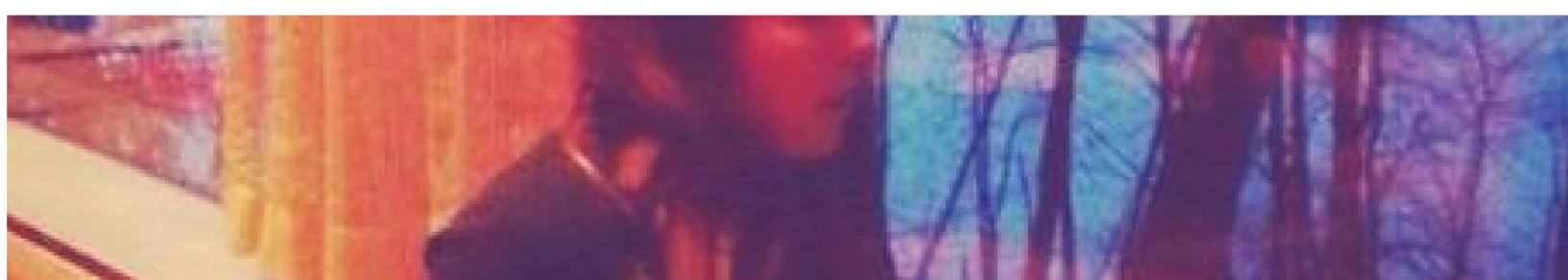
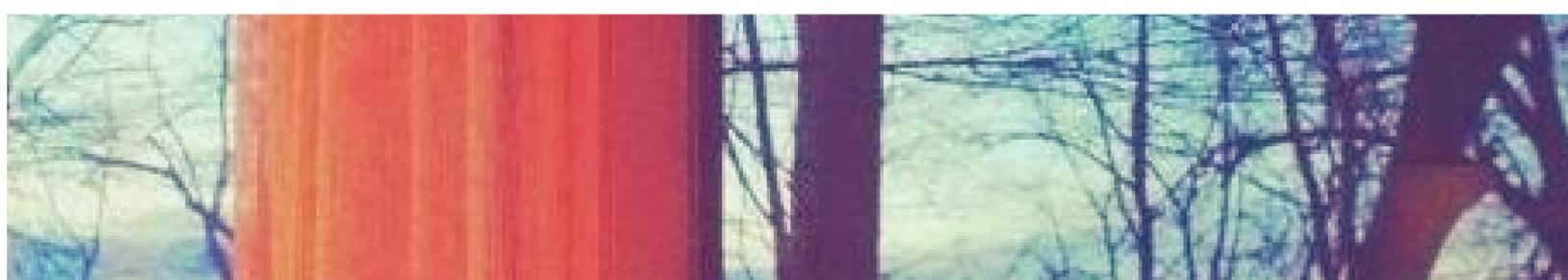
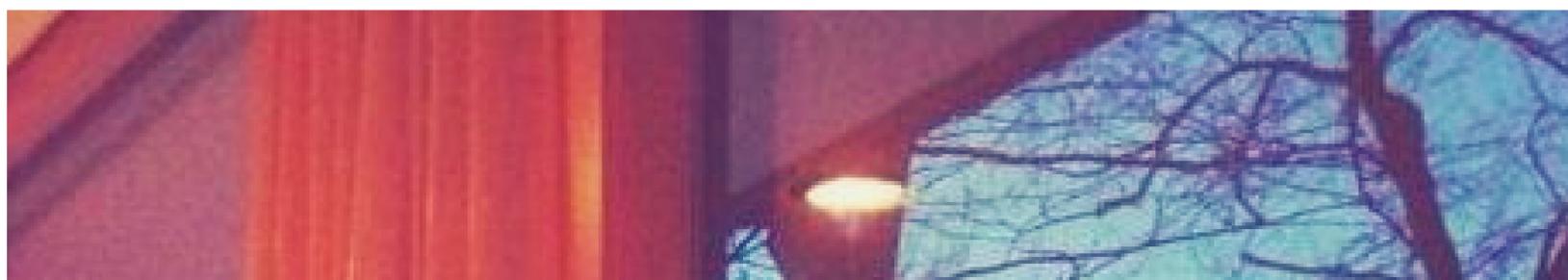


EATING DISORDER SELF-CARE GUIDE
WRITTEN BY PSYCHOTHERAPIST & ED SURVIVOR



OFF THE SCALE & INTO THE LIGHT

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WELCOME

Congratulations! Since you have started reading this eating disorders (ED) self-care guide, you may already be on your way to a happier and healthier life. This guide was designed to assist you in the process of coping with an eating disorder in everyday life while maintaining recovery.

