

Pretty Girls Don't Eat Pizza
How an Eating Disorder Taught Me I Am Enough

Hannah Kuhn

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----------|
| Abstract | 3 |
| Artist Statement | 4—9 |
| Critical Paper..... | 10—31 |
| Dedication..... | 32 |
| Preface: Here I Am..... | 33—36 |
| Introduction: One Way Out..... | 37—39 |
| Chapter 1: We’ve Only Just Begun..... | 40—42 |
| Chapter 2: How Fear Saved My Life..... | 43—51 |
| Chapter 3: Pretty Woman..... | 52—56 |
| Chapter 4: Finding Worth on the Mound..... | 57—59 |
| Chapter 5: More Layers than an Onion..... | 60—62 |
| Chapter 6: Set(her) Up to Fail..... | 63—66 |
| Chapter 7: The End of Happy Meals..... | 67—69 |
| Chapter 8: The Reversed Freshmen Fifteen..... | 70—78 |
| Chapter 9: Call It What It Is..... | 79—82 |
| Chapter 10: It’s Not About Food..... | 83—87 |
| Chapter 11: Meet My Friend “E.D.”..... | 88—92 |
| Chapter 12: My Mind Palace Has Many Rooms..... | 93—96 |
| Chapter 13: Whose Fault Is It Anyway?..... | 97—105 |
| Chapter 14: Some Won’t Understand..... | 106—108 |
| Chapter 15: The Consequences of Healing..... | 109—112 |
| Chapter 16: The One Behind It All..... | 113—122 |
| Chapter 17: Ready for Battle..... | 123—133 |
| Epilogue: Life Is More than A Board Game..... | 134—138 |
| Food for Thought..... | 139—142 |
| Acknowledgments..... | 143—146 |
| Notes..... | 147 |
| Bibliography | 148 –160 |

Abstract

Eating disorders have become one of the most fatal mental disorders, and yet many people still don't know anything about them. This allows society to misinform people on what this disorder is, and for those suffering from it to feel misunderstood and alone. Patients and their families don't need more medical advice on the topic. They need to hear a raw, honest, and messy story from someone who is not cured, but over time has found the resources, hope and strength to continue living with it every day until healing is granted. This is a story that both informs and shows the slow and invisible development of an eating disorder, what surprising things encourage it, why it's not easily treated, how family and friends can support, as well as what it looks like to live with it on a daily basis. Be encouraged and informed from someone who understands this has nothing to do with food.

Artist Statement

Literary Context

Jeremiah 30:2 NIV says, “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel says: ‘Write in a book all the words I have spoken to you.’” I’m not a prophet, and I’m obviously not Jeremiah, but I heard God speak the same words to me a few years ago. I believe God speaks to all of us in ways He knows we’ll each understand, and then after He provides us wisdom, we are to share it using the gifts that God also uniquely gave each of us; for me it’s writing.

I was raised with an anxious soul. I don’t believe I was born with an anxious heart because 2 Timothy 1:7 says, “For God did not give us a spirit of timidity or cowardice or fear, but of power, love, sound judgment and self-discipline.” However, as my young, impressionable mind started making sense of the world, the enemy snatched my mind and began filling it with fear, precaution and distrust for what was around me, and it has remained in this state ever since.

I experienced my first panic attack at eight years old, and it was already after years of various unexplainable phobias. The fear of spontaneously getting sick at school took complete control of my brain and life. I spent many mornings in grammar school standing in the bathroom with a racing heart, heavy breathing, and a colorless face begging my mom to let me stay home. I was convinced I would get sick if I went to school, but mom never gave in.

She looked into my eyes and traveled down to my soul to fearlessly stare her daughter’s demon in the eye and say with a mama bear firmness, “we are *not* giving in today.” The fear of getting sick at school was my most intense fear yet and it lasted for about a year and a half. In that time my nine-year-old self lost my peace, my sensibility, my joy, and ten pounds from my underweight body. As much as I wish I could say that was my trial and now it’s my testimony, it was only the beginning.

Audible words never came easily. I was always very quiet, in my head, and internally processing everything. Before I could speak, my parents said they could always tell something

was wrong, but when they tried to get me to tell them, words never came easily and I would bang my head on the floor in frustration. When my speech did develop, so did a severe stutter that added another barrier to the words coming out. In an attempt to understand what was stealing her daughter's peace and consuming her mind, my mom introduced me to journaling. Writing gave me a voice. It helped me put my feelings into words, process my thoughts, determine what I believe, what my opinions are, and most importantly it developed my faith and relationship with Jesus. Writing changed my life, and I know God gave me this gift for a reason– to glorify and honor Him with it.

When I was thirteen, I started showing early signs of an eating disorder. I hated the way my body was changing and my perfectionism mentally taught me that my body was filled with flaws which needed constant fixing. My parents didn't know the signs of an eating disorder, nor did they know much about the disease at all, but neither did I. Health class glossed over the mental disorders of anxiety and depression, but not this. By the time I was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa, I had already been taken to the emergency room twice, and long term damage had already been done.

Vision

Scholars don't know exactly what Paul's thorn was, but we do know that if God didn't have a purpose for it, then it wouldn't have been there. I didn't know why I was born with a brain susceptible to anxiety, nor why God allowed it to develop habits that formed into an eating disorder; until I did.

There was a moment in my junior year of college when I finally wanted to know and understand what was wrong with me so I could figure out how I could fix it. I started basic research on eating disorders from a medical and biblical perspective. I wanted to know where it came from, if I was only one of few who suffered from this, what neurologically was happening to my brain, what did God have to say about eating disorders, and what was the cure?

Medical articles said there is no guaranteed cure, and Christians suggested that if I was righteous enough and prayed hard enough, God would take it away. I didn't know anyone else who had the same quirky relationship with food that I did, and I was desperate to hear someone else's raw and honest story— even if they weren't healed.

Daily, I wondered if this happened because of my own fault? Was God punishing me? Was I destined for this? My friends at the time didn't understand, but how could they? They told me things like, my brain was just different, “just eat the piece of pizza”, or when they didn't know what to do at all they watched and said nothing.

God would not have made me the way He did, with an uneven brain and an eating disorder if He did not have a greater purpose for it. The enemy intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives (taken from Genesis 50:20). The biggest trials in life can produce a faith of steel and therefore become our testimony. Isn't that worth it? A testimony is meant to be shared, and this is mine.

My vision for this book is to produce the medically researched, biblical perspective and raw, detailed resource that my fragile but strong heart desperately needed when I wondered if what I was doing to myself was normal. A resource that was honest about why a person felt the need to restrict certain foods, not eat at all, and in a panic excessively exercise after eating.

A material that provided medical research as to what was happening neurologically with my brain, and explained why despite how much I tried, it was so hard to break the cycle of eating and getting rid of it.

Most importantly, a resource that points to the only hope and says what God's intention and purpose is for this disease and those who suffer from it. I want my story, that I felt God called me to write, to inform and encourage. As the second most deadly mental illness, and the least understood, victims who suffer usually do so confused, invisibly, feeling stuck and

hopeless. They're told to stop being egotistical, quit worrying about what they look like, ignore the diet culture, but simultaneously pressured to look a certain way.

I want them to know they are not alone. I want them to understand what is happening to their brain and why it's so hard to just "not think or be like that." I want to share my upbringing and personal reasons as to why I clung to an eating disorder to confirm that (even though I wasn't) I was okay. I want to provide an honest, biblically and medically sound resource filled with hope from someone who is not cured, but knows that there is a loving God who is always in complete control.

Impetus

Sharing your story, your burdens, and your life publicly (when you have thus far kept most of your life private) is arguably one of the hardest things one could ever do. It's overwhelming to share what only a few people know, knowing that those who read this and know me will be shocked and unsettled by what they had no idea of. I have found that most people ignorantly assume they know someone because they know the shell which makes up two percent of a person.

However, despite the news that will drop and the conversations that may be had, I know where the idea and desire came from to write my story. God gave me this gift of writing and communication through written words so that I could share the glory, goodness and hope that are found in what is deemed as a hopeless disease. I was chosen for this. I was chosen to suffer so that the glory of God would be revealed, and that is ultimately what we are on earth to do, right? I am determined to share my story and the things that were purposefully kept private for nearly a decade.

A resource like this has such a need in the eating disorder and even mental health community. Every fifty-two seconds someone dies from an eating disorder, but rarely recorded as what it was. Suicide, organ failure, and heart disease are only a few of the diseases that eating

disorders hide behind. The world needs to be educated and informed on this issue so that they can know the signs and take them seriously instead of putting labels and titles and assumptions on those who display such signs. The sooner more people are willing to share their story and journey, the sooner more people can recover from what's silently killing them. It's time more people know what eating disorders are actually about; and contrary to the name, it has nothing to do with food.

Significance to Christianity

As a follower of Jesus Christ, I believe every detail of my life points to, belongs to, and is ultimately from Him. Jeremiah 29:11 says, "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord. Plans to prosper you, not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future." I know nothing about me escapes God's notice, and nothing in my life happens outside of His sovereign care.

"His ways are not our ways and His thoughts are not our thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8) because He is perfect in every way. As human beings who are not perfect and will never know perfection on earth, how could we question God's perfect ways?

When I was seven years old I gave my life to Jesus. When I was twenty-two I understood that my life was not about me. My purpose on earth is Philippians 3:11-12, "I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him sharing in his death, so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead." I am not on earth to live a safe, healthy, fulfilled, and happy life. I'm here to praise God, in the good and the bad, to weep with those who weep, rejoice with those who rejoice, spread the gospel and goodness of God to all corners of the earth, and allow God to use whatever He has given me for His glory, and my good.

Therefore, the goal of my story is not to receive praise, but instead to point to the One who is to be praised. John 8:50 "Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and

he is the judge.” My purpose on earth is to display Christ in everything I do, for He is who gives and takes away (Job 1:21), and nothing, not even sharing my story, happens outside of His grace.

My life, just like my story, is significant to Christ because it was written by Him. Everything. Every detail, the joy, the pain, the blessings, the utter disappointment. Romans 5:3-5 says, “Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us,” this verse wisely spoken by Paul is what gives godly purpose to everything in a person’s life.

Critical Paper

The Invisible Beast

The question, “how are you?” has become quite an autonomous, surface-level question. Three powerful words that when put together, seem to hold no weight anymore. People ask out of formality expecting to hear “good, how are you?” and if it’s anything else, it makes people uncomfortable. How do you respond to someone if they say they’re not doing well?

If you asked 98% of the people who were in my life when I wrote this, how I was doing, they would tell you, “good.” But the truth was, I had not been “good” for a long time. Why people assume they know everything about a person based solely on the 2% that they see earnestly blows my mind.

Everyday, I silently fought a very patient, persistent monster that was in the form of a disease that slowly tried to take my life. It’s a disease that my parent’s generation doesn’t understand, and mainstream society says is a result of attention-seeking, self-centered women who spend too much time on their phones and only care about what the latest diet trend is—except, who tells us what the latest diet trend is?

For ten years, my mind was programmed to believe that to cope with the inevitable hard feelings and experiences of life, I needed to become physically and mentally as small as I could be if I wanted to survive and be seen. The last ten years were spent going to school, work, sport’s games, social outings and out into the neighborhood with a smile on my face, hoping no one detected that I was functioning off of energy that I didn’t have.

Those who suffer from an eating disorder can take a long time before the effects begin to show, and sometimes, as horrifying as it is, they don’t show at all. When you contract the flu, the symptoms show up overnight, but not eating disorders, or most diseases found in the mind for that sake. Mental illnesses start with an undetected, microscopic moment that starts as thoughts,

which turn into habits, which turn into a way of life until you realize you have two options: die from it, or learn how to live with it.

There are no antibiotics or white blood cells in existence that can fight this disease off, so from a worldly perspective, it's no wonder doctors deem this disease as nearly hopeless.

No, that doesn't sound good, but most people don't want to hear that. There's no easy answer, it's uncomfortable, it's messy, and it's real.

It was Spring of 2018. I was a junior in college, sitting at my desk while no one was home. It had been two months since I was taken to the emergency room for reasons no one outside the hospital knew or asked about, and something inside of me finally decided I wanted to know... "do I have an eating disorder?"

What is an Eating Disorder?

I had known for a while that something wasn't right. This "fluke" I called it wasn't going away on its own and I had suspicions it was getting worse, but I didn't realize what was already planted and growing. Like many who suffer from this, I didn't believe it was an eating disorder. It wasn't not eating, I wasn't making myself throw up, and I wasn't *that* skinny. In my mind.

Common symptoms of eating disorders, from my experience, is small portions, having a hard time focusing, having one thing to eat and calling it a meal, choosing to not eat with others, having feelings of fear around foods that people or the internet have deemed as "bad" (processed sugar, carbohydrates, red meat).

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, "eating disorders are classified as serious and often fatal illnesses that are associated with severe disturbances in people's eating behaviors and related thoughts and emotions." (National Institute of Health, 2023)

Mayo Clinic expanded even more to include, "They are problems in how you think about food, eating, weight, shape, and in your eating behaviors. These symptoms can affect your

health, your emotions, and your ability to function in important areas of your life.” (Mayo Health, 2023) Put generally, while it’s not about food, it’s a bad relationship with food and the body.

Personally, I think a lot of people deal with eating disorder behaviors– especially in a digital society where we are obsessed with the way we look or come across to people. When I think about the signs that I showed of a building eating disorder in middle school, I worry about the girls who are in middle school (or even younger) today who are unknowingly dealing with the thoughts and behaviors that will only continue to grow into something they won’t be able to control.

Johns Hopkins Medicine reported that the most common age to develop an eating disorder is between twelve and twenty-five. (Johns Hopkins Medicine, 2023)

What used to be about twelve, and is now even younger, is when girl’s bodies begin to change, mine certainly did. Depending on health, education, home life, social circles and personality, this could be one of the hardest and most damaging times in a young girl’s life. While some girls perceive the changes to be exciting, other girls perceive the softening and enlarging changes as something to be ashamed of, a flaw, or a sign of what society says is the worst thing to have (fat).

For these girls, depression brings them low, or anxiety runs them straight to the internet to research what diet or exercise can fix them to look the way they did before.

As mentioned before, an eating disorder starts with a thought. If you’re standing in the grocery store and you feel something in your mind holding you back from buying and eating something that’s “bad” for you, take that seriously. Nutritionally-speaking, it’s not a healthy idea to eat ten cookies everyday, but speaking as a woman who has been dangerously on the other side of the healthy eating scale, I will never tell someone not to eat something because it’s “bad” for them.

I believe that even foods that are considered treats, everything is okay in moderation, and even nutritionists will say so too. Again, I am not a doctor or food specialist, but if you're a healthy person (and even that word "healthy" differentiates depending on the person) no uncredentialed person should be telling you to avoid sugar, carbohydrates, meat, etc.

Avoiding can turn into restricting which can develop into a fear, and if you find yourself afraid to eat something because of what it might do to you (yes, I've been there)... that's an eating disorder.

The behavior and thought process I am describing are symptoms of anorexia-nervosa, but as mentioned before, there are a handful of different eating disorders depending on the behaviors, thoughts and symptoms. While most of them share symptoms and behaviors, medical professionals have categorized the two most common eating disorders as:

Anorexia-Nervosa: This is a disease of self-starvation characterized by an abnormally low body weight, an intense fear of gaining weight, and a distorted perception of weight. Those who suffer from this obsess about controlling their weight using mechanisms that tend to significantly interfere with their lives. For example, they severely restrict the types and amount of food they eat while simultaneously trying to lose weight by ejecting food they just ate by means of laxatives, vomiting, or excessive exercise. (Johns Hopkins Medicine, 2023)

Bulimia-Nervosa: This disease is classified as individuals engaging in repetitive cycles of binge-eating then self-induced vomiting or starvation. Those who suffer from Bulimia consume much larger amounts of food than you would normally eat in a short period of time because the body is not used to having food in its system to fully digest. This disease is very dangerous because excessive vomiting can deteriorate the lining of one's esophagus, stomach lining, and people who suffer from Bulimia can actually maintain a normal to above normal body weight, making it harder to detect from the outside. (Johns Hopkins Medicine, 2023)

While those two are the most common, the types of eating disorders are growing and becoming more and more specific to the causes and symptoms. These include binge eating disorder, orthorexia, rumination disorder, avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder, and other specified feeding or eating disorders. (Beat Eating Disorders, 2023)

Eating disorders aren't about food, and I can't stress enough that those who suffer from one aren't choosing to live in this way; the disease is a coping mechanism for something—trauma, personality, major life event, control, etc. The hard, but true, reality is that eating disorders are mental health disorders. They're the result of a brain that's malfunctioning, and one of the most helpful stepping stones in my journey of recovery was learning what made my brain so different.

