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Relearning “Normal” Eating after an Eating Disorder.

By Mary Bamford, Registered Dietitian

When people recover from an eating disorder, they often need help relearning what and how much to eat in order to maintain a healthy weight and feel well.

Patients, their friends and family members all have difficulty understanding the challenges people recovering from eating disorders face as they learn to eat normally and overcome fears of specific foods and weight gain.

This month’s case study describes a client’s Eating Disorder on the first page and her recovery under the care of our Registered Dietitian on the second page.

The Client--SK

SK, a 19 year old university student, came to Adelaide Clinic in February 2010 for nutrition counselling. With the support of her school and family, she was in outpatient treatment for an eating disorder—a combination of anorexia, bulimia and binge eating. She was seeing a Psychiatrist weekly and was on medical leave from school. She moved out of University Residence and back home with her parents and younger brother two months prior.

SK was progressing well with the psychological issues of her eating disorder and was ready to learn how to eat “normally”. She consulted a Dietitian for private and personalized guidance.

Eating and Weight History

SK was 165 cm tall, petite East Asian stature, at a healthy weight of 135 lbs (Body Mass Index of 22.2) at first visit.

As a teen her weight reached 180 lbs. She used strategies including fasting, purging, excessive exercising, calorie-counting and food restrictions to lose weight. At the time her treatment began, she was severely restricting and at her lowest weight of 110 lbs.

As part of her treatment she gained weight, but when she reached 135 lbs, “I realized it was too much for my liking...I became panicked about weight issues and began fasting to compensate for extra calories”. She did not know how to eat to maintain weight.

SK’s Nutrition Goals

1. Learn how to eat normally, with no more restricting, bingeing and purging
2. Discover and trust hunger and satiety signals
3. Lose 10 pounds and keep it off by making healthy lifestyle choices
4. Feel well, able to get back to school and move forward with her life.

Portion Distortion

What you're served



What's one serving



Eating and Nutrition Issues

During assessment, we identified the following nutrition problems that were causing or contributing to her medical problems—anemia, acne, lack of menstruation, bradycardia, depression, low energy and loss of muscle mass. These nutrition issues also put SK at risk for more serious medical issues.

- **Bingeing:** No meals. Two to 3 episodes of out of control eating per day where SK would have something to eat every 5 minutes for about 2 hours.
- **Purging:** with pharmaceuticals and natural health products
- **Restricting:** The rest of the day had no food intake. While the first eating period started anywhere between 3:00 am and 7:00 am, she never ate past 4:00 pm.
- **Eating alone.** Feeling uncomfortable eating with others and planning a full meal.
- **Sedentary lifestyle - no energy to move**
- **Inadequate nutrient intake:** Intake was inadequate in protein, essential fatty acids and many vitamins and minerals.

The Approach to Recovery

SK was ready to make changes to her eating, and was looking for a safe place to learn what changes to make and how to make them. Recovery from an eating disorder is a gradual process, full of small and critical successes. Patience is a key ingredient.

Getting Started

Change began with discovering a lifestyle structure that will work for SK as the foundation to learn and trust the rhythms and needs of her body. After discussion SK planned to:

- Initiate a Bedtime and Waketime routine 3 nights a week - 11 pm to 7 am.
- Work toward a routine to eat 3 meals per day--Start with eating 300-400 calories at 7am, 11 am and 4 pm one day over the next week.

- Add a 9 pm snack of a 100 calorie yogurt one evening
- Start a daily physical activity routine—Two 15 minute walks, one in the morning and one in the evening.

Progress-building on successes

With each visit, SK discovered beneficial effects of different gradual changes and was ready to further build upon them. For example:

- Evening exercise helped her feel ready to go to bed on time.
- Eating dinner and an evening snack helped her sleep through the night and prevented the urge for 3:00 am binges most of the time.
- Including a protein-rich food at each meal prevented hunger and cravings later.
- Planning a specific activity at the end of a mealtime, made it easier to stop eating.
- Specific stressors (such as betrayal by a friend) drove her back to old habits such as staying up late, bingeing and restricting.
- Her body did not feel well when she went back to old habits
- Her psychiatrist could help her manage the stressors and help her get back on track.

Further Progress--overcoming eating fears

As SK gained confidence with understanding and meeting her own body's needs for regular meals, rest and exercise, she was willing to challenge and test some of her fears and beliefs.