If...

- you can relate to my story
- you've ever struggled with body image
- you've engaged in compulsive behaviors to control your body and/or weight
- you've tried to avoid your feelings through disordered eating
- you want to implement and/or learn positive coping skills
- you're looking for ways to maintain long term recovery
- you're looking for another way out of the restriction, binge, and purge cycle
- you think you may need help

Then this guide is for you.
Because trust me: **I get it.**

HOW IT STARTED

Like most people (women in particular), I've had a complicated relationship with food for as long as I can remember.

I wasn't fat or skinny, I was in-between. I was only six years old when one of my peers asked me, "why are you so fat?" At that moment, I discovered I was different from most of the girls with whom I went to school. I was often labeled "chubby," and I felt like an outsider. I didn't look like the other girls—in any way, shape, or form. This experience at such a young age prepared me for a complicated journey of dieting. Around age 13, I started my first diet because I wanted to look good in a bikini. Although I worked hard and lost several pounds, I still did not like how I looked in the mirror, and I still felt different and out of place. Those feelings remained throughout all of my dieting and weight loss journeys.

I engaged in dieting on and off until around the age of 23, which often resulted in some weight loss then a return back to my normal weight. Feeling successful at a diet allowed me to feel confident and more comfortable in my skin, like I had finally done something of which I could feel worthy. In my mind, my weight loss was my strongest asset; it meant more to me than any other achievement.

During my final diet, I had finally lost what I thought were those "last ten pounds" I was longing to lose, but looking back now I can see what I truly lost was control—over my freedom and sanity. At the time, I felt this sense of immense pride I had never experienced, thinking, "this is what thin people must feel like," like I was finally separated from the rest. I felt I could finally sparkle and shine as a result of this newfound thinness, whereas once I felt I could barely fit in.

That feeling of euphoria was short lived, however. Soon enough the feelings I was so accustomed to of inadequacy, insecurity, and desperation for belonging, returned... **and were the perfect recipe for an eating disorder.**

MY RECOVERY JOURNEY

My recovery journey began after I got married in November of 2015. I began to realize I didn't "just want to lose weight for the wedding" like I had been telling myself—I **actually had a problem**. I would step on the scale 8-10 times per day, I restricted heavily, and over-ate on weekends. I could see I had a problem.

Now what?



MOMENT OF CLARITY

I didn't want to continue on the way I was, but I didn't want to gain weight either. I would put my scale away for a week at a time and just hope that my weight hadn't changed. I remember getting on the scale one day and the number on the scale had increased by three. I was beyond devastated—**my life revolved around this number**. I sat on the scale, naked, and cried. It was agonizing, and it was at that moment I realized **my life had to change**. I could not, nor did I want to live that way anymore.

I was ashamed that I did not discover this issue sooner despite my experience as a mental health therapist. Questions like, "how did I not see this?" and "how did I allow myself to get to this place?" continually intruded upon my peace.

It was also hard for me to believe that I deserved help. I didn't see myself as "sick looking" or "sick enough" and I had no reason to suspect anyone was concerned about me. As a therapist, though, I knew better: **people don't have to look sick to be sick**. When I read, "a healthy person doesn't want to be sick" I thought, "OH! This is me. I relate to this."

After months of failing to heal on my own, I started attending a nutritionist, group therapy, and individual therapy. It was grueling, eye opening and emotional.

In the following pages, I will provide you with tools, skills, and self-care modalities I've learned as a patient and a therapist. I hope you find them as helpful as I have.

FIND YOUR TEAM

First things first: get support. Recovery is nearly impossible alone. You need people on your team who understand what you are going through and can assist you with your journey in recovery. For me, my team consisted of but was not limited to: an individual therapist, a nutritionist, and members of my group therapy.

Individual Therapist

Sometimes it takes a few different meetings with various therapists to find the right fit. That's okay! We need to have a comfortable, strong, and healthy connection with a therapist in order for therapy to benefit us. We must feel connected, heard, safe, and validated. A therapist who is knowledgeable and specializes in eating disorders is imperative.

