

Izzy's Recovery Journey

A little bit about me

Hi everyone, I'm Izzy. I'm 20 years old and have fully recovered from anorexia.

I'm first going to talk a little bit about me and my background with my eating disorder. I'll then go on to talk about how my biological understanding of eating disorder and what helped me fully recover.

SPORT – growing up I loved sport. I ended up playing cricket for the England Academy for 4 years, and also played hockey to county level. I also played loads of other sports in my free time as hobbies.

Sport was NEVER correlated to my weight/body. It was always something I just did for **fun**. Growing up in general I didn't have body image issues or weight issues. I never counted calories and never weighed myself. It just wasn't on my agenda.

BUT in 2018 I stopped playing for the England Academy because I no longer enjoyed the pressure that came with playing elite sport. I wanted to play just for fun and also have more of a social life outside of cricket.

HOWEVER I carried on exercising, at first mainly to keep going with my routine and because I was unsure if I would return to cricket at some point (so wanted to keep my fitness levels up). But because I had no official fitness goals, as I was no longer part of the programme, I began exercising purely for aesthetic reasons. I wanted to keep "in shape" and develop toned abs and a good bum. Unrealistic ideals presented on social media websites like Instagram certainly fuelled this. Also, the girls I were hanging around with at the time were very beauty and gym obsessed, so this certainly didn't help. Who you surround yourself with can certainly have a massive influence on your values and perspective on life.

This soon turned into an exercise obsession, which was also linked to what became an obsession with healthy eating. I eventually stopped lifting weights at the gym to just focus on running. I then began to lose weight, and others around me noticed this too. This made me enter a prolonged energy deficit which triggered anorexia (I'll talk more about this in a minute). From there it was a very slippery slope into a dark place. However, I have managed to fully recover...

I will now talk a little more about my understanding of eating disorders and how this really helped me to get better. I firmly believe that if both carers and sufferers are able to educate themselves on the mechanism driving the illness then they will have a higher chance of being able to understand the positive behaviours which are going to drive the illness out of the system.

What is anorexia?

So, I'm going to talk a little about my biological approach to eating disorders.

I will use the term anorexia, but the model can be applied to all eating disorders (most are based around bodyweight suppression)

ENERGY DEFICIT – as mentioned earlier, entering a prolonged energy deficit is what can trigger the eating disorder. An energy deficit is created when the energy going out of your body is **greater** than the energy going into your body. This can be caused by a few things. The most obvious being an intentional diet, but it can also be caused by an exercise obsession, illness or stress – all which can cause you to lose weight and enter an energy deficit.

When most people lose weight, if on a diet for example, they feel tired, grumpy and hungry all the time. Their body also enters hibernation mode. Meaning the body is actually triggered to store more fat and also disincentive movement. This is why most people going on a diet actually end up gaining more weight than their pre-diet body.

BUT, when individuals with the genetic predisposition to an eating disorder go into the energy deficit, they feel **great**. From my experience, it feels safe, warm, addictive, like a high, relaxing, anxiety free etc. This is why eating disorders are so **dangerous**, because the biological response in those who are predisposed to the illness makes **restriction and starving oneself feel amazing**.

Why is this? When individuals with the genetic predisposition enter the energy deficit, an evolutionary migration response is triggered. This is based on a model for anorexia nervosa that is proposed by the evolutionary biologist Shan Guisinger. It's the only explanation that made complete sense to me in my recovery.

Basically, as animals, those with eating disorders have migratory responses to the energy deficit, which encourages them to eat less and move more i.e. to migrate. A lot of eating disorder behaviours play into the *scarcity mindset* – the idea that resources are scarce. The most obvious resource being food. But it is also not uncommon for those with ED to hoard items like toilet roll, envelopes, paper etc. This all plays into the idea that the brain things resources are scarce. IT'S ALL ABOUT SURVIVAL!

This might sound pretty crazy for someone without an ED. And it even sounded crazy to the non-ED part of my brain when I was suffering, but it **did** help me understand a lot about what was happening to me. This is because I never wanted to restrict. I **wanted** to eat, I was just so terrified of doing so and felt as if I had a compulsion to starve myself. This biological explanation provided great insight into the mechanism that was driving these unhealthy behaviours. A biological approach also made even more sense to me, considering throughout my whole illness I **never** knew my weight and **never** counted calories.

To sum this up a little - essentially, when someone has an ED, the thing that is essential to survival (food), becomes seen as a threat to the survival. This is why eating more is SO tricky, because it feels like a genuine wrongdoing that is putting you at serious risk. But ironically, it is the not eating that will kill you. So full recovery is essential.

