

HOPE

THIS BOOK CONTAINS:

Marie's Diary - extracts from Marie Campion's Diary,
which she kept since she was eleven years old

Personally Speaking - writings by sufferers from eating disorders

Action Days - suggestions to aid recovery



Hope

Marie Campion

ILLUSTRATIONS

Emma Walsh



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CONTENTS

- Introduction page 6
- 1 Recovery is for You 15
- 2 When Can It Start? 22
Marie's Diary 23
- 3 Trapped in a Big Bubble 27
Personally Speaking 28 ♣ *Marie's Diary 35*
- 4 A Day in the Life of ... 39
Personally Speaking 40 ♣ *Marie's Diary 46*
- 5 Coping Skills from the Chemist 53
Marie's Diary 55
- 6 Festive or Furtive? 61
Personally Speaking 64 ♣ *Marie's Diary 65*
- 7 I Used to be a Fitness Queen 69
Personally Speaking 72
- 8 Male Sufferers 77
Personally Speaking 79
- 9 Strange But True 83
Personally Speaking 84 ♣ *Marie's Diary 91*
- 10 It's Never Too Late 98
Personally Speaking 99 ♣ *Marie's Diary 106*
- 11 Recovery 114
Action Days 118
- 12 Hope - a Certainty, Not a Question 149
Personally Speaking 150 ♣ *Marie's Diary 159*
- 13 We Did It 162
Personally Speaking 163 ♣ *Marie's Diary 171*
- 14 For Those Who Care 176
Personally Speaking 182
Acknowledgements 192

INTRODUCTION

This is a book on eating disorders. Our purpose is not to tell sufferers how to recover, but to remind them that they can do it because other people did. We do not present case studies or a deep analysis of what causes eating disorders. Here we share the real stories of people who have overcome or are overcoming their difficulties in relation to food. We do this with the intention of encouraging sufferers, to remind them that they are not alone in this frightening illness and that there is light for them at the end of the tunnel.

People who have an eating disorder usually suffer from either anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa or compulsive eating. Until recently very little was known about this 'secret' illness. Anorexia nervosa was first documented in 1964 by a London physician who reported the condition in a 16-year-old male. Even though it is a widespread illness it was not properly described until 1968 when the complexity of emotional, physical and psychological aspects associated with the illness were uncovered.

Anorexia sufferers usually share the following characteristics:

- ~ fear of gaining weight
- ~ distorted body image
- ~ missing monthly menstruation
- ~ withdrawal from all social contacts
- ~ perfectionist compulsions
- ~ a feeling of cold
- ~ dizziness and fainting spells
- ~ a tendency to dress in layers in order to hide oneself
- ~ fear of situations where food may be present

- ~ a rigid exercise programme
- ~ insecurities about personal capabilities.

The main characteristics of bulimia are as follows:

- ~ repeated episodes of binge eating with or without self-induced vomiting
- ~ laxative and diuretics abuse
- ~ diet pills abuse
- ~ over exercising
- ~ complaints of fatigue and muscle pain
- ~ swollen glands
- ~ puffiness in the cheeks, broken blood vessels under eyes
- ~ tooth decay
- ~ weight fluctuation, often within a 10 to 20 pound range
- ~ preoccupation with and constant talk about food and weight
- ~ mood shifts and depression, sadness, severe guilt and self-hate
- ~ self-worth determined by weight.

Compulsive eating involves:

- ~ constantly eating through the day, or occasional binges
- ~ eating in secret, often at night
- ~ a feeling of being out of control around food
- ~ a pattern of strict dieting, possible abuse of laxatives, diuretics and slimming tablets
- ~ hypertension or fatigue
- ~ an inability to maintain constant weight
- ~ mood swings
- ~ guilt and shame about amount eaten
- ~ loss of interest in sexual activity
- ~ possible malnutrition, because of poor diet

Compulsive eating is only beginning to be recognised as an illness; it is still not included in the official list of psychiatric conditions. It is definitely a psychological disorder in which food is used unknowingly to cope with stress, emotional conflict and daily problems. Dieting is mistakenly seen as the solution and is undertaken with strenuous effort; feelings of deprivation set in because dieting is usually approached in a rigid manner.

People are driven to compulsive eating through suppressed anger, loneliness, stress in work. Very often they have a tendency to pretend the problem does not exist. They try to cope with it alone because there is so little recognition of this form of eating disorder.

Our society is desperately trying to become thinner. It seems that the average healthy body is not enough anymore. The body is no longer viewed as a gift of nature, but as an object which we can sculpt to our liking, which we must manufacture for other people's approval. The body has become an expression of the way we feel. Our culture has become very superficial; we are living extremely stressed, pressurised lives; we are distancing ourselves further from nature; we are developing even more internal stress; we feel pressurised to put our energy into external impressions and we forget that it is our relationships which count; we have fallen victim to consumerism and to the seduction of advertisements. All of this has become fertile ground for the development of eating disorders.