The Brain of an Eating Disorder

Doctor Daniel Amen, founder of Amen Clinics, is a psychiatrist whose mission is to end mental illness through the creation of a revolutionarized brain health. Through his extensive research, he has discovered that there are many different brain types based on the level of activity within each region of the brain.

While the brain is the most complicated organ in the body, and it may be impossible to ever fully understand, Doctor Amen has broken down the complexities to help people understand their own mind. While all brains contain the same regions, it really is true that every brain, like every person, is unique. Through brain scans and in-depth research, Doctor Amen and his team discovered brain patterns that correlate with specific mental illnesses. (Amen Clinics, 2023)

His extensive research and clear communication has made neurology simple to understand and groundbreaking for many.

While there are many types of eating disorders, according to Doctor Amen, a brain controlled by an eating disorder has a distinct look, and while it has common patterns of other

mental illnesses, this sort of brain has its own look. (What are Eating Disorders?, Amen Clinics, 2023)

Personally, understanding what was happening inside my own mind helped me better understand the disease and have less hatred and frustration for myself because up until this point, I was told my eating disorder was my choice, my fault, and I had the control to “just eat the piece of pizza.”

There are three major regions of the brain that are impacted when it’s suffering from an eating disorder: The anterior cingulate gyrus, the basal ganglia, and the parietal lobes. (What are Eating Disorders?, Amen Clinics, 2023)

The anterior cingulate gyrus is the part of the brain that allows people to shift attention from subject to subject. So when it’s overactive, this causes people to get “stuck” or feel stuck on the same thought or behavior. (What are Eating Disorders?, Amen Clinics, 2023)

After four to five years of teaching my brain that it had to send signals to the rest of my body to let it know that it had to exercise and burn everything it just consumed, this habitual way of thinking made it very difficult to just not think like that anymore.

As much as I didn’t want to do sit-ups to the point of tears, I felt like my mind wasn’t giving me an option. I could not focus on anything else until it was done. Not only did my brain get caught in a loop of exercising after every meal, it also learned that in *any* stressful situation, the only thing that would help would be to control calories in some way to give me some sense of control and relief– even if it didn’t make sense. I felt ashamed, and embarrassed that after group lunches, friend’s game nights, girl’s nights and public outings, my mind felt enslaved to a cruel, cruel master who held my mind hostage saying “you know what to do.” People, who have no idea that I was using their bathroom as a place to get rid of the meal we just enjoyed together, would never guess that their home was the battlefield for some of my biggest spiritual warfare.

Friend's bathrooms, public restrooms, workplace bathrooms, school bathrooms; my distorted mind knew it's way of thinking was wrong. It knew that giving in was only a temporary solution and it would prolong the healing my mind and body needed, but because it couldn't reverse the thought pattern, it learned to do what it had to do without anyone detecting it.

My body got tired, and my mind got even more. I never wanted to excuse myself to go exercise, so when I didn't want to deal with that voice or use the energy to try and fight back, I learned that in social or over stimulating situations, the only way to silence this loud, demanding, controlling voice that I couldn't fight back in my head was to either eat only "safe" foods, or don't eat at all. If it was a lose lose situation, I preferred to lose silently, not on the bathroom floor in my friend's parent's house.

The basal ganglia is what helps set the body's anxiety level and is involved in forming habits. An overactive basal ganglia is associated with increased anxiety and fear. (What are Eating Disorders?, Amen Clinics, 2023)

The mix of thoughts getting stuck with anxiously formed bad habits created the fatal routine of thirty-thirty-thirty. After every meal, thirty squats, thirty lunges, thirty sit-ups. To relieve any anxious feelings that produce discomfort, feelings of inferiority, overstimulation, and feeling out of place or unwanted, thirty squats, thirty lunges, thirty sit-ups. Excessive exercise wasn't just maintaining an (un)healthy weight, it was also ensuring my worth. If I couldn't do this routine because people were and there were no empty rooms around, pure panic would break out as I desperately sought solutions to quietly burn *something* off and silence the voice that was screaming at me to exercise before it was too late. This formed habit would not be easily broken.

The parietal lobes control sensory processing, so these lobes give you spatial awareness. (What are Eating Disorders?, Amen Clinics, 2023) There's a common stereotype that middle schoolers are awkward, and while that is definitely true for many reasons, one of the biggest neurological reasons is because when this part of their brain develops, part of the process is

learning (the hard way) how much space their growing and changing body is taking up. When this part of the brain is under the influence of an eating disorder, this throws neurological signals off making it hard to perceive things the way they really are. Essentially, this is a very technical way of describing body dysmorphia.

Body dysmorphia is not a disease in of itself, it is a consequence of most eating disorders. It's when the person who suffers from an eating disorder perceives their body differently from the way it actually is. They could be dangerously underweight, but because of the influence their brain is under, they see themselves in the mirror as fat or not skinny enough. This consequence has fatal effects as the person, who will never see their body correctly, will continue to be driven by what they see until they physically are but nothing.

I will never forget the day I was at work when I looked at my thighs and hated the way they spread in a healthy way on my chair. To me, it was fat, but I knew I couldn't trust my eyes. I kept looking at my legs and said to myself, "you are not fat, you are so skinny, actually you are too skinny," and it was like I saw with my own eyes the size of my legs shrink. Of course they did not physically shrink, but I witnessed with my own eyes my perception completely change.

After many months of researching what an eating disorder is, I wanted to know what most victims do, how did I get like this? I thought the same thing the first time I found myself staring up at the dull white ceiling in the emergency room, "how did I get here?"

Unfortunately, a complicated disease is going to be complicated in all areas, so there is no absolute cause for why a person develops an eating disorder. Doctors, therapists, psychotherapists and researchers have determined that eating disorders are usually a response or coping mechanism to certain personalities, genetics, trauma, environmental factors, and social factors. (Johns Hopkins Medicine, 2023).

"Once an eating disorder takes hold, however, it is sustained by perpetuating factors that contribute to its maintenance." (Johns Hopkins Medicine, 2023)

Where Does it Come From? Who is to blame?

Something I learned after the first few months of therapy was that it's not worth pointing the finger at someone to "blame them" for why I can't eat pizza without a breakdown anymore. First of all, it's not their fault. Second, even if you do pinpoint a moment in time that proves to be significant in your journey, it's not going to heal you. While it's interesting to learn what causes this disease, I would suggest only spending about 2% of your time on why, and 98% on what truly heals you.

While it's easy to blame society and social media for the existence of eating disorders, the reality is that social media rarely instills the disease, it feeds the disease. In my personal experience, eating disorders are a result of three main purposes:

To gain a sense of control

To self-punish

To use as a coping mechanism for not feeling good enough.

I have experienced all three.

Alfred Adler was an early twentieth century psychotherapist who invented the theory that birth order leads to sibling differences. If his theories are correct, then I am the textbook definition of an oldest sibling.

Growing up, I was very introverted with a type-A personality, a perfectionist, a people-pleaser, a rule follower, and I was terrified of making a mistake (all theories found in Adler's research). I wanted nothing more than to please my parents, and their methods for raising my sister and I subconsciously taught me that my value was determined by my performance.

Children are so impressionable. Everything they experience or witness is teaching them how the world and society works.

If I got a 'B' on a test, I was asked if I didn't study enough. If I didn't set a perfect game in volleyball, I was told I should practice longer. Anything less than perfect felt like it wasn't good enough, and that I had the power to become good enough.

I wasn't just the kid who did every activity— sports, music, art— I carried the pressure of being the kid who was the best at everything too, because if I wasn't, then my identity was destroyed and I was a failure.

Getting ready for school as a kid meant ironed, matching outfits, curled hair, and any facial imperfections covered— whether it be a bruise, a zit, or a scrape. When my grandma took care of my sister and me, she would always say before we went out the door, "my beautiful granddaughters," and I believed her. I believed we were beautiful, just as she said, but only under certain conditions.

As mentioned before, children are like sponges. Everything that happens in their world is their making sense of how the world works. Through months of therapy, I realized my perception of the world was formed with the belief that in order to be enough, I had to be perfect, and the only way I would know I was enough was if I pleased people. Perfect became my identity, and what people thought of me became my measurement of worth and value. So my daily purpose was clear, perform perfectly, look perfectly, behave perfectly; because while people say they only want your best, what they really want is perfection. Or at least I thought so.

The older I got, the more aware I became of society's expectations and standards for women. Women are pressured to look a certain way, act a certain way, and be a certain way otherwise, we have failed. It's ingrained into our minds as little girls that our objective is to be desirable, and if you are not desired then it's because you aren't enough in some capacity. I'll never forget conversations with my grandma, who grew up in a *very* different time, about the importance of looking beautiful, not allowing crude noises to come out of your body, making

sure your hair was a certain way all the time, and doing whatever (literally, whatever) it took to have clear skin.

Contrary to most girls my age, I never loved or was comfortable with the idea of being liked for the way I looked. I thought it was shallow and unsettling to be liked or wanted because of a pretty face or body; I wanted people to like me for my mind (who I am) no matter how broken it may be.

In the hollow days of middle school, I hated the way my body changed. I no longer looked like my grandma's "beautiful granddaughter," I had pimples that got covered with makeup, my natural blonde hair grew darker that got lightened through highlights, and my body was slowly getting indents and becoming bigger in certain areas that, to my distorted eyes, I perceived to be ugly and fat. To me, it was evidence that not only was I losing my purpose for existence (being pretty) I was becoming the object that I never wanted to be.

Beyond body changes, school was getting harder, especially math and science, so it wasn't as easy anymore to bring A's home to my mom and dad anymore. Sports competition was also increasing, and my natural athleticism was getting less and less recognizable. I was fighting a losing battle. Everything that validated my worth was falling between my fingers and there was nothing I could do about it.

I couldn't change that I was better at English than I was at math, so to cope, I started controlling what I could. I wore three shirts to school to cover my changing upper body, and brutally punched the lower changing parts of my body that I hated. In my mind, while I didn't agree with it, I was controlling the one validation that I had left, my body.

Beating myself up (literally) slowly grew to food avoidance and obsessive exercise. Comments about being less toned, and eating too many granola bars in high school lead to me doing squats and sit-ups after every meal to "burn those foods off" and obtain then sustain a toned figure. Playing volleyball with teammates who ignored me for not looking and acting like

them convinced me that my not-so-stick-figure body was also just continuous proof that I was not good enough. When I expressed my beliefs about being fat and ugly to trusted ears, I was told how to “fix it” rather than fight the lie I was believing.

Through exercising and subtle food restrictions, I believed I was in control of my own worth and value. As long as I was physically, and emotionally, small, then I was good enough. I became my own personal fix-it project that never had a deadline. “Fixing myself” helped me cope with feeling inferior in other areas of my life. I excused myself from class, dinner, friend gatherings and family events to do squats in the bathroom when I feared my worth was depleting. I may not be as smart as her, or as athletic as her, but at least I have society’s praise-worthy body.

As psychotic as it sounds, it’s a blessing and a curse to be a perfectionist. On the positive side, anything and everything a perfectionist does is usually done very well. Everything I tackle, I work at it with my heart and soul. If anything is less than perfect, it feels like a negative reflection on myself, or evidence of depreciated worth. However, nothing this side of heaven will ever be perfect, and even if we do achieve perfection to some capacity, it will never be sustainable. It sounds harsh, but it’s just the reality.

For a perfectionist, every waking hour is spent either striving to be enough, or anxiously trying to sustain the achieved perfection. This behavior results in anxiety, and never feeling like I’m enough.

When I played volleyball in high school, I was expected by my coach, teammates, and father to set three perfect games every time. I was usually the only setter, so I remained on the court the whole time, and was expected to touch the ball every time it came to our side. If I got a bad pass, I was expected to perform some sort of redemptive play by doing whatever I had to do to redeem the bad pass and set the hitter up perfectly. Having to redeem a bad pass sometimes felt impossible, but it didn’t compare to the pressures that came with a good pass. When I got a

good pass, there was no excuse to not set a perfect set to the hitter, so the anxiety of potentially being the one to mess the entire play up and have the coach, my teammates, and parents disappointed in me, was crippling. What if I mess it up? What if my humanity shines through? What if I'm not perfect?

I remember feeling like my head was in the clouds when the noise of the crowd, the shouting from the bench, and the varying direction from my teammates reminded me that for the next twenty-five of our points, I was expected to remember every play number (a "three" meant high to the outside, a "nine" meant high to the right side, a "one" was a quick to the middle), how every girl hit (who was a lefty, who needed it "on" the net, who needed it "off"), and simultaneously read the opponent's court to know what play would be the most sufficient one to do.

In my experience, a bad hit or set was usually my fault, because when the finger needed to be pointed, it was always to the setter. If I wanted to avoid being reprimanded or talked poorly about on the bus, I needed to deliver perfectly under all circumstances.

While I do not regret playing for the school in this sport, when I think about my time on the high school volleyball court, I have one clear memory, and it was how it all ended. I was a senior, it was the end of October, and we were five points down in the first sectional game of the season. The ball came over the net, my teammate passed it, my perception of how far the ball was from me was off so I called for "help" and the outside hitter and I watched the ball drop right between us— it was over.

After four years of being the primary setter, floor captain, and MVP, my main memories consist of the final play, being left out by my teammates, questioned by my dad and coach, and hating the way I looked in the uniform. At the time, I wouldn't have been able to tell you why I obsessively exercised after every game, but today I could. It was to cope with the feeling that I let my team, coach and dad down.

What is an Eating Disorder Accomplishing?

I believed that when others were disappointed in me, that showed my lack of perfection, whether it was as an athlete, a student, a musician, a daughter, a sister, a friend, or a disciple of Jesus, if I wasn't perfect, I deserved the worst punishment. As if the feelings of failure weren't punishment enough, I believed my body deserved to be damaged on top of that too.

Eating disorders aren't always related to food or body image. They are usually responses to feelings of anxiety, depression or trauma, and in our society, there are many things that can trigger those feelings.

Feeling like a failure went beyond sports and grades. When my sixteen-year old body no longer looked like my ten-year-old body, I was suggested to eat less carbohydrates, drink more water to feel full, and do lunges and squats in my room. In my eyes, from what I saw, heard, and believed, my changing body was not a sign of a beautiful, healthy, wonderfully made functional body, it was a reflection of failure. When I looked in the mirror, I saw what I hated. I saw what I couldn't control and made it my mission to try anyway. By over-exercising and depriving my body of food, I was punishing it for changing, while also trying to fix it.

Perhaps the biggest and most common use for an eating disorder is for control. Control—the thing we all want but can never have. We can't control how people treat us, what they think about us, or what they say about us. We can't control an abusive past, the lack of love from a parent, mistreatment from classmates, loss of friends; we can't control most of what happens in our lives.

When you ask someone with an eating disorder why they do what they do, most of those who have been through counseling will be able to tell you it's because something happened in their life that they couldn't control. I have friends who used an eating disorder to get through trauma. I also have friends who used an eating disorder to gain control in a situation where they had none. Parents divorce, boyfriends (or girlfriends) mistreat the one they say they love,

scholarships fall through, friends betray, and whether you found your identity in what you lost, or you don't know how to handle the shock of what happened, eating disorders or disordered eating behaviors have always been something that gives people a sense of control.

You may not be able to control the poor treatment from your significant other, nor the fact that you will never be perfect, but you can control the weight of your body.

In my own life, I was taught that if I didn't like something, I had the power to change it. This narrative that human beings possess power to change things or make things happen in our lives is empowering and deadly. Because the truth is, we really can't change much in our lives. The only control we truly have is how we react to the things that happen to us.

As a little girl, I believed I was beautiful and good enough because I was thin, I had no imperfections on my face, I was good at school, people liked me, I was first chair in orchestra, and I could hold my own in most sports. However, as I mentioned before, as I got older, everything changed. Math went from multiplication tables to pre-calculus equations. Just because I could hit the ball and get on base in softball didn't mean I was anything special. And my body. . . no one warned me about all the internal and external changes that were going to happen, nor that they were all normal and okay!

I didn't like my changing body, nor what it made me feel like, so I attempted to do what I had been taught to do about something I didn't like— change it. But studying more didn't make math easier, and practicing more didn't make me an all-around MVP in sports (also, who has the time to practice every single sport?) But exercising made my legs smaller... and eating less made me thinner. Since a lot of attention went to my appearance as a little girl anyway, I figured if there was anything I could control, my body would be the ideal thing to control anyway— since it clearly held my worth.

Over the years, my body became sharper while my mind became weaker. Soon, any and every incident that made me feel like I fell short led me to squats and situps anywhere that was

out of sight. I remember thinking what I was doing was weird and bizarre, but I felt anxious if I didn't do it. I also knew if I told my parents what I was doing, they would be concerned and I didn't want to deal with that too.

