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Weighing it Up

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Extract

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Chapter 1

The Start of It

There was no set point as to when the anorexia started; it just seemed to creep into my life.

Who would have thought it? After growing up in a loving family that had a healthy attitude to food and regularly enjoyed nutritious, home-cooked meals, an eating disorder was the last thing anyone expected of me.

My first sight of the dark and cruel world of anorexia was when I was about fourteen years old. I was suddenly rejected by my group of friends, and being sensitive, this rejection was a blow to my self confidence. I passed my long, lonely summer doing what made me feel good, what passed the time well and didn't require any company – I exercised.

It's such an insidious illness that it tricks the sufferer into believing that they are in control, even when it is clearly obvious to onlookers that they are not. The

sufferer's own friends and family, the people who know them best, become frustrated and feel distant from this strange being, who looks like the person that they know and love, but is turning into a self-destructive stranger. The shocking weight loss, the secretive and disturbing eating habits, the obsessive nature towards all aspects of food, all are the effects of anorexia.

How it started

June 2003: age fourteen

I feel like I'm putting on a lot of weight at the moment so I'm on a diet and trying to do a lot of exercise (going to the gym tomorrow, walking home and sports day on Thursday! so should be all right). Avoiding sweets and shit too.

December 2003

I woke up really late (11.40) but was in the gym at 12.30! Was in there yesterday too; lots of exercise! I ate a Weetabix, a banana with cream, and chicken and potato, and now I weigh 8st 12! Pretty chuffed – I bought a tiny white skirt in town the other day and I want to look thin in it; hoping to get to 8st 7 by Xmas.

January 2004

I've been pretty good this week; went to the gym Tues, Thurs, Fri, on Wed I had dance class, had two hours' dance class today, and Sat night I danced all night until 12.30!

March 2004: age fifteen

ATM I'm on a diet – feel really fat lately and I have to get to 8st 6 (1lb loss). Increase exercise and decrease food – will be good about it though. No exercise makes me feel so frustrated.

September 2004

Weighing just under 8st and am 5 foot 7. Have been a bit lazy this summer, better get off my fat arse and do something! Periods have been gone for about four months.

Walking, swimming, gym – whatever, I did it. I also gained a sense of power by controlling my diet, and this lethal cocktail allowed me to lose weight. People began to compliment me on my weight loss, but that soon became comments of concern that I'd lost 'a bit too much weight'.

Weight issue getting kind of serious – form tutor told my head of year who told the nurse who phoned my mum (!).

She is 'concerned about the amount of weight I've recently lost' and she's been asking my friends if I'm bulimic and stuff! Sneaky cow, fair enough if she's concerned but there's no need to go behind my back. I will talk to her tomorrow and say 'thanks for your concern, but I'm fine'. Because I really don't know how or why I've lost so much. I DO NOT make myself sick! And I might be a bit obsessed about my weight and diet but it really isn't such a big thing. Anyway, me and Mum are going to the doctor's after school to see about my periods (haven't had any for six months), fainting and bowel problems etc. I guess I do want to go, to make sure I'm OK and everything, and I do know deep down that I should really put on a few more pounds. So I guess I ought to start soon, but I'm not breaking my New Year's resolution not to eat chocolate.

My concerned mother took me to my GP, who warned me that I was borderline anorexic. With the combined threat of having to see a psychiatrist, and of having my medical history revealing my bout with anorexia, I managed to gain weight with the doctor's advice on how to balance my diet with my extreme exercise levels, and steadily increased from 7st 7 to a healthier 9st 5.

October 2004

Apparently I'm on the verge of an eating disorder. I don't know what to say about it – I guess it's just one of those things and I count myself lucky that I have people around me who care about me and didn't let me get too bad. Weighing 7st 10lb-ish. Don't want people to worry though.

November 2004

Went to the doctor's – put on 1kg = ( ) and have to put on 2.5kg (5.5 pounds) in a month. Am referred to a dietician and have been told to eat: cereal and toast in the morning, midmorning snack, a whole sandwich for lunch, snack when I get home and carbs in my dinner. It will be a bitch but I will try.

2005

January 2005

I am eating enough for a small country, I just can't stop. Not only do I take whale-sized portions, I also can't control myself or monitor when I'm full, so I snack until I'm almost sick and can't bend down because my stomach feels and looks pregnant – ten months I swear! At least it's mainly healthy stuff, but I feel guilty for going on eating and yet I know I'm slim . . . OK, thin . . . Deep down I KNOW, it's just hard to explain what I am feeling.

February 2005: age sixteen

GOT MY PERIODS BACK! After almost one year without a period, I've finally gotten back up to a healthy weight – this is the sign from my body that I'm all in working order and am back on track! Yay – so chuffed!

All my family were relieved to see the weight go back on, and assumed that this had been a random phase simply due to stress over my GCSE examinations, and a change of friendship group.

However, looking back on my teenage diaries, I can see that I was focusing on fitting in by changing myself, because of my insecurity and self doubt.

Last night, all the girls were with a boy and I was ashamed as I was on my own practically all night – what the hell is wrong with me?! I feel like such a loser!

I have always had a great relationship with my parents, being far younger than my brother and sister made me close to my mother and father. (As a baby I was even mistaken for my sister's daughter.) My sister and I had always had a great relationship, too, and I loved going to visit the older sis up in London to do fun things like go shopping or go and watch All Saints live! When she married her partner – who I'm also close to

– they moved to Spain for his work, and during this time my illness may not have been physically apparent, but I still overheard her complaining to my parents about how I was 'still f—g anorexic' and it was 'driving' her 'crazy'.

