

SAMPLE CHAPTER

EATING MYSELF CRAZY

HOW I MADE PEACE WITH FOOD
(AND HOW YOU CAN TOO)

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My story—“Hey, Fatty!”

There were two incidents that quickly educated me that there was a standard in body shape that I apparently was not following. To make matters worse, I wasn't told nicely. I was berated in front of others.

My first experience learning the importance of body image came at five years old—the day of Kindergarten school pictures. My mom had brushed out my shiny strawberry blonde hair and put me in a red turtleneck. I was so excited to get my first school picture taken. The assembling of the students was a bit disorganized. The library filled as a few classrooms of students at a time piled into where the pictures were being taken. It was fairly cramped and I was trying to stay near my class, but was shoved off to the side by some older kids who said, “Get out of the way, Fatty.”

I was stunned and hurt and stopped in my tracks. Others continued to push me further from my class. I started to panic because I was getting lost in the mayhem and could see through a small opening of kids that my class was getting its picture taken. I desperately pushed my way to the staffroom where I knew my mom was visiting. I started crying to my mom that I was pushed and was missing having my picture taken. With that, she took my



hand and barged right through the crowd. She put me right front of the camera, wiped my tears, gave me a kiss and told me to smile a big smile. I sat in front of the camera with the big bright light shining in my face feeling like I was on display for all to see. I squeezed out the best smile I could, but inside my heart was sinking.

The second experience was in my first gymnastics class a couple weeks later. I was so excited to start my class as I loved to do somersaults and tumble around. My mom recognized this and thought it was the perfect activity for me. I was so proud of the gymnastics outfit my mom bought me. It was a red jumpsuit with red tights and little slippers. I felt like a ballerina and was eagerly prancing around in it. Just before the classes started I went in the dressing room with a couple of the kids I knew. We ran into two girls who were about three years older than us. They focused their attention on me, looking me up and down. They started pointing and laughing at me. “You look like a big, fat, red tomato!” They kept laughing and walked away.

A huge lump formed in my throat and tears welled up. I wanted to run as far away from there as fast as I could. I never went back. My mother couldn't understand why, given that all I did was somersault after somersault at home. I didn't tell her due to my embarrassment and worry she would call their parents (or worse) speak to them directly. My shame over my body shape was preventing me from doing something I loved. I quickly went from a happy-go-lucky little girl to one who felt she wasn't the same as everyone else. I started feeling shame about my body size, feeling others were constantly scrutinizing my appearance.

Lots to learn

At five years old, I had no awareness of my body image or that I was fat until I was told so. Even my idea of “fat” wasn't clear or accurate, as my only comparison with fat people was Santa Claus. I certainly couldn't look like Santa Claus, could I? I started to become self-conscious about my body and was insecure and shy around kids older than me. Luckily, over the next couple of years I lost my baby fat and didn't hear much about it until my teen years, but the thoughts of being fat remained.

Knowing what I know now, three things come to mind when I think of those two significant moments. First, it clearly shows how very early childhood social experiences can quickly mold one's self-image and self-esteem. Second, it shows that experiences, combined with strong, intense negative emotions have the ability to bore a hole in your mind and influence your thoughts for a long time. And third: What was my mom thinking dressing a chubby kid in tight red clothing?!?

Seriously, we can all relate to times when we received negative feedback and it may have taken us totally off guard. Depending on the power you give it, it can totally change your view of yourself. As a child, your self-esteem is forming and your self-concept is being influenced by the immediate environment and other people's feedback. My self-esteem had started on shaky ground and I was now hypersensitive to other people's judgments. I now couldn't trust my own self-concept because it obviously was so off the mark from how other people seemed to see me.

As long as I was willing to give the power to other people, my inability to trust myself was going to make my life very difficult.

Comfort food discovered

The summer I turned 14 years old, my family and I moved to another town. Everything I knew and cherished was left behind—My best friend, my grandparents, my school and (most of all) my house in front of the lake where I spent most of my childhood playing. It became a very depressing summer for me. No lake, no friends...no happiness. I spent most of it hidden in a new, unfamiliar house and didn't dare venture outside in case someone saw me. I didn't get much sunshine or exercise, which was out of character—normally I loved running around in summer shorts and bare feet in the summer heat. That summer I just stayed in my room reading or watching TV in the family room.

My mom took to baking every day and made fresh bread, buns and (best of all) cinnamon buns. She made the big, sticky ones the size of my dad's hand where you had to lick the sweet cinnamon syrup off your fingers. It was the only thing that brightened my lonely days. I had at least three or four a day. This is when my love for bread and sugar flourished and became my favorite comfort food. The smell of fresh bread warmed my heart and the taste filled my emptiness and distracted me from boredom. I was also dreading starting at a new school, and the freshly baked dough felt like a fuzzy blanket wrapped around me, giving me the sense that everything was going to be all right.