Research reveals that contrary to popular myths about eating disorders, the illness does not discriminate; it is found among males and females, across all socio-economic classes, in many races, and in all age groups.

In the USA more than 8 million people are suffering from an eating disorder and in Great Britain an estimated 600,000 people are in treatment. Research has also shown that 80 per cent of Americans have dieted by the age of 18, and in Great Britain one out of four is on a diet. Alarming research from Swansea University has shown that 25 per cent of children under seven years of age

want to diet even though they are the correct body weight. In Ireland, a study undertaken by the Dublin Institute of Technology in collaboration with Trinity College and the Eastern Health Board has shown that seven out of every ten of the 420 young girls interviewed are trying to lose weight even though almost a third of them perceive themselves as being normal weight or even underweight.

Those who suffer from an eating disorder carry around with them a terrible secret. For over twenty years I carried the sufferer's secret. I lived in fear that people would find out the real me – the bad one, the one who had nothing to offer to this world, to anybody.

From early childhood I felt different. I could not understand this feeling, but I was ashamed of it. I wanted to have somebody to trust, to share how I felt, but I was afraid that if anybody discovered the real me they would be terrified and never want to see me again.

From about the age of nine I developed an eating problem: gradually it became more and more difficult to eat. Suddenly people were noticing me, worrying about me, fussing over me. I was important. For several years home became a battle ground but I solved this problem by eating and then getting rid of the food through vomiting. I had developed bulimia, a condition which at that time did not even have a name. I had become a good girl again, not a difficult one. And this became my big secret for nearly twenty years. It was my very own secret. When I reflect on all the negative feelings connected with this secret I feel sad, but no longer for myself. I survived and let them go. My sadness is for the thousands of people who are now going through this confusing condition.

I have felt a great desire to help other sufferers. When I was at my worst, when my life consisted only of binges or severe starvation, when I was told by experts that I would never recover, that I would have to live with it and control it, I read an article in a women's magazine about another person who went through similar experiences. She wrote about how wonderful it felt to have recovered and

be free of this obsession. That was one of my breaking points. If she did it, I could do it too.

It took many years of hardship, of ups and downs, before I was able to call myself 'fully recovered'. There were a lot of moments and even days and weeks when I doubted my ability to do it. 'Maybe she is much stronger than I am, maybe others can recover and I cannot, maybe it is too late for me ...' These were the thoughts that held me back, but in the end I did it; it never came back and the result was well worth it.

Today, on the other side of the condition, I can see the world differently. My life was not the problem, my body was not the problem, people around me were not the problem. The problem was my attitude to all that was happening. At the time I did not know any other way. I had to revise my thinking about myself, about my values, about life itself.

After working with hundreds of people in the process of recovery I have become more and more convinced that to enable people to recover we all need to increase our understanding of what eating disorders are and their function in people's lives. Eating disorders are not about food only. This is actually the smallest part of the illness, the most obvious manifestation of the self-destructive thinking of the person. Eating disorders are the expression of an inability to accept oneself, a crisis of identity. For sufferers, the person they are is just never good enough, never perfect enough. The condition is literally self-denial in an extreme form.

What is recovery, what is cure? Usually people who have never suffered from this illness, especially parents, partners and some of the medical professionals, tend to look for a short-term answer, concentrating on the food issue. Working on the food issue only is like building a house with no foundation. The first strong wind will knock this house down. Eating disorders develop slowly, and so recovery also comes slowly. In recovery, there are no quick fixes, there are no short cuts. Recovery is a process and it takes a long time. If

we want to help a person in recovery we have to give them this time and help them tackle the underlying difficulty in accepting themselves. Putting pressure on the person is never a help; it can be a barrier. From my own experience the less we pressurise, the better the chances of recovery. We need to listen to sufferers, listen to their needs, not tell them what to do or try to do it for them.

Eating disorders do not start when a person begins to lose or put on weight or take a laxative, vomit, or over-exercise. These are only the symptoms of the condition, the signs of a much deeper problem. Eating disorders are about people's feelings and emotions, the way people perceive themselves and the way they think others view them. When you go through this illness you spend so much mental energy on wanting to be liked by others that there is no energy left for coping with life. And even if you are loved and liked you do not allow yourself to believe it. It is a vicious circle. It becomes easier to feel negative about yourself than to accept yourself the way you are. Negativity becomes a protection against hurt, against reality and against disappointments. It is the only security you allow yourself to have. Sometimes negativity is the only thing you know at that time and self-destructive behaviour becomes a ventilation of this way of thinking; this in turn reinforces the negative state of mind.

If we want to help a person to recover from an eating disorder, we must not concentrate on the physical symptoms only. We must not try to take their patterns of behaviour from people without showing them some other choices. Often this is the only feeling of control they have. We need to see the person and her or his quality as a human being first and then we can work with the behaviour.

