

Confronting Bulimia

By Tara STEWART-STANLEY

On Sundays she ate everything she could get her hands on.

Ellen* was a big eater. She was an active girl who cut back on her physical activity when she was 13. She thinks this is the point when her food addiction and distorted thinking began.

She starting gaining weight. Her doctor suggested perhaps she be put on a diet. So, Ellen's family began strict dieting following the Canada Food Guide.

Ellen was rewarded for her good eating habits by being allowed to eat whatever she wanted on Sundays.

So began her binging.

"I'd go through the cookie jar and I would eat absolutely everything," Ellen says. "I'd have syrup or spoonfuls of peanut butter just because I could."

Even today, at 26, she still feels she has to eat everything on her plate. She has a problem determining when she's hungry or when she's full. She never learned to differentiate between the two when she was young.

It's been five years now since she confronted her bulimia. She still sometimes gets ill after she's eaten.

Bulimia has a lot to do with feeling in control. It's often the only part of a bulimic's life that feels as though it's working. Those suffering with this disorder use food as a comfort tool. Throwing up on purpose, taking laxatives and using diuretics are all part of life as a bulimic.

"It was absolutely twisted, and it was gross, and I knew it was bad," Ellen says.

She clearly remembers the first time she deliberately got sick. She had been to a dinner party where she ate

lasagna, caesar salad and garlic bread. She ate so much she was disgusted. She panicked and bulimia took over.

As she began losing weight, people complimented her. Because she was getting all this positive feedback, she thought she must be doing something right.

Looking at paintings of women from the 1700s, we see portraits of full-figured voluptuous women.

"I was wasting money insanely," Ellen recalls. "I'd go out and I'd spend all this money on food and I'd eat it and I'd throw up. It was just going right down the toilet."

The issue of self-esteem is a major factor when dealing with eating disorders. Anyone can have self-esteem issues. It can come from an abusive or from a happy background. Magazines and TV are a big influence on girls and boys growing up. The media often tell girls they should look like Barbie. Popular supermodels are toothpick figures. Looking at paintings of women from the 1700s, we see portraits of full-figured voluptuous women. Their rounded stomachs were considered beautiful. Today, women are presented with suck-in-your-gut underwear and pantyhose. Is it any wonder so many of us have such distorted body images?

Ellen knew she was doing something wrong when she was making herself sick, but not on a conscious level. She felt like a robot. It wasn't until she threw up blood that her disorder really scared her.

She went to her campus health

services centre for help. Counsellors were extremely busy with other girls and Ellen would have to wait several months to talk to someone. Her parents decided to pay \$80 a session so their daughter could meet with a psychiatrist twice a week.

It can take years for a bulimic to recover. In Ellen's case, her counsellor was a huge help. She had Ellen keep a journal, documenting everything she did, especially what and when she ate and purged. She never told her to stop throwing up, suggesting instead several other activities she could try, like going to the library or for a walk.

Ellen was 165 pounds at her heaviest. She weighs about 145 now. Being quite tall, she was never obese, yet she developed major weight-related problems.

"I know when I'm 50 I'm still going to be concerned about the way I look," Ellen says, hoping she's wrong.

"When do you actually begin to like yourself?" she wonders.

Ellen didn't think she had any major self-esteem issues. She had a great family, had travelled around the world and was doing great in school.

When she finally told her parents about her problem, she found out her mother had been anorexic. So had her grandmother. Then she recalled as a girl she watched her mother complain regularly about feeling fat.

"I think most mothers fear for their children because they don't want them to be fat because they know what it comes with," Ellen says. "And so how are you careful not to instill this fear of food or whatever, but yet preach the health thing? I don't know

how to do that, but I think I'd like to try."

"I don't want to spend 15 years of my life coping with this," Ellen says.

"There's all these issues that are wrapped up with this eating thing that are all manifesting themselves differently."

"Some days it's fine, but the majority of the time I'm struggling now," she says, "and it can't be that way, it can't, because I'm missing out on so much. I know that I can shine but there's something that's holding me back."

Things haven't changed much for Ellen over the past five years. She still deals with her eating disorder every day.

"The only thing that's changed is that I'm not throwing up as much."

*Ellen is not her real name.

** This article is a rewrite of an original written a couple of years ago. Everything in it is still pertinent today. Ellen still struggles sometimes, but she is doing much better.

Showing at
City Cinema
this week

Notorious C.H.O.
and
Possession

Times and Descriptions at
www.citycinema.net
368-3669



WorkRights.ca

know your rights!



Canadian Labour Congress
Congrès du travail du Canada