May 2005 (mid GCSE exams)

Been really stressed lately, I think my anorexic mind is upon me as I've lost weight (now 52kg/8st 3). I have to put it on in two weeks for another doctor's appointment, or else she's referring me to a shrink! That would go on my record and I don't want that, although I sometimes think it might do me good . . . I'm just not interested in food now, even when I'm hungry! And now I have to put on weight, I don't know what to do. I love food but I've messed everything up. I want to be well but it's hard to overcome.

16th September 2005

Am a bit sad at the moment – I need to do more exercise, I want someone to fancy me and for me to like them back, I want to have no homework or hassle from that area. I can't stop thinking about food.

Not only had I become obsessive about exercise, but little rules began to filter in, and dictate how I always

could have done better; how my attempts were never good enough.

Today I ate one Weetabix, popcorn chicken, a McFlurry and chicken and potato, a reasonable amount but I should've skipped lunch and the McFlurry, and only had one piece of chicken for dinner!

Despite the weight gain – that I knew was healthy – the rules and self hate continued inside, and the illness only lay dormant, yet never stopped reminding me of how I was unacceptable.

That year, after my GCSEs, I decided to move from my comprehensive school to college, despite the fact that only one other friend of mine was going there too. However, I enjoyed the opportunity to meet new people and to have a fresh start. I made lots of new friends, and finally met a guy that liked me as much as I liked him. We became great friends, and our relationship developed further.

People who had known me when I lost a lot of weight complimented me on how much better I looked, and my boyfriend often admired my curvy figure. But I remember the absolute panic I experienced as the scales read 9st 5lb. All I could think was how the weight

HAD to go, I HAD to shape up; if people realized what a sloppy mess I had become, surely they'd reject me again? Maybe they just said they liked me looking so fat so they looked better next to me?

I became absorbed in a punishing exercise regime, and became anxious, uptight and irritated if I couldn't do it. Over time, I preferred to exercise alone because other people would delay me and shorten the amount of time available for me to burn off all my horrendous flab.

Although I never went on pro-anorexia websites, I inspired my eating disorder with my own hand, writing a letter to myself to encourage me to keep up my self-destructive behaviour. Looking back and reading over it, it terrifies me to see how desperate I was to change myself and even how consumed I was by the anorexia, even when the weight loss at this point was not obvious. Before it became physically evident, this twisted illness totally consumed my mind.

2006

Letter to myself

Honestly don't eat anything because once you start you'll forget about your guilt and eat loads and after, when you've stuffed yourself, you'll remember your guilt and think of thin people like Eva and feel sad and promise

yourself to go on a diet but you never do and now you're not thin, just normal, and if you carry on like this you'll be tubby, then plump, then chubby etc; not attractive!

You only have a few lb to lose, by the end of the week 9st is just so easy just keep telling yourself you're not hungry, you have no appetite. You've been eating too much lately and you have been so lazy – eww!

You'll look so much better just a little thinner; keep yourself from getting any bigger. People compliment your figure now for the same reasons you used to compliment people who'd put on weight. No-one likes to be the biggest!

If you're ABSOLUTELY starving (8 hours since last meal) have a diet fizzy drink/half a litre of water/cup of tea. Control yourself. Just imagine your potential discomfort. Fat is unacceptable. If you concentrate on studies and busy yourself, you'll be fine.

Rules

When it came to eating, I was swamped with rules. Firstly, there was the divide between the foods that I couldn't eat, like deep fried things, high calorie or fatty things, and the things that I was allowed, such as fruit or no-fat yoghurt. To make things more complicated, if I were to indulge in something enjoyable at some point, I would have to know in advance so that I could not

only do a major workout, but also so that I could starve myself throughout the day, say for example if I were to go out for a meal later that evening. If I had to eat something, I had to really enjoy it, otherwise this would be a waste of calories, and if I ate something that I didn't enjoy I would feel so guilty and angry with myself that I'd have to spend the next day compensating for the wasted calories.

This led to me being irritable and anti-social during mealtimes, angry at those who distracted me from eating or appeared to pay attention to my eating, as I wanted to devote all my attention to the meal.

I feel very irritated when people try and talk to me when I'm trying to eat, as it distracts me and I don't like talking with my mouth full.

Anorexia gives you a set of rules that you simply must follow, and breaking out of these rules is not only extremely anxiety-provoking, but often sends you into a tremendous panic that often results in the illness taking over again. In fact, some rules were so detailed that it became almost impossible to match the specific demands made by the illness.

If I identify my behaviour as anorexic, I feel stronger. My anorexia makes me feel good about not eating so much fat – I become less of a pig, and it's an excuse to myself (I may have had 600kcal, but 0g fat!).

For others, these rules do not apply. For example, if they eat a slice of cake, it won't matter. But if you were to eat even half a slice, not only would everyone be shocked at what a pig you are, but you would get out of control, not be able to stop eating and it would really show on you. You would prove how out of control you really are if you were to eat the cake.

I often felt that people had 'anorexic expectations' of me: that it would be so out of character of me to eat say, a slice of cake, or a normal portion of the evening meal. I also became so ashamed if I were to help myself to something 'out of the rules' that if someone were to comment, I would become so angry that my cheating ways had been noticed, I wouldn't be able to eat it, and would throw it away to prove I hadn't eaten it.