

**Joanna’s Story**

When I was in my mid-twenties in grad school in DC, my ugly, nasty, self-defeating eating disorder reared its ugly head. My eating disorder spoke to me on a daily basis and always said the same thing. “You can do it, Joanna, you can get through this day because that pint of ice cream is waiting for you. Will it be chocolate or cookie dough today?” I told myself that I could always concoct a story that they are for my roommates if the store clerk started to recognize me. But truth be told, I lived alone.

When I started grad school, I was not overly concerned with my weight or my body. Looking back, I cannot recall anything in my life up until that point that looked like an eating disorder. Sure, I was a bit weight conscious in high school and college, but I attribute that to the millions of fashion magazines I devoured and societal pressures that “thin is pretty” and “fat is ugly.” As a teenager, I subscribed to many fashion magazines and loved looking at them to keep up with the latest trends in clothing, makeup, and jewelry. I suppose the repeated images of the models must have had some sort of underlying effect on me. I remember wearing a lot of baggy clothing, but then again, it was the 1990s and the grunge look was in style.

Growing up, I had a healthy relationship with food though I do recall being told that “I ate like a bird” by my grandmother. I wasn’t a particularly picky eater. I definitely enjoyed food and tried new things. I grew up in a family that celebrated milestones and special occasions around a big meal – as many of you, I would imagine – and those types of situations did not provoke any anxiety in me as a kid. However, they began to in adulthood.

I’ve had a lot of time to look back on my childhood and really analyze it to see if there were any signs of things to come in terms of my relationship to food. My mom and I have talked extensively about this recently and neither one of us feel like we could have predicted that I would end up with an eating disorder as an adult. I’ve looked back on journals that I kept off and on. My entries do not present a child with extensive anxiety or depression. I was just a typical kid with crushes on boys and a lot of homework.

However, if you look at my diaries from grad school, they were clearly written by a young woman with a lot on her mind. One entry stated: “I admit it. I often feel worthless. Here’s my problem to ponder: why have I felt like the fattest and ugliest person ever lately?” A few weeks later, I wrote, “I feel so tense – on edge- like my life is out of control.”

As my time in grad school progressed, my anxiety would escalate and set me off in a panic for the smallest thing. I remember one specific day when I was so panicked that if I didn’t get into a certain class, I would not graduate on time. The reality is that I had no idea if that was true or not, but I started catastrophizing many things in my life. Where would I park? Would I have time to get my reading done for class? When will I have time for myself? As a result, I began to emotionally eat. I would eat normal meals out with friends and then I’d go home, by myself, and binge. I knew instinctively that all this binging wasn’t smart, so I’d take a break, join a diet program, and lose the weight by doing the opposite: restricting. I’d eventually stop going to the diet program meetings, and within a few months, I would regain the weight I had lost plus an additional 20 or 30 pounds. I officially became what the media and I referred to as a “yo-yo dieter.”

I had changed. I had lost much of my self-confidence that was present as a child and instead, replaced it with feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. I sought out therapy and was quickly put on an anti-depressant, but a few weeks after I began to take it, I felt as if I were constantly walking on a cloud and looking down at my life happening below without feeling anything. I went from attempting to numb my anxiety with food to actually numbing my brain. I stopped taking the medication – cold turkey - and stopped seeing the doctor. I gave up quickly because I just didn’t want to deal with it. So I continued to seek out my own medication – excessive amounts of food - to numb whatever it was I was feeling.

I finished graduate school and landed in what appeared to be my dream job, but inside I was miserable. I worked long hours, didn’t have a boyfriend, and felt lonely despite having a lot of friends around me. After nearly 4 years, I came to the conclusion that I needed to move and have a fresh start, so I began looking for jobs here in Boston, where my best friends and brother lived.

A few months later, I got a job and moved to Waltham. I was so happy to be in a new place. But little did I know that my depression, anxiety, and emotional eating were coming with me to Waltham – those sneaky little buggers! I cried all of the time. I realized I needed to go back on medication, so I started to see new psychiatrist. Things with her clicked. She tried a few medications, tweaked them, and then I seemed to land on one that started to work. I began to feel more alive and happier again.

I rejoined a popular diet program, and in one year, I lost 70 pounds. I was very thin. On the outside, I looked amazing. I was so happy to be thin again. I thought I could tackle the world! Everyone praised my new physique and I cleaned out my entire closet and purchased form-fitting dresses, stiletto heels, and sexy tight jeans.

