



BODY BRAVE
recovery for every body



KAREN'S EXPERIENCE: NOTICING PROGRESS & PREVENTING RELAPSE



When Sonia returned from India, she seemed hopeful for the first time in years. Although she was still terribly thin, the purging had stopped and her eating patterns were a little more regular. Spending time with her family in India had also helped break her out of social isolation.

One day when my friend Diane was visiting, Sonia came downstairs and chatted with her for a few minutes. Diane invited her to go on a drive into the country, and to my surprise Sonia agreed. Over the next few weeks, the two of them would go off for long drives, sharing stories and laughter.

Sonia also started to take yoga classes, something that Pradeep had often suggested to her in the past. Pradeep has a longstanding meditation practice, and he felt that the practice of yoga could help her re-connect with her body in a more positive way. After she'd been taking yoga classes for a few weeks, she remarked to Pradeep,

"You know what, Papa? I am finding that yoga is really helpful. I just feel calmer after the class..." Then, with a mischievous grin, she continued, "Well, aren't you rolling your eyes at this point? You've been suggesting that I take yoga classes for years, and I always refused!"

Pradeep managed a smile. "I'm just glad you're finding it helpful!"



Sonia's eating patterns had improved somewhat and her physical health had stabilized. Although she was making some progress, she still had a difficult relationship with food and her weight was far too low. Recovery was still a long way off.

Before she'd left for India, she'd been on a waiting list for a day hospital eating disorder program. A few months after her return to Canada, she heard from the hospital's intake coordinator that a place in the program was available. She was briefly admitted to this program, but she decided to leave soon afterwards.

"I'm so tired of these programs that rigidly focus on just the food – making us eat every scrap of food on our plates. They need to dig into WHY we have issues with food," she said. "Also, the clinical staff treat us like we had chosen to develop our eating disorders. I'm done with these hospital programs!"

I felt instantly worried. Leaving an eating disorder program in such an abrupt way would likely prevent her from getting re-admitted if needed. But this time, instead of getting upset and asking her why she couldn't stick it out, I managed to keep my emotions in check.

I merely asked calmly, "So what's your plan at this point?"

"I don't think anyone has really tried to understand why I got the eating disorder to begin with. Also, I know that my eating disorder gets way worse when I'm feeling anxious and upset. So I'd like to try some therapy that helps me with those issues."

She and I researched various types of psychotherapy that could be helpful for eating disorders, and we concluded that dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT) would suit her best. This form of therapy addresses the cognitive issues linked with eating disorders combined with a focus on mindfulness, distress tolerance and emotional regulation.



Many people with eating disorders tend to be sensitive and empathetic, feeling their emotions very deeply. Sonia has always been an unusually sensitive child, highly attuned to the emotions of herself and others. She often explained to us that her eating disorder behaviors - whether restriction of food, overexercise or bingeing and purging - served to numb painful emotions that she finds intolerable.

A colleague in the medical school was a trained DBT therapist, someone I respected. The connection with this man proved to be remarkably helpful. He encouraged Sonia to tap into her own inner strength, and to use all the knowledge and insight she'd gained about her eating disorder over the years. He helped her develop more effective ways of dealing with strong emotion. Above all, he treated her with respect. Sonia described how empowering it was to work with a therapist who offered her compassion as well as guidance, and who championed a strengths-based approach to recovery.

She began to steadily improve, completing her bachelor's degree in economics and reconnecting with old friends. She also started journaling about her illness, gaining deeper insight into the multiple factors that lay beneath her condition. She began to think about her future, imagining a new life for herself.



As for me, I had time to reflect on my journey as a caregiver. What a lot I had learned about myself! Thinking back to the conflicts we'd had over the years, I understood clearly how fear can turn into anger. I also knew that changing those patterns was difficult. Even after so many years, I was only just beginning to learn how to turn an angry thought into a calm question or comment.

To cope with the extreme stress I'd been facing, I had gradually developed a good self-care routine. I would go on a long walk along a forest trail every day, trying to exercise my body and nourish my spirit. Pradeep and I had our morning quiet time when we made a pact never to discuss Sonia's illness. This was a sacred period of our day when we could re-connect. I also made a point of spending time with friends. Even though I didn't discuss any specifics of Sonia's illness with them, they were aware that she was unwell. It was a relief to keep the topic of conversation light. I also would periodically go away on

little vacations, sometimes with my mother and sometimes on my own.

I also pondered about the weight of guilt and shame that I was carrying because of past conflicts with Sonia. To ease that burden, I would need to learn how to forgive myself. For people who follow a religious tradition, offering prayers for forgiveness might be helpful. But for me, an agnostic, prayer or meditation just didn't seem to be the path forward. The psychotherapist I was seeing did help me to process some of the painful feelings. Also, I found that writing about the most difficult memories in my private journal was therapeutic. A dear friend lent a compassionate ear to my troubles, and Pradeep's love and support was unending. Finally, the connections I'd made with caregiver peers were so meaningful. I'll never forget the first time I heard those warm words – "I get it. I've been there, too."

~Dr. Karen Trollope-Kumar