Forcing an underweight person to eat or an overweight person to lose weight is only a short-term solution which usually does not last and in some cases can be even dangerous. Who are we helping here? Are we helping ourselves or them? Should we feel better if our daughters or sons put on weight or lose weight, or should we first

12 INTRODUCTION

care if they are mentally ready to do it? Research shows that fluctuating weight can do more damage to our bodies than being underweight or overweight. Having rosy cheeks is not recovery; this is not psychological health. Recovery means taking responsibility for our health, which includes healthy weight, and feeling good about it.

Recovery from an eating disorder is a long-term process. We need to learn to take one step at a time and not to expect miracles. We need to concentrate on weight restoration or health restoration more than on weight gain or weight loss. Strict behavioural treatment leads to the minimising of important issues in psychological functioning; it can cause relapses. Treatment for recovery needs to be orientated towards learning to think differently about body weight and shape, to find the human goals behind this condition. Factors included in recovery should involve not only diagnoses but also awareness of personality structure, the person's age, family history and family structure.

A belief that one can master life's problems and develop attainable goals will always be essential to reclaiming one's freedom. Recovery means developing healthy coping skills in order to reach a sense of responsibility for actions, behaviour and feelings, and achieving the ability to experience all the joys of life without fear or worry.

Recovery is possible. It was possible for me. Today I do not see my years of eating disorder as wasted. They were years of education for me. I learned all about life and realised that there is so much to live for. I have dedicated the rest of my life to helping others find their true qualities and live healthy, happy lives. I hope this book will encourage you to believe that everybody on this earth has something to offer, and so do you!

Marie Champion
July 1998

Winning starts with beginning.

DO YOU ...? OR DO YOU KNOW SOMEONE WHO DOES?

Read this carefully and decide if this book is for you.

- ~ Do you constantly think about food?
- ~ Do you starve occasionally?
- ~ Are you constantly going on diets?
- ~ Are you bingeing?
- ~ Do you always feel too full after a meal?
- ~ Do you feel guilty about what you have eaten?
- ~ Do you count every calorie you eat?
- ~ Is your size affecting the way you live your life?
- ~ Does your behaviour with food make you and other people around you feel unhappy?
- ~ Do you eat or not eat when you are stressed?
- ~ Do you put off decisions until you 'lose weight'?
- ~ Do you frequently compare your looks to others?
- ~ Does your perception of how you look depend on the amount you eat?
- ~ Do you exercise to lose weight rather than for enjoyment?
- ~ Do you feel isolated?
- ~ Do you begin a diet every morning?
- ~ Are you taking diet pills?
- ~ Do you hide food?
- ~ Do you feel groggy after eating?
- ~ Do you eat when you are bored?
- ~ Do you feel depressed about the way you eat?
- ~ Is how you look very important to you?
- ~ Do you exercise to excess?
- ~ Do you change the way you eat all the time?

- ~ Do you feel ashamed of your body size?
- ~ Do you have guilt feelings related to your eating behaviour?
- ~ Do your eating habits cost you an excessive amount of money?
- ~ Do you take laxatives?
- ~ Do you weigh yourself daily?
- ~ Do you avoid discussion of your food problem?
- ~ Do you throw up food?

You may be suffering from some of these symptoms. If you are, here are some tips to help you deal with them:

- ◆ Put yourself first. You can't be anything for anybody else unless you take care of yourself.
- ◆ When you need something, don't talk yourself out of it. Even if you can't have it, it's okay to need it.
- ◆ When you are angry, let yourself feel the anger. Decide what you want to do about it; express it or take some action in relation to it.
- ◆ When you are sad, think about what would be comforting.
- ◆ When you are hurt, talk to the person who hurt you; keeping it inside makes it grow.
- ◆ When you want something from someone else, ask. You'll be okay if they say no. Asking is being true to yourself.
- ◆ When you feel alone, know there are people who want to be with you. Fantasise what it would be like to be with each of them. Decide if you want to make that happen.
- ◆ If you are doing something like overeating or starving, stop. Think about what you really want. If you are stuck and cannot think clearly, talk out loud to someone.
- ◆ When you can't think clearly, stop thinking - feel!

