thighs being too wide and my stomach too big haunted me. At the time, I felt in control, wise and strong. But I look back and I see an awful abuse:

sprinting the stairs of my college dorm at 3 a.m., lying to loved ones, obsessing 24/7, and eventually wishing that this body did not exist and would fail to function at all. Perhaps that would give me relief.

Despite my despair, I did not feel worthy enough to go to treatment. I didn't believe I was small enough; I didn't believe my past and my emotional scars were messed up enough to warrant it. I faced a turning point as I sat with a nurse practitioner that pleaded with me to go. She casually asked me whom I blamed for my disorder. I retorted that my parents were amazing, I had great friends, and this was solely my fault. I was in my own head. Slowly, like Robin Williams in "Goodwill Hunting", she gazed at me sternly and declared: "This is not your fault." A seed was planted with those five words. An ounce of me believed her, and I went to treatment.

Treatment, as most of you know, was no joke. I would wake up, praying I was living in a nightmare that I would soon snap out of. The content and context of my existence quickly altered, and with it, I did to. Before treatment, I was a normal college student—a perfectionist dead set on becoming the next Diane Sawyer. I threw myself into my Broadcast Journalism and Spanish majors and kept busy with friends, activities, clubs, and sports. As I entered treatment, I soon realized that it was all surface-level. Now, I truly had to face who I had become, and therapy forced me to rip off the hundreds of Band-Aids and stare into the wounds of my life. I had spent over a decade measuring all of my worth in numbers: the one on the scale, the size inside my jeans, the grade at the top of a paper. For the first time, those numbers were out of my control. I felt desperate—a rabid, deranged kind of desperate. I screamed and sobbed and begged to have those numbers back in my hands. But as I learned that I couldn't have them back, I was forced to stand face-to-face with all I had suppressed in exchange for the worship of my eating disorder—my insecurity, depression, how I felt during my mom's chemotherapy in high school, my perfectionistic rigidity, the loss of loved ones, unprocessed hurts. As true emotion bombarded me, I longed for the security blanket of my eating disorder. Without it, I faced relentless waves of past pain, ebbing and flowing into my existence once again. The tides of confrontations were unrelenting, and life suddenly seemed so unstable. I was, for sure, no exceptional patient. I yelled at the director for lying to me about weight, I refused to talk to my therapist, I remained closed-off in group. As I heard tales of abuse, trauma, and tragedy from fellow patients, the thought lingered: *I don't deserve to be here. I haven't had a rough enough life to earn an eating disorder.*

Yet as the days chipped away, ever so slowly, a truer version of Lindsay began to emerge. It was not drastic; instead, like a tree whose leaves change color so gradually that you scarcely notice until the whole structure is bright red, a hope now burrowed deep within me. In treatment, I occasionally caught glimpses of what my life could be free from my disease. On exciting days, I would experience a gasp of fresh air. I truly began to realize and believe that it *IS* a disease. Perhaps I could someday go out to eat with friends and enjoy it. Maybe I could run for joy and not for punishment. Far in the future, maybe I could even make it through a day without my mind functioning as an automatic, cumulative calorie counter.

Though I was ecstatic to finish treatment, I soon faced the fear of re-entering my life. I shook as I drove up to my dorm room, horrified that people would see my body. *What would they think happened? How could I survive the embarrassment?* However, I soon learned that no one really watched my weight very closely. Instead, I got a few “you look great” remarks, but none of the cruel ones my mind had devised.

If treatment is hard, maintaining recovery post-treatment is ten times harder. Suddenly, those numbers were *kind of* back in my power, but I now understood why they shouldn't be. Partially out of an aversion to ever going to treatment again and partially because I could see how the eating disorder was robbing me of joy, hope, and a future, I fought like hell. While back into the hectic college scene of classes and social events and dining halls, I clung to a meal plan. I refused to stray, because I knew that's when the mind games began. I kept appointments with my therapist, nutritionist and doctor and began to slowly, month-by-month, tell others about my battle. Before and during treatment, my eating disorder was my deep, dark, twisted secret. My roommates didn't even know where I was. I fed my best friends just the smallest parcels of information. But I began to realize that the secrecy was fueling the disease, and I needed to bring light to it.

