

Starved of Power

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An eating disorder is a very personal issue to deal with. It is not only a medical and psychological challenge but also a deeply emotional struggle. Relationships with those around us can be fraught with conflict and difficulty and I hope by telling my story here I can shed some light on the power dynamics that exist in eating disorders treatment from a sufferer's perspective.

There are two situations which come to mind when I think of this. The first is an incident from my teenage years. I was about 14 and I was becoming increasingly concerned about my weight. I was a little overweight but not massively so; however, I was huge in my mind. My developing breasts distorted my perception: I associated them with being fat. Still, I could have done with losing some weight when I look at it from a distance. I kept asking my mother if she would help me eat more healthily. Instead of being supportive she laughed and dismissed my concerns. My mum was a size 32 and she wasn't going to change things for me. She continued to feed me fried and processed foods, leaving me with no frame of reference for healthy eating.

The result of this was that I came to feel that an offer of food was not something that I could refuse and that I had little control over. I had no choice, my mum was overweight and I wasn't going to be allowed to be myself. I had to be like my mum. Over the years I continued to put on weight without fail until I reached the age of 20 and the weight of 17.5 stone. I continued to live at home and I binged on unhealthy food. Bingeing for me involved sitting in my bedroom alone with packets of biscuits, crisps and take away food; eating past the point of fullness and then passing out on my bed, high from the binge and exhausted. There was also a general desire to binge that ruled me every time I ate; I always chose the unhealthiest option and kept eating until I felt sick.

On some level, I found the binges liberating and felt that I was taking control. The feeling of liberation came from the fact that there were no limits in what I ate. When I binged I felt euphoric: it was better than any drug high. I felt in control because in my mind I was choosing to do this to myself and I was controlling my body but it was an illusion: I wasn't in control.

Part of me knew I was harming myself and that I had internalised my mother's damaging legacy but I was indifferent to it. I didn't care enough about myself to change.

When I was 21 years old, something switched. I was sick of people constantly telling me I needed to do something about my weight and patronising me by asking me if I had ever thought about going on a diet. People don't mean to judge you when you are overweight, but they do and I was tired of it. I was studying mental health nursing at the time and while on placement I had a mentor who regularly pestered me about losing weight. I didn't perceive it as someone trying to be supportive and helpful, it just felt like another person trying to control me and my body. Instead of rejecting it, I internalised it and I went to the other extreme. I started dieting in a bid to lose weight. It began as healthy eating but it became an obsession: my sole focus was restricting and losing weight.

This was further heightened when I was made to take a year out from my studies to be a mental health nurse because of concerns about my own mental health. I lost around 8.5 stone in 10 months as I reached a low healthy weight for myself through restricting more and more. However, the bingeing returned as my body was starved of nutrients and needed food. I understand that in hindsight but I couldn't see it at the time; I was terrified of gaining weight so I began to vomit. The more I binged and vomited, the more I felt I needed to binge and vomit, both physically and psychologically. When I was in this mode I binged and vomited constantly and then I could stop for a few days where I would restrict myself to 500 – 800 calories a day. In my mind when I binged I was being bad and when I starved myself I was being good. Bingeing was loss of control, and vomiting and starving were my furious attempt to fix past mistakes.

My life revolved around my eating disorder. I rarely slept; I had damage to my car that I couldn't account for as I had lost consciousness while driving. I also struggled to maintain friendships. I recall going to the cinema with friends and leaving during the film because I had eaten something I considered bad and felt I had to go and vomit. I would disappear for long periods and my friends found my behaviour strange. They knew something was going on but didn't know what to do. I lost contact with a lot of friends during this period. Eventually I lost my job, I couldn't function. Even my mother started to realise that I had an eating disorder. I could binge and she didn't see it as a problem, I starved and she didn't see it as a problem. It

was only when I started vomiting that she started to take notice. This didn't come across as concern; she was angry about what I was doing, but at least she paid attention.

In May 2006, I ended up in a psychiatric ward after a failed suicide attempt. They soon discovered the true extent of my eating disorder. I was referred to the Belfast eating disorders team, who immediately referred me for treatment at a London eating disorders unit. I remember the many fights I had with my mother at this time. She seemed more concerned that I was wasting food through my bingeing and vomiting than any adverse impact on my health. She begged me not to get treatment in London and told me that she feared losing me if I went. I was tired of the illness; I wanted help so I agreed to go to London for treatment.