Nutritionist

Finding a body positive and Health At Every Size nutritionist is critical; we want to connect with someone who is not giving us advice from a restrictive and diet culture mindset.

Group Therapy

Group therapy provided me with an incredible community. We made deep connections with one another and there was a common feeling of "me too," which felt so liberating. Eating disorders are extremely isolating, so allowing myself to be surrounded by a group of women who "got it" was comforting. Everyone's journeys and stories were different, but we could all relate to one another. The pain was the same. The avoidance of feelings was the same. We were the same, and we were no longer alone.

DITCH THE SCALE

I've gone through waves of having my scale and not having it. Sometimes I would step on it out of curiosity, other times because ED (the term I use for my disease) told me to. **I am happiest when I do not have a scale in my home.** It takes the curiosity and mystery away. Having a scale out of sight allows for some of the obsession to subside. When we simply don't see something, we tend to forget about it. Its power is removed.

Whether you're in early recovery or maintaining recovery, the number on the scale is none of your business! It doesn't matter what it says. **What matters is how you FEEL.** Are you feeling physically and emotionally well in your body? Are you eating properly and nourishing your body? The scale **CANNOT** provide you with that information.

When we put the scale away, we are allowing recovery to do its job. **We are surrendering to the belief that our body knows what is right for us.** We have decided to stop pretending we have control.



DITCH YOUR OLD CLOTHES

Is there a worse feeling than trying to put your jeans on and they're too tight? Or maybe yours are too big! The way in which your body has changed is represents health and a new way of life which should be celebrated. **Instead of waging a war against yourself, donate or give your clothes away.** I've wasted hours and hours trying to fit my changed body into old eating disordered clothes. The longer I had them stuffed in my drawers and closet, the stronger the desire became to fit into them once again.

I realized I had to get rid of them; I needed them out of my space. I didn't want to pay for all new clothes at once, so I did it slowly. I started going thrifting, buying new pieces overtime, and asking my friends (similar to my size) if they were giving anything away.

Remember your clothes are just...material. Cloth. **They don't represent who you are nor determine your worth.** Everyone goes through different periods in life in which their bodies change and grow; clothing sizes are a spectrum. These numbers are arbitrary, but feeling good about ourselves in our clothing is not. Make the decision to rid yourself of unhealthy memories in order to make new, healthy ones.



WHILE YOU'RE AT IT, DITCH THE TRACKING DEVICES

I'll let you in on a secret: it doesn't actually matter how many calories you burned in a day or how many steps you walked, no matter how hard diet culture tries to tell us otherwise. Trackers are especially dangerous because they appear to be a more acceptable form of diet culture.

Using these tracking devices like phone apps, fitbits, watches, is similar to measuring our worth in numbers; we are being programmed by "fitspo" (fitness inspiration) culture to notice how many calories we burned in a spin class, how many steps we took on our walk, or how much of an avocado we ate. **This steals the present moment from us**; it makes it more difficult to enjoy exercise, movement, eating, and anything in our everyday life.

Tracking keeps us in our heads versus our bodies; noticing our bodies' internal cues of what we crave and need becomes more challenging. You may be exhausted during your workout but have a calorie burn quota to make, so you continue. Or you may be enjoying your workout and want to continue, but you've hit 10,000 steps in a day, so you stop. **In recovery, we are learning how to listen to our intuition.** We already know when we are tired, when we want to exercise, when we are hungry. The hard part is listening, and if you are struggling with this, tracking makes it even more difficult. Ditch them. **You're allowed to trust yourself.**