So, through knowing this, one of the keys to recovery is *getting yourself out of the energy deficit*. In my experience, once I was securely in energy balance, a lot of the ED behaviours calmed down. Although there was still a lot of neural rewiring to do (which I'll explain now)

Tabitha Farrar

A lot of my understanding about the biological approach to eating disorders came from Tabitha Farrar. She is an absolute hero, and her blog posts and YouTube videos guided me through my recovery. Had I just carried on with conventional therapy techniques, I doubt I would be in the fully recovered position that I am today.

I'm sure a lot of you would have heard of her, but I encourage you to read her blogs and watch her videos if you haven't. She is very blunt and says it how it is. This approach worked very well for me, but I'm aware it's not everyone's cup of tea.

One of the biggest things I learnt from Tabitha is that:

Full recovery = happy **body** + happy **brain**

Achieving a happy body means achieving full **nutritional rehabilitation** – this is weight gain but it also continues after weight gain, because there are still a lot of repairs that need to be made as a result of severe malnutrition.

Achieving a happy brain means achieving full **neural rewiring** – this means changing the brain pathways so that there are no longer any ED thoughts driving the behaviours.

Research has now shown that neural pathways can change over the course of our life - neuroplasticity

How do you do this?

Well, the main belief system that is active during ED is *fear of weight gain*. Whether it's conscious or unconscious, this is often the primary fear that drives the whole illness.

So, in order to neurally rewire this, I learnt that I had to teach my brain that I was **not** afraid of weight gain. And to do this, you have to **act** as if you are **not** afraid. This is because the brain learns via actions, not thoughts. So even if your thoughts are screaming that you cannot eat the whole pizza or cake because it will make you gain weight, if you eat it anyway, you will be teaching your brain that these foods are not something to be afraid of. Repeatedly doing this with all your fears is what leads to full neural rewiring.

Neural rewiring is SO important, and it is often the missing piece in a lot of people's recovery. Yes, weight gain is important from a medical perspective, but if someone gains weight but does not neurally rewire their brain to challenge and change the ED thoughts, they will still have anorexia.

Essentially, gaining weight without neurally rewiring is just *anorexia at a higher weight*. And, remember, someone can have an eating disorder AT ANY WEIGHT.

3 COMMITMENTS

Although I understood all of this in theory, it didn't take away from the fact that eating was still extremely challenging for me! So, I made myself commit to 3 things which essentially became my mantras throughout my recovery (non-negotiable)

These were:

1. **Unrestricted eating** – no upper calorie limit, no such thing as too much
 - Carers should encourage unrestricted eating, even if it's 10,000 calories a day, or even 20,000.
 - Unrestricted eating means eating *what* you want, *when* you want it and in the *quantity* you want it in.
 - It means eating another pudding after you've already had one. Having thirds if that's what your body and mind are asking for.

2. **Unsuppressed bodyweight** – weight gain is the goal, mental state over target weight
 - This is the individual's natural bodyweight, when they are not engaging in any behaviours which may be suppressing this (i.e. exercising, restriction)
 - It helped me to make weight gain a goal/focus i.e. when my brain would scream at me to not eat something, usually the underlying fear would be "*it'll make you gain weight*", so I would then reply "*well, good, cos' that's the whole point!*"
 - This helped me overcome the fact that a lot of the time I was trying to "recover" without gaining weight or "too much" weight

3. **No OCD rules/rituals** – OCD often common with anorexia → my experience = toilet, washing hands, really hot food, sitting at same place, same bowls etc.
 - All these also need to be overcome in order to fully recover + fully neurally rewire

I would repeat these little mantras over and over again when I was faced with a challenging situation.

What also helped was asking myself some questions. This helps because, in the moment of fear (when the brain and body are sent into fight/flight/freeze mode), this helps bring you out of your fear-based amygdala, into the pre-frontal cortex, which is where you can think rationally, healthy thoughts (non-ED thoughts)

So, asking myself questions brought me into the PFC which would help me make pro-recovery choices. Questions such as:

- What would I eat if I wasn't afraid of weight gain?
- What would I eat if food had no influence on my weight?
- What would I eat if food had 0 calories?
- Which choice offers the greatest opportunity for neural rewiring?
- Which choice offers me to make the most progress in my recover?

