ANOREXIA NERVOSA AND RECOVERY

A Hunger for Meaning

KAREN WAY
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karen Way, MA, is a writer in Washington, DC, specializing in the social sciences and women's issues. Her understanding of the crisis-of-being wrought by anorexia nervosa is drawn from her own brief bout with a borderline form of the disorder. Way holds an MA in psychology from Goddard College and is a doctoral student in sociology at the American University. She is married to Washington radio personality Cerphe Colwell.
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Introduction

I didn’t plan on studying anorexia nervosa when I started graduate school. In fact, the subject of eating disorders was one of the furthest things from my mind.

Back then I didn’t like writing, talking or even thinking about food, weight or eating, because when I was 17, I had a bit of a scare. At the time I started college, I was about 5’6”, maybe 120 pounds. But after a few months of dorm food, desserts at every meal, late night snacks, and many other forms of “stress-eating,” I gained the proverbial “Freshman Ten.” (Of course, in retrospect, I realize my weight of 130 was normal for my height.)

It seemed that the women in my dorm were obsessed with their weight. Especially my roommate, who was three years older and two inches taller than I. She continually lamented the fact that she was a “huge” six pounds away from 112—her “ideal” weight. That’s all she ever talked about. And next to her, I felt like a real blimp. (Later that year, she dropped out of school to become an NFL cheerleader, but that’s another story.)

I was very depressed and lonely, being away from home for the first time, overwhelmed by the pressures and demands of college, especially since I was a year younger than everyone else. Even though I was on an academic scholarship, and objectively, must have shown some promise for scholarly pursuits, I was very insecure and doubted I could cut it. If I failed, I’d disappoint my family and everyone who knew me. It would be so humiliating for the Class of 1980 Valedictorian to flunk out of college. What would people think? I’d be a total failure. It made me unbearably anxious just thinking about it.

My scholarship didn’t cover much toward my living expenses. Even with a student loan, I needed extra money for school. That’s part of the reason why I was absolutely thrilled when I landed a part-time job at a women’s health spa.
As a Spa Assistant, my job was to walk around in a leotard, weigh and measure potential new members, give tours, demonstrate the equipment, and get everyone excited about joining the club, so that someone else could take it from there, sign them up, and make money. My other duty was teaching aerobic dance classes—usually two to three in one evening; four or five on Saturdays.

When things were slow, I worked out and did things like weighing and measuring myself, again and again. Mirrors were everywhere and slowly, but surely, I started getting obsessed.

Since I worked nights, I had to miss dinner at the dorm. But I didn’t mind. By the end of the semester, I’d easily dropped my Freshman Ten. And then some.

By February of that year, I weighed in at 116. A lot of the other women in my dorm noticed my weight loss and complimented me on it. They wanted to get jobs at health spas, too.

At that point, I had never felt so triumphant in my life! School and grades no longer seemed much of a concern; how much I weighed was a lot more important. In fact, the first thing I did when I woke up was hop on the scale.

I found it was getting a lot harder to lose weight once I reached 116, but I wanted to desperately. Losing weight was the one thing I had a handle on, the one thing I could succeed at. It was right there in black-and-white, a number on the scale that no one could dispute. Not even me.

But 116 didn’t seem good enough anymore. I had this problem—a monumental problem, in my eyes. My inner thighs were "fat," and no matter how much I ran, danced and jumped up and down, the "fat" just wouldn’t go away. I focused on my problem intently. It disgusted me.

Clearly—in my mind—I could stand to lose a few more pounds. If Kristina, my roommate, was 5’8" and thought 112 was perfect for her, then I had to be at least 106—three pounds less for each inch of height.

