

Anorexia Nervosa:
AMY'S STORY

I grew up wanting to be perfect, and I was very compulsive about everything. I was a straight-A student in school and always tried to please my teachers. I tried very hard not to be on anybody's bad side—I tried to please my parents, my friends, and everybody around me. I had a strong need for perfection and a very strong need to be in control of every situation in my life. There was one situation that I desperately wanted to control but could not control; it was the amount of time I spent with my parents. My parents' work required them to travel frequently because they were in the entertainment business. They left me at home with a nanny most of the time. I had a very wonderful, kind nanny, but still, she was not my parent. I missed my parents a lot when they were gone. I would get very anxious and sad whenever I would see them packing for the next trip. Even as a child, I tried to hide my feelings, and I kept my anger and sadness inside. I cried myself to sleep many nights, wishing my mom could read me a bedtime story. I would visualize that my parents were next to me at bedtime and it would help me go to sleep.

At the end of school days, other children got picked up from school by their parents. They would run to the car and hug their mom or dad, but I got picked up by my nanny. I always wished my parents would pick me up, too, and I could run and hug them, just like the other children. My parents would come back from their trips with lots of gifts for me, but it did not make up for their being gone. Whenever they came back, they spent the little time in between their next trip catching up on their social life in the community. They organized a lot of parties and went to a lot of parties as well. My parents were not alcoholics, but occasionally when they both drank a little too much, they got into verbal arguments. My mom especially could not handle alcohol; I remember she always acted funny with very

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little alcohol. I would say my mom would drink mainly to fit in with her social circle.

I hated it when my parents argued. You could tell that they loved each other very much, but the occasional arguments upset me. When I was younger, I would go to my room and cry, but when I grew a little older, I would try to play a peacemaker between my parents. I was very resentful of their arguments. I would say to myself, “First they were gone and now they came back home only to argue instead of spending time with me.” I harbored an inner resentment toward my parents, but I never showed it to them. I suppressed all my emotions instead.

I was involved in different sports—soccer, basketball, and volleyball. I also took piano lessons, ballet, and gymnastics. My obsession with being perfect nearly was getting out of control; I just did not know how to forgive myself if I were not perfect. I would get really upset if I made any mistakes during practice, and continuously berated myself over my errors. When I reached early puberty and began developing as a young woman, I hated myself. I believed that I could no longer be good at anything if I put on more weight and had all these changes in my body. I was extremely worried about weight gain and initially devised a way to control my weight by skipping one meal a day. I talked about food a lot, but not because I wanted to eat it. As I grew older, my fear of gaining weight became worse and worse. Whenever I looked into the mirror, I saw a very fat person. Being able to control my weight gave me a sense of control over my life. It was as if something were planted in my brain that constantly told me that I was fat. Later I started skipping two meals a day and gradually turned to using diet pills.

I slowly stopped socializing with the outside world. In the past I would go out with friends. We would go shopping at the mall or go to the movies as a group. When I went out with my friends, they would always want to get popcorn, candy and snacks or “grab a bite to eat afterwards”. At first, I usually said that I was not hungry and my friends did not mind. The skinnier I got, the more they started to ask questions or make comments. They would say things like “you never eat anything.” Or “why aren’t you eating again Amy?” Their comments bothered me and hurt my feelings. I decided that if I did not go out with my friends, then I would not have to worry about my friends bothering me concerning food. I did not want to go on dates either. I wanted to have a boyfriend like any other girl, but I did not want to deal with being taking to a restaurant or any type of activity where I would have to see food.

Within a few months everybody noticed the drastic changes in my weight, and I could sense that people were talking about me, but it could not stop me from not eating. My schoolmates and friends would constantly comment on how skinny I was. I got so angry that I stopped talking to almost everyone at school. I felt like

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if they wanted to talk about me all the time then I did not need them. My teachers were worried and asked to see my parents. I very defensively told my teachers that my parents were not available, but they could see my nanny if they wanted. My nanny was equally worried about me, but she could not tell me what to do. I was too adamant and stubborn to take any instructions from her. She would try to force me to eat, and I would explode into anger. The mere thought or sight of food created a lot of stress and fear in me, and got my heart racing. I spent an unreasonable amount of time in the exercise room working out. We had a very well equipped exercise room in the basement of the house. I would keep exercising until I felt so dizzy that I would pass out. I was obsessed with weighing myself and always felt a big sense of relief whenever the scale showed I was losing weight. I walked around feeling lifeless most of the time, but I could not be bothered. My menstrual cycle became irregular, but I was not worried about it because I was not sexually active. In fact, I was very happy. I would prefer my menstrual cycle to go away because I never accepted it, psychologically or mentally. I always wished I did not have any monthly periods.

