

June 15, 2011

My anorexia: How I became a survivor

BY JESSICA PAULINE OGILVIE



"I couldn't stop. The sicker I became, the more successful I felt," says writer and former anorexic Jessica Pauline Ogilvie, pictured with her dog, Molly.

About seven of us have gathered for group therapy in a large room scattered with chairs. A woman with frizzy red hair and a head that looks several sizes too big for her emaciated body sits across from me. Next to her, a statuesque blonde has a polished demeanor that belies the fact that, after lunch, staff members will try to keep her from going to the bathroom to vomit.

It's just weeks before my 16th birthday, and I've been deposited here in the eating disorders unit of the Waltham-Weston Hospital in Massachusetts because, after a year and a half of starvation, my vital signs have dropped dangerously low. With my knees tucked under me to guard against the chill, though, I feel fine, and the fact that

I'm the youngest person in the room gives me a smug sense of accomplishment.

This moment stands out to me now, 15 years later, because I credit what happened next with saving my life: Looking around at the ghosts of my future that bright September morning, a voice shot into my head, replacing my self-satisfaction and shocking me with the following epiphany: "I don't want to die."

And with that, I became one of the lucky ones.

My battle with anorexia began when I was 14. I was wrapping up my first year at a private school and at the same time coming out of an adolescent rebellion that involved a lot of dark eye makeup and short skirts. If I was going to fit in with my new Polo-wearing classmates, I figured that I would have to change my look, starting with dropping the extra 20 or so pounds of baby fat that stuck stubbornly around my middle.

One afternoon in the spring, I mentioned my diet to a delicate, ethereal-looking girl who was one year younger than me.

"All you have to do," she said breathlessly, "is just not eat."

It was both brilliant and incredibly obvious. Almost immediately, the gears in my mind that carry whatever glitch causes eating disorders were sent into overdrive. All of my mental energy stopped, pivoted and turned toward her suggestion, becoming completely focused on ridding my body of unwanted, excess pounds.

I weighed and balanced calories with the precision of a molecular chemist. I went from eating three meals and two snacks a day to eating one meal a day and nothing else.

As soon as summer rolled around, I convinced a friend to spend every afternoon doing hours of workout videos with me in the basement of her house. Once the sun went down, I would jog the two miles back home through the sweltering New England humidity.

When I went back to school in the fall, though, the ride came screeching to a halt. My now-bony body caught the eye of the class ballerina, who was experienced enough in such matters to notice when the flesh covering a girl's rib or hipbone was stretched just a bit too much. She tipped off a teacher, who in turn notified my parents.

The news was met on their end with palpable fear, and within weeks I was set up with a psychiatrist. He was the best of the best, the head of the eating disorders program at Massachusetts General Hospital, and for one hour every Tuesday night, in the basement office of his imposing gray mansion in Newton, I would sit silently as he worked his magic, peppering me with questions for which

I didn't have any answers.

Two afternoons a week, my mother would drive me to my pediatrician's office in Weston, where I would strip down and don a plastic gown, remove all my jewelry and empty my bladder, and then watch with delight as the numbers on the scale continued to drop.

On the way home, I never knew whether my mother's silence meant she wanted to scream or cry.

As the year wore on, despite my continually plummeting weight, the eating disorder lost its thrill. I began to get exhausted, and my rituals became obligations that I could no longer comprehend. Food had turned into an obsession that drove me to think up ways to eat without eating. When I knew I was alone, I would take out snacks or leftovers, smell them and put them away. Other times I would chew them up and then spit them out.

But I couldn't stop; the sicker I became, the more successful I felt.

My psychiatrist was the one who broke the news that my bags were being packed for Waltham-Weston. After getting an EKG and blood work done, I landed in his office, where he informed me from underneath his bushy gray mustache that I was going to be taken directly to the hospital.

"Like, to stay?"

"Yes."

It was another year or two before my weight became stable, but after that, I shut the door on what I viewed as a one-time episode. I didn't want to think or talk about my anorexia; I didn't understand it, and it seemed no one else did either. The details also seemed unsavory at best — I was certain that they would repulse normal people.

When I was assigned to write an article for The Jewish Journal about eating disorders several months ago by my unsuspecting editor, I took it on thinking that I was far enough removed from the topic that I would be unfazed.

I was wrong. It took shockingly little to jog the memory of the flesh on my body feeling almost parasitic, and how satisfying it once was to starve it off. But as I've been telling people that I'm writing this, a surprising number of women have confided that they have battled eating disorders, too. Many of them are Jewish. Many still struggle, every second of every day.

And I suppose that's the point: to expose my thoughts and feelings and secrets to the light of day, for myself and for anyone else who might be affected. I am one of the lucky ones. But I don't want to sit by silently anymore.