I preached about healthy living to anyone who would listen, I rarely ever had dessert, and I always had a date at least 2-3 times a week. On the outside, I had it all. But, inside, I was still relatively unhealthy, despite a rapid weight loss. I had lost a lot of fat but hadn’t gained muscle. Looking at me, you think I could easily climb a mountain. But in reality, when I went to climb Masada in the desert in Israel, I was the very last person in my group to reach the top. I may have been the thinnest, but I was out of shape. And I didn’t eat breakfast before my hike. Sure I did sporadic exercise like water aerobics, but you see, I had starved my body and it didn’t have enough nutrition to keep up with the weight loss.

I kept the weight off for 2 years by monitoring every morsel of food that went into my mouth. I had my routine down pat. And then, I switched jobs. Suddenly my daily routine changed. As I moved up the ranks in the working world, I had more responsibility which required me to work more evenings and weekends, which is when I typically prepared and weighed my food, exercised, and generally, restricted my eating. Instead, out of convenience, I began to eat the food that was available to me at work and I started gaining weight again. My job was initially very stressful and overwhelming. I stopped caring about monitoring my food. It was just too difficult. I attempted to, again, numb my pain and stress again with food.

But let’s be serious. The food did nothing to help me other than distract my mind for a few minutes and give me a break from my perfectionism. For the few minutes during my binge, I could just let go and not have to think about anything. I’d plop myself onto my couch with an array of snacks and mindlessly eat while watching TV. It was pure joy. For a few minutes each night, as I ate and ate and ate, I did not have to deal with work, dating, money, or my life. I could escape into my binge with my favorite foods and the latest episode of Grey’s Anatomy. The other stuff could wait. I gained 100 pounds that year.

For the most part, I tried to avoid thinking about my weight gain, but I was so embarrassed and ashamed, especially to see those people that I had told I would never, ever get fat again. “Nope, I’m going to keep the weight off this time!” I boasted and alas, I had failed. Those of us with perfectionist personalities never want to expose our failures. I was literally wearing my failure on my body.

I stopped socializing with the people who only knew me as a thin person. I couldn’t handle them seeing me or even worse, them not recognizing me. Trust me that happened a lot. People had no idea who I was anymore. Can you imagine how humiliating that was? One person even asked if I was expecting a baby. I tried to hide behind my sense of humor and blow it off, but inside, I was dying.

I had sought out help from a therapist who constantly told me to go on a diet. Eventually, after 4 years, I ended our professional relationship. She fought me on it; I knew it was the right thing to do. I try not to harbor resentment towards her, but the reality is that if she was educated about eating disorders, I may have gotten help sooner.

Eventually I had enough of being fat. I told my psychiatrist that I needed to go back on on a diet. In her quiet way, she handed me a pamphlet and told me I should look into this place instead. It was a brochure for a local eating disorder program. “Ok, will do.” I said with my usual chipper attitude.

I was ready to try something different than a typical diet program. I called the eating disorder clinic the next day. They told me I would need to commit at least 3 nights a week to the intensive outpatient program (IOP). I wasn’t quite ready for that level of commitment, but a few months later, I called back and went in the next day for my intake. I was finally ready.

Have you ever had one of those “aha” moments in your life when all of the pieces of the puzzle begin to come together to form the whole?  Well, when I sat at my intake, as the counselor asked me a series of questions related to eating disorders, I felt a sense of calm come over me.  I had finally landed in the right place and, for some reason; I knew from that very moment that my life was forever changed. Often people with eating disorders are afraid to give them up – that they, in some way, define them. I was tired of all of the shame and hiding.

The not-so-literal light bulb went off above my head. I had binge eating disorder and apparently had been struggling from it for nearly 10 years since I began grad school. I began attending the IOP. I kept it relatively quiet considering I tend to be an over-sharer. I told my family, a few close friends, and my boss, namely because I had to flex my work hours to make it on time to the program.

Having disordered eating can be a very lonely experience. People may know you’re doing it, but you don’t want to talk about it. At my program, I finally realized I wasn’t alone. I loved the group dynamics and friendships formed. Programs don’t always encourage friendships between patients, but now years later, I still talk to many of the women who joined me during my treatment. We act as cheerleaders for each other on Facebook and over email.

A year after I attended my program, I returned to speak to the current IOP participants, similar to a program like Hope & Inspiration. One person asked me: “How do you know you are recovered?” The truth was – I didn’t know. I honestly said that things could change, but I believed I was on the right track. I thought the binges were over.

