

Home > Opinions > What I wish someone had told me when I had an eating disorder at Queen's

## What I wish someone had told me when I had an eating disorder at Queen's

**Embracing a recovery plan begins by understanding that asking for help is a strength**

January 31, 2020 | Kelly Clark



Kelly Clark resisted getting help because she thought the root of her disordered eating was a lack of willpower. Credit: Supplied by Kelly Clark

This article discusses eating disorders and may be triggering for some readers. The Canadian Mental Health Association Crisis Line can be reached at 1-800-875-6213.

My four years in Kingston were a defining chapter in my life. When I arrived as a first-year student, I was already entering my sixth year of obsessive dieting.

I was constantly trying to stick to my restrictive food plans. As soon as I made a 'mistake,' I'd think I ruined everything and would have to restart the next day. That meant I was always on and off diets, and, without realizing it, building unhealthy habits between diets.

For years I was caught in the vicious cycle of starving, bingeing, and purging.

But I didn't see the pattern.

In my mind there were days I was 'good' and days I lacked discipline. Deeply confused and ashamed of all my disordered behaviours, I kept them secret, even years after I got healthy.

As time went on, I found new ways to punish myself if I ate something I regretted—even a tiny bite. For instance, I'd make myself skip class, miss the sports I loved, and cancel any social plans.

I thought that the more of my life I put on the line, the more pressure there'd be to eat exactly what I planned. I didn't recognize it back then, but following my diet perfectly was more important to me than losing weight.

All the while, I pretended everything in my life was great. I didn't want anyone to worry about me. But in reality, my life was slowly unravelling.

Eventually I hit rock bottom—something I don't recommend because it isn't necessary for change—and just wanted my life back. So, I focused on being healthy instead of thin. Finally, I was open to try something new.

That first year at Queen's marked a turning point for me, because it led me to do something I was hellbent on not doing: asking for help.

As Canada's Eating Disorder Awareness Week approaches (Feb. 1 to 7), I want to tell you information that took me years to understand—and I'm not alone in my experience.

One in four teenage girls spend 20 to 90 per cent of their waking time worrying about food, weight, and hunger. And for Canadian university-age people, between 10 and 20 per cent of females and four to 10 per cent of males suffer from a full-blown eating disorder. Sadly, these rates are on the rise.

We need to change those statistics.

A good place to start is understanding the surprising truths that can help break shame, stigma, and silence.

### 1. An eating disorder is usually an indication of high-achiever traits

The shame comes from thinking, "I have an eating disorder because I have no self-control"—but actually, most people with eating disorders are givers, go-getters, and perfectionists. And it's these admirable traits that can lead someone to get lost in the details and make eating unnecessarily complicated. Once your energy is redirected toward your interests, these traits make you feel unstoppable.

When I couldn't lose weight, I blamed myself instead of my method. I kept thinking, "I just need to be more disciplined." But no matter how hard I tried, things kept getting worse. I was afraid my life would never change, even though I wanted it to.

Now, thanks to the resources that were available to me at Queen's, I understand that I had all the wrong eating and exercise information. If you only have the toaster manual, you'll never fix the fridge.

### 2. Asking for help is a strength

I was reluctant to speak to a doctor or tell anyone about my complicated relationship with food. I thought I was weak and lacked willpower. Overcoming my eating disorder on my own felt like my only chance to prove I was the determined person I felt I used to be. That meant I was hellbent on fixing myself alone.

Now, I know reaching out to experts stops us from wasting time trying to reinvent the wheel ourselves. That's the same reason we go to the hair salon, bring our pets to the veterinarian, and bring the vicar in to perform an exorcism. After that professional guidance, we can continue to move forward with our own expertise.

Help support independent student journalism with a donation<sup>EP</sup>



Listen to our new election podcast, hosted by Journal Sports Editor, Jack Rabb

## The Print Edition

### QUEEN'S JOURNAL

#### Uncontested AJA wins confidence



#### Chinese New Year complements torn down in Victoria Hall

Cindy Liang and her roommates hope for a greater focus on industry in residence.

Chinese New Year celebrations were held in Victoria Hall on Saturday, Jan. 25. The event was a success, with many students and faculty members attending. The decorations were beautiful, and the atmosphere was festive. The event was a great way to celebrate the Chinese New Year and bring the community together.

