

Finding My True Self and Inner Beauty

By Andrea Roe



My name is Andrea. I'm twenty-eight years old and a recovered anorexic and bulimic. I'm Austrian, married to a wonderful Canadian and currently living in beautiful British Columbia, Canada. I struggled with depression and severe body image issues for almost ten years and with eating disorders for six long years. I have finally overcome my struggles—and this is my story...

While I was growing up, food and weight were not a problem for me. I came from a very active and health-oriented family and never had to worry about my weight. Almost every weekend my parents would take my siblings and me walking, hiking, biking, skiing or on a sightseeing trip to a gorgeous place somewhere in Austria. I like thinking about my childhood; it was a wonderful time, and thinking about it creates a warm feeling inside of me. Even now, while I am writing this, I have a smile on my face and a tear of joy in my eyes.

When I was about thirteen-years old, a girl who was about two years older than me said to me that my face looked weird when I smiled, and then she started to laugh. She said this in front of other people. I was very confused; I didn't know what to say, and I blushed. I had never paid much attention to my smile until that day. When I came home from school, I looked at myself in the mirror. I smiled. I used two mirrors and looked at my smile from different angles. I stared at myself for hours, and, came to the conclusion that the girl was right: my smile looked weird! And I came to the conclusion that looked ugly when I smiled. And so I decided not to smile anymore.

It took almost ten years before I learned to love my smile again. In photographs taken during those years, I hardly ever smiled. *(By the way, this comment did not cause my eating disorder; it is an example of the power of words, and how one simple innocent comment can spiral out of control).* That happened about two or three years before my eating disorder developed. It was the first step towards disliking and hating my face, and eventually my body.

Around that time, I also developed acne. I already did not like my face because of my "ugly" smile, and having blemished skin made me hate my face even more. I tried everything that was on the market to get rid of my skin problems, but nothing helped. I became depressed and cried a lot. I started wearing makeup to cover the red spots. I wouldn't leave the house without putting it on, so ashamed was I of my face. There were times I didn't go to school because of my skin; I didn't want anyone to look at it. I didn't like people looking at me, at my skin. I didn't want them to look at what was "wrong" with me.

My parents did everything in their power to help, support, and comfort me. They were always there for me. I had times when I cried almost every day and locked myself in my room. I just wanted to

be alone. I would lie on my bed, look at my face in a mirror and cry. Not many people knew about those struggles, or how big a problem my skin really was for me. I was a very sad teenage girl on the inside, but did not show this to other people. I pretended to be strong.

When I was fifteen, I had the thought that I had to lose some weight. There was no reason for me to go on a diet, but I felt so badly about myself and I thought maybe losing some weight would make me feel better about myself. I wanted to feel pretty and was desperate to do anything to feel that way, and I thought losing weight might be a way to get there. I felt like I had nothing to lose; I already hated myself and what I looked liked so much... I thought things just could not get any worse for me, but they did...

My dieting got out of control, and I slipped into having an eating disorder—I had developed anorexia. I don't know exactly when my eating disorder started and my dieting ended, I just slipped into it.

I read a lot of women's magazines and adored the female models in those magazines: their beautiful smiles, their clear skin, and their flawless bodies. Back then I didn't know that what I looked at, what I admired and wanted to look like, was not real but digitally airbrushed and drastically altered by computers. At that point, I actually didn't know that I had a problem. I was in denial, and I thought that what I was doing was normal. Now, when I look back, I can see how much I was already into my eating disorder world. I just didn't notice it back then.

Sometimes when lying in bed at night, I imagined how life would be if I liked my face, smile, and body. How "easy" life would be because I wouldn't have to hide anymore. I wouldn't have to be afraid of people looking at me anymore. I could be free of all my worries! I thought I would be happy.

After graduating at eighteen, I went to university. The idea of me not being beautiful was still stuck in my head. It was at this point that my eating disorder started to take complete control of my life.