In middle school, eating less gave me a sense of control over my changing body. In high school, over-exercising and restricting gave me a sense of control over ignorant teammates, imperfect volleyball games, stubborn school subjects, classmates who thought I was beneath them, and my inevitably, ever-changing body that felt like a daily measuring scale for what my worth was.

In college... When my solutionary, disorders eating behaviors all mounted into the diagnosed disease today, it wasn't because I constantly faced things out of my control. It was because after all that time, it wasn't a habit anymore, it was my way of life.

Unfortunately, one of the reasons why this disease is the second highest and deadliest mental disease, is because its corresponding behaviors are encouraged by mainstream society. Especially for women, who are told to be skinny, but also healthy. Don't eat carbohydrates, but don't restrict yourself. Look perfect, but don't be vain. Look healthy, even if it means not being healthy.

When I started my freshman year of college, I weighed 125 pounds. By the end of my sophomore year, I was 112 pounds. In two years, I cut out every food group except fruits, vegetables and occasionally chicken. I spent two hours in the gym every day, while still exercising in my room. I exercised when I was stressed, I exercised when I was anxious, I exercised before bed, after meals, after class, before a test, before an intramural game, before and after a social outing... And by that point, I never thought anything of it.

My family always told me how great I looked, and friends would tell me they wished they looked like me.

I remember the point when I knew I was in trouble. I knew what I was doing to myself was not sustainable, but I also knew I couldn't stop. It was so ingrained into my life and routine that it became an addiction. If I couldn't exercise when I felt like I needed to, anxiety would run so high I wouldn't be able to function.

I was twenty-years-old when I woke up in the middle of the night in a panic fearing that I was gaining weight. I remember I didn't want to, but I silently got out of bed and did sit ups and squats in the dark until I couldn't do one more and hot tears ran down my face. I layed on the hardwood dorm floor while my roommate slept two feet away internally screaming "God help me."

Shortly after that I started noticing the ridges on my ribs, and lying in bed at the end of the day, feeling like my heart would beat out of my chest. I remember lying there sometimes wondering if the two apples and peanut butter I ate that day would sustain me through the night, or if I wouldn't wake up. No, I didn't have a death wish, but I also wasn't afraid. I knew what I had gotten myself into was a beast bigger than myself, and if God took me in the middle of the night, I would go to a place where I would never be a slave to food and exercise again.

Be it my personality, or delusion for how serious it was, I never told anyone. I knew something was very wrong, but I also assumed I would grow out of it. Six months later, the beast took me to the emergency room.

As a follower of Jesus, I believe God created all things, and that He created all things to be good (Genesis 1:31). I believe He is an all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-loving God who does not make mistakes. However, knowing what I know about my own brain, I had a moment of panic when I put two and two together and couldn't help but wonder if God was all those things, why would make me like this?

Every resource I found on eating disorders was either completely scientifically based, or it was completely faith-based. The medical articles broke down the symptoms and consequences

and followed it with the fact that while there is no cure, counseling helps. The faith-based articles had the underlying “pray it away” mentality; which, when you know the neurology behind the disease, such advice can feel a little insensitive. Like, *you really think in the last ten years I haven't prayed about this?*

What Does God Have to Say About this?

If you believe the Bible's true, and I do, then you know God doesn't make mistakes. I am fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14), I am made in His image (Genesis 1:27) and His image is perfect. I am on earth at this time for an intentional reason (Esther 4:14), and there is nothing in my life that God is not aware, or out of control of (Jeremiah 29:11).

So, why? I may have been designed perfectly and flawlessly (Song of Solomon 4:7), but I live in a broken world that's forever ruined from sin (until Jesus returns). Because of sin, we experience pain, loss, sickness, and war. But not only domestic warfare, we experience spiritual warfare (Ephesians 6:12). When your mind attacks itself, drags you mentally under the bed and holds you hostage with chains of inferiority, you must know this was never God's intent for you.

God never wanted this sort of life for us— a brain drowning in depression, anxiety, or controlled by an eating disorder. I think one of the hardest realities to grasp on earth is that while there is pain and suffering, God is still good.

When talking to other victims of this disease, both believers and non, I have noticed a common theme of hopelessness. I'll never forget the day a friend said, “I don't think you ever recover from something like this. I think it's something you just learn how to live with.” What's sad is that she wasn't the only one who has ever said this. I've heard it from a couple of other friends as well.

I'm not healed, and I understand that as long as I'm on this side of heaven, I may never be healed; but I have what I feel like so many victims don't have— hope.

I know that this life is nothing more than a vapor (James 4:14), and that there is a perfect eternity on the other side of this. Even if I spend the remainder of my life learning how to live with this disease, it won't compare to the eternity I will spend in a place where there is no more pain or suffering (Revelation 21:1-4). However, I don't want to diminish the life we have on earth, because a vapor or not, if you're on earth, you're on earth for a reason.

So even if God never heals me of this disease, I know nothing is wasted with Him. Scholars don't know what Paul's thorn was (2 Corinthians 12:7), but we do know that if God didn't have a purpose for that thorn, He would have removed it. My eating disorder is my own personal thorn that has tangibly taught me how when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Corinthians 12:10). What once felt like my identity has become my testimony, because I know that in all things, God works for the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28).

I remember being so against being diagnosed with anorexia and having that title attached to my name. I remember feeling like no one would want to associate with someone who made "just getting food" so complicated.

You don't know what you don't know, and society has painted eating disorders to be a result of vain, egotism, and attention-grabbing.

I didn't want that false label, nor to use the little energy I had left to explain the truth that I barely understood myself. But the symptoms were getting harder to hide, and by the second trip to the hospital, I knew it was time to accept help.

Shortly after I started getting treatment, I started feeling nudges from the Lord to boldly tell my ugly, uncomfortable, raw story because He had an ending of redemption. In the process of writing, there have been times when I was reminded of Moses. Sometimes I feel completely incompetent and lack the mental, emotional and spiritual energy to do this, yet when I want to whine about not knowing how to write every experience and detail of what I've learned and gone through, I sense the Lord's presence whispering, similarly to what He told Moses, I am

ultimately not the one writing this *“The LORD said to him, “Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say”* (Exodus 4:11-12).

I’ve already been privileged to help a couple of close friends seek counseling and push through the hard moments of their own eating disorder, and I know that if God gave me the gift and passion for writing as well as this thorn in my side, it’s because He has a plan, and my story has a much greater purpose.

References Page

Connolly, J. (2021). *Breaking free from body shame: Dare to reclaim what god has named good*.

Zondervan Books.

Eating disorders. Eating Disorder Treatment | Binge Eating | Amen Clinics. (n.d.).

<https://www.amenclinics.com/conditions/eating-disorders/>

Eating disorders program. Johns Hopkins Medicine. (n.d.).

<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/psychiatry/specialty-areas/eating-disorders>

Flannery, M. E. (n.d.). *The Mental Health Crisis on college campuses*. NEA.

<https://www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/mental-health-crisis-college-campus#:~:text=Indeed%2C%20a%20new%20national%20survey,they%20are%20thinking%20about%20suicide.>

Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research. (2023a, March 28). *Eating disorders*.

Mayo Clinic. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/eating-disorders/symptoms-causes/syc-20353603>

4, Aug, et al. "Project Heal." *ProjectHEAL*, www.theprojectheal.org/. Accessed 7 Aug. 2023.

Schaefer, J., & Rutledge, T. (2014). *Life without ed: How one woman declared independence from her eating disorder and how you can too*. McGraw-Hill.

The holy bible: Containing the old and new testaments translated out of the original tongues and with the former translations diligently compared & revised. (1986). . American Bible Society.

“Transforming the Way Mental Health Is Treated.” *Mental Healthcare Clinic Focusing On Your Brain Health* | Dr. Amen, www.amenclinics.com/. Accessed 7 Aug. 2023.

The UK's eating disorder charity. Beat. (n.d.). <https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/>

To my family and friends who have prayed and walked through this entire journey with me.
“I thank my God when I think of you.”
(Philippians 1:3)

Preface: Here I Am

I was twenty years old, sitting with my mom in our family's Subaru when I told her, "I think I'm going to write a book one day... but I also don't think the story I'm going to write is ready to be written." My mom has always encouraged my writing. As a little girl, I was very quiet and had a severe stutter, so speaking was not my strongest method of communication. She was the one who encouraged me to write my thoughts and feelings in a journal and from there, I found my voice and developed a deep love for writing.

Three years later, I was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa. In the early stages of treatment, I was having my quiet time with Jesus one morning and asking Him, as I routinely did, to one day use my eating disorder for His glory. I was looking at the painting I made on the wall of a mountain and the verse Matthew 17:20 written underneath.

"Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain to move from here to there and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." God revealed that I was to write a book about my eating disorder. I did not know how, or what the book would look like, but I knew that at the right time, both would be made clear.

This book has evolved from an informative textbook to a personal and exposing account of everything that this disorder has caused me to do, to what it is now. For a while, I even hesitated to put my name on it because I've never wanted praise for writing this or pity for what I live with. I just want to be a voice for a massive group of people who most likely suffer in silence for fear of judgment and being misunderstood about their disorder that not even they fully understand. Most importantly, though, I want God to receive the glory for this because while it's my life, it's His story, and my role in this as His apprentice is to gladly do what He has instructed me to do.

When I started writing the first draft, I was writing it from the point of wanting people to understand eating disorders. The problem was, I didn't understand my own anorexia, so how was I supposed to teach others about it? The only thing I knew was that the actual disorder was nothing

like what society painted it to be, and I wanted to dismantle the shameful and ignorant assumptions and associations that were tied to it. In all honesty, I assumed I would be cured by the time I finished writing this so that I could use my story as proof of success and victory, but God had other plans. It's been four years since the start of this book, and I am far from cured.

The Lord has humbled me and made sure I understood that there was no victory or making sense of this disorder without Him. I initially felt ashamed and like a fraud for trying to write something on a topic I, clearly, was no master at. The truth is that eating disorders are growing and there is still so much more research to be done. I explain later that this is not my first (or second) attempt at writing this. I've dramatically lost hope in other drafts of trying to write this, and yet somehow even after losing each version, I always knew I would still write this. As a good friend once reminded me, "Relapses aren't the end of the story," he said, "they're just a part of it."

Yes, there have been many drafts. The first one was written quickly and scientifically. Draft two remained a secret, and it took the longest to write. While writing the second draft of this book, I lost many things and people in my life that were ultimately hurting me and making this disorder harder to live with. Those winter days were long, cold, and dark, and I remember sitting by myself in my room feeling empty and stripped of everything I once knew and found hope, stability, and comfort in.

While some of what was lost were not good things, they were predictable, but so were the fatal consequences. Somehow even when you know you're walking into something painful, it doesn't make it any less painful; and the confusing truth is that even after God took it all away, there was still a grief that lasted a very long time. Even years later, while incredible healing has happened, it still stings to see from afar the places and people that once caused a lot of pain.

That season of goodbyes and writing the second draft was one of the darkest seasons of my life, and the book showed it. The theme of it felt like answering the question I used to ask myself all the time, "How do you tell someone you love that they're the reason you're starving?" While

writing it, I knew the finished product was going to be far from what the final version of this book would be, but I also knew that unless I let myself write explicitly why I was hurting my body, who was causing me to starve, and what specific triggers were holding me captive from food, health, and peace, I would have never gotten to this third and final version of the book. I learned a lot about the disorder, myself, and God through that version, and without it, I also would not have been refined in all the ways God used it to refine me.

I remember on an October day before that season of darkness started, God gave me this image in my mind of Him and I standing on a pier, the water was restless and there was a storm on the horizon. I couldn't tell how quickly it was coming, but it was inevitable; it was coming. But Jesus wasn't just standing there with me watching the storm approach, He had His arm around my shoulder to ensure me that He wasn't sending me through the storm, He was taking me through the storm. A month later, almost everything started to change. It took seven to eight months for this storm to settle, and even for a while afterward, while God was building new things, I was still stumbling through some of the rubble from the storm.

People have asked me why I'm not sharing the elements of the second draft in the third, and it's simply because God knew I needed to write that, but I know it's ultimately not what I was called to write. Glorifying God never involves framing good people, places, and things in a bad light, and as you will soon read, you can love something more than you can say while also hating how it made you feel.

I didn't write this book to advocate that eating disorders are worse than any other mental disorder; I wrote this to show that they are equally as serious, fatal, and complex, and that is what I hope others will understand. Writing this book has been one of the hardest things I've ever done—and I thought living with the daily consequences of an eating disorder was hard. It's re-enforced that this disorder does not happen overnight; it's discreetly built from over a decade of systems and beliefs.

Writing this book has forced me to remember things I wish I didn't have to remember, and I've suffered some of the worst relapses, panic attacks, insomnia, and spiritual warfare that I've ever had. In an odd way, though, suffering from these things has been extremely motivating and validating because it has acted as a reassuring sign that if the enemy is trying so hard to stop this project, then I am doing exactly what I've been called to do. On harder-than-normal days when I just want to close the computer and call the project off, I feel the Lord's strength and nudge, "I need you to do this for me, Hannah."

"Here I am, Lord."

Introduction: One Way Out

“Write in a book all the words I have spoken to you” (Jeremiah 30:2).

When the Lord calls you to do something, you can trust that He’s going to use it for more than you can imagine. The story of this book is as ugly as the disorder that it’s about, but at the same time, it’s as beautiful as the glory of God. I’ve climbed mountains thinking they were metaphors for conquering my own, just to be humbled in a valley a few short weeks later.

I am not qualified to write a book about something that is slowly trying to take my life, has already taken away pieces of it, and shows no sign that I will ever have victory over it on this side of heaven. But maybe, that’s what qualifies me more than anything else to write this; because as Moses, who was slow in speech, needed the Lord to speak through him, it’s not my words you’re hearing, it’s my story you hear spoken through the Lord.

I don’t have the strength, wisdom, or authority to share the loss and false victories that my eating disorder produced over the past ten years, but God doesn’t always use strong, influential people to reveal Himself. He uses overlooked shepherds, persecutors, tax collectors, rebels, and lowly women. Surely, He can use eating disorders, too.

But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. **For when I am weak, then I am strong.**

(2 Corinthians 12:9-11)

My biggest fear about this book is that it will not include every detail someone may need to be informed or encouraged from, but then I remember my job isn’t to control how various people receive my story. My job is to write what our sovereign God told me to write in the most gracious and honest way possible. He will use it how He sees fit.

My goal for this project, as overwhelming as it is to share things that I only let a few select people know up until this point, is to provide education on a disease that few understand and hope to a silently suffering population who believe their situation is hopeless. I'll warn you that there are words and experiences on the coming pages that may be hard, uncomfortable, alarming, and even unsettling to read— I suggest reading with your discretion, but to leave those parts out would be doing what is ultimately God's story an injustice.

I was officially diagnosed with anorexia nervosa when I was twenty-three years old. Before then, I spent the previous six years restricting foods, cutting calories, calling black coffee "breakfast," overdosing on peanut butter, exercising after every meal, exercising in the middle of the night, having panic attacks about sugar, going through seasons of losing a dangerously unhealthy amount of weight, receiving medical attention, and not telling anyone about it.

If you resonate with the things that I share, the last thing I want is this to trigger you, and if you have not sought professional help, I encourage you to if you are willing and able. I hope this ultimately encourages and reminds you that despite what you're fighting to believe in your head, there is hope, you are not alone, and even if no one else understands, I know this is not a choice.

If you cannot personally resonate with what I share, I hope this doesn't make you feel bad or overthink anything you may have said or done to someone in the past. My desire is that readers on both sides discover a theme of grace woven throughout this entire story. I appreciate you reading this, and I hope it informs you about a disorder that, contrary to its title and societal belief, isn't a choice and it has nothing to do with food.

While eating disorders are found in both men and women of all ages, as a twenty-some-year-old female, my experience will probably only resonate with someone like me; however, I want to make clear that eating disorders are something to be taken seriously no matter what age or gender you are.

As you'll read later, it's not a disease made from social media or society's unrealistic expectations, though both encourage and enforce such habits and behavior. This complicated disorder that's housed in the mind and can take years before it shows physical symptoms leaves Christians suggesting you should pray it away while the medical world has not found an absolute cure for it.

At the time I am writing this, I am not cured, and to be honest I don't know that I ever will be, while I'm on earth. I struggle daily just to eat the number of calories my body needs, and the thinning of my hair and nails shows it. But, as Paul talked about the thorn he had in his side (2 Corinthians 12:7), while we don't know what his thorn was, we do know that if God didn't have a purpose for it, then it wouldn't have been there. While I'm not healed, knowing God is with me and is using this burden for His glory and my good me gives me joy, and finding God amid my eating disorder has given me the true hope, worth, value, and purpose that I tried finding in all the wrong places.

