



BODY BRAVE
recovery for every body



KAREN'S EXPERIENCE: MANAGING RISK, SAFETY & CRISIS



Sonia's weight was dropping, and she was also bingeing and purging several times a day, unable to stop herself.

Purging can cause dangerously low levels of potassium which can then cause heart irregularities and even sudden death. Although she was fully aware of how dangerous her eating disorder had become, she was unable to break the cycle.

"I know it must be hard to understand," she said one evening. "When I don't eat, or when I get into a cycle of bingeing and purging, I just feel numb. That's such a relief...but it's only temporary - then the overwhelming anxiety comes back." She slumped back in her bed and buried her face in her hands. "I'm afraid I'll never recover - I am just giving up hope."

"Soni, don't say that..." I replied, frantic with worry. "From what

I've read it can take several admissions to hospital before you recover. You're on the waiting list for that residential program again. Please just hang in there!"



Some weeks later, Sonia was finally re-admitted to the hospital for the second time.

The program at this facility has a regimented eating schedule where the patients are required to eat high calorie meals to maximize weight gain. Patients also receive sessions of cognitive behaviour therapy to help them see connections between thoughts, behaviours and actions. Sonia endured the treatment and graduated from the program after twelve difficult weeks. Her weight was back up to a safe level, and she'd had no episodes of bingeing and purging.

We felt cautiously optimistic. Sonia began to make some tentative plans to return to her university studies. She found a lovely place to stay in Guelph, sharing a house with two other students. I was worried about how she'd manage her food. She told us that she'd received shopping lists and meal plans from the dietitian in the program.

"I need to do this myself, Mom," she said. "There's only so much a parent can do."

The first few weeks seemed to go reasonably well. Sonia was spending time with her boyfriend and taking a couple of courses at the university. We kept in close touch by phone and through frequent visits. I'd often bring prepared meals which she could store in her freezer.

One night we received a worrisome phone call. Sonia's voice sounded distant and cracked.

“I’m not doing very well...I think I need to come home for awhile.”



When Pradeep and I picked her up, her pale, drawn face told the story clearly- she’d relapsed again.

She said very little on the drive back to Hamilton. After reaching home, Sonia retreated up to her bedroom, her footsteps slow and her shoulders drooping. Her energy levels were so low that she spent most of her time lying in bed. One morning, I knocked on her door and begged her come downstairs, saying that we hadn’t been able to have a chat with her for ages.

“OK, Mom, I’m getting up,” she replied

She pushed back the covers and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. But when she started to stand up, she suddenly sank back onto the bed.

“I think I’m going to faint,” she murmured. She lowered her head between her knees, staying in this position for several long moments. Finally she sat slowly up and said, “I’m just too weak to come downstairs.”

“This is all because of the eating disorder, you know,” I said, my voice edged with anxiety. “Low energy and fainting...your blood pressure is probably way down.”

“I know, I know. Just don’t bug me,” she responded, lying back down and turning away from me.



Even though she was so weak, she still felt compelled to binge and purge some days.

We could tell that her weight was dropping again. Her mood was very low, and her motivation to recover had vanished.

“I’ve never seen her this despondent before,” I said to Pradeep one evening, when we were on a walk. “Her eating disorder is so severe...she’s at a low weight and she’s still purging as well. She’s way overdue for her regular bloodwork. What if her potassium drops really low? Her heart could stop!”

I waited for Pradeep to offer some reassuring words, as he usually did. But this evening he was silent. Finally he said,

“We have to face the fact that she might die of this illness.”

My breath caught in my throat. The same terrifying thought had been haunting me for weeks – but hearing Pradeep say the words was a shock.



When we reached home, Sonia was curled up on the sofa in the living room.

She looked so fragile lying there, a mere shadow of her former self. Fighting down a rising sense of panic, I asked her when she was planning to get her bloodwork done. She shrugged, her face blank. Suddenly I felt a rush of anger, that helpless

rage that would overcome me when my fear reached a breaking point. I turned to her and said,

“You’re not even trying to get better, are you? You obviously don't care enough to even get your blood checked. You could die!”

“Do you think I care?” Sonia flared back at me. “My life is not worth living anyway!” She scrambled off the sofa and rushed up the stairs to her bedroom.



Hours passed. My anger slowly subsided, and I thought I'd go and check on her.

When I opened her bedroom door, I noticed a pill bottle lying on its side on her bedside table with some pills scattered around it. My heart pounding, I tried to rouse her. When she barely responded, I realized that she was slipping into unconsciousness. I shouted for Pradeep. He rushed into the room and took in the scene immediately. Horrified, he called 911. Sonia was rushed to hospital in an ambulance, where her life hung in the balance for many hours.

During that agonizing time, I sat in the waiting room, aware of a flood of emotion filling my body, so powerful that I could almost taste it. At first I could not even name this emotion. Was it guilt? No – it felt different. More painful. More devastating. An emotion that was shattering something deep within me. Finally the word came to me: Shame.

It was my argument with her that sent her over the edge. She might die because of my actions. What kind of a mother am I?

I thought about saying something to Pradeep, who was sitting beside me, his head in his hands. But the feeling of shame was too deep, too painful to share even with the person I trusted most in the world. This would be a burden I had to bear alone.

Sonia's condition finally stabilized. Fortunately, the bloodwork showed that there was no permanent organ damage. She was admitted as an involuntary patient to a psychiatric ward to monitor her mental state. After a grim week of psychiatric assessments and medication changes, she was discharged home.

But my confidence as a caregiver had been swept away by that wave of shame.

“I don't know what to do anymore,” I said to Pradeep. “I feel utterly helpless.”

“We just have to keep on going,” he replied grimly. “No other choice.”

~Dr. Karen Trollope-Kumar

