

Dieting: A weighty issue

By Sarah Lang

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I see her every lunchtime, wind, rain or shine. As I'm walking into town along the Wellington waterfront, she comes running towards me. She looks about 20. Her cheeks are hollow and there is desperation in her eyes. Her tiny shorts hang off her bony thighs. Her shoulder blades protrude like an angel's wings. It's a skinniness that's not natural, not even for the thinnest model.

I might be wrong but I'd chance a guess that she has anorexia – the eating disorder characterised by an overwhelming fear of gaining weight, self-starvation, and a distorted body image. As she runs past me, I want to call out to her, give her a hug, buy her a kebab, tell her there's a way out. Tell her that I found my way out.



Sarah Lang. Photo / Richard Robinson

At 16, after an awkward adolescence, I realised I could diet to lose weight and – so the logic went – be prettier, more attractive, somehow "better". Just add alcohol and makeup and boys would like me, right? Back then, I didn't realise that jutting out at the hips, then again at the thighs was a normal body shape. Imagining these "saddlebags" sliced off, I dieted my way into a tiny gown for my 7th form ball. And so I fell down the rabbit hole into disordered eating that would last nearly a decade.

Disordered eating, which affects one in five New Zealand women, spans all types of eating behaviours that disrupt lives but fall short of the strict criteria of full-blown eating disorders like anorexia, bulimia or binge-eating disorder. Think obsessive or extreme diets (sometimes masked as "detoxes"), compulsive over-exercising, drunkorexia (avoiding food when drinking alcohol), overeating "made up for" by undereating, yo-yo weight loss/gain.

Imagine all these behaviours plotted on one line, with dieting at one end and anorexia at the other. Between 16 and 25, I slid back and forth along that continuum.

At 18, in my first alcohol-soaked year of university in Wellington, I put on about 10kg and felt disgusting. So back in Wanganui that summer, while pumping petrol, I was stoked that feeling permanently nauseous meant I lost both my appetite and the weight. "Look how my jeans hang off me," I thought. Back at uni, I became obsessed with eating only "good" foods like fruit and vegetables – and started exercising for hours each day. I'd walk to class, go to the gym (for weights), then go straight into an aerobics class. For a time I decided to eat very little – some days nothing – and rapidly shrunk, but still believed I didn't look good (thin) enough.

Eating, weight and exercise dominated my life and my conversations. Technically, I was anorexic but was not skeletal yet. I insisted and believed I was just being healthy, so there was no intervention. Rather, I got lots of compliments.

So here comes the big question: why? Was I a victim of my own personality type, addled by my then-perfectionism? Were the glossy magazines, saturated with impossibly-thin models and celebrities, to blame? Or was it living in a society that praises dieting and congratulates weight loss? Yes, we have an obesity problem, but all the lose-weight, get-thin messages pollute people's minds and spawn unnecessary angst.

As Deb Schwarz, manager of Auckland-based agency, Eating Difficulties Education Network (EDEN), tells

me, four in five New Zealand women are dissatisfied with their bodies. It's not just the grown-ups, either: research shows young girls are more afraid of getting fat than they are of nuclear war, cancer or their parents dying. A local study of 15-year-olds shows that although 75 per cent were healthy weights, nearly 7 in 10 wanted to weigh less. Unfortunately, the socially-sanctioned sport of dieting is usually the trigger for more serious disordered eating. One study shows girls who diet severely are 18 times more likely to develop an eating disorder.

My darkest year hit at 20. Mentally and physically drained by over-exercising and dieting, I had a slice of fatty pizza, then another, then the whole thing. I started binge-eating, feeling out-of-control and unable to stop in a way that's hard to explain. My body ballooned.

Though I masked my depression and disgust by becoming the life of the party, I still felt invisible. People treat you differently when you're overweight. It wasn't until the morning when I spotted purple stretchmarks snaking across my hips, belly and thighs that I was shocked into action. I forced myself to start crash-dieting and exercising again. I remember the shame: the girls at aerobics staring at the one who used to do step classes daily and had now got fat. I looked away and didn't go near the mirror.

Once I'd lost half the weight, I plateaued. Now studying in image-conscious Auckland, I desperately wanted to be thinner, but was hungry and craving "bad" foods.

And so came the years – shameful, secret, suppressed years – where I binge ate and vomited. I told no one. Sometimes I did it a little, later a lot. I did it in public toilets once the stalls were empty. I did it when flatmates were out. Unbeknown to me, the fluid I was retching was destroying the enamel on my teeth.

One day, crouched over the toilet with tears streaming down my cheeks, I promised myself that this ended here.

So I searched the internet and stumbled upon EDEN, a small not-for-profit organisation that, since 1990, has been working on disordered-eating prevention, early intervention, advocacy and information provision as well as campaigning for change at a societal level. I decided its support group was worth a try.

At the door, I wondered if I was thin enough to be there. Sure, some of the girls were super-thin, others looked "normal". I heard stories similar to my own and fully grasped that disordered eating happens to many people. That it wasn't my fault nor a weakness. Outside of EDEN, I got cognitive behavioural therapy, which helps challenge unhealthy or unhelpful beliefs and practices and replace them with more positive, realistic ones.

Through the support group, the therapy and my own reading, I learned how to appreciate my body rather than criticise it. I learned how to be kinder and a better friend to myself. I learned not to subscribe to all-or-nothing thinking (you know, you've eaten one biscuit so you've blown it). I learned strategies that helped me put slip-ups behind me and carry on with intuitive eating: responding to my body's natural cues of hunger and fullness, eating healthily most of the time and indulging sometimes, without heaping that treat with guilt. I started enjoying food again. I threw out the scales. And, to my astonishment, I settled at a size I was okay with.

It was no quick fix: two steps forward, one step back. It takes a long time to exile long-held beliefs, attitudes and practices. But six years later, at 31, I've finally put disordered eating behind me.

Sure, there are still times when I eat past fullness, covet Miranda Kerr's body, feel guilty about that Mars bar, but I'm not ruled by it. Paradoxically, it was only when I stopped trying to control my food and weight that I stopped feeling out of control.

I wish I'd known that at 16. Today, EDEN runs its Body Image Leaders programme in five Auckland schools, training 52 student leaders to help spread messages of positive body image, intuitive eating, body diversity and the dangers of dieting to more than 8000 students. There's no money to reach more schools. Indeed, EDEN's never had any government funding, despite research showing that early intervention and prevention is not only more effective but much cheaper than the ambulance-at-the-bottom-of-the-cliff approach. What about those who don't need an ambulance, just a helping hand? What about our teens turning 15, 16 now? I believe in the work EDEN is doing, so much that I now do volunteer work for them.

I've asked myself a lot of questions over the years. When hunger stalks the world, what right did I have to food issues? Why did I waste so much time, energy and tears that could have been better spent elsewhere? Nowadays, I don't berate myself like I used to. I see disordered eating as just a small part of my past and of me. I see the thick stretchmarks that crisscross my body not as gross or stupid anymore but as my battle scars. Some embarrassment lingers.

So why write this? Not to draw attention to myself, but to a problem in our society, to a road out of disordered eating, and to the crucial work EDEN is doing in our community. And in the hope that maybe, just maybe, that girl on the waterfront, or another like her, might read this and find her own way out.

During October, EDEN's Love Your Body month, New Zealanders are holding Love Your Body cupcake parties at home, work, school, book clubs, anywhere. To host a party or for more information about disordered eating, email info@eden.org.nz or phone 09 631 7570.

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