If you choose to keep reading, I pray you discover hope, encouragement, grace, and an all-powerful God who loves you more than any person could ever understand. This year, 28 million Americans will be diagnosed with an eating disorder, someone, diagnosed or not, will die of one every fifty-two seconds, and there is only one way out.

1. We've Only Just Begun

As a little girl, one of my favorite singing groups was The Carpenters, the 1970's sibling duo who sang "Superstar" and "Close to You." My parents rarely played mainstream radio, so while I didn't hear 'Apple Bottom Jeans' until high school (2012), I knew every word to most of the golden oldies. When my mom was driving my sister and I to school, we were mainly listening to Sarah Groves or James Taylor. When my dad was driving, we listened to The Bee Gees, Styx, Dionne Warwick, Donna Summers, and my favorite, The Carpenters.

By the age of nine, I think I knew every word to every song on their 1971 'Carpenters' album by heart. In my curious era (I think every kid has one. It's the era where you start conceptualizing life and death, and want to know "why" to every question), I remember asking my dad,

"Are The Carpenters still alive?"

"One of them is," he said. "Richard Carpenter is still alive, but Karen isn't."

"What happened to her?"

"She was sick," he answered. (Parents who handle their child's "curious era" with patience deserve so much more credit and recognition than they receive.)

"With what?" expecting the answer to be what it always seemed to be, cancer.

"She had an eating disorder. She just stopped eating, so her body stopped working."

Why would someone not eat, I thought. My nine-year-old mind couldn't wrap my brain around the concept of someone being hungry but still not eating, especially my hero of the time, Karen Carpenter. I didn't think much of it because I didn't understand it, but that was the first time I ever heard about eating disorders. Like most, I understood them for what they were at face value—A disorder women get when they think they're fat and don't eat, simple. I would have never guessed that starting only six years later, I would resonate with and understand my childhood hero in a way that ninety percent of Americans couldn't.

My parents said I was born with typical first-child traits; deep-feeling, quiet, rule-follower, perfectionist, afraid to make a mistake, type A, goal-oriented, motivated, and hyper-focused. It's always amusing when someone's greatest weakness(es) is also their greatest strength(s). I took rule-following so seriously that when I was in middle school, my dad said he would pay me to break a rule.

My parents thought I was wound up so tightly, they mainly just wanted to see me relax and enjoy life as an eleven-year-old. Talk about a moral dilemma-- obey your parents, or obey your school rules? I can't say I've ever heard of another parent being willing to take that risk, but my parents knew me well enough that when I told them what rule I eventually broke, it was nothing short of what my dad expected from me. I came home from school one day and said,

“Dad, I broke a rule!”

“What did you do?!” He was very excited.

“I went *up* the ‘down only’ staircase,” I proudly admitted.

What a rebel... While some of my thirteen-year-old classmates were being detained, suspended, and expelled for bringing vodka to school in water bottles, hooking up in empty classrooms, ditching school or chewing gum, I worked up the courage to sprint up the staircase that hall monitors labeled as “down” for better foot traffic flow. If that doesn't sum up Hannah Grace Kuhn, I honestly don't know what does.

Like most children I assume, I wanted nothing more than to please my parents. They were so generous and gracious to me to invest in the things I took an interest in. When I was seven, they allowed me to take violin lessons. From the age of five to fourteen, I played tee-ball, baseball, and then softball. From thirteen to eighteen, I played volleyball both on a travel team and for my high school. Mixed in between were various art lessons, more sports, as well as other hobbies.

Unfortunately, until about halfway through middle school, I was decently good at most things that I tried. I was naturally athletic, artistic, and good at school. Good grades came easily, I

was first chair in the orchestra, the teacher commonly used my art project as an example, and when deciding sports teams at recess or in gym class, I was usually picked at the beginning. The concept of not being good enough at something was, unfortunately, an unknown feeling for most of my childhood. My parents were naturally always proud of me because I was performing successfully at essentially everything I tried. Adding to that, no teacher, kid, or parent blatantly did not like me, so not only did I feel like I was enough to my parents, but I felt I was good enough to everybody else, too.

When it came to my physical appearance, I was a blonde-haired, blue-eyed kid with fair skin and a small figure. Both of my parents worked so my grandma drove an hour one way every week to take care of my sister and me in the middle of the week. Until I was seventeen-years-old, I had two beds in my room—one for me, and one for my grandma to sleep in. When my grandma took care of my sister and me during the week she would lay out our clothes (if you've ever heard of Lands' End, my sister and I could've been walking advertisements for them), curl our hair, add a clip that matched our outfit, and kiss the top of our foreheads saying "my beautiful granddaughters."

My sister Leah and I walked into public school Tuesday through Thursday with doll-like outfits, curly hair, clean backpacks, and lunch bags— one might say I peaked in elementary school. I believed that I was loved, worthy, and good enough because I performed well at everything (school, sports, music, art) and I was constantly told I looked like an American Girl Doll. To me, perfection measured worth, and being perfect meant being good at everything, being liked by everyone, and being physically beautiful; So, if my nine-year-old self came in a box that all dolls come in, mine would've been stamped with the fatal word "perfect."

2. How Fear Saved My Life

If you only heard my current story, you would probably assume I developed my relationship with Jesus through my eating disorder, but that's actually not the case. The concept of undeserving grace mixed with worth and value did not make sense to me until I was much older. Anxiety, however, and how to understand and cope with it, was something I was well familiar with. As a little girl, I had many phobias. At one point it felt like I had a new phobia every other week. Bugs, storms, fires, guns, the city, getting kidnapped, something irrationally happening to my sister, you name it-- I was probably at one point afraid of it.

I was always a cautious kid. My parents said I was always very unsettled when going into new situations. When I was a little girl, my mom started telling me in the car when we would go places, who would probably be there, what we would probably do, if they had a dog (oh yeah, I was deathly afraid of dogs too) because she learned that when she did that, my anxiety levels would go down.

Of course, all of these phobias were irrational. I was never kidnapped, our home never burned, and I didn't have a bad experience with a dog, but based on my reactions to these things, you would have been convinced that I had a near-death experience with every single one.

When I was ten years old, I remember going to a friend's house whose mother must have never met a child with a crippling fear of dogs before because when my friend told her I was afraid, she insisted that everything was fine. I'm sure she never made that mistake again because five minutes later, I was sitting in the fetal position on the kitchen table while the dog barked and tried jumping on me. My face went pale. The intensity of fear drained all the blood from my face almost immediately and my ten-year-old friend took matters into her own hands and put their dog in another room. Meanwhile, her mom called my mom to tell her, "Hannah's really pale," to which my mom responded, "Well, I told you she was afraid of dogs."

The one good thing about these various fears was that they left as quickly as they came. My fear of fire? It lasted about a week. My fear of the city? It lasted a couple of months. While these fears were extreme, paralyzing, and captivating in the moment, in the grand scheme of things they really didn't last that long, and they always seemed to get over themselves.

That was until I adopted the fear that was different from them all. This was the first fear that somewhat permanently robbed me of all peace and rationality. When I remember my three-year phobia of emetophobia (the fear of throwing up), I think of two Bible verses: Joshua 1:9 “For this is my command, be strong and courageous, do not be afraid, do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God is with you, wherever you go” and Genesis 50:20 “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”

I couldn't tell you the moment that this fear intruded into my head, other than it was the summer before third grade, but until about five years ago, this was my testimony. I grew up in the church, so I knew about God, but this experience helped me *know* God personally.

By the start of third grade, my mind decided that the worst thing that could ever happen to a nine-year-old was throwing up, especially at school. Again, I have no idea where this fear originally stemmed from, but looking back I think I know what things triggered it. Unfortunately, third grade was a less-than-ideal year—some school years are just like that.

My original teacher needed emergency knee surgery one week before school started, and the school board didn't have enough time to find a permanent substitute until she was able to come back. Therefore, in the beginning of the new school year, twenty-four nine-year-olds got to school having no idea who their teacher was going to be that day, and for a while, it was someone different every day.

For an already anxious kid who liked to know, generally, what to expect, this stretched me, but it was a good lesson to learn early in life—life is unexpected. Showing up with no idea who

my teacher was going to be was not a fun, comical adventure; it was unpredictable, overwhelming, and unsettling to not know what I was walking into.

Even when my original teacher eventually returned, our class still walked into the classroom on a daily basis with no expectation of what we were going to get. Due to her pain from surgery, the hard season of life she was in, and her unique teaching methods, it felt like having many different teachers in the same body, and the only way you could find out who you were going to get was by walking through the door. Some days she was patient, other days she was emotionally abusive. Between lessons on drunk simulations and sitting us down to talk about her messy divorce and pet custody, I'm surprised throwing up was all that I was afraid of.

Panic attacks became a part of my routine. Most mornings I stood in the bathroom with a bloodless face and dilated pupils, begging my mom to let me stay home. I was convinced I was going to throw up and I couldn't figure out for myself that what I was experiencing was just the fear of it. Every morning felt real and the same, yet simultaneously different from the day before because I was sure "today was the day" that I would get sick at school. It completely consumed my mind and kept me from thinking about anything else. My mom never gave in, though. She knew she needed to interrupt the thought from controlling all parts of my brain and body. She gripped my shoulders, stared through my eyes and down deep into my soul to say,

"We are *not* giving in today!"

She knew as well as I later did that if I could get myself to school, then I would be fine, but in a moment of panic, when fear held the reigns of my mind, all I could think of was, "I need to stay home, I need to stay home." The voice in my head was manipulative, convincing and believable every time— but not to my mom. She prayed for me every morning, taught me what and where fear came from, as well as my defense mechanisms for when it attacked at school-- as it frequently did. When I could feel a panic attack coming on at school, I excused myself to the

bathroom to run cold water on my wrists and repeat the verse my mom taught me to say over and over until it subsided.

Joshua 1:9 “This is my command, be strong and courageous, do not be afraid, do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” This verse holds a special place in my life because it was the first verse I memorized, and the first of many verses I added to my spiritual toolbox. In my toolbox are verses I have memorized over the course of my life to help me in various situations. In other words, it was the start of my armor of God.

Ever since my sister and I were little, my mom taught us Bible verses to help us in whatever challenging situation we were in. Mean kids at school? Ephesians 4:32, “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” Nervous about giving a presentation? Philippians 4:13, “For I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Scared of the thunderstorm? Psalm 46:1, “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.” Joshua 1:9 was the first verse I ever memorized and holds as my sword of truth in my armor of God (Ephesians 6:17) as I enter the daily battles of spiritual warfare.

I decided to give my life to Jesus when I was seven-years-old, and I was baptized on my golden birthday (when I was nine). My parents raised my sister and me in the Christian faith, and we went to church as a family every Sunday. When I accepted Jesus as a kid, I believed God made the world and everything in it, He sent His son Jesus to die on the cross for my sins so I could live with Him in heaven one day, and until He returned or called me home to heaven it was my job to obey my parents, listen to my teachers, be kind to everyone and do good things. When my mom dropped my sister and me off at school, she would tell us, “Look for ways to be a blessing!” So as little kids, this looked like sharing a pencil with a kid who didn’t have one, inviting the kid sitting by themselves on the playground to play with you, or sharing part of your lunch with someone who didn’t have one.

Romans 8:28 is a well-known verse amongst Christians. “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” When I started getting panic attacks, my mom explained to me that my fear of throwing up was from the enemy who lied to me to try and steal my joy. She said, “But Jesus, Hannah, is not only your personal Savior, he is your friend and he says that no matter what we don’t ever have to be afraid.” From that point on, I named the enemy, “Mr. Fear” and I knew Mr. Fear was a liar.

After my mom taught me that, whenever I felt anxious butterflies in my stomach, or my throat started to close up, I tried to tell myself, “Mr. Fear is lying to me because he is a liar, but Jesus is with me, and He is more powerful than Mr. Fear will ever be.” I was stubborn, and it took over a decade for me to accept that it was okay to need help, especially in scenarios that are bigger than what I alone can handle. Despite my parent’s efforts, I refused to talk to a counselor because I was determined that I had the power with Jesus to handle Mr. Fear on my own.

It was a rainy, autumn day when my grandma dropped my sister and me off for school, she went to her kindergarten line and I got in line with the third graders. We all walked into the building and as soon as I took a step into that school something snapped. The loudest, most controlling feeling of fear I had ever experienced up to this point hit me like a brick wall. I felt the blood rush to my toes, and drain from my face, and in my ears, I heard “Get out of here!”

Without even thinking, I reacted to this intrusive thought by pushing past my classmates and sprinting out the door, down the painted sidewalk, and I chased after my grandma’s car like my life was inside there. She slammed on the brakes when I ran in front of the car to get her to stop, I jumped in the front seat and refused to go inside. “Why?” She asked. “I’m going to throw up!” I said.

Unhappy, annoyed, and ill-equipped to handle a nine-year-old with undiagnosed crippling anxiety, she did what was the only hope she had to get me to go inside– she called my mom. I stared out the window, heart racing, watching the tardy kids, or maybe that’s their parents, run

inside before the fifth-grade patrols locked the door. I thought as long as I didn't go inside, then I wouldn't get sick.

My mom was working downtown that day, but to my grandma's relief, she answered the phone and asked to talk to me. "We are *not* giving in today," she said, but my soul couldn't see her eyes to know she was serious, so they were just empty words rather than a statement I could adopt as my own. My feet were stuck and my mind was stubborn. My grandma begged me to go inside, but my fear made me disobedient. I was paralyzed, and nothing was breaking this chain. I handed the phone back to my grandma as she drove to the front of the school. We sat there as 'Crocodile Rock' played quietly in the background and eventually my grandma hung up. She didn't know what to do with a third grader who was so terrified of something she did not understand, but mom's instructions were clear, "do not take her home."

The front door to the school opened and out came the friendly social worker- an elderly woman with khakis, a sweater, and a soft smile. She came up to the car, offered me her hand, and asked if I wanted to hang out in her office with her. My senses were on high alert, but somehow I agreed. Holding her hand all the way to the school I noticed every leaf that crunched under my feet, how the air smelled like dirt, and the school smelled like glue. We passed my class going to Art class; the boys just stared, the girls asked if I was okay and my teacher was irritated I wasn't in class.

Mrs. Grover's office was small and next to Mrs. Klein the Speech Therapist's office. I knew that room well. They both had small but colorful offices, maybe that was intentional. When I went to Mrs. Klein's on Tuesdays, she physically only had space for me and one other student. Unfortunately for her, I think I was the only student in the building at the time who stuttered. The small colorful space made me feel safe and secure, though I'm sure both therapists would have appreciated a real office rather than a converted storage closet.

I sat across the table from Mrs. Grover. Her walls were blue, she had a lot of colorful books with interesting titles and she had very encouraging signs on her walls about how it was okay to feel happy, sad or angry. There was a big, yellow smiley face rug underneath the table we were sitting at, and she had absolutely nothing in front of her. I was not there to be a case study, I was there to be cared for and listened to.

“What are you afraid of, Hannah?”

“Throwing up at school.”

“Where did it come from?”

You might think that was a dumb question, but I had my answer.

“Mr. Fear.”

“Who’s Mr. Fear?” She asked.

“The enemy,” I answered honestly. She didn’t ask any more questions about that.

“What do you do when Mr. Fear lies to you?” Mrs. Grover asked.

“I say Joshua 1:9,” I told her, and I recited, *“This is my command. Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid, do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”*

“Anything else?” She asked. I do not know if Mrs. Grover the social worker was a believer, but as a child, I did not think twice about sharing my faith or the Bible. I just answered her questions with what I knew was true.

“I also sing the Copacabana sometimes.”

Talk about contradicting messages, but I proceeded to sing the 1978 hit for the social worker who probably wished she had a clipboard and pencil by now. For whatever reason, my sister and I knew every word of that song- no idea what we were saying- but for whatever reason that song became a great source of comfort for me. The Lord works in mysterious ways.

About an hour later, my panic had subsided and I was ready to return to my class. My third-grade teacher was not pleased that I was gone for the first hour of the morning, but for whatever reason her poor reaction did not bother me. I left Mrs. Grover's office, which served as the battleground for my toughest anxiety attack yet, victoriously. God used that moment to teach me that with Him, I could handle anything. This was a valuable lesson He knew I needed to learn then so that I could remember this truth fifteen years later.

Struggling with fear as a child that took away my sense of logic, my peace, and overall ten pounds from my body was destructive and hard for my parents to watch, but it was not wasted. Many kids knew what it was like to be afraid, but not many knew the degree of what my fear was. Being scared is an emotion that ebbs and flows, but fear is a way of life. Fear is in your blood and you carry it with you wherever you go. I may have lost what I mentioned above, but I gained something so much more valuable. I gained an understanding of a personal relationship with Jesus. Jesus wasn't just an authority figure and Savior, He was also my friend. At the age of nine years old, I personally understood what spiritual warfare was and how to fight it.