I started bingeing in order to try to fill the emptiness inside of me, although I never threw up (*the type of bulimia I struggled with is called "non-purging" bulimia*). I wanted to so much, but for some reason I was not able to make myself vomit. Instead, I would use other methods to get rid of the food and the calories quickly, like over-exercising, diet pill and laxative abuse (*which are very harmful and dangerous for your body and your health!*). I would eat until my stomach started to ache. I felt disgusted with myself and what I was doing. I was very ashamed and embarrassed about my behaviour. For the longest time I didn't tell anyone about my problem and struggled on my own, secretly and in silence.

Unfortunately, my eating disorder didn't stop there. It not only changed my relationship with food and weight, it started taking control over my social life as well. I didn't go out for a coffee, lunch, or dinner with my friends anymore. I felt uncomfortable eating in front of other people. I didn't want anyone to force me to eat. I was terrified by the thought of gaining weight. I also feared that they would notice what was going on with me. I was afraid of them asking questions. I didn't want anyone to find out what I was doing, and lied a lot to my friends in order to keep my eating disorder a secret. I didn't

like lying to them but I felt I had no other choice. I thought that if they knew they wouldn't like me anymore and wouldn't want to be friends with me.

During the first couple of years of my struggles, I wasn't very educated about eating disorders, mainly because I was in denial for so long. I knew only a bit of basic information and had no idea about where to get useful information about eating disorders, where to turn for help—I was too shy to ask. I thought that one had to be either extremely skinny or extremely heavy in order to be taken seriously, but I was neither. My weight was always somewhere in the normal healthy weight range. And people with eating disorders have to be one of those extremes, do they not?

I eventually hit a point where I could not deny my problem any longer and was finally able to admit to myself that what I was doing was not healthy and that I needed to stop this behaviour. But I didn't know what to do or where to start. I felt lost and confused, and thought I was the only one who had this problem.

I didn't know how to get out of my eating disorder cycle. I was ruining not only my mind and health, but also my life. I was hurting not only myself but also the people around me. Many nights I would cry myself to sleep, wondering if I was ever going to recover—or if there even was such a thing as “recovery.”

I had always had a very close relationship with my parents, but my eating disorder forced me to move away from them. I became very reserved and quiet. They knew what was going on and hoped I would talk to them so they could support and help me. Sometimes I wanted to tell them about my struggles, I wanted to be taken in their arms; I wanted to feel that I was loved no matter what. I thought about talking to them for months but was never sure what to say. I was afraid of disappointing them. I wanted them to be proud of me. But how could they be proud of me when I had an eating disorder?

I eventually opened up to my mum. I gave her a book about how to deal with someone who struggles with an eating disorder, and wrote a letter to her as well. I could see how relieved she was that I finally opened up to her, and she took me in her arms and comforted me. I was crying a lot on that day but I was glad I told her.

My eating disorder didn't get better after my conversation with my mum, but at least I knew now that I had someone to talk to when I needed help, comfort, and support.

So I continued my self-destructive path of bulimia. But no matter how much food I ate, I was not able to fill the emptiness inside me. I wasted so much money on food; I don't even want to think about the amount I spent on my binges. I withdrew socially, even more than I had before; I had spent most of my time alone, either bingeing, over-exercising, or starving myself. I led a lonely and sad life and had little hope about ever getting better. I spent so much time in my room alone, escaping into the virtual world of my computer. Here I was safe; nobody was able to see me, to judge me or hurt me. I know my parents were very worried about me, but they had no idea how to get close to me. When they tried, they were not successful. I didn't let anyone get close. I completely shut them out. I cried almost every day, sometimes even a couple of times a day.

What had happened to me? How could I have let it come that far? I felt completely hopeless. I wanted to get better and be happy and healthy again...but I didn't even know where to start my journey towards recovery. Besides, I wasn't even sure if there was such a thing as "recovery."

Just looking at myself in the mirror made me cry. I hated my face, my body, everything. There was nothing pretty about me, at least that's what I thought. Even though my skin had improved and became really nice over time, and I had stopped wearing makeup to cover up my face, I didn't recognize that nor was I grateful for it. Even though my acne was gone, it still didn't change the fact that I hated my face—and my smile.

