

## LIKE COMING OUT OF THE DUNGEON

Anonymous

This is my experience of processed food addiction leading up to rehabilitation (rehab) and following rehab.

## FOOD

Childhood. Cupboard eating. Handfuls of choc bits. Food became very important. Lit-up like a billboard in my mind. "Soup and Scones Sunday Night."

Teens. After school making creamed butter and sugar. Mum told me I was obese. My thighs rubbed and got sores. I tried Vaseline. I wore lycra bike-shorts under dresses.

Strict calorie-counting. Stomach filling tablets. My friend drew a picture of me on my bike, my calorie-counting book under my arm. Binged after diet. One chocolate éclair and two vanilla slices. Standing across the road looking at the bakery, excited that I would be going in soon.

Started binge drinking, marijuana use, promiscuous sex.

Twenties. Getting fat. Desperate for men to be attracted to me.

## TWELVE STEP FELLOWSHIPS

I attended a well-known 12-step fellowship for alcoholics and made a decision to substitute alcohol for food. I felt like I could quit food anytime because I chose it. Binge eating family sized blocks of chocolate, tubs of ice-cream, packets of Arnott's Mint Slice. Going to bed hot and too energised to sleep. My cheeks were red. During my café job breaks, I wrapped my arms around big bowls of ice-cream so no-one would see how much I had. I joined a well-known weight-watching organisation. An exciting new start for me. I loved counting. I loved how vegetables were 'free food.'

I constantly had gnawing cravings. They tormented me. I asked professionals: GPs, naturopath, homeopath.

I started my first 12 Step program; three bowls of food a day. I read a well-known author's book regarding food addiction which inspired me. I then started another food 12-step program.

I loved the weight-loss, prayer and meditation. I felt well. But I went yellow and had chronic fatigue and amenorrhea.

I was very controlling. I left that program. I restricted then binged. I went to India. I binged on whole pineapples and my mouth stung. I said, "No sugar please." Later I ate everything. I ate until my stomach felt like it would tear. The Indian people said, "You're a big eater".

I came home. My boyfriend said I'd got fat. He'd got me size-eight undies because, "Most people lost weight in India!" I binged. I threw up. I was devastated that I couldn't throw up chocolate, only the veggies come up! I learned I could throw up ice-cream.

I roamed supermarkets. I loved low-carb muesli bars.

I went to a meditation retreat. They said to give up intoxicating substances. I gave up sugar and flour. I felt better.

I got pregnant. I'd been vegan but I ate chicken Kiev, lamb chops, and drank milk. It was so good to eat.

I became vegan again and binged on banana-pancakes and roast vegetables with humus. Being full hit the spot. I baked with rye flour sweetened with fructose, xylitol, dates or maple syrup.

I was cupboard eating. One-kilo bags of almonds. I waited until 11am for breakfast because after breakfast I lost control. I'd eat those almonds all day. My teeth hurt and my stomach was sore. I gained weight. I missed 12-step programs. I yearned for peace. I rang my last 12-step program. They said I couldn't stay vegetarian. I rang another 12-step food program with a similar name and started that day. An exciting new start. I adapted the food program to be vegetarian. I lost weight.

#### FIRST BOTTOM

There was one problem. I was having weird blowouts that I couldn't control. I told myself they were nothing. I finished jars of mustard in a couple of days. I gave up mustard. I went through handfuls of sugar-free vitamin C. My stomach gurgled. I had to stop Vitamin C. I bought 'green powder' superfood. I mixed a dribble of water and made thick paste. I gave it up.

Each night I cut up cucumber, capsicum and a quarter apple, mixing in cinnamon until it was dark brown. I called this my 'after dinner salad.' Once a cherished person in my life came by and I said, "Not now, I'm having my after-dinner salad." Food was more important than the most important people.

I tried living with the blow-outs. I accepted I was beaten.

My heart was bitter, toxic, resentful. I didn't know why. I spoke with someone from PFA who said, "How long are you going to keep dicking around with this disease? Call this lady." She gave me the number of an addiction specialist. I told the specialist I felt good when I restricted and had a bit less, because I'd lose weight. But I also felt good when I got extra food, because it was a bonus. I said my thinking was always switching like that. She said, "Honey, if I had that voice in my head I'd be in hell." She said I sounded like a processed food addict and I could have a quiet mind. I told her how after each meal I felt unfathomable grief. She said recovered processed food addicts enjoy food and when finished happily go

onto the next thing. I said I don't think I'm a processed food addict because I don't eat sugar and flour. She said the disease progresses and I might be getting hits from oil, salt and high carbohydrates.

## REHAB

I started regular Zoom appointments. I thought, 'What can it hurt? I can do this for three weeks!' I continued for two years.