I learned that spiritual warfare wasn't a mythical, Narnia-looking battle where Centaurs and soldiers charge the front line of defense with their helmets, swords, and shields. Nor was it a theological concept found in fairy tales or strictly the Bible. Spiritual warfare was waking up every morning in 'fight or flight.' It was using all the energy I had to push past Mr. Fear, into the school building, and fight him with the only thing that could defeat him, the Truth. The Bible says to hide the Word of God in your heart, for it's your armor when you go into battle. Joshua 1:9 was my sword of Truth and it went with me everywhere to school, church, violin lessons, friend's houses- everywhere.

Spiritual warfare was refusing to give in to what the enemy wanted me to do- stay (or go) home, and it was learning how to use the strength and spirit God had given me to depreciate Mr. Fear's power over me. And the battlefield, where spiritual warfare is fought, did not look like

beautiful, mountainous, grassy fields like in ‘Lord of the Rings.’ The battlefield was my bedroom, the public-school bathroom, or the playground, and victory did not look like walking away with scars, medals, sweat, and cheering. To outsiders, it looked the same as going into battle-- it was all internal, and no one knew.

I think it’s a good lesson to learn, and I did at nine, that you never truly know a person unless they invite you to. What you see on the outside is merely a shell, and you cannot determine that you know a person solely based on what you see. We don’t see what happens behind closed doors, nor do we see what someone’s using energy for on the inside. We are who we are by everything that’s found within, and very rarely are the things that make us who we are found on our skin or in our eyes.

To this day, the sight, sound, smell or potential of vomit triggers paralyzing memories of those third grade panic attacks. By the end of fourth grade, God graciously allowed me to overcome that crippling fear, and replaced it with godly wisdom and spiritual strategies that only He knew I would need in the years to come.

3. Pretty Woman

While I believe I was not born with an anxious spirit, unfortunately, I have had one for as much of my life as I can remember. Having underlying anxiety, that never went properly treated, meant that while I could go many days as a kid without having anxious tendencies or attacks, it was still going to always be a natural reaction to something unknown or that I could not control.

Growing up, I had very blonde hair. I'm half Finnish so I'm directing it to my Scandinavian genes. My mom had blonde hair, my dad had blonde hair (as a kid), both my grandma and great grandma had blonde hair. When I was a little kid in the summertime, my mom and grandma put lemon juice on my hair so that the sun would brighten it while I was swimming or playing outside. Besides being annoyed sometimes that I couldn't immediately join my brunette sister in the pool because I had to wait for the lemon juice to partially dry, I didn't really think much of it because that was just what I did.

There is nothing more impressionable than a child. Everything a kid sees, learns, hears and experiences contributes to their understanding of themselves and how the world works. Of course, they don't do it purposefully, there are no eight-year-old philosophers that I know of at least, that's just the beauty of how God created them. When I say that *every* experience is used to build a child's understanding of the world, I do mean *every* experience. Suddenly I understand why parents are so nervous to have children.

Your upbringing and the society you are raising them in are going to have a severe impact on how the child perceives life and themselves. I remember early on making the connection that being "bigger" was a bad thing. Whether it was a kid in my class, a woman wearing a bathing suit that wasn't necessarily flattering, or a politician that an adult didn't agree with, the way people would either aggressively say "they're fat" or try to politely say "they're, you know, a little bigger" came across as though that was a bad and shameful thing—something that made a person less worthy.

From as early as I can remember, a woman's body has always been perceived as an object to be fixed. We're surrounded by it both in the media and in our personal lives— women are rarely content with the physical bodies they have. For some reason, it's just never enough the way that it is. A maternal figure who I looked up to in my life was unfortunately rarely content with the chest she was created with. She was always looking for exercises or methods to shrink what she didn't like— or in other words, fix what she didn't like. I think most women experience the relentless desire to constantly feel the need to “fix” themselves. It's almost like that's just what comes with being a woman in a broken world— always feeling like we're failing at our one universal job, being pretty.

The beauty industry could probably solve world hunger with the amount of money they make off of creams, vitamins, procedures, ointments, diets, exercise routines, and unsolicited advice. Doctors and influencers can promise anything with their products: permanent hair removal, wrinkle remover, smaller chest, bigger butt, smaller waist, snatched jawline, flawless skin, smoother nails, whiter teeth, bigger lips, bigger eyelashes, anti-aging, thigh gaps, the list is truly endless. We live in a society where even if you are neutral about something on your body, you'll be tempted to fix it. Again, the older I get, the more I feel like it's just part of being a woman. Surely there is some motivating factor that is much stronger than our own inner desire to improve ourselves. Behind every cosmetic “fix” is some sort of promise, and whatever that promise is it's become the purpose that some women live for. Why do we feel such immense pressure to fix everything about ourselves? Why do we feel like we are only as valuable as the shape and weight of our bodies and faces? Why don't we just accept that our bodies are going to change as we age or are blessed enough to carry children within them? And why are we looking to broken people and a broken society to validate that we are good enough?

When I was in eighth grade, I had my first professional highlight done at a hair salon. In all honesty, I remember my favorite part about doing this was getting to spend time with my mom

and feeling like a grown-up by chatting with her and the hairdresser. They always asked me about school, softball, and friends, and I oddly loved just listening to their conversations too, whatever they were talking about. I loved that quality time.

The concept of my hair darkening never bothered me, and the idea of that being something that needed to be fixed, never crossed my mind. Similarly, to putting lemon juice on my hair, I perceived getting highlights as just something that blondes do; not necessarily something you had a choice about doing. Either way, at fourteen, I just enjoyed the outing with my mom. My grandma got her hair done without fail, every Friday (you can do the math, every Friday for give or take fifty years). She religiously brought the same cash tip for the girl who washed her hair, and donut holes from Dunkin Donuts for the receptionists. Between observing my grandma's weekly salon routines, and my mom's highlight appointments, it seemed like such a routine that, again, I thought it was "just something you do," whether you like it or not.

Our family was very blessed to have my grandma around as much as she was. Every week she drove to our house to take care of my sister and me, by bringing us to school and making dinner for our family three nights a week. My grandma had a heavy influence on my life because we were lucky to have her around so much.

My grandma was also very proud of the status and figure she had when she was in high school— it was the 1950s, different times. Whatever the measurements were of Miss America in 1956 (somehow, I have forgotten them), my sister and I knew them because our grandma found great joy in being able to say she had the same measurements (in 1956). She took great pride in her own appearance, so naturally, she also did in her granddaughter's appearances too— I think she saw it as a reflection of her in a way. My mom said that her mom (my grandma) paid for her to get perms like her own as a little girl, and generously bought her nice clothes from the notorious Marshall Fields (even though my mom says she would have rather worn overalls). When my mom

was growing up, she wore what my grandma usually wanted her to wear, she was a cheerleader in high school, and her hair was normally to my grandma's liking.

My mom has always had more of a creative, artistic style than the cookie-cutter outfits and persona my grandma wanted her to like, and she told me once that after she went away to college and had the chance to learn who she was, what she liked, and what she wanted, her mom blatantly told her, "I don't really like you." Whether it was the era, her personality, or simply part of being a woman, my grandma considered herself to be the definition of a perfect woman with her physical stature and social status. She had the ideal woman measurements, she was popular in school, she was a cheerleader, and she was "desired" by all the popular boys—so naturally she wanted her family lineage to sustain this reputation. These things clearly held great importance to her, and in her eyes, they were evidence and a measurement of success, worth, and value.

I remember countless moments of her crying when my natural blonde hair began to darken, or when my sister's skin started going through normal teenage hormones. She once told me she was glad Leah went through acne because she didn't think I would be strong enough to handle something so hard.

I remember how distraught she was when I told her I wanted to play volleyball instead of being a cheerleader, or the day she almost stopped the car when she found out neither my sister nor I were popular in school. I specifically remember being in middle school when I started noticing that some of my favorite shirts were disappearing. I looked for them for months until we realized that my grandma threw them away because they had stains on them, and she didn't want us going to school with stained and unpressed (not ironed) clothing.

Our lives, bodies, and high school experiences looked very different from hers and what she believed was the successful way to be a high school girl. Oddly, I believed she loved us so much and truly wanted what was best for us, and so in her mind, the best was what she had. It's an odd thing to experience as a kid, though; knowing your grandma loves you but also feeling like

it's conditional, or that because you don't have these specific material things, your life is less than great and could be better. It was my first introduction to the concept of only being good enough under certain parameters and conditions, and it was a concept that honestly started shaping the rest of my life.

4. Finding Worth on the Mound

As I got older, I carried everything that I believed made me good enough into my pre-teen and teenage years-- Good grades, good performance in sports and music, and being considered physically pretty. Unfortunately, my understanding of worth was like an old house that looks beautiful on the outside, but without proper care, slowly but surely deteriorates until it falls.

School got harder, my body began to change, and it was only a matter of time until I realized no matter how hard I tried, I would never actually be perfect at anything. This was a necessary and good lesson to learn, however, when you also measure your worth with these things, when reality hits, it hits very, very hard.

One of my favorite memories as a little kid was playing softball with my dad. He was the coach of our team from the time I was eight until I was fourteen. My dad coached the girls with the mentality of “We’re here to learn and have fun, and if we win, then that’s a fun bonus.” If a girl wanted to try pitching, he would help her in practice so she would feel more comfortable pitching in a game. If a girl was throwing the ball or batting the wrong way (with bad form), my dad would take her aside and teach her how to properly do whatever she was doing wrong to prevent her from getting hurt.

He was always very patient with the girls and well-liked by so many players in the league. The best part about playing softball was when, at the end of a season, if we won the championship (or honestly even if we didn’t), the girls and I would take the cooler of water and dump it on both my dad and the assistant coaches. I have fond, happy memories of those summers playing softball with my dad and with friends, but I also have some shaping memories too—who doesn’t?

My dad is a good dad. He always believed in me, and I know he always saw potential in me and believed in my natural athletic ability. When I played volleyball in high school, he never missed a game. He was rarely in the stands because he didn’t like the view from the bleachers, so even when I looked for him before the game started and didn’t see him, I never doubted he was

there. He was just somewhere in his work uniform, watching from someplace above the stands—probably somewhere that the public wasn't supposed to be, but that's my dad. If you played sports in high school, you know how much it means to have your parents there. My dad grew up in a bit of a broken family, and so I know he knows what it feels like to have a parent let you down or physically not be there for you.

My dad has always been pretty quiet (I know I get my quietness from him), but despite his upbringing, he's very smart, he put himself through school, and he learned how to wisely manage the financial means that were not as prevalent when he was a kid. He was more than generous with the time he didn't necessarily have to play catch with me in front of the house or take me to private pitching and batting lessons for softball. Both he and my mom constantly told me that if I could just get out of my own head, I would be unstoppable at both volleyball and softball. If I'm completely honest though, I didn't know how to get out of my head and frankly I was too young to realize I was in it. I didn't even know what they meant by being in my head, let alone how to get out of it.

If I wasn't pitching well during a game, I could tell my dad was not pleased. He knew I could do better if I would "just get out of my head," but for whatever reason, sometimes I just couldn't. It was hard, sometimes, to watch other girls be encouraged if they didn't perform perfectly during an inning, while I felt like I would get a certain look and what felt like the silent treatment. I wanted to play perfectly because I was a perfectionist, but I also wanted my dad to be proud of me, and there were certainly times when I felt like I failed at that. The truth that took over ten years for me to understand was that whether I understood how to get out of my head (at twelve years old) or not, I still would have never (consistently) played a perfect game. I do wonder, though, if I wasn't so concerned about playing perfectly for a variety of reasons, would I have collectively played better?

We laugh about it today, but I remember times when I was having a hard time throwing a strike in a game, and my dad and the assistant coaches would say from the bench “Hannah! Just throw a strike, man, just throw a strike!” and then they would do the pitching motion as though that wasn’t what I was already trying to do. We laugh because, obviously, as the pitcher on the mound, that’s exactly what I was trying to do... pitch a strike. Plus, “just” throw a strike? As though throwing a strike is as easy as turning off a light switch. It’s always easier to play the game from the stands.

Needless to say, a perfectionistic people pleaser is a fatal combo whether you’ve been on this earth for seven years or seventy. One thing I will never forget was at the end of my softball career, I was about to enter high school, and my dad and I went to watch one of the playoff games in the league. While sitting in the car (as we did; we’re introverted) my dad apologized to me for putting so much pressure on me. He reminded me that it was because he believed in me, he loved me, and it was kind of the unfortunate inevitable of being the coach’s kid. I don’t know if he knows how much that meant to me to hear him say that. Sadly, I think I was too young to realize how this lesson in perfectionism regarding sports applied to worth and value in my life because when other determinates of my worth started to morph and crumble as well, it created all new problems.

5. More Layers than an Onion

Like most girls in middle school, my doll-like body began to change. It was no different from every other tween girl's changing body, but I hated it, and I fought it. The changes of puberty were awkward for everyone, but to me, they felt like a punishment. Up to that point, I had been praised my whole life for my tiny, beautiful figure, so pulling out the box of shorts every summer to try them all on and see which ones still fit sent me spiraling. Jeans shopping... we should have just put it off until I was in college.

Hate is a strong word, and yet I hated the changes that were happening to my body. I hated the change in general, I hated that I couldn't control it, I hated the way my body was developing into the object that society suggested that it was, and I hated the feeling that as some things got bigger my worth got smaller. I'll never forget my grandma sitting down at the dining room table with me and saying, "Hannah, I'd like to talk to you about breasts..." My index fingers went right into my ears and I watched my grandma's mouth move (for some reason she was committed to giving her speech whether I heard it or not) until it stopped. I can go on with my life having no idea what she said.

I didn't like the idea of boys looking at me in a certain way or liking me solely for the way that I looked. I cried and I longed to retain the ten-year-old body that gave me verbal assurance that I was good enough and didn't show any sign of what society said was the worst thing to have. (Fat). I was Hannah, my grandma's beautiful granddaughter with blonde hair, blue eyes, a pretty face, a small body, a matching outfit, and a coordinating hair clip. I was once "perfect" (I thought) and then tortured when I realized wasn't; I was willing to do whatever it took to be perfect (good enough) again.

In sixth grade, I started wearing three layers of shirts (yes, even in the summer) to cover up my changing chest, and basketball shorts to disguise my growing hips. My dad would say, "You know you're drawing more attention to yourself by wearing so many layers" but in my mind, I

preferred that attention rather than lust-filled attention. I remember being in my sixth-grade music class when two boys turned around and asked,

“Are you wearing two shirts?”

“No,” I answered. “I’m wearing three.”

“Why?” The one asked.

(Because I hate that society and my grandma suggest that a woman’s body is made to be eye candy for you boys, meanwhile I also perceive my changing body to be fat and ugly therefore taking away from my whole hollow purpose as a woman which is to be pretty.)

“Because I want to,” I said. It was good enough for two thirteen-year-old boys.

By eighth grade, my Old Navy jean jacket buttoned all the way up became my best friend. Three shirts weren't cutting it anymore, so I needed an extra security blanket and cover-up. Whether it was fifty degrees or ninety degrees, my jean jacket and I were ready to take on anything. One day, on an unusually hot day in May, I was walking home from school when I saw my dad’s truck back into the driveway. I was so nervous because I knew what was about to happen. I got to the house and my (concerned) dad aggressively asked,

“Hannah! It is ninety-two degrees... Why the hell do you have a coat on?!”

“I’m not hot,” I told him. It was the easiest answer to give, and as crazy as it sounds, I got so used to feeling overheated in all my layers that eventually, I truly didn’t feel hotter than usual—I simply got used to it.

Sometimes I think my parents were almost so concerned about me that they didn’t know where to start. They were firm in their recommendations to dress appropriately for the season, but we all knew I was so stubborn that they never forced me to stop wearing four shirts in summer. Fortunately for them, my sister took the changes much more gracefully than I did.

Besides wearing layers for all four seasons, when I noticed certain body parts growing, I also started hitting and punching those areas on my body that I believed were making me ugly, not

good enough, and therefore needed to be changed. Overtime, this physical abuse I was doing to my body morphed from an intentional action to change what I didn't like, into a subconscious habit I did whenever I felt anxious or that I was not good enough.

When I came home from high school after a volleyball practice and with a lot of homework, I would bang my hips while I unpacked everything. Eventually, both before dinner and after I would also hit my hips without realizing it. The kitchen made me anxious because it was often loud, chaotic, and housed what I was slowly beginning to believe was the most dangerous thing of all—food.

