



BODY BRAVE
recovery for every body



KAREN'S EXPERIENCE: MAKING SENSE OF WHAT'S HAPPENING



I have to tell you something..." our daughter said. Her voice was shaky and hesitant, and she couldn't meet our eyes. "I think I have an eating disorder."

She was sitting in bed, with her knees drawn up and a quilt wrapped tightly around her body. Although it was mid-afternoon, the curtains were drawn and the room was so dimly lit that it was difficult to see her face.

For a few moments both my husband Pradeep and I were speechless. Finally I said, "Can you tell us more? How long has this been going on?"

"I guess I've had it for about two years," she replied, in a voice that was barely audible.

"Two years? But how is this possible?" I replied, genuinely shocked.

"Well, for a long time I didn't want to admit it even to myself. I thought I'd be able to fix this problem but it is just getting worse and worse. I guess I can't deny it anymore. I've got bulimia and I'm totally trapped by it."

Pradeep was the first to respond. He took her hand, and said softly, "Sonia, I'm glad you told us about this. You just haven't been yourself for the last few months. But now that we know what the problem is, I'm certain that we can find a solution."

Sonia looked at us wearily. "I don't really want to talk about this anymore." She lay down, turned away from us and pulled the quilt over her head. Clearly, the conversation was over.



Pradeep and I left the room, closing the bedroom door gently behind us.

On my way downstairs, my mind was swirling with disjointed thoughts. How could this be happening to us? Is it possible she's been sick for that long? But why didn't we realize it - why didn't she tell us?

A tight band of fear constricted my chest. I suddenly felt desperate to get out of the house, to breathe some fresh air. Pradeep and I take a daily walk along a forest trail or in the nearby park, a relaxing time when we review the day's events and enjoy each other's company. But today's walk felt very different. It was a cold December evening, and darkness was falling fast. Hardly aware of our surroundings, we couldn't stop talking about Sonia's distressing revelation.

"It's awful to think that she's been ill for two years, and we never noticed anything," I said. "After all, she was living at home until just a few months ago."

Pradeep said softly, "But we have been noticing things - so many things..."

We both fell silent, lost in our own reflections. Images of our beloved daughter during her childhood years flashed through my mind - a happy, confident child who seemed to sail through life. She grew up in India, where Pradeep and I were doing medical work in the Himalayan foothills. Sonia's early life was filled with colour, excitement and the warmth of her Indian extended family. When we decided to move to Canada, she seemed to navigate cross cultural challenges with ease. So what had happened?

"I just can't understand it!" I said to Pradeep. "How could we have missed the warning signs of an eating disorder? I feel terrible - I'm a family doctor, and I didn't even realize what was wrong with my own daughter!"

Pradeep said, "Well, now that we know what the problem is, we must get help for her immediately. Once she gets the proper treatment, I'm sure she'll get over this soon. After all,

she's so intelligent..."

By the time we returned home from our walk, it was past 10 p.m. and we were thoroughly chilled. We tiptoed upstairs and cautiously opened Sonia's bedroom door a crack. The lights were off and she appeared to be asleep.

"Let's go to bed," I whispered to Pradeep. "I'll investigate treatment options first thing tomorrow morning. We'll find an answer to this!"



The morning after Sonia had revealed her secret to us, she decided to cut her visit short and return to university.

I drove her back to Guelph, hoping that on the 40-minute ride we'd have a chance to talk. She sat scrunched up by the window, the hood of her jacket hiding her face. Desperately wanting her to engage with recovery, I tried to share some of the resources and treatment options I'd discovered from a hurried Internet search the previous night.

"You just don't get it, do you, Mom? It's not your problem - it's mine!" she snapped.

"Of course it's my problem as well - I'm your Mom!" I was about to retort, but something held me back. Something about the language we were using.

If I kept thinking of Sonia's eating disorder as a problem that I needed to fix, where would this lead? I realized that it would only increase the shame Sonia was feeling. Also, I was already painfully aware that there are no quick fixes to an eating disorder. If my problem-focused approach was not producing desired results, this could increase the guilt I was already feeling as a parent. Shame and guilt - toxic emotions that would only make things worse. Somehow, we would have to learn to navigate this treacherous path to recovery as a family.

We travelled the rest of the way to Guelph in silence, both of us lost in our own thoughts. When we reached the residence, I parked the car and walked with Sonia to the door of the building. Just before I turned to go, she said to me, "*Don't worry about me, Mom. I know I'll find a way out of this whole thing. I'm going to make an appointment with the Wellness Centre first thing tomorrow. You'll see - I'll be better soon*".

I felt a wave of relief wash over me. I gave her a hug, our bodies relaxing against each other for a few precious moments.

On the drive back home, I was filled with hopeful thoughts. *She said she'll be better soon...I bet she's right. Maybe we've been way over-thinking this problem. She's so brilliant - she'll find a way to break free of this thing. We'll be able to put this all behind us before long.*

Looking back at that moment now, I had no idea that we were only at the beginning of a long and terrifying journey...

~Dr. Karen Trollope-Kumar

