 **Jackie’s Story: Recovery is Possible**

Hello everyone! My name is Jackie, and I am recovered from an eating disorder. My eating disorder started to develop in 2002, when I was only eight years old. There were so many contributors to me developing an eating disorder that sometimes is hard to keep track. One of the main contributors was the stress of my Granny passing away. She was an excellent role model for me, and it was such a devastating loss because she was not only my grandmother, but also my best friend. At such a young age, I didn’t know how to deal with loss, so I turned to eating disorder behaviors to numb the pain. Of course, I wasn’t aware of what I was doing at the time, but looking back on it, now, I can see that that was a contributor to me developing an eating disorder.

Another contributor was definitely the fact that I was severely bullied for my looks. The bullies were relentless, and would make fun of everything from my size, to even something like my eyebrows. By the time I was in 7th grade the bullying was so severe that I decided to change schools, but it didn’t stop there. I was bullied tirelessly, even sometimes by people I thought were my friends, until the day I graduated high school. Now, looking back on it, I can see that, as the bullying got worse throughout my childhood, my eating disorder behaviors became more and more prevalent.

The media was another factor in me developing an eating disorder. While watching television shows from the time I was eight until I reached recovery, I was absolutely fascinated with weight loss commercials. When one came on the TV, I would stop what I was doing, listen to them, and dream of growing up and buying anything and everything that was out there, to keep my weight down.

Throughout my childhood, while mourning the loss of my Granny, being bullied, and being fascinated with weight loss commercials got worse, my eating disorder became more powerful. I no longer thought for myself, or had much control over what I was thinking. The thoughts were paralyzing. I felt as if I wasn’t good enough, and that I didn’t deserve food. I hated my body, and had no self-compassion or self-love. A list of rules developed in my head, and at that time I believed there was no choice but to follow them. When I was sixteen, I broke my back playing field hockey, and had to miss my entire sophomore year of high school. During that time, as less and less people came to visit me, I began to feel worthless. After a year of being bedridden, I had lost some weight, and when I went back to school I got comments like, “You look so much better now that you lost weight!” While the torturous thoughts developed, so did my eating disorder and other mental health issues. By the time I was seventeen, I had a full-blown eating disorder, depression, anxiety, and was using eating disorder and self harm behaviors to cope with the utter pain that I was in, mentally.

At the same time, I joined the drama club at my school. Although I loved theatre, it also allowed me to spend less and less time at home, and more time away from my parents. I began to eat less and less, and by the time I was eighteen, my parents were so concerned that they had me go to the doctor. It was then that I was diagnosed with anorexia.

My doctor urged my parents to put me in treatment, so towards the end of my senior year of high school, in 2013, after eleven years of developing an eating disorder, I started treatment at a local treatment center. During my intake, I lied about almost everything, so at that time I was put into the intensive outpatient program. I felt as if I didn’t want help, and that there was nothing wrong with what I was doing. My behaviors then became even more frequent than before, and the day after I graduated from high school, I was moved to the partial hospitalization program. But that didn’t last long, because as the lies I once told unfolded, my clinician realized that I needed more help. In July of 2013, I began my first month long hospital stay. During that time, I decided that I wanted to get better, basically because I wanted to go to college in the fall. While in the hospital, I was put of various medications for depression and anxiety. By the time fall came, I convinced my parents and clinicians that I was ready to go to college, and I moved into my dorm at Suffolk University in the fall of 2013. That, however, only lasted two weeks, and at that time I realized that I wasn’t ready to be away from my mom, who is and was such a support system in my life. At that time I moved home, and continued to take classes at Suffolk, but as a commuter student.

Throughout that next year, I began to struggle more and more with body image, as the medicines that I was put on in the hospital caused me to gain weight due to thyroid problems and edema. As this got worse, I began to resort to eating disorder behaviors as a way to cope, and in the fall of 2014, it got so bad that I was forced, by my parents and doctors, to take a leave of absence from college and enter treatment for the second time.

