



BODY BRAVE
recovery for every body



KAREN'S EXPERIENCE: UNDERSTANDING EATING DISORDERS & RECOVERY



Sonia's illness continued to worsen. She dropped out of university altogether and returned home, where she spent most of her time locked in her bedroom. On the rare occasions when she was willing to talk to us, she expressed feelings of discouragement about her condition.

One evening she came downstairs, her footsteps slow and hesitant. She said softly, "Can we talk about what's happening?"

I felt a surge of relief. Sonia's increasing isolation had led to a gulf of communication between us. "We've been so worried about you," I said. "What can we do to help?"

"It's this eating disorder, Mom," Sonia said, a note of desperation in her voice. "I keep thinking that I can just break out of it, but it feels impossible. Whenever I try to eat normally, I feel so much anxiety. The only way to break out of the anxiety is either to eat nothing at all or to binge and purge. I know it doesn't make much sense, but that's what I feel..."

"It sounds awful," I murmured. "But I'm glad you're talking about it. There must be ways to break free from this..."

“I’m willing to try anything at this point,” said Sonia. “I can’t beat this on my own.”

The next day, Pradeep and I renewed our desperate search for information and resources to help our daughter recover. Sonia’s family physician had referred her to the eating disorders program at our local hospital in Hamilton. However, we were distressed to learn that there was a six-month waiting list to get into this publicly funded program. The program did not offer any support for people on this waiting list, which was disturbing. We linked Sonia up with a private therapist who was well trained in the treatment of eating disorders. Sonia began seeing this woman once a week.



I wanted to learn more about eating disorders, realizing how little I understood about these complex conditions. I studied medical journals, trying to glean as much knowledge as I could from clinical experts and from research studies. Also, I began to read popular books that had been written by people who’d recovered from an eating disorder. Slowly, I began to understand more about the multiple factors that can underlie an eating disorder.

I was surprised to learn that that genetic susceptibility is a major risk factor for the development of an eating disorder. If a person has a family history of an eating disorder or another major mental illness, they are at risk of suffering from an eating disorder themselves. My family has a dark history of major depression, stretching back many generations. My father suffered bouts of depression that lasted for years, and I have also struggled with episodes of depression. I realized that it’s possible that Sonia was born with a genetic susceptibility to mental illness, which made her more vulnerable to stressful life events.

Identity issues can play a role in the development of an eating disorder. Sonia has a biracial background – Pradeep is from a Hindu background, born and raised in India, whereas I am from a typical middle-class Canadian background. Pradeep and I met in a whirlwind romance in India, when I was doing an elective placement at the medical college where he was completing his training as a pediatrician. We made the decision to live and work in the Indian Himalayas. We spent eleven remarkable years working on primary care projects in this remote part of the world. Sonia was born in India and spent

much of her childhood there. She always felt connected to her Indian heritage. But when we moved to Canada, she struggled to form a new identity as a biracial individual. When she started university, she was suddenly immersed into a different cultural environment which posed many new stresses for her. I suspected that this may have precipitated the desire to diet and over-exercise. Although that seemed to help her anxiety to begin with, it gradually became an obsession.



One quiet evening, I shared some of the reading I'd been doing about eating disorders with Sonia. I realized that she must have already researched the subject intensively. With her keen intelligence she would likely have important insights into the origin of her illness.

"Yes, I think I must have a genetic susceptibility," Sonia said. "And you are probably right that identity issues have played a role. Don't get me wrong - there are so many great things about being a biracial person. But it can be confusing at times."

"What else might be playing a role?" I asked.

"Well, you know how competitive I've always been - I'm a perfectionist," she said. "I always want to be the best at anything I try. But at university I've gotten so confused - I don't know if I'm in the right program or where I'm headed academically. This really bugs me."

"Are you feeling hopeful about breaking free from this disorder?" I asked quietly.

Tears filled her eyes. "I just don't know," she said. "It's like I'm caught in a terrible trap." She got up and left the room.



In many ways, Sonia fitted the stereotype of someone with an eating disorder -

a young, intelligent woman from a well-off family. Yet I knew from my reading that eating disorders can affect people of any age or gender. People from an LGBTQ2S+ background experience a higher prevalence of eating disorders compared their cis-gender peers. The stresses of poverty and racism are also major risk factors. Unfortunately eating disorders in people facing this type of oppression are less likely to be diagnosed or treated. Traumatic experiences such as sexual or physical abuse in childhood can predispose people to developing an eating disorder. Often people suffering from the most serious eating disorders have a background of trauma.

Eating disorders are much more common in Westernized cultures, although they are appearing with increasing frequency worldwide. Wanting to understand more about the social and cultural aspects of the illness, I attended a conference in Toronto about eating disorders organized by the National Eating Disorders Information Centre (NEDIC) (<https://nedic.ca/>). The primary focus of this conference was on body image. One of the speakers gave a powerful talk about the toxic effects of diet culture, which she described as our society's deep orientation toward trying to regulate what people eat in order to regulate what people weigh. The media exposes us to a constant barrage of images about the “ideal body” for both men and women. Diets of all kinds are promoted by the multi-million-dollar diet industry, many of which are nutritionally inadequate. The conference speaker described dieting as a “gateway behaviour” for the development of an eating disorder.

I was immediately reminded of the summer before Sonia started university when she embarked on a rigorous diet and exercise regime. When I returned from the conference, I was eager to share some of these insights with Sonia. However, when I talked about the link between dieting and eating disorders, she said angrily, “Don't you think I have a mind of my own? I am not influenced by the media in that way!”

~Dr. Karen Trollope-Kumar

