



Ten years ago, my battle with bulimia was in full swing. My days were consumed by an illness I never expected, nor wanted, in my life. When people think about eating disorders, they often think that they are a choice- someone probably wanted to lose weight and it got out of control. This is not the case! Eating disorders are not choices; they are illnesses and they are also the leading cause of death among mental illnesses.

In order for you to completely understand why my eating disorder began, I think it is important for you understand a little bit of my past.

I grew up in a very competitive home. My mom was a former national champion baton twirler, and by the time I was five, I was well on my way to pursuing the same goals. I was a complete perfectionist from the very beginning and applied a lot of pressure on myself. From pushing myself in the gym, to expecting straight A's on my report card, I didn't want to settle for anything less than the best.

One point that I want to stress to you is that I didn't wake up one day and decide that I wanted to be a bulimic. I remember vividly the day my eating disorder started. I had a bad day at the gym and was really upset. For some reason I got so worked up and it caused me to throw up. It just happened- something was triggered in my mind and it eventually led to a life consumed by an eating disorder and some very serious side effects.

My eating disorder was my secret for over three years and by the time I was a junior in high school, I physically could not deal with it anymore. I went to my parents for help but they didn't really know what to do. I became very angry and at that point anorexia also came into the mix. By the time I started my senior year, my symptoms were very visible and I was suffering from the side effects. I was extremely weak, I lost half the hair on my head, I had popped blood vessels in my eyes, I had done damage to my esophagus from the binging and purging, I couldn't digest food properly if I wanted to and I was at a dangerously low weight. That November, I knew that I couldn't live that way anymore. I went to my parents once again and called my family doctor. We then put together my treatment team consisting of a psychologist, psychiatrist and a nutritionist to help me start to heal.

Treatment was very difficult but was worth every moment. I had to make a commitment to myself that I wanted to live my life eating disorder free. A huge turning point was when I left for college. It was my opportunity to start my life over but could have also triggered my eating disorder again. I decided the best thing to do would be to surround myself with people that could help keep me strong and to get involved in groups that helped to prevent eating disorders. I volunteered at the student health care center at the University of Florida and I started to speak out and tell my story. For me, every time I would tell my story, I was able to put one more piece of the puzzle back together again. I realized that by being open and honest about what I went through, I was helping others that were either suffering or knew someone who was.

At that point, I decided to start HOPE, Helping Other People Eat, and today it is a 501c3 nonprofit organization that works for the prevention and awareness of eating disorders.

I also wanted to give back to those organizations and groups that helped me during my struggle. The National Eating Disorders Association provided a wealth of information not only for me, but for my parents as well. Currently, my involvement with NEDA ranges from being a yearly NEDAwareness Week coordinator to now serving as the inaugural Chairwoman of the National Junior Board. I also lobby for insurance parity with the Eating Disorders Coalition on Capital Hill and with the NEDA STAR Program in Florida. During my year as Miss Florida, I traveled the state educating all ages groups about eating disorders. Over the last few years, I have spoken to over 30,000 people about these illnesses and have made a commitment to continue speaking and reaching out for the rest of my life.

I truly believe that you go through things for a reason. As terrible as it was to suffer from an eating disorder, I live my life every day trying to prevent others from traveling down that path and helping those who are suffering find the help that they need.