This time was different. I had no desire to recover or change my ways. But I couldn’t stand to see my mom so upset, so I agreed to start treatment again. After time in the partial hospitalization program, and another month in the hospital, I began to use even more behaviors. I was convinced that I would be in and out of treatment for the rest of my life, and that there wasn’t a glimmer of hope in sight. At that time, January of 2015, I decided to quit treatment. I felt that since I was 20, I could now decide for myself what I wanted to do, even though I now realize I wasn’t mentally equipped to do so. But that didn’t last long, because after a month of being on my own, too sick to go to school or even work, I was convinced after many interventions by friends, family, therapists, and doctors, to begin treatment for the 3rd time. But this time was much different. I was rushed to the hospital for my 3rd month long stay, and put on a feeding tube. I remember feeling like “This is the end,” “There’s no hope for me.” But that actually changed, after I became nourished and realized that being in and out of treatment is not what I wanted for my life. I didn’t necessarily know what I wanted to do, but I knew treatment wasn’t going to be it for the rest of my life. I began, slowly but surely, to stop behaviors, and this April marks my 1-year anniversary; free of behaviors and free to LIVE.

I began to pursue recovery, in the hopes of having a life full of fulfillment and joy. I would say the single activity in treatment that helped me the most was making vision boards. I was able to think about my goals, draw them, look at them every day, and now, achieve them. There is something so fulfilling about setting reasonable goals, and achieving them.

There are many tools that I learned in treatment that definitely helped me recover. Besides vision boards, I also learned to combat negative thoughts. I would do this by looking in the mirror and talking to myself as if I were giving advice to a friend. If I had a thought like, “You don’t deserve to eat dinner tonight,” I would look in the mirror, look myself right in the eye, and say, “You have done nothing wrong. Food is not bad in fact it is good because being nourished allows you to do what you like to do, like going bowling with your friends, and spending time with family.” I would say things like this over and over, until there came a time when I knew it was the truth.

Another tool I learned in treatment was learning to practice self-care. This can mean different things for different people, but for me it meant a range of things from nourishing my body, to doing my nails. Do things that make you feel good about yourself, and that inspire you to take good care of your body.

I also learned many important skills in treatment, including journaling, writing positive affirmations, and using distractions. I used journaling as a way to communicate with my treatment team, until I was ready to talk on my own. I would journal after meals, and show my journal to my dietitian and clinician, who would then better understand how to help me. I would also write positive affirmations such as, “You’re worth it,” and “You are enough,” on note cards and put them all over my room at treatment, and then eventually, my room at home. When I was in treatment, I would use distractions like talking to others about my hobbies during meals and snacks. Once I was able to come home, and had to eat some meals alone, I would use distractions like playing games on my phone, or looking up positive quotes while eating.

Now that I have recovered, I couldn’t possibly be happier! I am able to live life to the fullest; I go on adventures with my friends and family, and most importantly, I feel FREE!!! Free of that nagging voice in my head. Free of feeling down. Free of not feeling “good enough”. And most importantly free to live my life.

Through the years, I have developed an amazing support system, including my parents, sister, grandparents, and my three closest friends. When I was in treatment and they came to visit, I found it helpful to talk about other things besides treatment. We would play Pictionary, and my sister would make me laugh, even on my darkest of days. Obviously nobody’s perfect, and sometimes it was hard for me to understand the fact that they couldn’t grasp what I was going through, and that they, themselves, were going through a hard time as well, watching their friend or family member go through the horrors of an eating disorder. The most helpful thing that they ever did was listen to me; and that may sound simple, but as I told them what triggered me to use behaviors, they would try their best to listen, and understand the best they could, and try to help me through the situation. They made me feel comfortable enough to tell them, when what they did or said was triggering, and when I did, they would try their best not to say it again. Just knowing that they were trying meant so much to me.

In the last year, I’ve even started a campaign called “Scales Are Only For Fish,” to inspire others to get the help they need, and it’s become my absolute passion to spread the word to people that recovery is possible! I want people to realize the glimmer of hope that lies even in their darkest of days. With determination and strength, anyone is capable of recovery!