Then, late one night, I experienced a mindless moment of extensive food consumption – aka a binge. Shortly thereafter I went upstairs to bed. About 3:00 or 4:00am I woke up with a terrible pain in my chest. Am I having a heart attack? What is happening? The pain got worse. I started pacing. I went to the bathroom and wondered: If I throw up, will I feel better? I sat with my head near the toilet but nothing happened, no relief. The pain would come and go, but in general, it was this constant stabbing in my chest, moving around like a huge bubble, and I was desperate for it to pop.

Suddenly it was 7:00am and the pain was so bad that I decided I need to go to the emergency room. I called my brother and told him I thought I was having a heart attack or a food attack or something, and I needed him to take me to the hospital. We went to the ER, I slipped into the gown and waited for the doctor. I begged him for narcotics. What? Since when did I beg for narcotics? I just wanted to get rid of the pain. And then the vomiting began. I couldn’t stop; I filled up endless bags until there was nothing left. Finally, the doctor gave me a medication and I fell asleep peacefully. The pain eventually subsided but that memory – and that feeling – has stayed with me.

I don’t recall having a binge since that day in the hospital, but there have been times when the thoughts have crept into my head. But, in all honesty, I just channel the feelings – both emotional and physical – from that day, and they quickly nip any thoughts away. Around the same time, I started seeing a new therapist who specialized in eating disorders. You know how people say that there are those who come into your life for a reason and you will always remember them? For 4 years, my therapist and I met weekly –and we tackled the difficult issues that fed my eating disorder as well as my depression and anxiety. We looked for patterns in my life – and I had many more of those “aha” light bulb moments - like how I had an avoidance personality, especially when it came to how I handled my finances and other aspects of my life.

Every few months, I’d bring my therapist a cupcake from one of my favorite bakeries. It became a symbol of my fondness for her, but more so, it was an opportunity to transform something that was once so negative in my life to something special just for us. I started a blog about my recovery and wrote a post reflecting on what I had learned since I attended my ED program. I wrote that my body was starting to normalize when it came to hunger. I was beginning to understand when I was hungry and when I was full. I also learned not to give into cravings if I was hungry – that sugar and bread were a quick fix – and that I should balance my snacks with fiber and protein. I also learned that I would never have to diet again!

I began to heal. I stopped trying to mask my raw feelings again and began to break down the wall I had put up around me. I didn’t want to numb them anymore. If I needed a coping strategy or distraction, I grabbed my iPad and played games. Or I painted. Or I watched a show on Netflix that I had been saving up for a special occasion. Or I would call my mom. Years later, I still do all of these things. I inaugurated what what I call my “10 Minute Rule” which means that if I think I’ve had enough of something to eat, but I’m fixated on eating more, I wait 10 minutes. If I still want to eat it after waiting, then I have it. 9 times out of 10 I forget about it. I still do it today, nearly 7 years since I attended the IOP program.

I stopped my late night eating a few years ago, which used to when most of my binges would place. I just don’t have those thoughts creeping into my head that I must go and raid the fridge. Also, I used to be a big snacker when I’d watch TV. Over time, I’ve stopped the association that with watching TV comes food. I’ve been able to separate out the two important elements in my life, so they don’t come hand-in-hand as often as before. I bought myself a nice dining room table so I had an enjoyable place to sit, eat, and relax. I have a rule for myself- I must eat breakfast, lunch and dinner at my table if I am eating at home. I can have snacks on my couch, but I must eat proper meals at my table. I also try to remove take-out foods from containers and put them on a plate. I pour my nightly sparkling water into a glass. I try to treat my meals as a civilized event that doesn’t need to be rushed.

One late afternoon, about 3 years ago, my therapist dropped a bombshell. “I have stage 4 lung cancer,” she told me. Now I’m not a doctor, but I knew stage 4 wasn’t good. I told her that she made her mark on my life and that I was “ok,” and she could know that I could handle things on my own now. “You do not need to worry about me” I told her.

I’m not going to lie. Over the next several days, weeks, months: there were a lot of tears shed. How do you grapple with the fact that the person that literally saved your life had a ticking timer on her own? I would text her from time to time to say hello. She texted me, “I’m happy to hear you are doing well enough to access your own inner strength. I know how capable you are (followed by many smiley faces).” Even while she was in the midst of her radiation and chemo, she was still looking out for me.