After meeting some new friends and starting school, things became much better. I seemed to have been accepted easily and everything became new and exciting. After school I came home to freshly baked bread and scarfed down two thick pieces with lots of peanut butter and milk. I noticed after awhile that my pants were getting a little tighter and I needed new ones. It didn't really bother me until months later when my childhood best friend told me that she received my new school picture I mailed. She said she showed it to my old classmates who were shocked to see how much weight I gained.

What she said was like a slap in the face, more like a wake-up slap, as I wasn't aware it was so noticeable to others. The feelings from Kindergarten came back to me in a rush. I immediately swore off my mom's baking. I would lose whatever weight I had gained because being fat was not going to make me popular among my new classmates. The realization that I was fatter than I thought and that, again, I had not been aware of my body size threw me in a panic to lose weight.

Dieting for a 14-year-old was all about calorie restriction as that was the only knowledge I had about losing weight. I scrutinized my food and restricted the ones that were high calorie or known to have fat in them. For months I tried not eat any bread or cinnamon buns but the cravings were so persistent that eventually I would cave, tearing into a thick slice of bread or a cinnamon bun and then agonize over how I was going to deal with the calories.

I exercised to music in my room hoping to burn the calories off, which seemed to help somewhat. I weighed myself twice a day, once in the morning to see if I lost any weight and again after school to determine how much I would allow myself to eat. When I didn't have any bread or sugar the cravings would be so intense that I would resort to eating a bowl of cereal or a handful of chocolate chips in an attempt to suppress the cravings. It never really completely satisfied me, but it helped take the edge off.

The next trick I used to try to motivate myself was to post pictures of models from my pile of fashion magazines all over my room. I would regularly compare myself to them especially, in regard to the stomach area. Their waistlines and stomachs were flawless, smooth and sexy. I had bumps and folds that would spill over from my jeans. I would feel disgusting and gross after looking at these pictures but it was the self-torture I needed to get myself to stop eating.

I rode this crazy train of calorie-in, calorie-out for about a year and after many failed attempts to control my eating I needed another way of dealing with my fluctuating weight and over-eating. Eliminating bread, sugar and fat was a daily battle and one that I wasn't winning. I was starting to eat out a lot with my friends. Hamburgers, fries, chicken

fingers, and pizza were almost a daily occurrence and I could see the number on the scale starting to creep up. I desperately needed a solution. My body image was becoming more and more important: girls my age were hooking up with boyfriends, and I had one in my sight. However, the boy I liked had the attention of another girl who was much skinnier in my mind. Food was ruining everything for me.

The last resort

I had heard one of my friends joking around about people forcing themselves to throw up after eating. It may have been a toss away comment, but I zeroed in on it. That's it, I thought. This is the solution to my problem! Would I actually have the guts to do it? I decided I had to; there was no other way. A couple of days later when nobody else was home, I gave it a try. It wasn't as easy as I thought it would be. There was a lot of gagging, choking and "God, this is disgusting," with only a bit of food coming up. My eyes watered and my face was red from holding my breath. I tried a couple of more times until I finally figured out where exactly my fingers had to be in my throat, and it all came up. I finally had my "get-out-of-jail-free" card.

Becoming a bulimic wasn't something I planned to do. I thought that purging was only going to be an option when I was desperate; a last resort when my eating got out of control and I overate. I thought I would be able to maintain my "diet" (whatever that was) and keep my eating under control. That ended up not being the case—not at all. My dependency on food to feel good and comfort me on the bad days was going against my diet ideals which led me to the bathroom over and over. It was a vicious and painful circle.

Purging was easier than controlling my food. The first bite would trigger all my senses and draw me into an eating frenzy. Everything was

starting to get more and more out of control and so was my behavior. My moods were all over the place which resulted in more eating. I was also starting to experiment with drinking on weekends, adding to more out of control behavior. My closet was stashed with chips, sugary cereals and candy with a lock on my door to ensure no one would see and eat it. I couldn't concentrate in class and my marks were starting to plummet in Grade 10. I was skipping breakfast to save calories only to end up giving in to the intense cravings of sugar and fat at the end of the day. The end of the day usually resulted in purging and feeling terrible for doing so.

The shame of my eating disorder was the worst part. I would absolutely die if anyone found out. I always made sure there were cleaning supplies in the bathroom cabinet to clean the toilet or for anything that missed its target. When my family was around, I would say that I was going to have a quick bath or shower to cover my gagging and the contents splashing into the bowl. I figured out how to throw up as quietly as possible. I learned that ice cream was quiet, easy on the throat and made things come up nicely so I always had a bowl of ice cream at the end of dinner. There were so many tricks needed. Keeping my bulimia a secret was the ultimate goal.