My poor body which was just trying to develop the way God intended it to, was bruised, burned, and relentlessly getting beat up all the time. It became somewhat of a joke in our family—Hannah hammering her hips back into place— but the truth was that it was anything but funny. In my distorted mind, my hitting, smacking, and beating were slowly but surely, fixing my body to the way I wanted it to be. But like I said earlier, if anything, it was merely a coping response that relieved the anxious feeling that something out of my control was depleting my worth.

6. Set(her) Up to Fail

I know some people who say high school was one of the best times of their lives. Sometimes I think about how much more I would have enjoyed high school if I was the version of myself I am today (don't we all). However, as cliché as it is to say, if I didn't have the growing pains that I had both in middle school and high school, I probably wouldn't be who I am today.

I mentioned before how the things we learn as kids usually get carried with us to some degree into the rest of our lives. While school was getting harder, sports were getting tougher and my body was still changing, high school was when it all started to intensify. All the math and science tutors knew my name by the number of times I went in for help, and I don't want to know how many collective hours I spent interrupting my teacher's lunch hour to ask questions about the lessons we were learning. The harder topics, like math and science, made me very overwhelmed and anxious, not because of the material, but because getting the desired and needed 'A' felt nearly impossible.

As mentioned, I have always been a perfectionist (both for myself and for others who had my respect), and I knew from grammar school the praise I would receive if I brought home an 'A' on a test. My parents would be proud, and I would have the assurance that I was good enough. When it came to school, my parents always told my sister and me to just do our best; but I remember thinking, what if my best wasn't a grade of one hundred percent? I remember taking home tests where I didn't receive an 'A' and being asked if I didn't study enough, or if I didn't understand the concept as well. While those were just innocent questions, in my mind it wasn't assuring that if this was my best, then it was good enough.

I already felt like a failure for not getting a perfect score, so to be recommended to do something different for the next one caused me to believe my worth was only as good enough as my performance was. Class performance wasn't the only factor that I allowed to determine my worth. Even my favorite subjects like Literature and History didn't accept me into the advanced

placement classes. I was never a great test taker, so due to my poor standardized test scores, I was always placed in the non-advanced classes.

The concept of standardized testing could be a book in itself, but the point is, it's a system that does much more than attempt to measure intelligence. It also provides an excuse for other kids (including yourself) to hand out labels to everyone. Unfortunately, I never tested well on those yearly exams. The time of year even made me anxious because of how degrading, discouraging, and devaluing they were. Since I didn't test into the advanced classes of even my favorite subjects, I was placed in what the student body referred to as "the dumb class." Yes, you heard that right. My test scores of these standardized tests placed me in "the dumb" math, science, history, and literature classes. While it was just a name and a way to identify yourself as being in the accelerated class or not, I let it identify me, and I went through my entire high school career believing I wasn't smart.

This is to anyone who is a teacher and is reading this. I don't have very many outstanding memories from high school, but this will always be one of them. My sophomore year, we were about to leave for Christmas break and my literature teacher pulled me aside and asked, "Hannah, why are you in this class?" After reading my papers for a semester, she wanted to know why I wasn't in the advanced class. I told her it was because I never tested well and therefore have always been placed in the non-accelerated classes.

She insisted that I didn't belong in her class and asked if she could place me in the accelerated class after Christmas. I was shocked, and a little scared, but I ultimately agreed. I remember it was quite an adjustment in terms of what we were reading and what kind of papers we were writing, but that teacher did more for me than I think she'll ever realize. Not only was I given the opportunity to be challenged in a subject that I loved (a subject that only God knew would become my career someday), but she also contradicted the lie in my mind that I wasn't

smart. She demonstrated an academic belief and confidence in me that I had not felt in a long time.

Like most high school students, mine also consisted of playing for one of the school's athletic teams. For four years, I spent every autumn afternoon and evening practicing or playing against another school in volleyball. I enjoyed the sport and was proud to represent my school, but the varying levels of pressure encouraged and resurfaced the underlying belief that my worth was only as good as my performance.

As the team's setter, I spent most of the time on the court for the duration of the game, and it was my responsibility to call the plays, read the other team's court, know every play number, know how every hitter liked her set, and redeem any bad pass to me and turn it into a scoring opportunity—no excuses. It did not matter if the ball was right to me, or twenty feet away from me, I needed to make sure I got to it and set it to a hitter in a way that allowed them to win a point for us. If the hitter hit the ball into the net or out of bounds, most of the time, it was my fault. I either set it wrong, or to the wrong person, the set was too low, or too high, so eventually, regardless of what happened I just started apologizing for every missed play. It just felt easier.

I figured if I was going to get spoken to by the coach or blamed for the play either way, I might as well just take the blame for it up front and carry the burden of missing the point so the hitters didn't get in their own heads for losing the point. While this is generally always the expectation for athletes, I felt fixated on the pressure that came from the lack of grace.

Just like in softball (and anything else) I wanted to play perfectly— but not just for me. There was always an intense amount of pressure going into every game that I needed to set every ball perfectly to my teammates who excluded me off of the court, to my coach(es) who expected flawless playing from me and had “punishments” ready for practice if I didn't measure up, and to my parents who would question me on what happened if I didn't play to what they believed was my fullest potential.

I wonder if other high school athletes could resonate, sometimes the worst part about playing a sport in high school was the ride home. After having been at school since seven-thirty that morning, by seven-thirty at night, I was tired, usually felt pretty bad about myself, knew I had multiple hours' worth of homework ahead, and so the last thing I wanted to be asked was why I set her instead of her, what I was thinking during that one specific play, or why one of the players plays the game a certain way.

I cried many tears in my room after those games, and usually, the only strength I had to finish my homework and do it all the next day came from the false hope that maybe I could be good enough tomorrow. However, a high schooler's worth is found in much more than just her athletic and academic performance. As a sixteen-year-old girl, my body which I had hated since middle school was still growing and (I believed) slowly but steadily depreciating my worth as well. My performance in school rarely felt good enough, my performance on the volleyball court rarely felt good enough, and my growing body that I hated seeing in a tight volleyball uniform flushed any hope of being good enough down the drain.

I was not the only one who experienced body image issues in high school, most girls do, but at the same time I didn't know anyone who was obsessing about the thought of not having their ten-year-old body anymore either. I remember being in volleyball practice one afternoon when a girl was doing squats while the coach was running us through the drills.

She stopped and asked the girl what she was doing and she said, "I'm trying to get my butt ready for homecoming." Let's just say we were both doing squats but for very different reasons. While some girls couldn't wait to have the desired woman's body, I woke up every day feeling a little less worthy than the previous. As much as I tried to be perfect in school, in sports, and in my body, I knew I fell short of perfection in all of it every single day.

7. The End of Happy Meals

If you're a woman, you know the pressures for perfect physical appearance goes beyond just your body. My sister and I weren't born with the genetics of having perfect skin. You know those girls who could eat fast food all the time, all the candy they wanted, rarely wash their face and still look like they could be in an Olay commercial? Yeah, that was not us, and that was another thing that brought tears to both me and my grandma's eyes.

When I was in high school, my face was covered in imperfections. If it wasn't a pimple, it was a scab from one, or a cold sore from stress (sometimes all the above). I knew my face wasn't the most desirable thing to look at, nor when I poorly tried to cover it up with makeup powder and a cotton swab, so it didn't help when two influential people in my life pointed at and touched my imperfections while asking, "Did you eat too much sugar? Did you eat dairy? Are you stressed? Did you pick at it? You know it's going to scar. The skin is a portal to the stomach, so anything you eat will show up on your face."

Apparently, someone with influence once said that dairy and sugar produce pimples (but only on the faces of those less fortunate). In an attempt to clear up my skin so that it wouldn't get pointed at all the time, I permanently cut out milk, cheese, cream, and basically all dairy products from my diet in one day during my sophomore year of high school. I remember also putting a piece of paper on the mirror so I couldn't see my face when I got ready for school. If I couldn't see my face, then I wasn't going to be tempted to aggravate it or feel down because of it. The only time I removed the piece of paper was when I attempted to cover up any imperfections with makeup. Again, pimples, scabs, and cold sores are apparently not accepted in society and are deemed to be covered up. So essentially, no matter what or where it is, anything short of perfect is required to be covered up.

In my sophomore year of high school, I took a physical education class that was about weightlifting. It was in the fall so I was both playing volleyball and weight training every day from

August through December. I enjoyed the slow and focused process of lifting weights and feeling strong. In January, the new semester started and I had to take a health class instead of physical education (public schools policy in Illinois), and since volleyball ended, I played in the pit orchestra for the musical instead.

My physical activity therefore scaled back about eighty percent. As a typical teenage girl, with body image issues, I made a comment to my parents about how I felt fat and that I hated my legs and hips. Even though it would not have made a difference, I was hoping to hear something along the lines that I was not fat and that my legs were fine. Instead, I remember being told that I just wasn't as toned as I used to be, and that felt like the beginning of the end.

The constant narrative in my mind was that I am expected to be (in every way) flawless. There was no room for humanity, or enjoyment, and if it gives you a zit or increases your BMI, you do not engage with it. Hearing that I wasn't toned translated in my mind as "you're right, you're fat" and I needed to fix it. It felt like a snowball rolling down a hill getting bigger and bigger as I was desperately trying to find validation from people and performance and I was coming up short every time.

In the same year, my body was stressed and growing and becoming more and more aware of food and its consequences. The concept of nutrition was completely foreign, so my understanding of it was that good foods were the ones that didn't cause imperfection (like vegetables and fruit), and bad foods were what did the opposite. Where did I gain this information? It was picked up from unsolicited websites, influencers, comments from other people, you know, nothing official or worth listening to.

One of these cornerstone comments was that I was eating too many granola bars. When I asked why I couldn't eat three a day, it was because granola bars contain a lot of carbs and sugar. "Sugar turns to carbohydrates, and too many carbohydrates make you bigger," and since I was unhappy with my body then I figured it would be in my best interest to listen. It was six years

before I ate another granola bar. In this fragile and forming time of life, the moment a negative comment was made about a certain food, it was gone from my palette.

I remember asking my mom what carbohydrates were and what examples of foods they were. She said they were things like pasta, donuts, cookies, things with bread-like consistency. My grandpa, who came to our house every Sunday until he no longer could, used to treat us to a cheese pizza from our favorite Italian restaurant in town because it was my sister and my favorite thing to eat. I loved it, until I learned that both dairy and carbs threatened my purpose and worth as a woman. As much as I wanted to eat my favorite meal with my grandpa, I decided that the consequences weren't worth it. *Sorry grandpa, but pretty girls don't eat pizza.*

Deciding all at once what foods were good and what foods were bad, I remember feeling overwhelmed and that there were more bad foods than good. A question that was always in my mind was, if I couldn't eat dairy to have perfect skin, or carbohydrates to have a perfect body, but also didn't have time to weight lift every day, what was I supposed to eat and do?

About the comment regarding my body being less toned, I was told that if I didn't like my body, there were exercises that I could do in my room at home. Squats, lunges, sit-ups, leg lifts—things that didn't require weights or a gym but would make me feel better about my body. It taught me that I had the power to fix what I didn't like.

The concept of loving your body the way it was and letting it grow into the healthy version God made it to be, wasn't a thing. Or, it was a thing, eventually, but by then it was too late. So, I started forming a habit that fulfilled not only the need to fix my body and worth but also any other desire to fix what was anxiously out of my control. Every night I started exercising in my room... and never stopped.

8. The Reversed Freshmen Fifteen

I was anxious and excited to go to college. I was excited about the new chapter of life and going to a place where no one knew me or had presumptions about me, but I was horrified of two things— not being able to keep up with school, and “the freshman fifteen.” If you’re unfamiliar with the term, freshman fifteen is a stereotypical occurrence for freshmen who go away to college and gain fifteen pounds.

Some say it’s from alcohol, others say it’s from the bottomless amounts of food in the dining hall. In my irrationally thinking mind, I was terrified of suddenly gaining fifteen pounds with no explanation. Without thinking any further about it, like what that would mean about me, I had the same mentality I did about throwing up at school, “I just couldn’t let that happen to me.”

I went to college three hours away from where I grew up. Moving to college was truly the first time I was ever away from home. Unlike my sister, I was never interested in the idea of sleepovers, sleepaway camps, etc. I thought they sounded exhausting and like an introvert’s biggest nightmare. All that to say, college was quite the shock. Saying goodbye to my family as they drove away is a core memory I couldn’t forget if I tried.

My school had 4,000 students at it, and I knew only one girl who was older than me. As hard as it was to adjust in the beginning, that’s what I wanted though. I liked the idea of going to a school where no one knew me, no one had any pre-determined assumptions of me, and I liked that it felt like a second beginning. I am forever grateful to my parents for giving me this opportunity because truly, the following four years changed my life.

The first semester felt isolating—not lonely—but isolating. My roommate was a random student I got paired with and we were just two very different people. I told her right away that every night I did exercises on the floor but to ignore me because “it was just my weird quirk.” She said she hated people and could not have cared less what I was doing or not doing on the floor. So, my relationship with Jesus grew in an exceptional way that it never had before. I was talking to

Him all day every day and through that, I developed a whole new personal relationship with Him. It reminded me of the first time I learned what a personal relationship with Jesus was like. It was like I was in third grade again when I met with Him nearly every day in the school bathroom to fight off Mr. Fear's panic attacks.

I discovered that my favorite way to talk to him was through writing. So, every night for the first thirty days, I essentially wrote a letter to Jesus about the friends I was making, the classes I was taking, and how every night got a little easier being away from my family. I thought it would be a fun thing to look back on if I recorded my first thirty days of college. It's encouraging to see the difference in confidence from day one to day thirty.

I wrote about my extremely punctual routine (like arriving to class half an hour early), my thoughts about the overstimulating dining hall, and any new discoveries or thoughts I had on a daily basis. One of my earliest memories of college is when a girl on my floor, one week into school, said that her friend cut out bagels from her diet and lost fifteen pounds in two months. Those dining hall bagels were good while they lasted (one week) because I never ate one again. On day twelve of my thirty straight days of journaling, I casually wrote in between a mix of random thoughts, "Also, I'm worried I might have an eating disorder, Jesus please protect me," but I didn't allow myself to think any more of it.

College, to me, felt like a bizarre dystopian universe that encouraged students to pray their problems away, utilize the fitness center to stay "healthy," and do whatever it takes to find your spouse in the next four years— starting now. My mom married my dad when she was in her mid-thirties, so I never truly understood the sheer panic I observed other girls have regarding that. I enjoyed college, I loved learning, but I hated the culture that it encouraged.

In terms of staying "healthy" that gym could not have been used for more contradictory purposes. When I started college, I went to the gym a couple times a week, but by the end of year

two, I was in there twice a day. When people asked why I went so much, I told them it was to avoid the freshman fifteen, and nobody (including myself) thought too much of it.

At the start of college, I weighed 125 pounds. By the end of my sophomore year, I was 115 pounds. In two years, I found something wrong with and cut out every main food group except fruits, vegetables and the occasional chicken strip (grilled, not fried). What started as going to the gym twice a week, turned into two hours in the gym every day, while still abiding by the advice I got in high school to exercise in my room every night. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was exercising when I was stressed, anxious, before bed (to make sure I burned all necessary food off), after meals (eating was stressful), after class, before a test, before an intramural game, before and after a social outings, and anytime I felt like I wasn't good enough... Yet to me, it wasn't anything to be concerned about, it was just what I did.

My family always told me how great I looked, and my new friends told me how much they wished they had a body like mine. I remember being in Target with a group of friends when someone said I was the only one with a body worth wearing a swimsuit. Originally, I loved getting reassuring comments about my physical appearance since I had not received them since I was a little kid. However, these comments taught me that not only did I have to workout to be (physically) enough, I also needed to make sure I continued to exercise in order to sustain and remain enough.

By the middle of college, my breakfast was black coffee, lunch was vegetables rolled up in a spinach wrap, and dinner was five apples with carrots and peanut butter. The idea of dessert made me panic and want to work out (even though I didn't eat it). My friends would say "It's just a cookie, it's not going to do anything to you," and while I knew that I couldn't convince my brain of that.

By the time I was twenty years old, I had figured out that if I only ate "safe" foods, then I wouldn't have to use energy to combat and eventually give into the lies that I needed to exercise a

little extra because I ate something that my brain deemed as harmful. This of course made film sets (I studied film in undergrad) and social gatherings interesting because, how do you tell someone at 6 pm (dinnertime) that you don't want a piece of pizza? Pizza was the cheapest thing that fed a lot of people, so any film set I went to provided pizza for the cast and crew. God bless the boy who randomly brought a bag of apples to a film set because thanks to him, I didn't go hungry that night.

In the spring of 2018, I was waking up in the middle of the night in a pure panic that I was gaining weight while I was sleeping. I remember reluctantly and silently, as to not wake up my roommate, getting out of bed and doing sit ups and squats in the dark until I couldn't do one more. Hot tears poured down my face, and I laid on the hardwood floor of the dorm internally screaming "God help me."