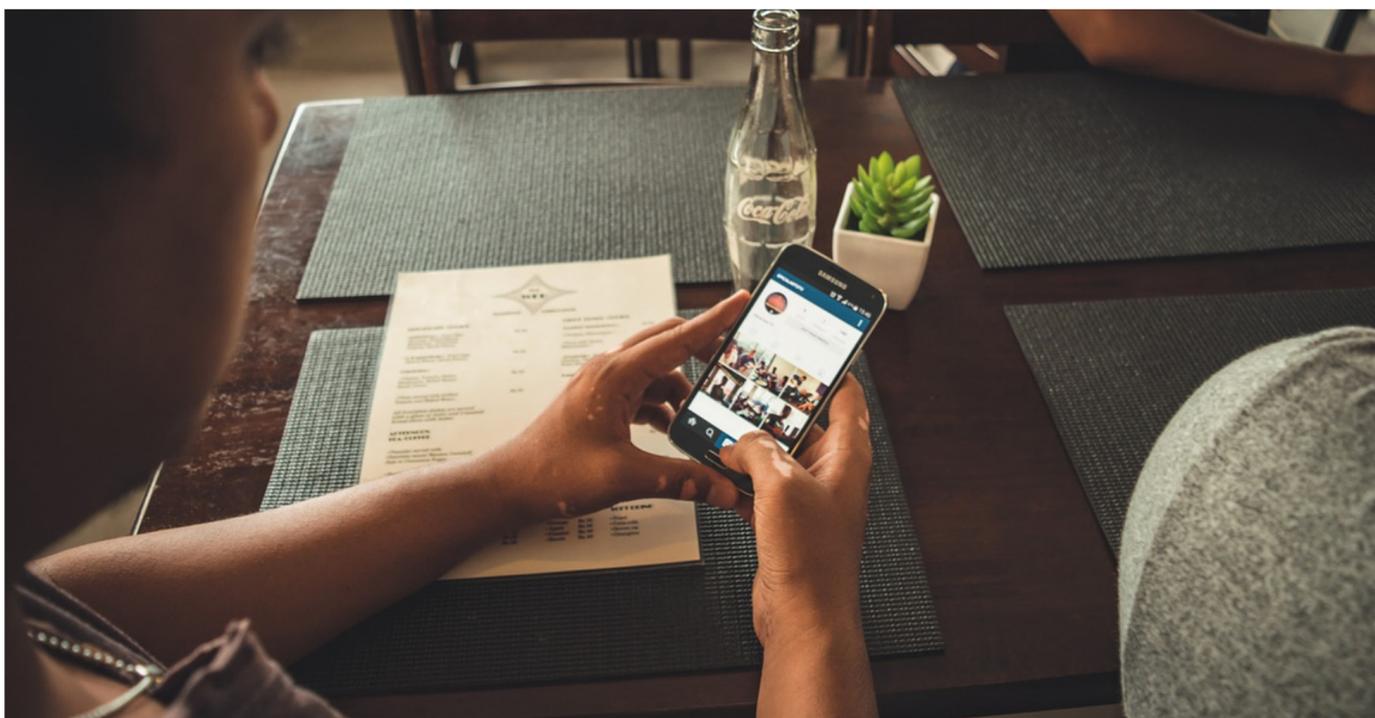
HIT "UNFOLLOW"

If you use Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, or any other social media network, you likely follow people who incite upsetting feelings within you.

It is perfectly acceptable (probably beneficial) to **remove these influencers, strangers, sometimes even family members or friends, from your social media life.**

In any stage of recovery we can be easily triggered. If when scrolling your feed, you see (and continue to look at) a model in a bikini and this is triggering...unfollow. If watching your friends meal plan on Instagram bothers you, hide them or unfollow. **We are allowed to do what works for us.** I have unfollowed many accounts and people who did not align with my recovery. I then replaced them with people who are part of the recovery community or body positive activists. Doing so has helped me tremendously.

Social media can be a difficult space if we let it; but if we flood our pages with things that bring us joy, we are less likely to act on destructive behaviors, or be sucked into a spiral of shame, envy, judgment, and sadness.



SIT WITH YOUR FEELINGS

People might hate to hear this (I know I did), but it's so important. Learning to be present with your feelings is a critical component of staying recovered. It is also important to **have a SAFE place to experience your feelings** (ie: therapy, coaching, confiding in someone you trust; refer to section on getting a recovery team!)

We don't have to like every feeling we have; sometimes we'll hate them! But we can survive them. As a therapist and recovered person, I can assure you that **our feelings cannot hurt us** (even if it doesn't feel true). **If we don't take the time to explore our feelings, however, we end up hurting ourselves by utilizing destructive coping mechanisms instead.**

You are allowed to feel angry, sad, tired, isolated, hungry, hopeless, anxious, depressed, or ANY feeling that comes up. We do not have to stay in these feelings feeling forever; emotions come and go. The trouble is when we suppress them, they come back much stronger.

We can notice our feelings without attaching them, and allow them to pass. We can even talk to them, invite them in, and after sitting with them, seeing them out the door. For example, saying to ourselves when we feel anger, “hi, anger, I see that you’re with me today.”

This is easier said than done—speaking from personal experience. **Once we believe and accept that feelings are just feelings, they don't hold as much power.** Remember: you will get through the hard moments. They will pass.