*To the question of life, you are the only answer.
To the problems of your life, you are the only solution.*

CONTENTS

- Introduction page 6
- 1 Recovery is for You 15
- 2 When Can It Start? 22
Marie's Diary 23
- 3 Trapped in a Big Bubble 27
Personally Speaking 28 ♣ *Marie's Diary 35*
- 4 A Day in the Life of ... 39
Personally Speaking 40 ♣ *Marie's Diary 46*
- 5 Coping Skills from the Chemist 53
Marie's Diary 55
- 6 Festive or Furtive? 61
Personally Speaking 64 ♣ *Marie's Diary 65*
- 7 I Used to be a Fitness Queen 69
Personally Speaking 72
- 8 Male Sufferers 77
Personally Speaking 79
- 9 Strange But True 83
Personally Speaking 84 ♣ *Marie's Diary 91*
- 10 It's Never Too Late 98
Personally Speaking 99 ♣ *Marie's Diary 106*
- 11 Recovery 114
Action Days 118
- 12 Hope - a Certainty, Not a Question 149
Personally Speaking 150 ♣ *Marie's Diary 159*
- 13 We Did It 162
Personally Speaking 163 ♣ *Marie's Diary 171*
- 14 For Those Who Care 176
Personally Speaking 182
Acknowledgements 192

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL CHANCE

Marie-Aude Louis

Over the span of our life, each one of our hearts is given not one but several chances ... to open, even more graciously and permanently than the most radiant and precious roses. Bulimia was for me, as it can be for everyone, the most beautiful chance of my life. Even during my crises, my tortures, my darkest hours, my greatest isolation, my total incomprehension, I was fighting against myself for myself. My tears had no destination and no source, they were the expression of this inner conflict, this huge contradiction, this eternal imbalance. But I could feel their warmth slowly healing my cheeks and I know this tiny moment of well-being came from inside of me, not from outside. I did not consciously accept it then, but it was like a ray of light caressing me, just as tenderly as the soft hand of a mother.

Still, my mystery lived for nearly five years. Life at the time seemed experimental, my mind attempting so many different escapes, tasting so many different lives and personalities, accommodating so many different environments. And inside of me kept being full of emptiness, though not deep emptiness. Under the layers of pain, plasticity, dependence, fears, coldness, traumas, anger, pride, humanity, I knew the existence of an unknown but true me. I simply and naturally knew, without any convincing effort, that there was a flower lying there, waiting to flourish.

Only when I understood that this self-destructive behaviour would not just fade away one miraculous day, only when I understood this condition was not dependent on my environment, only when I understood that the bulimia which was in me had to be faced, did I really begin the journey of my awareness. And very simply, the more I progressed on this path, the more I felt myself flourishing to the beauty of life. The

smallest details of our existence, that we so often take for granted, just like the wonderful action of breathing, became the basics of my recovery, of my rebirth as a natural human being.

The light penetrating slowly but intensely in myself was made of love, the true one which has all powers and certainly the one to destroy the transparent walls I had built in me. Love made itself so present, so boundless, so unique, so beautiful, and so much for me! It did not come suddenly. My bowing to the white throne had not ended, but the importance of the ceremony had substantially decreased. My guilty self-destruction was slowly vanishing, simply by accepting it.

And one day, I surprised myself feeling my own heart entirely full of love. With this awareness of love, I was then able to live and love myself. I finally began to feel my own balance within my own self, between my body, my mind and my spirit. As a result, I developed love for my body as it was, learning to sense its needs of expression, listening to its own words.

As a result, the confusions and the conflicts within my mind, which used to bring physical pain, slowly gave way to clarity and peace, learning to accept and welcome every foolish thought, expanding the boundless world of my imagination and creativity. My spirit saw the light of life, taking its first steps towards an endless growth, opening my heart to myself always a little more with each new second, each new beat, listening to the voices within me, to my guides and angels, embracing my past with all my smiles, cherishing the beauty of my eternal present happiness.

Love, life, God became synonymous. The inner understanding I reached makes me feel every second more intensely, makes me eternally thankful to every person who crossed my destiny for a moment or a lifetime, makes me full of myself and eager to live my dreams.

CONTENTS

- Introduction page 6
- 1 Recovery is for You 15
- 2 When Can It Start? 22
Marie's Diary 23
- 3 Trapped in a Big Bubble 27
Personally Speaking 28 ♣ *Marie's Diary 35*
- 4 A Day in the Life of ... 39
Personally Speaking 40 ♣ *Marie's Diary 46*
- 5 Coping Skills from the Chemist 53
Marie's Diary 55
- 6 Festive or Furtive? 61
Personally Speaking 64 ♣ *Marie's Diary 65*
- 7 I Used to be a Fitness Queen 69
Personally Speaking 72
- 8 Male Sufferers 77
Personally Speaking 79
- 9 Strange But True 83
Personally Speaking 84 ♣ *Marie's Diary 91*
- 10 It's Never Too Late 98
Personally Speaking 99 ♣ *Marie's Diary 106*
- 11 Recovery 114
Action Days 118
- 12 Hope - a Certainty, Not a Question 149
Personally Speaking 150 ♣ *Marie's Diary 159*
- 13 We Did It 162
Personally Speaking 163 ♣ *Marie's Diary 171*
- 14 For Those Who Care 176
Personally Speaking 182
Acknowledgements 192