Several months later, I began to have a challenging time at my job and needed to get some therapy. I had a very negative interaction with boss that spiraled me into a deep state of depression. My self-esteem was at a record low. I also started on a new medication that made me feel hopeless. After leaving a slew of voicemail messages to some random therapists I found online, I reached out to MEDA and began attending the Wednesday group for some immediate relief from my stress. I also got a recommendation for a new therapist.

During my first session, I immediately knew my new therapist was going to be a good fit. In fact, she was the one who called to let me know that my former therapist had succumbed to the cancer. I can still feel the pain in my heart when I think of her passing. I wrote about her on my blog: “She helped me see the grey in life.  Many people who suffer from eating disorders have perfectionist personalities and only see the world as “good vs bad” or “black and white.”  She helped me understand that not everything had to be all or nothing.  I use what she taught me every day in my life and often quote her at work as I channel her wisdom. “I have to see the grey in this situation,” I hear myself saying.  She’s an angel now I carry on my shoulder every day.”

After my therapist passed away, I felt this need to give back to the ED community for all that she had done for me. I realized I could give back by sharing my story. I felt as if I helped one person, then I’ve done my job. In the process, I realized that I had already helped that one person – me. I had an encounter with the health editor of Boston magazine, pitched my recovery story to her, and within two weeks, my struggle with BED was shared with thousands of readers on their blog. Opening up was incredibly cathartic. When I posted the article on Facebook, the outpouring of support was incredible. For the first time in years, I felt free.

In Dec 2015 I shared my story here at MEDA at Hope and Inspiration, and shortly thereafter, I spoke at MEDA’s fundraising gala in 2016. I stood in front of 200 MEDA supporters and told them my story – this tale that you’ve heard today. It felt like an out of body experience! Afterwards, people came up to me and thanked me – over and over – for bravely sharing my experience with BED. I was so happy to have the opportunity to give back to MEDA….and to my therapist who had passed.

I know I’m lucky. I’ve been with my current therapist – the one that MEDA had recommended – for about 3 years now, and she has supported me through a lot of ups and downs in my life. While my relationship with food is much healthier, I still have a lot of struggles with my anxiety and depression. I’m a Director at work with a tremendous amount of responsibilities, and it would be stressful for anyone, but for someone like me, those stresses can often be amplified if my medications needed tweaking or someone says something to me that I take the wrong way or, frankly, if I am feeling uncomfortable with my body.

Speaking of my body, it has taken me a long time to get used to being in a bigger body. I’m much more at peace with my appearance these days, which has taken me years. My friends always tell me how beautiful I am, but I needed to believe it myself. I’m still working on liking what I see when I look in the mirror.

Recently I said to my therapist, “I think I am getting worse” in reference to my anxiety and depression. She said to me, “On the contrary, you are making tremendous progress” and I realized that she was right. I’m not masking my feelings anymore with food. I’m dealing with issues as they arise head on and allowing myself to feel vulnerable. I’ve knocked down those walls I had built up for so many years. It’s incredibly empowering to not obsess about what others are saying or thinking.

My relationship with food and those big family meals ebb and flow. When I was first beginning my recovery, I would scrutinize the menus of restaurants in advance of visiting them to calm my nerves about what I would order. Now, I can be spontaneous and order more on a whim. If I feel like having a burger, I have one. I have nearly kicked the feeling of shame and guilt ordering a cheeseburger in front of other people, which, to me, used to be considered a “bad food” and could only be consumed alone in a binge. A few years ago, my family took a road trip to the Culinary Institute of America, and participated in an all-day cooking class. Beforehand, I was terrified and embarrassed that I was so terrified. I confided in my mom about it, so she comforted me through the day and paired herself up with me so I wasn’t alone. I survived, though I didn’t enjoy it much. I was invited to go again but I politely declined. It feels good to know my limits at this stage in my life.

One of the side effects of depression and anxiety is the inability to maintain an organized home. For years as I dealt with my ED recovery, my home remained a mess. This past fall I hired home organizers to help me whip it into shape. When they left, I called my parents on FaceTime to show them how beautiful it looked. Suddenly I started sobbing – you know, that really ugly cry where you can’t speak. When I finally got the words out, I told them, “Don’t worry, these are happy tears of pure joy and pride.” It’s been months now and my home remains tidy, but comfortable. I’ve even hosted a few parties and a weekend guest.

Life is pretty good these days. I’m not going to sugar-coat it (pun intended!) and say that every day is full of roses. But these days, despite an occasion thorn, in general I’m the most content I’ve ever been in my adult life. It’s a wonderful feeling! Thank you.