USE SELF-CARE YOU LOVE

Self-care: it's the foundation of this guide, we hear about it and talk about it all the time, but do we actually practice it? Are we really utilizing this modality to take care of ourselves? When we're engaging in what we believe to be self-care, **if it doesn't consist of things we ENJOY, we won't get anything out of it.** In fact, it may defeat the purpose. Do you like to run? Does it feel like a positive and motivating form of caring for yourself? If so, great! Do it! If you don't, try exploring something else to find what soothes and nurtures you.

There are so many examples of self-care out there; we often hear about lavender bubble baths, essential oils, getting a massage, getting a manicure-pedicure...while these are all valid and work for some, they may not be for everyone! If you gain something from baths bombs, essential oils and massages, that is AMAZING. For anyone who feels that they don't, though, **it is crucial to explore self-care to discover things that you love, that make you happy, that give you JOY.**

Sometimes, self-care means disengaging from a toxic friendship or relationship, having three meals a day, or mindlessly watching Bravo. It doesn't have to be fancy; its only function is to help you.

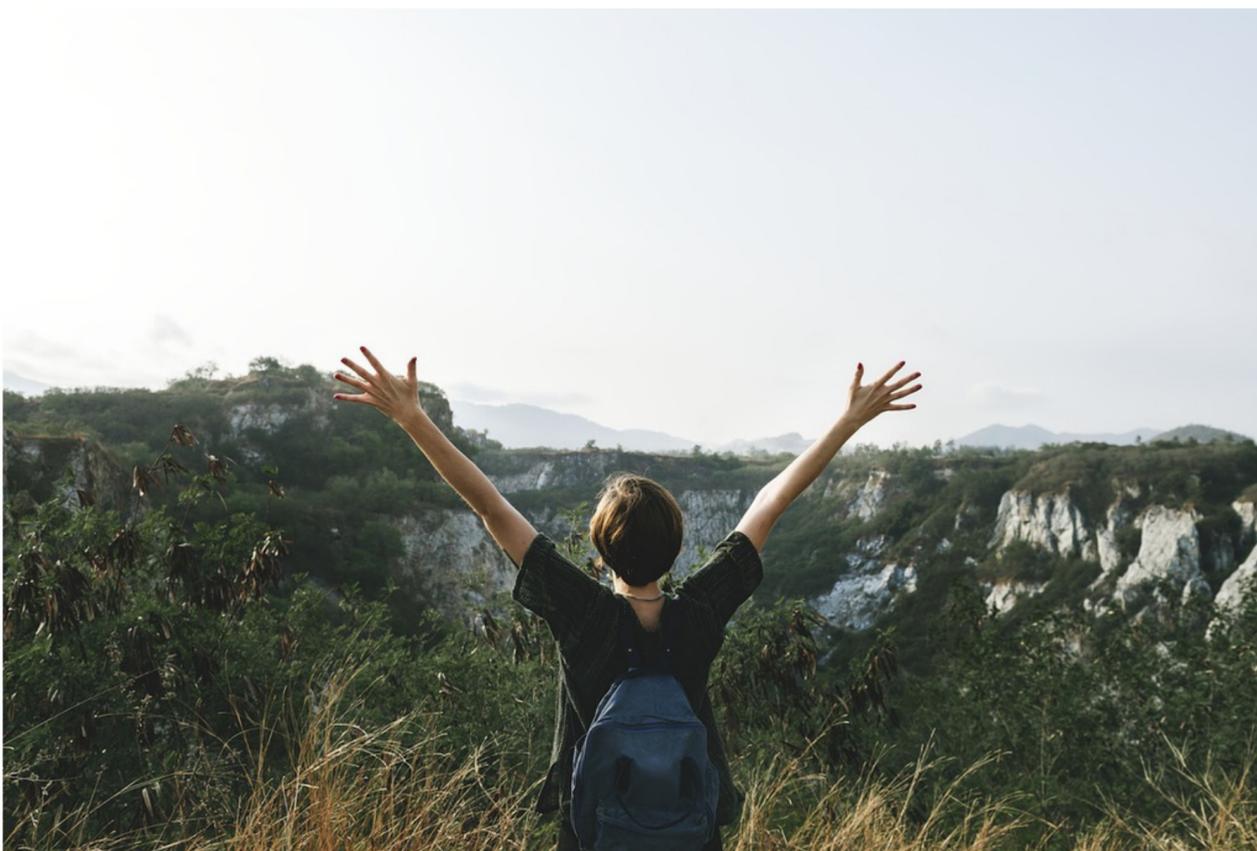
This process of discovery and/or remembering is difficult for many. Some of us may not even know who we are, let alone what we enjoy. If this sounds like you, try to remember if there was anything you liked to do as a child. How did you play? What was fun for you and made you happy? Being in nature, creating something, being with friends, getting active? As long as it is not addictive or obsessive: whatever works for you, works for you. This way of thinking will be helpful in the following pages as well, when we explore getting creative and getting active.