That was the point when I knew I was in trouble. I knew what I was doing to myself was not sustainable, but I also knew that for some reason I couldn't stop. It was so ingrained into my life and became such a routine that if I didn't exercise in the gym, in my room, and after every meal then my brain would keep me from being okay. It was an addiction. If I couldn't exercise when I felt like I needed to, anxiety would run so high I wouldn't be able to function until I gave my mind the relief that it desperately needed. I knew it was bad, but to me, it was just doing what I needed to do to survive. I was a student with a lot of responsibilities, so in my mind I was just doing what I needed to do to get through and do my job well.

The mentality of doing what I needed to do to survive was not a new concept. It took me back to the days when I played softball and wore two shirts under my uniform because I was so uncomfortable with my changing body. While my parents always gave me a hard time about it (especially since softball season is usually very hot), the year we made it to the championship, my mom told me she wasn't going to tell me not to wear three shirts because this game was important

to my dad and our team. She told me I just needed to do whatever I needed to do so that I was one-hundred percent focused on the game. We won.

Fast-forward to the fall of 2018, I was walking three miles to and from school everyday, on top of taking a strength and conditioning physical edition class, plus further exercise in the gym if I felt I needed it, and don't forget the at-home workout routine that I carried with me since high school. I wouldn't touch bread or anything made from it, and essentially lived off of rice, beans, apples, peanut butter and coffee. I basically lost my menstrual cycle, I was freezing all of the time—even on warmer days, my hair was falling out, I was exhausted all the time, I felt like a shell of a human being, and believed there was no way out.

I remember lying in bed one night, feeling like my heart was going to beat out of my chest, and wondering if the two apples and peanut butter I ate for dinner that day would sustain me through the night. I never had a death wish, but I also wasn't afraid it. I knew I was stuck, and that the situation I had gotten myself into was with a beast bigger than myself. I had peace in knowing that if God quietly took me home in the middle of the night, I would go to a place where I would never be a slave to food and exercise again.

Obviously, He didn't, and I believe it's because He called me to write about it instead. While I was putting my body through so much that year, I actually have fond memories walking to school. I didn't have headphones, nor enough music to listen to, so it was just me and Jesus having a conversation all the way there and all the way back. Rain, snow, sunshine, hot or cold, my Savior and friend walked me to school with His arm around me everyday.

By the time winter came, I remember looking in the mirror one day and noticing the ridges on my ribs. Shortly after that, I was talking to a soulmate-of-a-friend about how overwhelmed I was and how I wanted to eat nothing but peanut butter. Somehow that triggered a miraculous signal to her that something was very wrong. She skipped her class to listen and talk with me, and she told me I needed to talk to someone about it. I cried because that was the first time in four years

that I told someone about the weird quirks I had that I thought would go away on their own, but were in fact getting worse and I was afraid.

Unfortunately, I refused to talk to someone at that time because I was convinced I could defeat this on my own. I told her about “how I defeated the devil when I was nine, and I could do it again.” I think one of the biggest lies the enemy will convince our minds of when it comes to this, is that our condition “is not that serious.” We’ll believe we’re okay because we don’t “look anorexic,” we’re still functioning, we’re still eating, but you don’t have to be not eating to be starving, restricting, or in trouble.

One week later, after a heavy snowfall, I shoveled the double driveway of our college house by myself, went to bed that night without eating anything, skipped breakfast the next morning, walked the mile to school, got to my weight-lifting class, squatted 250 pounds, and everything went dark. That was the tipping point when my body just couldn’t take the abuse I was doing to it anymore.

We had just found our maximum weight we could squat when our professor wanted everyone to circle up so he could read a devotion. I remember feeling like something was wrong and even wondered if I was going to throw up. As much as I wanted to shout, “someone help me!” I didn’t want to interrupt the devotion, so I gripped the pole behind me until my hearing and eyesight quit.

A classmate told me I was unconscious for about five minutes, and they had to pry my hands off of the pole I was gripping. They sat me down, I didn’t wake up, so they laid me on the ground and lifted my feet to pour the blood back into my head. I did not know any of this—one minute, I was gripping the weight rack behind me to not interrupt class, and the next I was on the ground with paramedics and classmates around me.

I was taken to the emergency room where they asked me questions and ran standard tests. They said it was syncope (passing out for an unexplainable reason), but while I waited in that room

for the results to come back, I felt like God had taken me there to force me to admit that I had a problem bigger than myself. But what I, and everyone else needs to understand from this story, is that the problem didn't start the moment everything went dark. The problem started four years before that, when I started developing restricting habits and seeing certain foods as a bad and harmful thing.

You don't need to wait until you're in the emergency room to get help, you need to get help the moment you feel like eating (or not) is not entirely in your control. When this condition takes you to the hospital, that indicates you have a problem much deeper than you think. You can't do this on your own, you need to accept help, and more importantly you need to believe you are worthy of accepting help— because you are.

As an older sister, I have always felt that embedded protective characteristic in me. Even though there were more times when my younger sister was standing up for me, I was always very protective over her. I knew she compared herself to me, and that other people compared us too, but this was one thing that I was especially very protective over her about. Despite not officially being diagnosed at this point, I knew there was something seriously wrong and that I was not the normal weight of a five foot, four inches tall twenty-one year old woman.

When people told me in college how “great” I looked and how they wished they could be as thin as me, it stopped making me feel good because I knew for one it was unhealthy, and confusing to want to remain an unhealthy weight as that was what was praised. But it was also disheartening because I was putting my body through great trauma to be the size that most people wanted to be, and while some thought it was a pathway to success, I feared it was only leading to death. I remember during spring break I came home for the week and my sister came to the train station to pick me up. While we walked home, I told her I had something very serious to talk to her about.

I told her that I knew she compared herself to me in most things, and as much as I didn't want her to compare herself to me in anything, I especially didn't want her comparing herself to my size. I told her that I didn't know what was wrong, but that I knew I was probably sick and far from a healthy weight. I didn't want her to be worried about me, but I especially wanted her to love the body that she had and not compare her healthy body to my unhealthy one— even though it was smaller. She was only seventeen, but handled it with such maturity and grace, and I'm grateful that we are able to speak openly about it to this day. I think we both knew at the time that whatever it was, it was something that I would probably struggle with for most of my life.

Unfortunately, it took another year and ten months before I waved the white flag and accepted help. For just under two years, I lived in a delusional state of mind that while I was continuing to do the same things (only more discrete and at least being mindful of what I was doing), I believed it was getting better. I was proud of my “clean eating” and regimented exercise routine. I genuinely believed I was being healthy. When I saw my mom toward the end of college I remember asking, “Mom, don't I look good?” to which she said, “Yes, but I don't want you getting any smaller.”

I felt proud of my “progress” and my disappearing hips and inner thighs, but I was confused by her reaction. I was expecting her to be prouder of me.

In a strange way, I felt like I needed to get smaller if I wanted to be seen. If I wanted the audible confirmation that I was enough, I needed to be small. When I felt like my body was admirable on the outside, I was scared and felt like I was slowly fading away on the inside. I wanted someone to say what I was afraid of in my head. I wanted someone to notice that I was getting smaller but tell me to stop getting smaller.

Nothing was stopping me from trying to get smaller because I was receiving nothing but praise for my tiny figure, so I was equally afraid and convinced that it was all in my head. But I wanted to feel like someone saw, noticed, and cared that something was clearly wrong with me,

and the only way to do that was to continue getting smaller and smaller. My mouth surely wasn't going to scream "I'm sick!" so my body needed to.

9. Call It What It Is

Eating disorders are messy, uncomfortable, and complicated. No one ever pulled me aside and told me their concern about my habits and size, and there was a time when I felt like I resented even my parents and my closest friends for not doing so. While I felt like I was wasting away in front of their eyes, my condition felt like a don't ask, don't tell situation.

I found out later that some friends noticed something seemed wrong with my eating habits, but they never did anything about it for fear I would get mad at them. Between my first visit to the emergency room and the end of my senior year of college, I only told three friends what I was struggling with and all three of them strongly suggested I get help.

I was visiting my family in my hometown for Christmas and New Year's six months after graduating college, and I was getting a haircut in the morning before getting on a plane to go back to home. I was in a harder season with my eating disorder and thought if I skipped breakfast then my legs wouldn't feel so uncomfortable sitting in the chair for an hour—if you know, you know.

The hairdresser was working on my hair when the same familiar feeling from over a year ago started overcoming me. I wondered if I was going to get sick, but the potential of passing out never crossed my mind. I asked to stand outside and about a minute later I lost consciousness, hit my head on the wall and fell to the ground. The receptionist ran out and called 9-1-1—about five minutes later an ambulance pulled up and took me away. This was during the height of Covid so my family was not allowed to be with me. The doctor and the nurses ran all the tests they did before, diagnosed me with syncope and had me on my way. When I got home to rest before getting on an airplane, my mom sat next to me and said, “You need help, Hannah.”

One week later, in January of 2021, I started therapy for a condition that I didn't want to give a name to. As a child, my anxiety was named Mr. Fear, and as a young adult, I eventually learned that this was the same thing (the same person) in a different form. When I started therapy, I was surprised at how easy it was to be honest with her about what I was doing to myself, why I

was doing it, and how I perceived the two necessary things for life, food and exercise, to be dangerous.

When we started breaking down the thoughts that I labeled as temporary quirks, I remember wondering how different high school and college would have been if I hadn't normalized the thoughts about sugar leading to panic attacks, and the criticality of exercising after every meal. Would have I lived less in my head? Would have I enjoyed it more? I guess I'll never know.

I remember noticing from the beginning how safe and trustworthy she felt, and it shocked me that within a couple of weeks, I was crying about the thoughts and reasoning that for eight years I suppressed, accepted as routine, and never cried once about. As a kid, I was not very good at letting myself think and question things that didn't make sense. I was told Santa Claus was real, so I didn't allow myself to think too much into it until I was way too old. I never questioned why women felt like they had to cover up imperfections on their faces, why gray hair felt like a curse, or why any signs of fat needed to be immediately and drastically addressed. I accepted things for how they were presented. So when my mind slowly started labeling some foods as bad, I just accepted what I should and shouldn't eat them. God had to literally stop my life (twice) and force me to sit with an IV to wonder, "Why am I doing this?"

One of the earliest things I told my therapist, and my few friends who knew, was that I did not want to be diagnosed with anything. Whether it was anxiety, an eating disorder, or a mix of both, I did not want to put a name to it. In my mind, giving the condition a name gave it even more power than it already had (even though not giving it a name didn't necessarily decrease its power).

I didn't want the word or phrase and all of the associations and assumptions that came with it to be attached to my name. Similarly to how doctors have their name and then M.D. or PhD added to the end of their name, I didn't want Hannah Kuhn, (mental disorder) to be a part of my name— or at least that's how I originally saw it. I had already lived with that condition for so long

that it felt like part of my identity; I just didn't want other people to know that. There was even a moment when I dreamt about what it would be like to eat without worry, exercise without shame, and live without my eating disorder impacting how I perceived almost everything, and I was scared. As sick as it sounds, I genuinely wondered, if I didn't have an eating disorder, who would I be?

The unnamed disease already had enough power over me that I was horrified by the concept of it becoming more officially part of my identity for everyone else to know. If it was an eating disorder I was battling, the last thing I wanted was for people to find out I was associated with it and then make up their determinations and assumptions about what it meant. Whether it's our shortened attention spans, pride, or selfish sinful nature, people don't want to take the time to get to know someone or something fully. That takes effort, it takes time, it takes sacrifice, and it takes utilizing one of the senses that a lot of humanity does not like to practice: listening. It's so much easier to assume "x" when all you've heard is a, b, and c.

We like to believe we're experts and have solutions for everything even though we've only read the headlines of most things. With people, we like to believe we know someone because we see the shell that everyone else sees— their job, their occupation, their personality, their geographical location— but these external things only make up, in my opinion, about two percent of a person. Who a person is cannot be found on the outside. To really know someone, not just who they are but why they are who they are, takes patience, loyalty, commitment, humility, trust, character, and time. You can only truly know someone if they invite you to. My parents have been married for twenty-eight years, and my mom is still learning new things about my dad all the time.

Eating disorders are one of the most misunderstood and unknown mental disorders to exist. Society and Hollywood sometimes have it painted as a glamorous, self-absorbed disease when it couldn't be further from the truth. I didn't want people to know I had an eating disorder because I didn't want them to treat or perceive me differently. I didn't want them to look at me as weak or

less than, and I didn't want people to exclude me from things for fear it would be triggering or too hard for me to handle.

For example, I play a lot of volleyball, and I didn't want to be excluded on a hot day because others were too nervous it would be harmful to me. Or at friend gatherings where there's Little Cesar's pizza and breadsticks because it's the cheapest thing that will feed a lot of people. I didn't want to be excluded from that just because my friends knew I probably wouldn't eat it. The disease caused enough problems before people knew why I wasn't eating the pizza, I didn't want others to feel responsible for helping or catering to my condition.

Everyone knows that it's hurtful to feel seen as weak, coddled, or even excluded because of something you can't help but it makes others uncomfortable. When I heard comments like, "Oh, Hannah won't eat that," or "Well we can't go there because there's no way she would eat that," it made my burden feel like other people's problem, and that my life and the baggage I carried with me was an inconvenience on the lives of people who were supposedly my friends.

After months of therapy, prayer, and learning about the disease, a good friend helped me realize that a sickness doesn't define who you are. While you may have it, it isn't necessarily a part of you, it's just something you're dealing with. It's like carrying a heavy backpack every day. For an unbalanced chemical reason, people with eating disorders must carry their backpacks around with them everywhere, but that doesn't mean that their backpack is a part of who they are.

I learned that perhaps the only way to start healing from an eating disorder was to call it out of the darkness and put a name to it. I've lived almost more of my life with an eating disorder than without it, and it took a long time to accept that while I have been officially diagnosed with anorexia-nervosa, it doesn't define me, it's just a part of my story. My identity is still the same whether I suffer from an eating disorder or not.

10. It's Not About Food

Part of bringing a disorder out of the dark involves putting it under a microscope and dissecting everything there is to know about it. For years I did not believe that my body was truly in danger because while I was skinny, my body didn't look like the malnourished bodies we've seen in medical and history books.

I also felt like to be considered in danger, I needed to stop eating altogether—and it wasn't like I wasn't eating at all. But once I started learning about eating disorders, the brain, and the human body, I realized you don't have to be skin and bones and stop eating altogether for your heart to be overworked and stop beating at a given moment.

Eating disorders don't look like cutting all food overnight, it's a slow and gradual process of eating less and less overtime. When you give your body time to learn how to live with less nutrition, it will adapt, but it also may produce damage that can't be undone. Whether it takes a couple of years or ten, if you continue to eat less and less, at some point your body will use up all of the energy it has stored for emergencies, and it won't be able to sustain itself anymore.

A couple months into therapy I started watching videos of families talking about their children whose hearts just couldn't sustain their bodies anymore using the little nutrition it was given. I remember realizing that even sleeping using calories and energy to stay alive through the night, so how much more does it need to work, study, play sports, and simply live during the day?

Once I accepted I had an eating disorder that I couldn't overcome on my own, I wanted to know everything there was to know about it, where it came from, what was neurologically happening in my mind, why couldn't I get rid of it on my own, how do I get rid of it, what things made it worse, why were some days harder than others, how was it psychologically and physically impacting me, and most importantly where was my God in all of this?

I became a scholar of the disorder, reading and watching every research resource I could find. I spent almost a year studying the disease before I started correlating my findings with my

own life and experience. My purpose for writing this is not to provide more solutions that aren't absolute, patients and their families aren't interested in more non-guaranteed advice anyways. My purpose is to provide what I feel so many of these resources lack-- hope.

Amidst the research that ended with the statement that there is no absolute cure, I still found hope, and it didn't come from any scientific facts. There is hope that while someone with an eating disorder may never fully recover (myself included) there is joy-- there is joy in the daily suffering.

My goal was to be able to raise my hands to heaven, even on the worst days when I couldn't get myself to eat more than an apple and peanut butter, and joyfully whisper that God is good. He is good because He doesn't make mistakes, He created me perfectly and purposefully, He is all-knowing, He is all-powerful, He wrote my story, He is in control, He is for me, He made me complete, and because of Him, I am enough. What the devil intended for harm, God used (and continues to use) for my good. My eating disorder has taken many things from me, but without it, and without the process of healing and understanding it, I would have never learned the truth that I spent my whole life trying to achieve-- that, not by work or validation from other people, I am enough.