I resumed dairy. I was adamant I'd get mucous and was allergic. I resumed fruit. I'd given up fruit to control my rosacea and inflammation. I resumed chicken after being mostly vegan for a decade. I felt I was finally getting nurtured with food my body craved but I abhorred myself eating meat because I wanted to be spiritual, walk lightly on the earth and have a lighter vibration.

My parents were confused again. "So you're eating meat now? No oil? Now what are you eating?" I felt ashamed.

I got well in areas that weren't food. I hadn't watched TV for 15 years. I didn't want to 'sell out to the system'. I learned to have balance. My loved-one and I sat and watched TV. I recycled and couldn't throw out anything that could be used. At my community groups I scoured through rubbish bins to sort recycling at events, getting half-eaten hot dogs out of bottles and cans, sauce on my fingers, furious at people who weren't recycling. I learned I could throw things out.

I felt light. The controlling perfectionism was loosening.

## RELAPSE

The specialist mentioned ego reduction by withdrawing from my master's degree. I said, "No." When the specialist said I'd need more treatment than first estimated I thought she had gone back on her word. I ceased treatment.

Slowly over nine months I started some odd behaviours. Covid started. Following my master's degree I wrote a book. I thought it was cutting edge. I believed I was a microcosm affecting the macrocosm and my mind could affect the world mind.

My birth family had addiction and psychotic thinking. In rehab I learned addiction involves grandiose, egotistic delusions. I was having those.

I was scared of losing control. I was panicky. When I weighed myself I felt excited. I was soothed when my weight stayed down. In covid I had good, calm, happy times. But I did odd things with food. Although my food was weighed and measured, I mixed food in a blender like baby food: cauliflower, beetroot, humus. I slathered meals in salt and spice. I boiled milk for an hour to make it caramelly. I used so much cinnamon I was concerned I'd get sick. I researched 'good' cinnamon that had no side-effects, bought a three-kilo bag. My oats were

thick with cinnamon, like cookie dough. The 'good' cinnamon was bland. I didn't know I was punishing myself with food. I also ate burnt food, wrecked food and cheap food.

My aunt said I should read the gut microbiome book to heal addiction. I resisted but eventually read it. I was inspired to leave PFA. I explained to Mum my well thought out decision. I felt so light. I could finally do my own thing with food and apply my full intelligence and intuition to listening to my body. I could combine my learning about food to design a perfect plan. The 16-hour fasts from the gut microbiome book. Soaked and peeled almonds. No dairy. I could combine fish and seeds based on the other gut book, eat fruit on an empty stomach from a third book. I could wait until I was hungry. I would know when to stop 'if I listened.' I lasted four days.

On the fourth night I lay awake. All night. Committed to no food until 10 AM for healthy gut microbiome. At four AM I 'knew' a lot of things with perfect clarity. I now believe I was delusional. Later that day my thinking worsened. One scary, flashing thought chopped into another and another. Mental terror.

#### RELOCATION AND RECOVERY

I was beaten. I started weighing food again and thought I'd be fine. A friend said she thought I was sick and would benefit from treatment. I resumed Zoom rehab.

The specialist identified I was playing with food. I didn't like her pointing it out. I thought it was nothing. Too small to matter. For example, when I felt fat, I planned to make my oil slightly curve under the tablespoon measure next mealtime. The plan soothed me. And it was technically still a tablespoon.

I relocated for rehab. My family didn't understand but my primary loved-one accepted it, thank God.

In rehab I learned to eat. A plate of sliced fruit, not just two chunks of pear. A mixed salad with beetroot, onion, fresh herbs and cherry tomatoes, not just one chopped cucumber. I learned to say, "This is delicious," and stop feeling bad for enjoying. I cried over plates of food fit for a princess. I felt I didn't deserve such nice food. I learned to shop for food that wasn't on sale.

I learned weighing food nutritionally nurtured my body and quietened my head. I learned a noisy head is the disease. I learned treating processed food addiction is treating the head as much as the body. The specialist wouldn't argue about butternut pumpkin and Jap. I learned what it felt like when my disease went back on itself in rage and pride because 'why the fuck won't she even talk about this?' It burned like acid inside - white-hot pain worse than 1,000 dentist drills - then burned itself out and there was peace.

In rehab I felt crazy. I was used to listening to my disease voice, sure it was the real me. I was separated from the disease's domination of me. I felt turned inside out. The world was

upside down. I wanted to kill myself. I was broken and raw. I felt like I emerged from a dungeon after being chained.

I started to know peace. The heart-aching despair at the end of binges and meals, the most terrible punch-in-chest pain of no more food, has left. The cravings have ceased.

My addiction, now in remission, can't be explained. You'd have to live it to know. I had tentacles wrapped through my brain, directing me. They released, one strand at a time. I never thought I could feel this free. I never thought I deserved it.