CHALLENGE NEGATIVE & IRRATIONAL THOUGHTS

When we're active in an eating disorder, ED is running the show. ED brain says "don't eat that," or "you need to spend at least 60 minutes on the treadmill" or "you should have more pizza, even though you're not hungry." These thoughts can still occur in recovery. They will be less frequent and less intense, but our new "healthy brain" needs to challenge them.

This is hard! It takes time and practice in order to challenge these thoughts that come automatically without our permission. **When these thoughts arise, we can neutralize them** by responding to ourselves, "I'm actually not hungry anymore" or "30 minutes is enough time on the treadmill for me" or "I'm okay even if I eat and don't burn off the calories."

It is important to listen to these thoughts and often **do the opposite of what they are telling us**. My ED brain tells me to cut out carbs when I'm experiencing sadness, anxiety, or any other type of strong emotion. I can take a moment to listen to these thoughts, acknowledge it's not me but my ED talking, and then instead of cut out carbs...make myself sandwich! And it helps, because it shows ED that I'm stronger than my eating disorder.



USE YOUR FIVE SENSES

When we're struggling with our disordered thoughts, it can be helpful to get outside of our brains. **Getting outside of our minds can help us to be mindful and be present in a different way.** We can shift energy in and out of our bodies and take a needed break from being cerebral. How can we do this? Use our senses: touch, taste, sound, smell, and sight. Here are just a few ideas:

LISTEN to some music that you love (for me this is usually John Mayer...I know, I know)

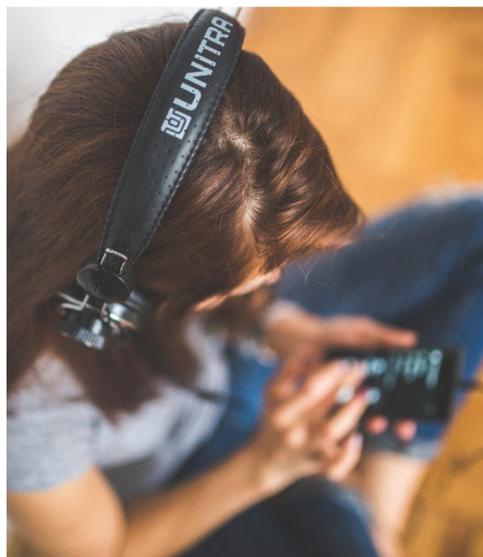
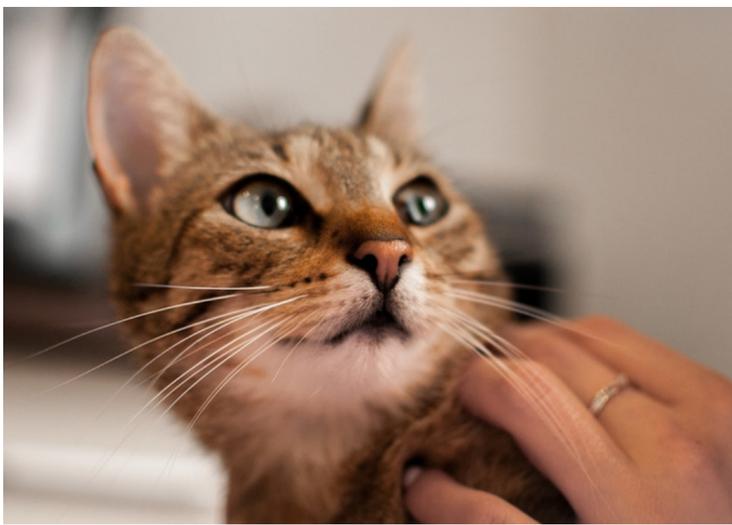
LOOK at a leaf and notice all its colors and veins, a beautiful photo, art, or watch a movie

TOUCH a soft furry friend, hold some ice cubes in your hand for a few seconds, or a warm cup of tea

TASTE your favorite drink and sip it slowly, or have a lollipop

SMELL your favorite perfume, candle, essential oil, an old book, or a flower outside of your home

Shifting to physical experiences allows us to be more present, mindful, and gives us much needed time and space from obsessing.