Of course life isn’t always sunshine and rainbows, so I’ve definitely had some “bad days” in recovery. But I use quotations because even my worst day in recovery doesn’t come close to the heart-wrenching pain I was in when I had an eating disorder. When I have a day when my eating disorder thoughts come back, I reach out to a friend or family member, and I try to focus on how far I’ve come, and the fact that I never want to take steps backwards. I try to remember how happy recovery makes me, and how sad I used to feel. When I had an ED my days were mostly bad days, but now in recovery, most of my days are good, to the point where even if something bad happens, I’m able to handle it, and move on- something I never used to be able to do.

My body image now, is SO different than when I had an eating disorder. I’m a human being, so of course I have days in where I’m not a fan of my body. But now, more often than not, when I look in the mirror I think about all that my body does for me. My hands help me type, my feet help me walk, my brain helps me think for myself; and I value that! I also think of the fact that I am a woman, and I’m proud of that; and women have curves and THAT’S OKAY! I’ve learned to not only appreciate my body, but also love my body and what it does for me.

My relationship with food is another thing that is a lot different, now that I have recovered. I followed a meal plan for a while, but now I’m able to do a mix of a meal plan and intuitive eating. I’ve found that I really like to cook and bake, and that I can even enjoy food. I used to be scared to say I liked certain foods, because I felt vulnerable, and like people might look at me differently. But now I’m able to understand that food is a part of living, and I want to live a long and healthy life. I’ve also learned that food can be enjoyable, and even something that can be enjoyed among family and friends. The thing that’s definitely been the most helpful in changing my relationship with food would have to be the fact that, early on in recovery, I began to challenge myself with foods that were hard for me, and I would focus, with the help of my therapist, on being proud of my accomplishments, rather than ashamed. When I was in treatment, instead of Jackie, people started calling me “Jaquiqui,” and with the help of my mom and clinicians, that evolved to “Jaquiqui the Challenge Conquering Ninja!” This made me feel strong, happy, and powerful, and is still something I remind myself of today, when I’m feeling down.

My relationships with others have changed immensely from the time I was in treatment, to now. I find myself being honest with others, a value I’ve always had, but didn’t always obtain. I am an open book now, something I once was afraid of. But I’ve found that the more honest you are with others, the more confident and comfortable you feel with yourself, and I used to think the opposite was the case. But I’ve learned that having or having had an eating disorder is nothing to be ashamed of, and that by talking about it, we can not only help others, but also help ourselves.

My dream is to become a professional public speaker about recovery, and to let others know that I was once in their shoes, and was able to recover, and so can they! To help me stay on track, I still see a therapist every couple of weeks, I still decorate my room with positive affirmations, and I have a solid support system that I know I can always turn to when I need help.

If I were to give advice to those who want to recovery from an eating disorder I would say the first step is to ask for and accept help. Find things in life that support you, whether that be a person, positive affirmations, or getting rid of things like old clothes, mirrors, and scales. Know your worth, and develop self esteem and confidence by combatting negative thoughts, and making a list of all the things you are good at (trust me, there are many!) And if I were to talk to someone who has been struggling for many years, I would tell him or her that there is hope. Even people who struggle for a long time can recover; I’ve seen it happen, not only with myself, but also with others. I want people to know that you CAN break the cycle. It’s hard work, but you can do it! And when you do, the pride and happiness with outshine your past, and you will be free.

There was a time in my life that I never imagined living without an eating disorder. It felt like I was living in the fog of a rainy day with no sunshine in sight. But I found a new beginning with recovery. I like to think of recovery as a battle or a war in my head that I have the power to win. I picture myself as a fighter: a person willing to give all they have to not get knocked down.

The message that I want to send is that EVERY life is worth living. Be open to receiving help, know that you are not alone and that your struggles are not shameful, and embrace your freedom from your eating disorder!

Everyone deserves happiness and joy!