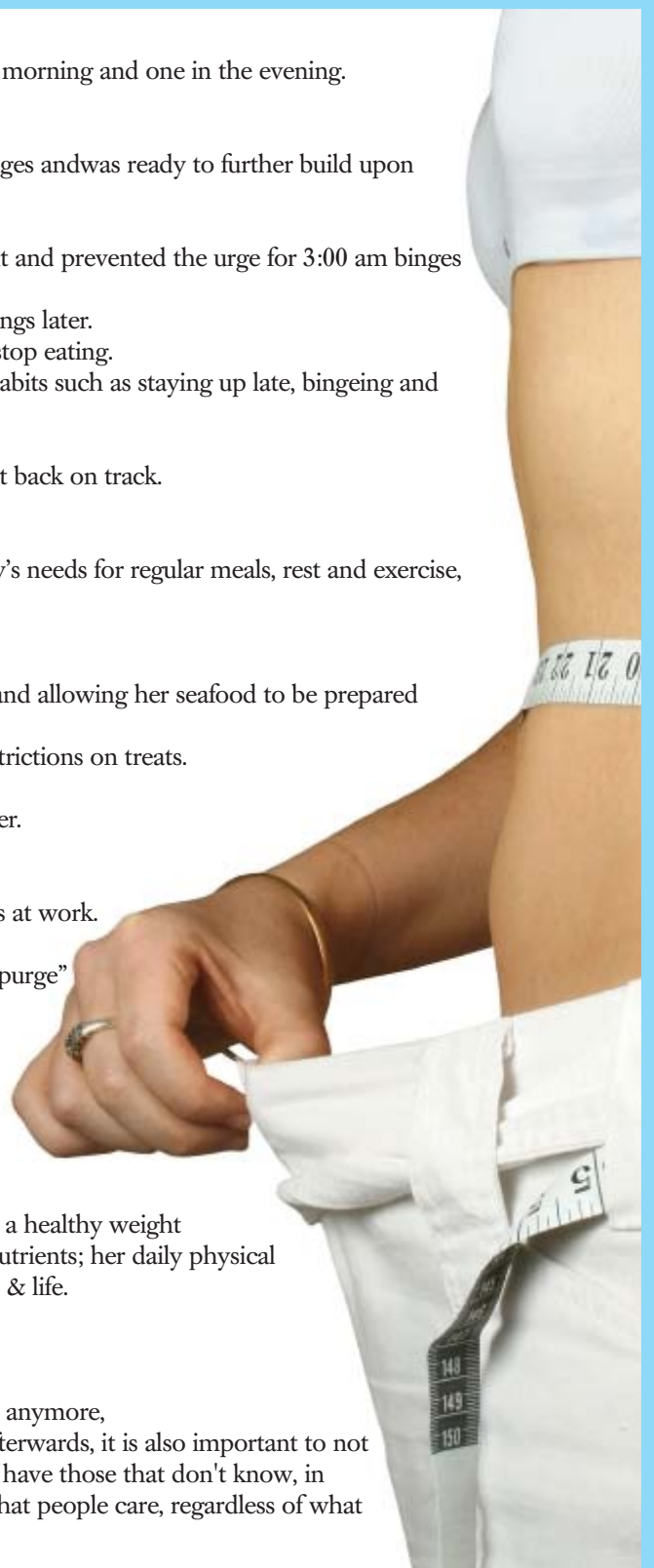
- She stopped feeling the need to purge with for drugs and supplements
- She trusted herself to know what and how much to eat at all 3 meals
- She added foods containing fat to her meals. It started with egg yolk and allowing her seafood to be prepared with teaspoon of oil. This was a big step forward.
- After a 7000 calorie binge on pizza, she was ready to lift her severe restrictions on treats. SK started planning for an average of 100 calories per day of treats.
- SK started eating her evening snack with her father while he had dinner.
- After success with dad, she started eating lunch with her mother.
- Then she went out for ice cream with a friend....and was comfortable
- As she got better, she started working and enjoyed eating with friends at work.
- By month 3, her overeating moments felt under control—"they are just overeating, not bingeing, not feeling stuffed, no self-hatred, no urge to purge"

Progress—Positive Medical Outcomes at 4 months

- Energy levels are high; depression lifted; confidence level appropriate
- Menstruation is regular; her body feels strong; anemia corrected
- The acne and acne scarring has fully cleared. Her hair feels soft and healthy, no longer frizzy.
- SK's weight is stable at her goal of 124-126 pounds
- SK trusts her eating pattern and hunger signals to maintain health and a healthy weight
- Lifestyle: Nutrition, activity, well-being - her diet provides optimal nutrients; her daily physical activity is appropriate; she feels confident in her skills to manage stress & life.
- SK was accepted to return to school and is excited about her future

SK's Insights after Reviewing the Case Study Write Up

"Acknowledging that these issues don't have to be a part of your identity anymore, yet accepting what has already happened, is the first step to recovery. Afterwards, it is also important to not only have those who know about your issues to support you, but to also have those that don't know, in order to help you moving forward. Keeping yourself busy and realizing that people care, regardless of what state you're in, is very reassuring."



Cambridge Group of Clubs

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