GET CREATIVE

I've never truly considered myself creative in the traditional sense (whatever that means). I rarely craft, or bake, or make pretty things. It's been important in my recovery to expand my perception about what creativity is.

Our eating disorder steals so much from us; it can take our joy, our excitement, or willingness to do or be anything. **When we start getting creative (in whatever form we enjoy) we are giving ourselves life back.**

I started to write. I didn't write with the intention of it being seen, but the practice of writing allowed me to have a voice and utilize it. I gave myself permission to write anything: in a journal, super long Instagram captions about whatever I wanted, and most recently, this guide.

For you, it may be coloring, painting, making a vision board, putting outfits together, writing, gardening, cooking, or re-decorating your home. ANY FORM OF creating something that stems from your individual, unique talents will do. There are no limits or rules! Again, this is about what FEELS GOOD for you!



GET ACTIVE (FOR FUN)

This has been a battle for me. During my eating disorder days, I wouldn't exercise because I was afraid to gain any muscle and see a higher number on the scale. I started to listen intuitively to what my body craved: walking, jazzercise (yes, and I love it so much), and yoga, to name a few. **A vital part of my recovery has been figuring out how my body wants to move, and consequently honoring that need.**

If you don't enjoy the gym, don't go. Ask yourself how you like to move. Give yourself permission to try new things (or old ones that you once enjoyed) in order to pinpoint what kind of movement brings you contentment (and those endorphins never hurt anyone's mood). Again, going back to how we used to play and move as kids can be a helpful way to figure out what we enjoy doing. Did you like to play sports, bike ride, swim, run, dance? Whenever your gut says "YES," that is the movement it's craving!

Remember this is a process and it's important to be gentle with yourself. Realizing that movement/exercise is supposed to be fun may be a new concept for you like it was for me. **It's not supposed to be torture or punishment.** It's not about the amount of time spent or tracking calories burned. It is about ENJOYMENT, having fun, and feeling strong in your body.



BEWARE OF DIET CULTURE

Diet culture and disordered eating culture are everywhere. We live in it, we breathe it, we see and experience it every day. Once you're in recovery, you realize how incredibly visible and disturbingly accepted it is.

How do we deal with this? Come to terms with the reality that the diet/weight loss/beauty industry does not care about who you are as a person and is just trying to SELL YOU THINGS, almost none of which are based in evidence or have been proven effective.

I guarantee that you will experience diet culture: through conversation, at the mall, out to eat, on television, on social media, in books and movies, in slogans, at doctor's offices, and so many other environments. Understand this: **it is not about you and you do not have to engage.** You are allowed to disengage from diet culture conversations, you are allowed to change the subject, you are allowed to leave, you are allowed to do whatever you need to do to nourish yourself, live in your truth, and take care of yourself.



Diet culture is ingrained Western civilization, and nearly impossible to escape. Learning about Health At Every Size and educating yourself on the body positive movement can truly make a difference in your recovery.

REMEMBER SELF-LOVE IS A JOURNEY

It takes time to dismantle and deprogram everything we've learned about our self worth, disordered eating, and diet culture. We must give ourselves the time, flexibility and graciousness we deserve on our journeys to love and accept ourselves.

Just starting this journey can be one of the most difficult challenges, but it is possible. I started by getting a manicure. It was one of the first things I allowed myself to do, for me, during early recovery. I didn't believe I deserved it because I had gained weight—I equated my worthiness with the number I read on the scale.

When I'm experiencing negative thoughts, I'll ask myself, "would you say or think this about someone else?" and the answer is always no! Eating disorders like to make us think that we are the exception to the rule, that everyone ELSE deserves love, care, rest, and compassion...but we don't. This isn't true. This is the eating disorder talking, not our healthy brains. We all DESERVE love, kindness, rest friendship, community, and joy.

I believe recovery is a life-long process. We can do small things every day to learn how to show ourselves kindness, compassion, and empathy. This takes time and effort, and that's okay! There is no rush. What's important is that we take these steps to give ourselves the love we deserve.

MORE

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