Externally, I was a bit “healthier,” but recovery is not like the flip of a switch. I could not simply change my mind. When doctors' prescription of treatment and unwanted pounds was fulfilled, the eating disorder thoughts remained. Each day, I struggled to untangle a bit more of the mess, fighting to rewire my brain. I forged on but soon faced a life-event that tested my recovery more than I thought possible. My college boyfriend was the reason I sought help in the first place; he was the only person close enough to my shut down self at that point to see how desperately I needed help. He begged me to get therapy. He pleaded with me to tell my parents. He encouraged me to go to treatment. He was the face that kept me going and the voice on the other end of the phone rooting for me to push through. And a month after leaving treatment, we broke up. My instantaneous reaction was to call out for my eating disorder. Surely I could not break up with both my long-time boyfriend and my longer-time eating disorder at the same time. My mind jumped to the number on the scale going down.....down.....down. With my boyfriend out of the picture, maybe I could focus more on my eating disorder.

But something amazing happened. The night we broke up, the habits and skills I learned in treatment begged me to stick to my meal plan. Against all odds, I obeyed that voice. I went to a friend's dorm, cried earnestly for the first time in a long time, and I *ate*. That one snack, at 10 p.m. in a musty dorm in Syracuse, New York changed my life. It taught me, in a real way, that it was possible for me to face the tragedies of life without resorting to my eating disorder. Even if I were alone, without my boyfriend's support, I could still recover. I truly saw, with clarity, that although my relationship with my boyfriend had been healthy and stable, my love affair with my eating disorder was abusive. It had dragged me back and forth, near the line separating life and death, leaving me dazed and empty. My recovery process continued for days, months, and years. I recall sobbing into hotel sheets, making a mess of them with wet mascara as I screamed that I missed my eating disorder. But five years later, as my brain has healed and

many lies have been rewired, I miss my eating disorder very infrequently. Instead, I mostly mourn what it did to my body. I recall receiving the phone call from my nurse with test results: advanced osteoporosis at age 19. I had the bones of a 91-year-old. But over the years those bones have strengthened, the holes being filled with hope and health and truth. Five years later, I still need weekly appointments for my fibromyalgia: a pain condition most likely tied to my time with my eating disorder.

I also remember a doctor telling me that I may never be able to have children and declaring to a therapist that even if I could, I would only ever adopt because I could never handle the out-of-control weight-gain feeling of treatment again. I stand here today, five and a half months pregnant, and I am so thankful that my disease did not rob me of that joy.

Establishing a healthy relationship with food is a continual journey. Like any friendship or marriage, it can be messy; there are no clear-cut answers. At times I wished eating disorders were more like alcoholism: once you quit, you avoid bars and booze at all costs. But food proved to be trickier; I still needed to encounter food, multiple times each day. However, I learned that food is not the enemy; the disease is. The tricky thing with eating disorder recovery is that stopping ED is like stopping a moving train. You have to fight like hell to stop its momentum, and you have to retrain your brain to *want* to stop it. But what I see again and again is friends leaving treatment, having slowed the train down, but then they re-enter real life. Slowly, they allow the train a bit more speed. They skip a meal; it moves faster. They start to allow the thoughts back in; it gains momentum. They miss an appointment. They step back on the scale. And the train is moving so fast again, landing them eventually back in treatment. And the cycle continues. For years upon heart-breaking years of life spent with ED.

My good friend Gina and her family were cheering for her mother at the Boston Marathon finish line in 2013 when the bombs went off. Gina, her brother, and her brother's girlfriend were badly injured. It's challenging to even form the words to express how much they taught me as I watched them fight for their recoveries. After a year of rehab, multiple surgeries and an enormous dose of courage, Gina was able to feel her left foot again. Her brother Pete underwent countless surgeries and still carries a zipper from the bomb underneath his skin. Pete's now wife Rebekah had the most extensive injuries. She underwent countless surgeries over eighteen months attempting to reconstruct her leg. The doctors offered hope that perhaps *this* surgery would allay some of the excruciating pain and prevent further damage. Until November 10, 2014 she tried to make her leg part of her new self. But, finally, she underwent amputation. Eighteen months after the bomb, she wrote a letter to her leg. Here's an excerpt from it:

"I feel like our time together has come to an end. I need to feel everyday that by having a relationship with you, I am becoming a better person. And for a long while now, I haven't felt like that. Instead, I feel like you are holding me back from really reaching my full potential. Now I get this is probably pretty tough to hear me say, but I have never lied to you and I don't plan to start now. What I need is something you can't give me anymore. And the empathy that you require, I can no longer handle. I love you. I really do. But I think I need to start on the next leg of my journey. So with that said, I have enclosed a gift certificate that I hope you will use. Go get yourself one last pedicure on me and enjoy

it because tomorrow...I will be cutting you out of my life for good. Wishing you the best wherever you end up, Xoxo, Rebekah."

On the morning of her amputation, she posted to her Facebook: "I want more than anything for people to know that while tears may fall, this is NOT a sad day. This is my new beginning. Adios, leg."

Rebekah truly "broke up" with her leg. She posted an Instagram photo of her mangled, purple leg with Sharpie words written on it: "It's not you, it's me."

Yes, Rebekah has an amazing attitude. Certainly, accepting amputation at age 27 as a young mom and wife is not easy. But Rebekah realized that she could never have the future she longed for without getting rid of her leg forever.

To my friends who are suffering, I'm sure you've tried to make your relationship with your eating disorder *work* for a long time. While it pains you emotionally, physically and relationally, while it chips away at your soul and your career and your future, you try to make it work *just one more time*, for you cannot imagine parting with it. Today I urge you to consider amputation. Yes, the "surgery" itself may suck. Recovery afterwards will be rough. But in the end, you'll be able to live a much fuller, happier life.

What so often brings me to tears as I think about Gina, Pete and Rebekah is their victory. They were blown up and their lives will never be the same, but the enemy didn't win. They refused to let the bombers defeat them. They won.

I pray your recovery also ends in victory.

A few small, but important, things I learned in my recovery:

- Sweatpants and leggings. It's all about sweatpants! I don't care if you buy maternity pants. They're genius. Be comfortable.
- Throw away, donate or burn your pre-treatment clothes. That was the old you. Don't let them taunt you. O, and get rid of that scale, for good.
- A lot. Don't be afraid to.
- Tell a few, close friends the cold, hard truth. Eating disorders thrive in isolation.
- Your job can wait. Your family can wait. Your bank account can wait. Your semester can wait. Your life cannot.
- Write down what freedom from your eating disorder would look like. Memorize those words, visualize them. Make them your mantra. Keep your eyes on them. For me, a few of my goals included: being better able to focus, for less food anxiety, to live without obsession, to experience joy.
- Today is a great day to start again. You can create a new beginning whenever you please.

A quote I love from F. Scott Fitzgerald says:

“For what it’s worth ... it’s never too late, or in my case too early, to be whoever you want to be. There’s no time limit. Start whenever you want. You can change or stay the same. There are no rules to this thing. We can make the best or the worst of it. I hope you make the best of it. I hope you see things that startle you. I hope you feel things you never felt before. I hope you meet people who have a different point of view. I hope you live a life you’re proud of, and if you’re not, I hope you have the **courage** to start all over again.”

Against all odds, my life does NOT look like it did five years ago. I am in my last semester of graduate school to become a therapist. I love going out to eat. I don’t count calories. I have thick hair. I exercise when I want, for the joy of it. I am married. Certainly, the pregnancy has tested my recovery. I still hate outgrowing clothes and I still stand backwards on scales at the doctor’s office because I don’t want to know the number. Yet I’m surviving it, and I allow myself to grow as much as the baby needs.

All are statements that seemed 100% impossible to me a few years ago.

My life is richer, fuller and more meaningful without an eating disorder. Today, I think about the little baby inside of me and I say, “thank you for making a home in this imperfect, *deeply* unappreciated body.”

I hope and pray that this child never encounters an eating disorder. But if he does, I pray he gets help, quickly. I pray he has parents who models self-care, self- love, and true health. I pray he knows he is cherished. And I pray that he lives in a community in which eating disorders are talked about and fought against.