My turning point came when I met a wonderful man from Canada who is now my husband. We met in London, England, and it was love at first sight. We immediately felt a special bond, and it seemed as if we had known one another for a long time already. It almost felt like "coming home." It felt wonderful to be close to him. I felt safe. He was also my first boyfriend. I finally had what I had desired for so long—a loving, caring, and understanding man by my side who truly and deeply loved me.

In the beginning, I didn't tell him about my eating disorder. I was afraid that if he found out he would leave me, and I didn't want him to. I was afraid of being alone again. When I was around him, I would eat normally, and it felt good. For the first time in years I felt "normal." I decided to move to Canada with him, and we moved together, very quickly, which, in the long run, really helped me with my eating disorder.

I still binged, but I wasn't able to do it as often because I only binged when I was alone, and, since Brandon and I lived together, we spent a lot of time together. He never noticed my binges, but he did notice that I had stomachaches on a regular basis, and he was worried about me. I always told him I had problems adjusting to the food in Canada and that was where my stomachaches came from. He never doubted what I said and never acted suspicious. He saw no reason to; why would I lie to him? But I did lie to him, and I lied a lot. I felt like I had to, as if I had no other choice. I didn't want him to find out what was really going on with me. I was afraid of losing him, of being left alone.

It took me a couple of months until I was ready to tell him about what was really going on with me. He hadn't even noticed and seemed quite surprised. Brandon took me in his arms, gave me a kiss and said that we would get through this together and that he would always be there for me and do whatever it took to get me healthy again. I started crying. It felt as if a heavy weight had been lifted off my shoulders. He believed in me, in us, and he believed that together we would be able to beat this disorder. For the first time in years, I felt, just maybe, recovery was possible for me.

Today, I am healthy. I am grateful for my body, and I love myself and my life. I am thankful that my body has not given up on me after many years of abuse.

My journey to recovery was difficult at times. I had to take it one day after the other. I had setbacks; I had a lot of them. Every time I fell, I got up again and continued on my journey. I did my best not to look back, but forward.

Brandon was always there for me and with me, every step of the way. We talked a lot and I told him everything, and I mean EVERYTHING. There were a lot of things I told him that weren't pretty, but, no matter what I said, his feelings for me did not get any less. He never judged me or my behaviour, no matter what I did. The only thing he didn't want me to do was to lie to him and cover up things. It was important for him that I always told him the truth, no matter how "bad" it was. That was one of the hardest patterns for me to break: to stop lying. I had been lying about my eating behaviour for so many years that I did not even notice it anymore when I did... lying just happened automatically.

My husband also taught me to smile again. He always told me that I looked pretty when I smiled and that I was a beautiful girl. I didn't believe him at first, but over time I was able to see that I really was beautiful girl, inside and out, with a beautiful smile. Now, I actually love my smile. I didn't smile for pictures in almost ten years, and these days, whenever pictures are taken, I am the first one to smile! ☺

I am so thankful for having Brandon in my life. He has always been there for me; he has always believed in me and never gave up on me. His love and support are what I needed to find the strength in me to beat this disorder.

I have reached the point where I am able to openly and honestly talk about my eating disorder struggles and everything connected with it. I'm not ashamed anymore of my past and no longer feel the need to hide it. I always saw my eating disorder as something negative, as "lost years." Now, I can see it in a positive way. If not for my past, I know I would not be who I am today and would not be where I am today—and I like the person I am, and I love my life.

I believe that everything happens for a reason, even though often we are unable to see the reason right away. While I was struggling, I often asked myself what good reason all this pain, all these tears, could possibly have, and I never found an answer. Now, things have started to fall into place. All of it was a big learning experience for me, one that was necessary to make me the person I am now. It was a painful and difficult experience, that is for sure, but it was necessary. I have learned so much over the past few years, about life and about myself, that I wouldn't have otherwise. I now know who I am. I have found my place in life. I have found personal meaning in my life.