My mother noticed my preoccupation with dieting and losing weight. She was concerned that I wasn't eating. One day she found my undigested contents in the bowl and confronted me about it. I can't remember the lie I made up but I knew she didn't buy it. It cost me a trip to a social worker. I didn't want to go and protested, but there I was, being questioned about my feelings about my body and food in the social worker's office. I told the social worker that it was the first time I tried it and I hated it. That it was gross and hurt my throat and I would never do it again. I explained I must have forgotten to flush the

toilet because I immediately wanted to get the taste off my breath by brushing my teeth. The social worker bought it and I never had to see her again.

I don't remember the exact details but I remember being so angry with mother and writing her a letter saying that she was trying to ruin my life by making me fat. I left her the note on my parents' bed and didn't come home that night in retaliation. When I returned she was more upset about me going A.W.O.L. than the accusation of trying to make me fat. She said it was a ridiculous comment and that she was just worried about my disturbing eating habits.

My bulimia was up and down and went on for several months after this incident. There were times when it was twice a day and times when I wouldn't throw up for a week. There was one period when I actually thought I was on the way to recovery. In Grade 12, I was eating healthier and working out regularly. My marks were starting to come up and my head felt clearer. I didn't have the symptoms I had previously with purging such as headaches, chronic tonsillitis, mood swings, constant thirst, screwed up menstrual periods and, most of all, cravings. I was only purging once every few weeks which was a significant improvement from every day. I also felt good about myself. I think mostly this was attributed to exercise, which I enjoyed. I felt stronger and more confident. On my graduation day I was able to fit in a very sleek mermaid-like gown and I actually for once in my life thought I looked beautiful.

My recovery never did materialize. In fact, things spiraled downward fast and furiously after graduation. That fall I moved to the big city to attend business college. I was on my own sharing an apartment with one of my best friends. I was excited and scared at the same time. I was away from my parents and had complete freedom for the first time in my life to decide what to do and not do.

I may have not been ready or mature enough for my new living arrangement but I certainly was going to take full advantage of it. I started partying a lot with new college friends and eating out every day. I was stressed from my new environment and at times felt overwhelmed. School was demanding with homework and missing classes would put you far behind. Of course, this is exactly what I did because I felt too fat to go. There were days I just didn't cope well and wanted to hide from the world. I started eating again to soothe my anxiety and comfort my feelings of insecurity. I was a small-town girl in a big city and my self-esteem again was hitting bottom.

Purging became part of my life again and was occurring daily if not twice a day. I had easy access to fast food and grocery stores only a few blocks away. With total control over what food I had in my apartment, my choices all focused on bingeing. Everything fell apart. I ended up quitting school and moved back home to my parents. Not only did I feel like a failure, but I felt bloated and fat from the twenty extra pounds I gained over the previous nine months of eating and drinking. It was the lowest point of my life and I hated how I looked.

Another path

My recovery didn't come fully until after I was married. My bingeing and purging episodes were declining after I had first moved in with my boyfriend. It was a very tiny apartment and secretly purging was not an easy feat. He was a fairly healthy person and didn't stray far from healthy foods. I started learning about eating healthier and had less and less interest in bingeing. The only time I would lose control is when I would go to my parents' house for supper or at special events when there was an abundance of food. I would sneak off and purge, telling myself it would be the last time. I wanted to quit so desperately because it had gone on for so long and I was exhausted from trying to hide my disgusting little secret.

I was finally able to stop when I found out I was pregnant. We had just gotten married and I was feeling nauseous a few weeks after. Ironically, I hated the feeling of having to throw up. When I learned I was pregnant I knew that it wasn't just about me anymore and that I had to ensure I ate well and kept food down. It was a very difficult time for me as my anxiety was unbearable when I overate. To me, the sensation of being full was a hundred times worse than feeling hungry. I was not used to seeing or feeling my stomach bloated and it was agonizing to fight the urge to purge. I would have to go for a long walk after big meals to keep myself away from the bathroom.

I kept telling myself that I would lose all my weight after the baby was born and that gaining weight was part of the pregnancy program. The cravings got worse than ever with hormones all over the place. I started eating sugary foods daily trying to fulfill my insatiable sweet cravings. But I was doing it; I was keeping everything down. And then, at the end of my pregnancy with only seven weeks left until my due date, I lost the baby. It was a blow I never saw coming. My body betrayed me again.

There was no explanation from the doctors and I was left feeling it was something I did wrong. What did I do? What did I do to my baby? These thoughts consumed me, along with hatred of my body betraying me again. I felt little support from my husband as he withdrew trying to deal with his own pain. I fell back into my bulimia to cope with my own grief. It was a pain I had never experienced before and it hurt so deeply I could hardly breathe. I self-medicated with food. Freshly baked chocolate cake and cookies were the drugs of choice.

Most of the time, I would bake just to eat the raw dough. My episodes lasted another year until we decided to try again for another baby. I knew I had to get healthy and I forced myself to keep everything down.