So, for example, if I was deciding what to make myself for lunch, and was tossing up between a sandwich and some pasta (but secretly knew I wanted the pasta but it was more

scary), asking myself... Which choice offers the greatest opportunity to show my brain that I am not afraid of weight gain? Pasta then became the most obvious option. This can help to make choices less overwhelming.

Overall, educating myself on my illness helped me to prepare for many things that were quite scary but are a perfectly normal (and essential) part of recovery. These were things like:

- Extreme hunger
- Overshoot
- Fat tummy (gaining weight initially on your tummy to protect the vital organs – eventual weight redistribution)
- Night sweating
- Bloating
- GI issues – diarrhoea, constipation

If you're unsure about any of these, I encourage you to do your own research or you can ask me questions about them at the end.

OTHER THINGS THAT HAVE HELPED ME

Mindfulness, yoga and spirituality

- Yoga originally started as a form of exercise → then turned into a practice of spirituality
- Meditation, yoga etc. helped me to identify the anorexia thoughts + rewire them
 - Created distance → space between the thinker + the thoughts
 - Allowed me to see the ED thoughts and not act on them → opposite action
- Helped me build a more compassionate relationship with self
- Breathing exercises useful to stimulate PNS before eating
- Positive visualisation also really helped me → I would visualise myself eating my biggest fears whilst calm and in my room. I would visualise myself eating these in a calm manner, saying things like “this is delicious” and “this doesn't even make me anxious anymore”. This helps to plant positive images in your subconscious and your body believes it has already eaten these foods in a calm manner, so when you actually come to do it, there is evidence to pull upon that it is okay and not a threat.

CARER SUPPORT

Support from carers

Good

- Getting out of the challenge-restrict cycle → portioning all meals and snacks (struggled to give myself permission to eat) → a good bridge but NOT A LONG-TERM GOAL (almost like a meal plan can be a good bridge but is not a long-term goal)
- Educating themselves on the illness → showed them Tabitha Farrar's blog etc.
- I wrote them a list of what to say/not to say which helped them
- Not talking about food at the dinner table → keeping the conversation on something else

- Challenging me when I wasn't eating or was making an excuse → keep challenging, even if I scream! (my fear response = anger (fight, flight, freeze))
- Encouraging unrestricted eating, allowing the binges, not being scared of weight gain themselves → same goes for therapists, ED professionals etc. → "those treating the eating disorder cannot be afraid of the same thing the eating disorder is afraid of"
- Brother massive help → struggles w/ OCD = similar neural pathways. Became my ED project manager → we reviewed things on a week-by-week basis. Came up with 3 new rules for the week, different things to challenge, he would push me and portion me up different things, we eventually moved away from them portioning onto me portioning, massive help just **talking** each week and spilling my thoughts (journaling has a similar effect)
- Showing their emotions → Dad crying when chose to have a second fish finger, mum crying when said the wrong comment, Dad crying when lost a lot of weight → made me realise that I was upsetting those around me and they were seriously concerned

Could have been better

- Language/terminology → if not sure what to say, either say nothing at all or say something that isn't about food/weight
 - Very careful of words e.g. treat, guilty, burn it off etc.
- Still exercising initially (eventually family made this less obvious to make me less anxious)
- Forcing me to eat → force seemed to make me more angry BUT challenging me was important → communication needed here to know what challenges the individual but does not send them into ED retaliation rage

Overall, I hope you've got a good grasp on the biological approach to ED recovery, as well as some good little tips and tricks that you can perhaps take away and discuss with your loved one.

Does anyone have any questions? I'm open to answering anything. No question is off limits.

WN: Hi, thank you so much Izzy for sharing your story. I'd like to suggest the Tabitha Farrar blog to my daughter. Is there a particular post or video you suggest she start with? Thanks.

F: Izzy thank you so much your story gives me so much hope I would also like to recommend Tabitha Farrar to my daughter and also wanted to know if there is a particular video you recommend.

It's really difficult to choose just one of Tabitha's blog posts or videos, because I found so many of them really beneficial! But one blog post that I found extremely helpful for understanding and accepting extreme hunger was: "Anorexia Recovery Eating: There is never too much food". She has also written some blog posts on the 3 commitments which I spoke about – "Recovery Commitments: Weight Gain", "Recovery Commitments: Unrestricted Eating" and "Recovery Commitments: No compulsive movement, rules or rituals". These really great too. Her videos on mental hunger, extreme hunger and orthorexia are also very useful. These can be found by just searching these terms into YouTube along with her name.

J C: Would love it if Izzy could share some meditation links please! Thanks so much to everyone. So insightful.

