



BODY BRAVE  
recovery for every body



## KAREN'S EXPERIENCE: SUPPORTING DAY-TO-DAY RECOVERY



*Sonia and I would often get into serious arguments, particularly when I tried to offer advice.* The solution to the disordered eating patterns seemed so obvious to me. I noticed that she'd often restrict her food intake for hours, which would then be followed by a cycle of uncontrollable bingeing and purging.

I'd been researching treatment approaches for people with bulimia and I realized that the foundation of treatment is to normalize the eating pattern. This structured eating approach involved having three meals and two snacks a day, not allowing oneself to go for more than 3 or 4 hours without eating. I realized that when Sonia was restricting her food she was actually driving the binge/purge cycle. Since the treatment program was still months away, I thought we could try implementing a structured eating strategy at home. I showed Sonia the details in the workbook I had ordered.

*“Let's plan for me to prepare three meals and two snacks. You can choose the menu items. If you want take-out food we can do that - whatever works for you. We can set a schedule to follow. I bet this will help,” I said.*

***But Sonia turned away, saying, "I don't want your advice - I have to figure this out myself."***

My frustration level spiked at this point and we ended up in yet another conflict. Pradeep tried to intervene, pointing out that Sonia really resented unsolicited advice. I realized he was right. My approach was just not working.



***I know it bugs you when I give you advice," I said one evening. "***

It's because I am worried and I keep thinking of things that might help. But let's start fresh. Can you tell me something I could do or say that would be helpful?"

Sonia sighed. "I know you're trying to help, Mom. But I wish you'd realize that I am not doing these behaviours on purpose. It must be hard to understand. I do want to recover - I really do - but for right now I don't want you to intervene."

"OK," I responded slowly. "I'll try my best - you can tell me when I am slipping back into giving advice. But I must do *something!* You need to tell me what I can do to help."

***"I'd really like it if you and I just spend some time together and not discuss the eating disorder at all. I am seeing a therapist and my family doctor - leave it to them to give me advice for now. And remember that I am trying to best to make changes," Sonia replied.***

After this conversation, we agreed to put aside the eating disorder for awhile and do something that we could both enjoy. Sometimes we go to the mall, do a little shopping and wander around, and other times we just go for a drive and chat about other topics.

On one occasion she agreed to go with me on a short camping trip. I was thrilled that she'd agreed to this because for weeks she'd hardly left the house. We went to the Pinery, a beautiful provincial park on the banks of Lake Huron. I had bought a new tent for the occasion. When we were trying to put it up the whole structure collapsed on top

of us. We both burst out laughing - the first time we'd shared a good laugh in a long time. That evening we lay on a sand dune near the beach, watching the sunset. Streams of blue, pink and mauve shimmered across the surface of the lake.

Sonia whispered, "This is the first time I've noticed beauty in so long..."

Later that evening she talked to me openly about all the factors that she felt had contributed to her eating disorder. I was thrilled to hear her detailed analysis. *Perhaps this will be the moment that things will change*, I thought.

But when we returned to Hamilton, the eating disorder behaviours began again - restrictive eating followed by episodes of bingeing and purging. I felt a wave of sadness. The eating disorder had Sonia in a relentless grip.



***Although there was no improvement in Sonia's symptoms following our camping trip, it did help repair our strained relationship.***

In the weeks that followed, I focused on working on better communication strategies. Using "I" statements helped. For example, instead of giving advice about changing a specific behaviour, I would instead say something like - "I am worried about your low mood. Is there something I could do to help?" Or, "I am wondering if there are particular foods that would be less triggering for you?" Or, "I am concerned that you haven't seen your family doctor for several weeks - can I help with that?"

I also worked on trying to understand Sonia's personal experience of the eating disorder. Since I've never had struggles with eating, it was hard for me to understand the dynamics of the illness. When Sonia shared her insights about the links between her thoughts, feelings and actions I got a much clearer understanding of the way her eating disorder behaviours were perpetuated. In these conversations, Sonia would often mention ways she was trying to break these links. I would then affirm her efforts.

I began to think of the eating disorder as an entity in itself - something that both Sonia and I were trying to overcome. This mindset helped to deflect anger away from Sonia herself, which was not productive. We needed to think of ourselves as a team, working together to battle a treacherous enemy.

Finally, it was essential not to lose sight of the daughter that was so dear to me. It seemed as if the eating disorder had robbed her of so much - her brilliant intellect, her sense of humour, her loving nature. I needed to remember that these qualities were still there, deep inside her...

*~Dr. Karen Trollope-Kumar*