#### SGPS votes to divest

Students of the Student Government of Queen's University have voted to divest from fossil fuels. This decision is a significant step towards creating a more sustainable and ethical campus. The divestment will be implemented over the next few years.

IN FROM BUCKLE: Photo: David Sawyer with permission. P. 6: Wang Jiechun with permission. P. 4: Steve Hasky (cinch) photo: P. 4: Justin Hyatt (strip) Canada to the Mission. P. 10: [unreadable]

See *The Journal's* latest print issue online<sup>EP</sup>.



Here at Queen's, you have the incredible choice to ask for help. You can get healthy, figure out who you are without your eating disorder, and connect to the world with your interests.

When I went down to Queen's Student Wellness Services, I got on the road to recovery.

First, I was referred to a doctor who specializes in eating disorders. Then, I was diagnosed with OCD, which is a condition that has helped me excel at school and sports, led me to create a self-esteem program for children, and played a part in so many other things I'm proud of.

However, it also perpetuated my eating disorder.

Discovering that OCD was an underlying issue for me was a huge relief—it felt like a missing piece to the puzzle, and it helped me to identify and interrupt my self-defeating patterns. I couldn't have had this clarity without someone on the outside looking in who had years of experience to draw on.

### 3. Getting healthy is possible, and it's easier than you think

One of the first things I learned in my recovery was what healthy eating and exercise actually look like. Here's a hint: It's not diet soda, skim milk, rice cakes, or working out constantly. I realized that a healthy body is the result of healthy habits, which is a message incongruent with all the diet rules, tips, and tricks that I'd collected over the years, promising to make me 'look' healthy if I made extreme sacrifices.

As soon as I started being healthy, things came together quickly. When I was kind to my body, food and weight became a non-issue, and have continued to be a non-issue for the last 20 years.

Big problems don't need big solutions.

Recovery is all about letting go of the idea that you're not trying hard enough. Work smarter, not harder. Ask for help so you can get healthy, accurate information. The available resources won't be perfect, but they will help you patch together a plan that works for you.

There were times I thought my eating disorder ruined my life. I kept wondering who I could've been without it. But then, I realized that obstacles are an education—one you can't get in a textbook or a lecture hall.

My eating disorder taught me how to be resourceful, resilient, solve problems, focus on the big picture, appreciate the small stuff, and have empathy for others—if I didn't understand myself, how could I judge someone else?

Overall, I learned that the rough experiences we undergo in our lives are fertilizer for the future. I'm a better person than I would have been for having had this experience.

No matter where you fall on the spectrum of disordered eating, you can not only get healthy, but you can thrive.

If you see yourself, or someone else, in any part of my story—whether it's mental health, addiction, trauma, grief, abuse, or anything else disrupting your life—I hope you'll talk to someone you trust and book an appointment at Queen's Student Wellness Services.

Be proactive. Write out a few things that describe your typical day so you can refer to your notes. And make sure you share your story even if your voice shakes.


When we surround ourselves with people who care and have knowledge to share, we go further than we ever could alone.

Special thanks to Dr. Stephen McNevin, the founding director of the Division of Psychiatry at Queen's, who helped me get the information I needed to turn my life around at a time I needed it.


*Kelly Clark is a '98 Queen's alumni blogging about mental health and eating disorder recovery.*  
Tags: Mental health / Student Wellness Services

 Share

## Related Stories



February 7, 2020  
**Provincial governments support students when they invest in mental health**



January 28, 2020  
**Climate grief can't be cured, but it can be addressed**

When commenting, be considerate and respectful of writers and fellow commenters. Try to stay on topic. Spam and comments that are hateful or discriminatory will be deleted. Our full commenting policy can be read here.

Sponsored

Sponsored

---

## THE JOURNAL QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY – SINCE 1873

190 University Ave., Kingston, ON, K7L 3P4  
Editorial Office: 613.533.2800  
Fax: 613.533.6728

[About Us](#)  
[Subscribe](#)  
[Contribute](#)  
[Archives](#)  
[Masthead](#)

[Writer's Handbook](#)  
[Editorial Board](#)  
[Production Schedule](#)  
[Advertising Information](#)  
[Journal Policy](#)

[Corrections](#)  
[Journal Board Minutes](#)  
[Join the Journal Team](#)  
[Op-Ed Guide](#)