I practiced meditation using Headspace and Calm, but there are also some really great YouTube videos to help you learn.

E and C: Interested to know about the other symptoms of recovery. Izzy mentioned night sweats, extreme hunger, Elsa wondering about others. Izzy said there were others.

Night sweats were a common one when I was going through the weight gain phase. This is largely due to the thermic effect which an increased food intake and nutritional rehabilitation has on the body.

Extreme hunger is a natural biological response to a time of famine (feast follows famine!) – this can come and go at any stage during recovery and can continue well beyond weight restoration. This must be honoured as it is an essential survival mechanism.

Other symptoms include overshoot – this is where the body gains more weight than the pre-eating disorder weight in order to fully repair all the internal damage to vital organs. This completely terrified me when I first learnt about it – however accepting it and completely committing to your unsuppressed bodyweight – even if that means you are at a higher weight than before your ED – is essential. Lots of research has suggested that weight eventually redistributes and most individuals return to their pre-ED weights. My way of dealing with this was to just completely surrender to the process – so, if you overshoot or not, if weight redistributes or not, it's simpler to completely commit to your unsuppressed bodyweight without conscious control.

Mental hunger is another big one. This is thinking about food. Anything to do with food e.g. planning when to eat, clock watching, waiting until you are "allowed" to next eat, looking at recipes online, looking at pictures of food, cooking food for others etc. All of these behaviours mean you are hungry – so you need to eat!

GI issues was also common for me. I would fluctuate between diarrhoea and constipation. I also experienced a lot of bloating. It was extremely uncomfortable – but it eventually gets better. Just make sure you don't use any of these as an excuse to restrict. I had many meals

where I would force myself to eat despite being in extreme physical discomfort (tummy pains etc.). The golden rule is to never ever restrict!

More on your new healthy approach to exercise – joyful and social rather than obsessive/addictive

Learning about intuitive movement was really important for me. Moving my body in ways I enjoy, rather than choosing activities based on how many calories they burned. It has taken a while to get to this place, and a lot of neural rewiring was required in order to unlink the connection between food and movement in my head. Exercise can be a wonderful thing but I think the relationship an individual has to it is so important. It was really important for me to take time off exercise completely (cold turkey) in order to fully rewire my movement compulsion. I didn't exercise for around 2 years, but this will be different for everyone and the neural rewiring may take less or more time. Only the individual in themselves will know whether their movement intentions are ED based or not.

Coping with the really unpleasant physical effects of restoring regular eating (extreme hunger, fear of overshoot, weight on tummy, bloating, sweating, water retention, constipation)

Educating myself was a key one. This meant I expected these things to happen so didn't freak out when they did! It is just about coping with them. Extreme hunger – I found if I fought it, everything would be so much more stressful. Allowing myself to eat completely unrestricted, although it took a lot of practice, was the key to fully acknowledging my hunger and fully recovering. Introducing some self-compassion and body neutrality helped me accept my weight gain and especially the weight on my tummy. Bloating and constipation were uncomfortable but sipping on hot tea and hot water bottles on your tummy can help with this. It doesn't matter how painful it is – you still need to eat! The pain will pass and your tummy will eventually get used to your system eating enough again, however if you react to the pain by restricting then you won't be moving forward in your recovery. Trust me, it does get better.

Handing control over to your mum, dad and Hamish – did you fight back and how did they manage that

Yes, I fought back! Lots of times. It took a few trials before we fully cracked it. They eventually realised that I did truly want to get better and so no matter how much I would kick and scream they would always hold me accountable to my recovery commitments. They made sure they were firm but fair. They eventually realised when the ED voice was speaking and did not stand down when it piped up. As a carer you must have compassion for your loved one, but also must not tolerate the ED behaviours. I needed my carers to call me out if I was making excuses or hiding behind ED behaviours in any way.

Your transition to healthy yoga, meditation, spirituality, breathing and the fact you teach yoga and meditation now

This helped me create an inner sanctuary of healing. An inner strength that was always there and that I knew was far stronger than the ED voice. Teaching meditation and yoga has been a real blessing and I love sharing my knowledge with others. Having gone through something as traumatic as ED I definitely have a lot of insight to offer about the mechanisms of the mind and psychological distress in general.

The importance of your parents and brother being able to show their own emotions.

This motivated me to want to get better, because I could see how much it meant to them. It was important for my carers to be strong for me throughout my recovery, but it was also really important for them to show how much me challenging myself meant to them. This made me want to always push myself just that little bit extra each day to really show them that I was beating this nasty illness!