My life is not about me anymore. For years I was a lonely and depressed girl who lived a small, sad life. Now I have the desire to make a difference in other people's lives and want to give back to society. It is my passion to show others who are struggling with eating disorders that there is a way out—you can have a life without the eating disorder.

I want you to know that it **IS** possible to recover. **Please do not give up on yourself. You CAN get through this!** I did it, and so can you! Your eating disorder didn't just happen overnight, it started a long time ago, before you first binged, purged or starved yourself. It will take time to get better, one step at a time.

Eating disorders are not simply about food and weight. They are an attempt to use food and weight to deal with emotional problems. An eating disorder is just a symptom of something deeper

Here is some more pro-recovery information to help you on your healing journey.

My Top 3 Recovery Tips:

A reporter, doing a story on eating disorders, recently asked me about my three best tips related to eating disorder recovery. And I'd like to share my answer with you.

1) Your Personal Support Team

I could not have recovered without the help and support from others. I was close to giving up the fight many times, and my support team was there for me and believed in me, no matter what. And whenever I fell, they helped me get back up again to continue on with my recovery and healing journey. And they also celebrated my successes with me and reminded me of my successes when I was only concentrating on my failures and what was wrong with me.

In case you haven't already, I encourage you to set up your personal support team. And it's not about quantity, but **quality. Whatever works best for you.** There are many recovery support resources available, it's about finding what works best for you and going after that. Who can be part of your support network? Here are a few ideas... family, friends, spouse, therapist, psychologist, support group, doctor, treatment center, mentor, others who are recovered or in recovery, and more.

You deserve to get help. You deserve to get healthy and **live a fulfilled life—without the eating disorder.**

2) The Power of Sharing and Letting Go of Secrets

Speaking about how I was doing and what I was going through helped me so much during my recovery. When I talked about it, I didn't have to do it anymore. Speaking about my eating disorder was liberating. **Our secrets—no matter what they are—keep us sick. It's when we open up that we are able to start the real healing process.**

3) You are NOT your eating disorder

For the longest time, it felt like I was my eating disorder and my eating disorder was me. **It felt like "it" was my identity. I didn't know who I was without it. I had forgotten.** During my recovery, **I had to learn to separate these two voices**—mine and the eating disorder voice. And when it was the eating disorder talking, **I had to learn to fight back, talk back and disobey its commands.** I had to learn to take control back over my life— after all, it was MY life, not the eating disorders'. And whenever you hear the voice in your head telling you that you aren't good enough, need to lose weight, punish yourself... ask yourself if that is the "real you" that is talking, or if it is your eating disorder that is speaking to you.

What is your best recovery tip? Feel free to share it with me!

~~~~~

### **Breaking Free from the Eating Disorder Voice**

While I struggled with my eating disorder, I often wondered whether I would ever be able to silence this toxic voice in my head, which was telling me I was not worthy, I was not beautiful, I was fat, to punish myself. It was like a non-stop negative tape recorder in my head.

And for years, **I had mistaken this voice for my own true self.** I thought they were one and the

same---that I was the eating disorder.

Then I started my path to recovery.

I learned that the eating disorder takes on its own personified identity and then tries to convince you that the disorder is you. It can be difficult to see where one starts and one ends.

With lots of work, patience and persistence, **I learned how to separate my own true self from the eating disorder voice.** It was difficult, especially in the beginning, because my own voice was so small that I had trouble hearing it. The eating disorder was so loud and dominant.

I started to pay more and more attention to my own voice. Even when I was not able to do what it told me, I did my best to **acknowledge** it, and was **thankful** whenever I heard it was still there. I also slowly started to talk back to the eating disorder voice. I didn't want to be a slave to it any longer.

I found that the eating disorder voice started to grow weaker over time from neglect. The less I paid attention to it and more to my own voice, the stranger the eating disorder voice became. Over time, this toxic presence felt "sick", and out of place. And eventually, it faded away. **Today, the eating disorder voice is gone.**

***The same can happen for you.***

In the meantime, it is important to nurture your true you, your real voice. In the beginning, it can be difficult to tell these two voices apart -- yours and the eating disorder one. That's why it is important that whenever you hear your own voice speaking, to **embrace** it, **celebrate** it, **trust** it and give it **room to grow.**

It took time to develop the eating disorder, and it takes time to break free from it. But the important thing to remember is that **breaking free from the eating disorder IS possible.**

It's one day at a time. One step at a time. But these small steps add up to making a HUGE difference. Each of these baby steps brings us closer to recovery and a life free of ED (your eating disorder).

