



Finding Me

by Jenni Schaefer

Author of *Life Without Ed*

I used to starve myself to fit into my skinny jeans. I thought that thin was everything, and I was losing everything to be thin. For years, anorexia and bulimia stole my hopes and dreams. It almost took my life.

Ironically, my eating disorder was not really about eating at all. It was not about food or weight. My eating disorder was about low self-esteem, constant self-criticism, and painful, unrelenting perfectionism. My eating disorder was a real, life-threatening illness with a biological basis --- with a genetic link.

Because my eating disorder was an illness --- not a choice --- I needed to get professional help to recover. In the beginning, I remember searching aimlessly in the yellow pages for “eating disorder.” Those words were nowhere to be found, and I was lost.

After months of hitting roadblocks and dead ends, I finally found a team of professionals who specialized in eating disorders. I found a psychotherapist, a dietitian, and doctors. I found a therapy group and a Twelve Step program. I found hope!

My psychotherapist, Thom Rutledge, taught me to treat my eating disorder as a relationship, rather than an illness or a condition. He named my eating disorder, Ed (acronym for “eating disorder”), and helped me to distinguish Ed’s voice from my own. I realized that it was Ed who cared so much about those skinny jeans --- not Jenni. Ed wanted me to remain stuck in the cycle of bingeing, purging, and starving, and I discovered the part of me that wanted to live and to be healthy. It was not easy, but with perseverance (over many years) and a willingness to do whatever it takes, I was finally able to find a life without Ed.

And I was able to write *Life Without Ed*. I am honored that people have read my book and have shared their stories with me. If you have a story --- if you are struggling with an eating disorder --- get the professional help that you need. (Instead of looking aimlessly through the phone book like I did, call NEDA’s Helpline.) Surround yourself with support, and never give up. My favorite quote is a Japanese proverb: “Fall down seven times, stand up eight.”

Fall down as many times as it takes; just keep standing. Let your support team of friends, family members, and healthcare professionals --- let NEDA --- help you to do that.

NEDA has helped me to stand up in countless ways. I am honored to work the National Eating Disorders Association --- as a volunteer, as a participant and presenter at annual conferences, as a speaker during National Eating Disorders Awareness Week (NEDAW), and most recently as a member of the Ambassador Council. I enjoy being a part of a team that understands eating disorders and that really makes a difference --- with a vision to

actually eliminate eating disorders. Imagine a world where everyone embraces their natural shape, and no one betrays their true self for a particular clothing size.

I no longer starve myself to fit into a pair of jeans. Today, as NEDA says, I am comfortable in my “genes.” I wear jeans that fit the real me.

I have found the real me.

Jenni Schaefer is a singer/songwriter, speaker, and the author of *Life Without Ed: How One Woman Declared Independence from Her Eating Disorder and How You Can Too*. For more information, visit www.jennischaefer.com.