My weight was stubborn at that point. But I was determined. So I buckled right down and cut out nearly everything—everything but salads, vegetables and an occasional banana (cut in half, to savor now and later). I even took over-the-counter diet pills. And much to my delight, the weight dropped off.
I stopped having periods around 110. But I didn’t care, because I was losing weight. I was succeeding in a feat heralded as one of the major accomplishments of modern life in our society. As my weight loss continued, I became pompous and arrogant. I felt superior, holier-than-thou, and looked disdainfully at “lesser individuals” who could not achieve what I did, who could not lose weight like I did.

At times, I felt lightheaded; other times, I was in a sort of euphoric fog. I was very difficult to be around, because I was snappy, impatient, impulsive, unpredictable, and very obstinate—especially when others would get on me about what I was eating. Just ask my mother.

In March of 1981, I lost my job at the health spa. I didn’t care, because I was going to weigh 106 pounds. And that was much more important. But to my disgust, when I reached my goal weight, those insidious thighs were still with me. At least, that’s how I saw it: I wasn’t quite “there” yet.

Maybe 104 would solve the problem. Then I began wondering what it would be like to be under 100. I rather liked the idea of weighing 98 pounds, and that became my new goal. But before I got there, something happened that jarred me into stopping this process, and perhaps even saved my life.

It was the summer before my eighteenth birthday. I was floundering around at various odd jobs, trying to find something steady that would get me through my sophomore year.

I must have had four or five jobs that summer—at a restaurant, department store, and several aerobic dance studios. Curiously, at each one, I found myself the object of unwanted, often aggressive, male attention. Maybe it was because I looked so frail, weak, and vulnerable, or maybe it was just that I was insecure, unassertive, and had a hard time turning down dates and these men knew it. Perhaps that’s why I experienced so much sexual harassment that summer.

This unwanted attention scared me. I didn’t know how to stop it and for the first time, I felt that what I had done to myself was very dangerous.

I remember thinking right then and there, “If this is what it means to be thin, then I don’t want to be thin.” And as strange as it
sounds, that’s how I shook myself out of anorexia. I was afraid to be that thin.

The next year, when I was 18, I gained more than 40 pounds (and as a side note, grew two inches taller). Increasing my size was my way of protecting myself. Curiously, with a few exceptions, I didn’t experience much harassment that year, so it seemed that gaining weight offered me safety.

The following year, I met someone who cared a lot more about who I was than what I looked like. For the first time in my life, I felt no pressure to lose weight because he loved me just the way I was. Soon I felt the same way too.

Throughout the next year, as I finished college and got more involved in my work, I began to acknowledge—a bit grudgingly at first—that there were things I did well. Not perfectly, as I’d always aimed for before, but well. Gradually, as I began to accept more and more of myself, I didn’t need a shield of weight to protect me anymore, so I dropped the extra pounds of armor. But most importantly, I began to concentrate my energies on just being me.

For the next several years, I focused my attention on exploring my likes and dislikes, where I was going and what I wanted to do with my life. Rather than only doing things that I thought would please other people and make them happy or proud of me, I began to discover what I wanted and what would make me happy. For the first time in my life, I was getting to know myself.

It was rough going at first. Rather than knowing what I wanted, what I didn’t want seemed a lot easier to grasp in the beginning. I explored every avenue that struck my fancy and got involved in all sorts of fun, even a few flaky pursuits that I’d always wanted to.

Slowly but surely, I truly began to know myself and even began to like myself. Suddenly, rather than constantly trying to change myself to look, act or be like someone else or some ideal, I found myself just wanting to be me.

With this newfound self-acceptance, I learned to stand up for myself, fight bullies, and not let other people (individuals, groups, or mass culture) push me around. I learned to define my boundaries and to protest loudly when I felt others were encroaching. Of course, recovery took a lot of work—largely through my own intro-
Karen Way

spection and self-study—as well as through connections with others, interpersonal relationships, and short-term counseling.

With this new freedom to simply be me, I learned that freedom and responsibility were closely intertwined—that I was free to do whatever I wanted, as long as I didn’t hurt anyone. And when I truly cared about myself, I didn’t want to hurt me, either. As I began to make more positive choices for myself, I gradually discovered a calling, a purpose, a meaning in my life.

