

Choosing to live: A journey through the darkness and back out towards the light

When you have been so low that death seems like the best option, then you know you're in a dark place. This is where I found myself in 2001, aged 16, during my first bout of anorexia, which had full control over me, and my life became nothing but a monotonous calorie and weight fixation, each day just like the last, planned meticulously around every morsel I would allow myself at whatever particular time. I knew when I was forced to leave college in need of 24-hour care that if things didn't improve quickly, I would be sectioned and force fed. When threatened with this, I set out to gain enough weight to get everyone off my case so I could self-destruct in private once again.

This is exactly what happened. I ate. I gained. I smiled. I was discharged. What I hadn't expected was my ED (eating disorder) would take on a different form, and my sense of control was about to be greatly lost when bulimia which then gave way to ten years of EDNOS (Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified) took hold of me. Feeling more disordered and mentally unstable than ever, I was desperately trying to unravel the memories that anorexia had blocked out over the years, piecing back together my childhood years and dealing with painful flashbacks of the sexual abuse I received from an early age.

Rather than deal with these memories and emotions I chose to keep running and hiding behind my eating disorder. I went through cycles of EDNOS and anorexia, which always resulted in me getting NHS treatment, until I was sufficiently weight and 'false smile' restored. During my second episode of anorexia at the end of 2004, I decided once again that enough was enough. I realised that my step-dad's actions towards me as a child were the driving force behind my self-loathing and destructive ways. It came down once again to life or death: I had a choice - I could try breaking the silence, with the hope that things would get better, or I could continue to throw myself towards death at an ever increasing rate.

I spoke out, and it helped. The more people I told, the better I felt; the less shameful, guilty and disgusting I felt. Another suicide attempt and drug abuse finally led to me telling the police and a prosecution and imprisonment for my step-dad.

I really thought after this that all my problems would be solved. Christmas 2007 brought the tragic news of the sudden and unexpected death of my 28 year old brother Richie. We were best friends, and the news hit me very hard. I tried to ensure my ED was put to rest, knowing life is too short, but ED behaviours only stopped when I used alcohol to numb my thoughts daily. I found myself in another very dark place. I somehow managed to conceive my first child during this time, which had a massive positive impact on my life, and thankfully was the nudge I needed to stop drinking.

Maternal instinct took over and all my negative actions stopped throughout the pregnancy. The need to protect my baby was stronger than my ED or grief. I loved the freedom with food that came with being pregnant. It showed me how great food is and that I do have the power to overcome my thoughts - thoughts can't hurt me, they are not

real. I became pregnant with my second daughter a year later and gave birth to her in January 2011. This is when my last decent into anorexia began. Losing weight became my focus, as the thoughts and feelings that I was worthless, inadequate, insignificant, ugly, stupid and 'fat' grew. It is worth noting that my step-dad was released from prison around this time, which was also a contributing factor. I connected my feelings with my weight as always, and choose to listen to the 'safe' voice of anorexia telling me that losing weight would change all this. I knew my illness well, but I just wasn't ready to fight it. I didn't realise that it was possible to not feel these things about myself - I had believed it for so long, ever since I was brainwashed as a child by my step-dad.

Fast forward to Christmas 2011 and I was once again at a critical weight, rapidly going downhill and losing the strength to look after my own children. I hated myself more and more as my guilt increased each day as I knew I wasn't being a good mother to my daughters (I didn't know at the time that I was genetically predisposed to a restrictive eating disorder, and the fact that it was triggered in me is entirely not my fault). Things continued to worsen, everything suffered - my health, my relationship, my job, my capabilities as a mum, my singing voice due to purging (I am a singer by profession), my spirit and friendships deteriorated along with everything else. I knew what was happening; I just didn't know how to change things.

I was receiving weekly therapy whilst waiting for my assessment to the Richardson Eating Disorders Unit at Newcastle's RVI hospital when I hit another low. My ED made me believe my children and everyone else would be better off without me, that life with an ED was impossible and I wasn't good enough to exist in it. I got a reality check when I had my second overdose and admission to A&E in the same week of January 2012. Using laxative and diuretics at a low weight is extremely dangerous and life-threatening and I had been using a concoction of pills daily to the point of feeling sick and being involuntarily sick most nights. These two particular nights I pushed things too far. I had the sensation of rising out of my body and seeing myself dead - I call this my '5am bath' as I was in the bath at the time, trying to slow down my heart rate. I saw my skeletal body laid bare, and imagined how it would really be if I wasn't here for my family. I prayed (I'm not religious) and cried to God to give me one more chance, I didn't want to die. I knew then I had to step up to recovery.

I had to accept that I can't be recovered and control my weight. That in order to live, I needed to stop all ED behaviours; not just some, or replace some with others. It was a simple choice; I wanted to do this not only for my family, but for myself. I wanted to prove anorexia wrong. To show recovery is possible.

I argued with anorexia (I still do, just not as much, and the voice is a mere whisper now, like an annoying old relative you never listen to!). I realised that the voice I was arguing with was one I had developed, with unfounded, nonsensical and ridiculous thoughts. I started questioning my actions - if I really wanted to recover, then why would I buy laxatives? Diet pills? Diuretics? With every ED behaviour or thought, I remembered where it would lead me - to my '5am bath', ultimately death. I knew that with every recovery move, I was taking one step closer to life, health and happiness. I reminded myself when I did go off track that the recovery path is not a straight one. It is a continuous winding journey.

I did a lot of self-reading and educating. I read 'Courage To Heal' which helped me finally deal with the abuse and I recommend it. For my own actions, and no one else's, I began campaigning to show others that recovery can happen, and to raise awareness for eating disorders and childhood sexual abuse.

Eating disorders are a medical condition that need to go through a painful, extremely difficult physical and mental healing process, and then the sufferer needs to be continuously vigilant with taking their medicine (food!!!) and be on the lookout for potential triggers: it's an ongoing process. Is it worth it? Without a doubt. life is beautiful; when we allow it to be. I can honestly say I am recovered and it was worth every minute of the months of hard work to ensure I have a happy, healthy, brighter and longer future ahead of me.

To find out more about the Hungry For Change campaign, visit www.hungryforchangeofficial.org

For my Survivors website, go to www.ne1support4survivors.com

Lou

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