My parents came back from one of their very prolonged trips and noticed how wasted I looked. I lost so much weight that I looked like a skeleton and my hair was thin and falling out. They were totally shocked. My parents confronted me about my weight, and I was very defensive. My mom was especially devastated. She cried bitterly, repeatedly saying that she did not know where she went wrong. She even started throwing things around her room out of frustration. My parents had mistakenly thought that by providing me with a lot of material comfort, I would be okay. They completely forgot about emotional comfort.

My mom would put me in front of the mirror with her and would ask me if I saw what she saw. In my mind I thought we must have been looking at two different people because I only saw myself as a fat person. I was very convinced that nothing was wrong with me. People stared at me everywhere I went. I hated the staring but I could not stop starving myself. Eventually, my parents were able to convince me to go to the doctor's office with them, and I reluctantly agreed to go. The doctor diagnosed me with anorexia nervosa, a type of eating disorder, and I was checked into a treatment center.

Treatment for me initially was a torture. I considered running away from the treatment center many times. In my mind, I was convinced that I was fat, and I could not understand why everybody was trying to make me gain weight. I could not see what they saw, and my mind could not register what everybody was saying to me. In other words, I just did not get it.

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My treatment lasted for three long months, and I was lucky my parents could afford to pay for it. It was a long road to recovery, and I was relieved to go home. I have had two minor relapses since my first hospitalization, but nothing like the initial episode that resulted in my first hospitalization. I must confess that I still have a chronic fear of food and a fear of gaining weight, and I continuously struggle with my fears. I am using the coping skills that I learned at the treatment program to change the way I think and see myself. I was also diagnosed with underlying depression, so I was in treatment for both depression and an eating disorder. I was placed on some medications for the treatment of the depression as well.

I am so glad to say that I am making progress. I am eating healthy without starving myself. I am also interacting again with the outside world. I have lost some friends because they did not understand my illness, but the friends that I have kept have been very helpful. My relationship with my parents has also improved. I followed up with therapy at an outpatient treatment program. The inpatient and outpatient treatment, and several family sessions we had with my parents brought out a lot of hurt and pain that I kept inside of me growing up. The emotional neglect by my parents obviously affected me more than I thought. This was partly responsible for my struggle with anorexia nervosa. I could not control my parents' trips, but I could control my weight. The sad thing about this illness is, you do not feel cured of the illness, but you can always control it. You feel like your brain is tricking you whenever you look into the mirror. Your brain continuously tells you that you are fat because you only see a fat person in the mirror, even when you are lifeless and almost disappearing. The goal is to control the illness by not giving in to the deceitful thoughts, and not believing what you see in the mirror. I have to struggle constantly with reprogramming my thinking, and this is emotionally draining. I do not feel sorry for myself or walk around with self-pity, but I am still baffled about how I ended up this way. I try to focus my energy on recovery and thankful for every day that I am here. I always tell myself it could be worse, and I realize everybody has issues that they struggle with, which may not necessarily be anorexia nervosa. If your story sounds like mine, please get help. Do not allow anorexia nervosa to cut your life short. There is help out there; it is never too late to get help.

Quotes of Encouragement...

As the wind blows hard and Amy's story sounds familiar to you, remember the following:

“Don't forget until it is too late that the business of life is not business, but living.”

~ B. C. Forbes

Anorexia nervosa can kill; the disease will deceive you and push you to your grave; your brain will trick you and convince you that you are fat until you waste away. Life is a precious gift that must be protected by a strong desire to live; fight for your life before it is too late. Death is irreversible. (LB)

“Talk back to your internal critic. Train yourself to recognize and write down critical thoughts as they go through your mind. Learn why these thoughts are untrue and practice talking and writing back to them.”

~ Robert J. McKain

The manifestation of anorexia nervosa is primarily your thoughts that translate into the way you see yourself. Look for the inner strength to recognize these deceitful and destructive thoughts; confront them and recognize these thoughts as lies. Be mindful that they can only destroy you, and talk back to the thoughts through the same mind that produced them. Tell the man in the mirror that he is not real. (LB)

“Remember you will not always win; some days the most resourceful individual will taste defeat. But there is in this case always tomorrow—after you have done your best to achieve success today.”

~ Maxwell Maltz

Anorexia nervosa can be a continuous struggle for the victim, so be grateful for daily victory over the disease. Take one day at a time; the secret to living is not to give up. Life is worth fighting for. Don't allow your struggles or your failures to speak to you, because you fail only when you stop trying. (LB)