The ward was not an easy place to be. Trusting strangers to have control over the food I ate was a big challenge. My experience of being offered food from my mother was her attempt to control me under the guise of being loving. It felt like she was my drug dealer and she was feeding my habit and in return she could keep me close. I loved food and hated it at the same time. I viewed the ward staff giving me food with suspicion. Part of me knew that I was ill and that I needed to trust them as they were trying to help me. However, another part of me viewed their motives as an attempt to control me. Whether it was my mother or the staff feeding me, both starved me of power: my mum for selfish reasons, the ward staff in a bid to help me until I could do it for myself (but it was hard to see it that way at the time). This loss of power bred resentment, regardless of the motives of those restricting me of my power.

An incident sticks in my mind when I think about the connection between my mum giving me food and my trusting the nurses to give me food. Per my meal plan at the time, I was meant to have three large desserts per week but the nurse in charge that evening decided I was meant to have four large desserts per week and that would have been the fourth that week. I argued with them about it but no one would believe me. In the end, I complied and ate my dessert.

I recall that dessert so vividly: it was the most delicious and distressing dessert I ever ate. I cried with every mouthful but it also felt euphoric, I was being given the drug I craved, food I didn't need. Not being believed and submitting to the staff members' power reminded me of my relationship with my mum; it felt coercive, not in my best interest but what others thought was right. There was a huge power imbalance and I fell into my usual role of willing victim. I

knew that they were wrong but I didn't truly assert myself. I accepted the delicious but potentially dangerous food with ambivalence. In some way, I think I enjoyed being the victim. It was what I wanted but at least the responsibility didn't lie with me: I could blame someone else for my choices, they weren't all mine. It's not that I consciously wanted to be a victim but I kept falling into that role, and it was easier to be in that place. It was easier to put other people's needs before my own than to speak out and reclaim the power of my own voice.

This wasn't the only occasion from this time when I didn't fully assert myself. I remember a dietitian on the ward who kept insisting that I must be bingeing because my weight was above my 'target range' - despite me having no recollection of doing it. I now know that I wasn't bingeing at that time, but because someone whom I perceived as having more power than me was insisting on this, I doubted my own mind. It has been something familiar over the course of my life. I remember when I was about four my sister had done something naughty and after being confronted by our mother, she blamed it on me. Instead of protesting my innocence I started to doubt myself and thought I was going mad because I had no recollection of doing it. My sister is an extremely forceful presence and as a child she could convince me her lies were the truth even though I knew on some level that she was lying. Both my mother and my sister are very dominating and that dynamic was replicated in my relationships outside my family. I feel my eating disorder in many ways was my attempt to take back control.



After treatment in London I returned to Belfast and have lived on my own since then. I needed that space away from others to find out how I wanted to live my life and have control over it. It has been a difficult road but it was what I needed. In the last few months there has been a lot of change for me; this has been good but it has not been without its stresses. I have moved in with my partner; I have left group psychotherapy; and I returned to work full time for a local mental health charity as a Fundraising Coordinator. I volunteered for three years for a local homelessness charity: first in their wet hostel for those with alcohol addiction and then for their Fundraising and Communications department.

The thing that surprised me in my interaction with the residents that I could see some of myself in how alcohol addiction manifests itself and my eating disorder. I have an addiction to food

and I use it to numb myself. However, I cannot simply abstain from food, I need to learn how to manage my addiction, confront the feelings I am trying to numb myself from and find a better way to manage my feelings. I realized through my fundraising and communications that there is more to my identity than my eating disorder. I am beginning to discover new talents that I never realized I had. I have reclaimed my power and have had the confidence to return to full time employment. My work colleagues don't see me as someone who has an eating disorder, they see a valued work colleague who is good at her job. I still have the strong desire to help people but there are many ways to do that. I may not return to nursing but this is a way in which I can still help people. I still find it difficult to assert myself and can find myself in positions where I feel like the victim and that the other person has power over me. The difference is that I am getting better at recognising when I am repeating the pattern and learning to see it for what it is.

I think parents and authority figures have a huge impact on people and it is not necessarily good: that power can be abused even unintentionally. I don't think my own mother set out to sabotage me or harm me in any way. She was repeating the family dynamics that she had grown up with. Her actions were a twisted kind of love; she just didn't know they were twisted. She may have contributed to my disordered eating but she doesn't bear full responsibility for it. I made my own choices, I internalised her words and practices and used my body as my own personal 'fuck you' to the world.

I felt like there was power in refusing food, but I also found power in receiving food and using it as a form of self-harm. I still self-harm with food but it is now only part of my life and while I still suffer from an 'eating disorder', it is not my identity. In my own experience, I was more likely to comply with the wishes of others, especially those in power. I wonder if others who have experienced eating disorders have felt that their eating disorders were the only way that they could take back control. I believe those treating people with eating disorders should be very aware of the potential extent of their power. I imagine they have some idea of that power but it is hard to fully appreciate it if you haven't been on the receiving end of it. I would want them to understand that with that power comes great responsibility.