~~~~~

It's Not About Food & Weight

For the longest time I actually thought that my problems were about food and weight -- I really thought that was the real issue. It didn't occur to me that there were other things going on deep inside of me and the eating disorder was the symptom of these things. It took a while for me to really understand (and feel) that **my eating disorder was not simply about food and weight but an attempt to use food and weight to deal with internal struggles and ultimately life.**

Once I really got that my eating disorder was the symptom of something deeper going on inside and that food and my body were not the enemy (even though it often felt like it), I was able to realize the real issues. **I was finally able to work on these things and ultimately find recovery.**

Simply put, up to this point, I had used my eating disorder as a way of dealing with life -- it was my coping mechanism. A very unhealthy coping mechanism, of course. Once I understood this and was able to identify myself with this theory, I was able to work on my real issues and come up with better ways of coping. It was a s-l-o-w process - *baby steps*, but I eventually got there. I had setbacks, I had a lot, but I kept on fighting. I never gave up, even though I was very close to it many times. But I had people in my life who helped me get back up again whenever I fell... and because I kept on fighting, kept on pushing myself to move out of my comfort zone, **I was able to recover.** As long as we don't give up, we can reach our goals.

I had many motivations that kept me going... and I'd remind myself on an almost daily basis about my goals and dreams. I had a journal in which I'd put all the things that I wanted to do in life and in order to achieve most of these things, I just had to be healthy... and I also had a goal list glued to my mirror in my room. It is **rewarding to look back** now and see how many of those things I have actually done.

I recommend you do this very powerful exercise too. Keep focusing on your goals and dreams and what you want in and from life, write these things down and remind yourself about them on a regular basis. **Your goals will motivate you to move forward and keep taking action.** Whatever happens, keep looking forward, keep moving forward and **don't give up.** You have it in you what it takes to overcome your struggles.

~~~~~

### **Dealing With Setbacks**

During my recovery I had setbacks - A LOT of setbacks. And whenever I fell, I had to learn **not** to beat myself up but be kind and patient with myself. It was often very hard to get back up again and continue on with my recovery and healing journey. Sometimes I was able to get back up again by myself... I'd spend some time in my misery and with my eating disorder but eventually got tired of feeling this way and somehow found the strength to pull myself back up again.

And sometimes, when I felt too weak to get back up again by myself - just tired of the whole recovery process and close to giving up the fight - **I had people in my life who helped me get back up again.** And I was angry, frustrated, felt like a failure and just wanted to be left alone... but my support team didn't care—all they wanted was to get me out of this dark place again as soon as possible so I could continue on with my journey and move forward to reach my goals. And often I got mad at my support team for helping me get back up...I didn't feel strong enough to get back up again. I was tired of trying again as I *\*knew\** I'd just fail again in the end anyways. I was tired of being disappointed again and again, of failing again and again. But **my support team never gave up on me.**

In case you haven't already, please reach out and get help. You deserve to get help. You deserve to be happy and healthy. You deserve to live your life without the eating disorder. And in order for someone to successfully recover, help and support from others is crucial. **If it wasn't for my support team, I would not be where I am today.** I would have given up somewhere on the way. It's important to have others in our lives who believe in us and help us get back up again when we fall. Recovery is not easy...but it is well worth it. **This is a battle that can be won.**

It's important to find those people that will support you through the good times and the bad. It could be someone in your family or a friend, your therapist or support group.

The key is to find those first few people. Then, you'll no longer have to carry your burden by yourself anymore.

Stay strong and learn to believe in yourself. You can do this!

*Andrea*