Somewhere in the midst of this process, I blew the dust off of that once-scary topic of anorexia nervosa and began delving into it once again. Only this time, I had a candle to light my way.

For years, I hadn’t known what to make of that "phase" I went through when I was 17. Surely, I couldn’t have been anorexic. I mean, no one seemed overly alarmed by my weight loss. I wasn’t skeletal. I wasn’t shunned by everyone I met. I was just real thin. And I snapped out of it so quickly, with my weight catapulting in the other direction . . . I just didn’t know what to think about it. So I tried not to.

In retrospect, I did meet the clinical definition of anorexia nervosa: (1) Refusing to maintain a minimal "normal" weight for her* age and height—at least 15% below an acceptable minimum; (2) Being intensely afraid of gaining weight or becoming "fat," even while markedly underweight; (3) Perceiving her weight and body image in extremely distorted ways—insisting she’s "fat" when she’s emaciated; (4) Experiencing amenorrhea—missing at least three consecutive menstrual periods.¹

This realization was triggered one night as I paged through one of my psychology textbooks and the words leapt out at me: anorexia nervosa. As I read the text, I grew increasingly annoyed at the condescending, superficial tones of the male authors, who were smug and arrogant in ridiculing the anorexic for her "immature, developmentally-arrested" mind and "crazy" behavior. Moreover, the treatments they advocated—force-feeding, hospitalization, and behavioral therapy (reward-and-punishment models like one would use to train an animal, with solitary confinement for "disobedi-

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*In view of the fact that 90-95% of all anorexics are female, I am adopting the use of feminine pronouns throughout this book.
ence")—made me furious. I knew they were wrong—dead wrong. At one time, I’d been there myself, and in my mind, what they were promoting was total idiocy. Although hospitalization is necessary in life-threatening cases, it is extremely counterproductive when a program is rooted in behaviorism, i.e., releasing the patient when she has gained a “safe” weight and paying little attention to whether she is emotionally equipped to handle life on the outside. (See Chapter 5 for more on this.)

I felt obligated to set the record straight. Deep down, I had a hunch that my experience and insights could help others. Saving another woman from going through what I did was all the motivation I needed.

To avoid the trap of overgeneralizing through my own experience, I expanded my frame of reference, testing my theories through comprehensive theoretical, then interview research. My primary goal was for others to hear the voices of women—previously silent—to illuminate a crisis-of-being that few truly understand.

Through the course of my research, I interviewed 21 women in the U.S. and Sweden who identified themselves as recovering (or recovered) from anorexia nervosa. I located 16 of my interview subjects through notices placed in the health sections of metropolitan newspapers, four through support group meetings, and one through a personal contact. Six of the women I talked with felt they were fully recovered from anorexia nervosa; the remaining 15 considered themselves to be at various stages of the recovery process.

At the time of the interviews, their ages ranged from 19-44, although the majority were in their mid- to late-20s. Five were students and 16 were professionals—seven of whom held advanced degrees. All socioeconomic backgrounds were represented, although the majority said they were from middle-class households. Three were daughters of alcoholics; four had been raised in single-parent families. Twenty of the women I interviewed were white; one was black.

Except for one interview that I conducted by telephone, I met with each of the women for interviews that ranged from one to four hours in length. We talked in a variety of settings—restaurants, shopping malls, parks, hospitals, their homes, my home, and my office.
Although I had a standard list of questions to refer to, the interviews were conversational in nature—a sharing of struggles as well as triumphs. I tape-recorded and transcribed each interview to form the backbone of this book.

The pseudonyms I use generally correspond to a specific individual, but to protect the identities of the women I spoke with, I changed names and altered or omitted identifying information. The words, however, are their own.

My only hope is that together, we can encourage and inspire individuals who are struggling to recover from anorexia nervosa, and in the process, enlighten friends and family who are simply trying to understand.
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