As beautiful and victorious as the above statement sounds, it took many, many years to come to this realization, and while I eventually did, I need to daily remind myself of this truth. The road to understanding who God is and who I am to Him amid this monster involved big victories, small victories, relapses, and failures and I would have never gotten to know God so personally if I left knowing the science of eating disorders out. Many of the people and faith-based resources I read concerning eating disorders reminded me about the power of God and suggested that if I just prayed and waited patiently enough, then I would be free-- I think it's fair to say these statements did more harm than good.

It encourages a behavior and mentality that if you pray just a little more, and try just a little harder to please God, then He will do what you ask Him. Life and God do not work like that. We

cannot put God in a box. Without the complex understanding of the brain and how it's affected by this disorder, the verses that these resources held carried no weight. In my own life, I needed to learn the anatomy, neurology, psychology, and biology of the body, the brain, eating disorders, and myself.

Without this research, nothing is pointing to the brilliant master and creator of every intricate detail about the human body and brain. When I started therapy and she asked why I was exercising every night before bed, I couldn't give a clear answer other than I felt like I had to. Why? Because I ate food. Why did I have to burn it off? So that I wouldn't gain weight. Why couldn't I gain weight? I didn't know.

If you search the internet for "What are eating disorders?" you will get a lot of statistics and many articles on what the medical field has determined about eating disorders. If you missed it earlier, did you know that, according to the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, 28.8 million Americans will have an eating disorder in their lifetime? Or that less than 6% of people with eating disorders are medically diagnosed as "underweight"? Nearly 26% of people dealing with eating disorders attempt suicide, and it is currently amongst the deadliest mental illnesses.¹

For most of society right now, when the term eating disorder comes up, people picture a woman who eats salads and works out a ton because she wants to be skinny. They don't consider the fatality or internal complexities of it. A person with an eating disorder may think he or she wants to be skinny, but that's not really why she is doing what she's doing. I wanted to be thin because I felt like I had to be, and yet even when I got to the point of being underweight, it still wasn't enough.

I found that most of the definitions you will find on eating disorders talk about how it is a fatal illness associated with severe disturbances in people's eating behaviors. While this is true, it

does not provide more of an explanation than what we already generally know. This definition makes the disease sound like it's about food, and once again it's not.

The definition that I found, and feel, is the most precise and well-rounded is from the John Hopkins Medicine website. "Eating disorders are a behavioral condition in which normal eating behavior becomes disruptive and rewarded in an unhelpful way. Much the way alcoholism and other addictions disrupt normal function. These rewards look like binge eating and vomiting, or severe weight loss. These behaviors become rewarding, they become habitual, and they are difficult to interrupt."²

When I discovered this definition, I remember experiencing a feeling that I had not experienced with my eating disorder before. I felt understood, and known, and that everything I thought was just a weird quirk happening inside my head finally had a reason and explanation for it. I've thought before that if there was one thing I wish people knew about eating disorders, it's that it impacts every single thing in a person's life, not just mealtime, and this explanation described that perfectly.

I wasn't physically beating myself up in high school because of the sandwich I ate at lunchtime. I wasn't starving, overexercising, and bruising myself because of test scores, mean girls, volleyball games, unfortunate incidents at church, my blonde hair darkening, my skin breaking out, rejected job applications, and overstimulating situations because they caused feelings of extreme distress, discomfort (they made me feel inferior, unseen, out of control), and there was only one way I knew how to relieve it. Interestingly enough, none of those examples involved food.

These things I mentioned don't individually create an eating disorder, but they are examples of why once disordered behaviors are embedded in the brain, it is very hard to break the cycle. Why? Because these are the sorts of things that sustain it, and starving and overexercising are the only tactics the brain knows for how to relieve these gripping and paralyzing feelings.

When you attempt to reverse an eating disorder, while knowledge of the brain and disease is helpful, it's equally as critical to identify what things are sustaining the "hamster wheel" thought and harmful behavioral patterns, because those are the things an individual needs to decide if they are to be cut out or conquered.

11. Meet My Friend “E.D.”

The term eating disorder may have a generalized definition, but each individual case is very personal. The things that sustain a person’s eating disorder are personal to them and their life. My disorder didn’t look like my friend’s, even though we were both diagnosed with the same thing.

Therefore, our treatment, while it was from the same therapist, looked very different. Over the last couple of decades, scientists have been able to identify behaviors and categorize eating disorders into specific conditions. For me, it was important to have a general understanding of what the most common eating disorders were before I dove into what each eating disorder neurologically entailed.

Anorexia-Nervosa is usually just referred to as anorexia, and according to Mayo Health Clinic it is “characterized by an abnormally low body weight, an intense fear of gaining weight, and a distorted perception of weight.”³ Someone with anorexia lives in a constant fear of gaining weight. Why is gaining weight so scary? That answer is unique to the person.

In my own life, I was raised in a culture where part of a woman’s worth was determined by her physical appearance. Men determined a woman’s worth so if she wanted to be perceived as good enough, then she needed to be thin and quiet with perfect hair and flawless skin. The underlying message was, that the bigger your body, the smaller your worth. Too many calories, carbohydrates, sugar, and even some meats have the potential to expand your body and put your worth in jeopardy.

Up through college, my generation was surrounded with cultural messages about thinness. Commercials, magazines and billboards are completely consumed with messages on how to lose that stubborn tummy fat, just five more pounds, look your best, feel your best, avoid the freshman fifteen, and curb your sugar craving with this thing that looks like a brownie, it’s called a brownie, but it’s only fifteen calories and has no sugar in it.

As a young girl who already found her worth in the wrong places, adding another thing, like the size of my body, that could threaten or determine my worth triggered neurological signals that I needed to exercise at just the sight of bread, and that thought made itself at home very quickly. In the moment it made perfect sense, but I remember on bad days feeling the need to exercise before a meal just in case my previous meal wasn't burned off completely, or to make room and ensure that the next meal would not affect my weight. Losing a pound was fine but gaining just one meant panic and excessive extra exercise.

Bulimia is, according to Mayo Health Clinic, when someone “may secretly binge large amounts of food and then purge it, trying to get rid of the extra calories in an unhealthy way.”⁴ What makes this disease slightly different from anorexia is that someone with bulimia will eat large amounts of food (as opposed to not eating at all) and then use methods like self-induced vomiting, dietary pills, or laxatives to get rid of the extra calories.

It can be hard to suspect that someone has bulimia because they can maintain a healthy-looking weight for a long time. However, the damage that this disease causes is irreversible. Meaning, that when someone constantly makes themselves throw up, this can permanently deteriorate the lining of the esophagus and stomach. Both things your body needs in order to live.

Orthorexia is a newer and lesser-known category of eating disorders, but according to the National Eating Disorder Association, it's when someone “has an obsession of eating clean or healthy foods.”⁵ Researchers are also finding that this branch of eating disorders may be linked to obsessive-compulsive-disorder. Orthorexia can also be hard to detect because symptoms and behaviors can look like normal encouraged actions by society and health professionals, like eating organic and living a healthy lifestyle. Actions like always checking the nutrition facts and calorie count on the back of foods doesn't necessarily mean someone has orthorexia, but it's a symptom if they do.

Another symptom is completely cutting out entire food groups because they have been labeled bad or unhealthy. This may come from a lack of understanding about nutrition and if caught soon enough, can be reversed with proper education. However, if these behaviors get overlooked and untreated, it could turn into a habitual lifestyle and become harder for the brain to break those habits.

In my own life, part of my journey with eating disorders began with an undiagnosed case of orthorexia. I wanted to be healthy, and in my understanding being healthy meant not eating “bad” foods, exercising, and not gaining weight. When I started telling more friends about my eating disorder, most were surprised and had no idea. They assumed I was just small and wanted to be healthy. Over time, this slowly morphed into anorexia, something not uncommon.

An added element that most people experience in eating disorders is body dysmorphia. The technical definition is a distorted perception of one’s body, but I want to invite you to understand it from a more personal perspective. Body dysmorphia is (usually) physically seeing your body as bigger than it is, and in circumstances that trigger eating disorder behavior, you especially see your body as bigger than it actually is.

I remember talking through this phenomenon with my therapist and feeling fatally overwhelmed by the thought that not only could I not trust my mind (I didn’t have hunger cues and I felt like I needed to work out all of the time), I felt like I also could not trust my eyes for what they saw. Fortunately, I have not had to deal with body dysmorphia very much, but at the peak of it, I was regularly seeing friends who, unintentionally, invited the lies into my head that it did not matter what I said or did, I would never be good enough.

About an hour before, I would anxiously look in the mirror, see my body as twice its size, and cope by skipping dinner and undergoing extreme levels of exercise that left me light-headed and in tears. I exhausted all measures and attempts to try and “fix myself” to feel good enough but

all it did was make me feel better for a moment and leave me mentally and physically discouraged and exhausted.

I wanted to believe that I could overcome this without removing myself from the group. I didn't want to believe that human beings had the power to make me hurt myself, nor did I want to blame them for what I was doing to myself. But despite how many times I tried telling myself that I was good enough, that I had nothing to fix about myself, and that exercising wasn't fixing anything, the habits felt stuck and so did I.

After learning this was like a bad habit, I took a break from learning about eating disorders to learn the psychology of habits. James Clear, the author of *Atomic Habits* said, "Behind every system of actions, are a system of beliefs."⁶

Implementing this information with eating disorders, I discovered that whatever category they fall into, the reason why medical personnel say it's not a choice is because, after enough time, the brain has rewired itself to perform "y" when the input is "x." For me, it was eat a piece of bread, burn it off later. By the time I learned about habits, I didn't realize most of my broken eating habits were considered a habit, because I performed these actions without even thinking about it—as most people with eating disorders do.

Similarly to a habit, if for thirty days the first thing you do when you wake up is drink water, eventually you will perform that action without even thinking. You have programmed your brain so that it knows the first thing it does when it wakes up is drink water. If you miss a day, or don't have a cup of water beside your bed one day, your brain might even feel slightly disoriented because it is out of habit.

With eating disorders, the brain has learned over time that when it's under pressure or extreme distress and discomfort, it finds relief through a behavior that makes it feel like it's regained a sense of control. Unfortunately, it's like ripping a band-aid off of an open wound routinely. While the severe desire to relieve some feeling of turmoil can be simply met by purging,

or over-exercising, this not only damages the body but it also continues to enforce the belief in the brain that this is the only way to resolve those feelings.

When these aggressive feelings arise, I never think about how the solution is doing long-term damage, I'm only thinking about the relief it will provide in the moment. If I'm being honest, it doesn't feel like a choice, it feels like a means of survival. Why do people smoke when there's plenty of research showing what the fatal effects are? We know now that it's an addiction. It's the brain's only solution for releasing feelings of extreme distress. Now if only they could come out with eating disorder patches the way they have nicotine patches.

12. My Mind Palace Has Many Rooms

When you're getting to know a person, it's helpful to also get to know where they came from. These details help you get to know them even more because they provide background as to why they are the way they are, and eating disorders were no different for me. After I learned a lot about eating disorders, I wanted to know more about where they came from in the human body—the most complicated organ we have: the brain.

I wanted to learn about the house that held my eating disorder—my brain. I wanted to know what was physically happening to my it when it felt under attack (like when I had a physical reaction that I could not control at the thought of eating a piece of toast). I was listening to a podcast episode where the guest referred to himself as a brain doctor. Dr. Daniel Amen, founder of Amen Clinics, has developed his practice solely around brain health and understanding the differences in brain types. When I wanted to understand what was psychologically happening in my brain, I took his brain assessment that explained at a high level what kind of brain I had and what the neurological makeup of my brain looked like.

Amen Clinics also provides research on what is neurologically happening inside the brain of anxiety, depression and eating disorders. As someone who has never taken a psychology class, and knew close to nothing about the human brain, I appreciated how they explained what the components of the brain were called and how they helped you function. Learning about my brain and how certain parts of it were impacted by my eating disorder was a major turning point in my quest to understand what was psychologically happening to my brain when my eating disorder was triggered. Dr. Amen's in-depth research found that most eating disorders produce a brain with an, stay with me here, overactive cingulate gyrus, limbic system, and basal ganglia.⁷

By themselves, yes, these words sound like noise, but when you understand their function, it all comes together. If someone has a hardworking anterior cingulate gyrus, this means their thoughts, especially bad thoughts, feel like they get stuck on a loop. Picture a hamster running on

a hamster wheel and not being able to get off no matter how much it wants to— how exhausting. It's like trying to break a bad habit.

One tactic that people try to use when dealing with unwanted thoughts is to try and picture the thought as something that just floats by. Therapists say to acknowledge the thought but refuse to do anything more with that thought beyond acknowledging it. To put it in perspective, when someone has an overactive anterior cingulate gyrus, it feels like acknowledging the very powerful thought to burn calories (for whatever that reason may be) once every thirty seconds.

This is why living with an eating disorder makes simple everyday tasks so difficult sometimes, because if I'm at work, and I come out of an overwhelming meeting, or am preoccupied by something distressing that happened earlier in the day, the burning desire to go somewhere and exercise to relieve the distress does not go away easily on its own. It's captivating, it prevents any other thoughts or thoughts of logic from processing through, and essentially puts my mind in a choke hold until it receives the relief that it needs.

My therapist has tried to help me with a mental exercise that looks like riding a wave. Supposedly, the mind can only be in such a high state of distress for so long, so if you can force yourself to just "ride the wave of the thought" eventually the feelings of distress will go away.

An overactive limbic system is what makes a person feel emotions very deeply. I've thought about how this is such a beautiful blessing and curse in my own life because when I'm happy, I am *very* happy. However, that means when I'm sad, I am *very* sad, or scared, or frustrated, etc. Having emotions is what makes us human, so I suppose if they're inevitable, I would rather experience them with great intensity.

I will say though, that feeling sad or discouraged (inferior or that I don't belong) produces a heavy feeling in my lungs that I wouldn't wish anyone to experience. Whether it was feeling like a failure on the court, in the classroom, or in the mirror, I'm surprised the weight didn't completely prevent me from moving. This correlates to the anterior cingulate gyrus because when I (or anyone

with a similar eating disorder) experience feelings of discomfort or distress, it's not a "well this is uncomfortable" feeling, it's a "this is intolerable and I will do *anything* to relieve this to be able to function again" kind of feeling.

It's always been comical to me when people used to say, "Just eat the piece of pizza, nothing will happen to you." If only it were that simple. Of course, I know one piece of pizza is not going to add twenty pounds to my body (it probably won't even add one pound— but also if it did... So what? Why do we care so much about our and each other's weight anyway?), but it's not my body I'm worried about, it's my mind. If one delicious piece of pizza is going to send me to exercise in my friend's bathroom to relieve feelings of such intense distress that it's not even worth trying to use energy to fight back, then no, it's not worth trying to eat the piece of pizza. I'm tired enough as is from this disorder, so forgive me if some days I'm just not in the mood to poke the beast or try my luck.

Lastly, what I learned about a highly active basal ganglia is that it makes a person extremely motivated. Similarly to the consequences of an overactive limbic system, this comes with benefits and barriers. If we weren't motivated, we would never be able to do the things we have to do or set our mind to. Good luck achieving a goal you set for yourself if you're not motivated. We graduate college, start jobs, open businesses, and learn new languages because of motivation, and when you're extremely motivated you accomplish these things very quickly without letting anything get in your way.

When I was in high school and college, my motivation to be perfect (at everything) was what forced me to do *whatever it took*, to achieve perfection. I got tutors for the classes I didn't understand, I stayed up late and lost sleep to finish assignments that weren't due for another three weeks, and I exercised while also restricting foods that I believed would prevent me and my body from being "perfect."

I was so motivated by perfection, that I was willing to do any healthy or unhealthy thing it took to achieve it. Funny enough, when I did achieve what I believed was a “perfect body” by my junior year of college (the same year I needed medical attention for the first time), I remember thinking “How can I, after six years, finally have the body that I strived and sacrificed for and still feel so unhappy and dead on the inside?” I was so motivated to achieve what I wanted, that when I finally did, the process nearly killed me.

13. Whose Fault Is It Anyway?

While research continues to be done about this disorder, doctors and scientists still don't know exactly what causes an eating disorder. In their research of finding commonalities of where eating disorders come from, they have found that "there are genetics, personality traits, environmental/societal factors, and trauma involved"⁸ along with the fact that eating disorders are rarely ever diagnosed on their own (they are usually accompanied by another mental disorder). The distressing feelings that eating disorders (like starving, purging, or extreme exercise) are used to subside those feelings are usually paired with other psychological conditions like anxiety, depression, OCD, or addiction.

As mentioned before, the things that cause an eating disorder are rarely the things that sustain one. It's a slow process, but you can picture it like a boulder rolling down a hill. A traumatic event may initially push the boulder (introduce the thoughts and behavior of an eating disorder), but whatever initially pushed the boulder is not what is also keeping it rolling down the hill (sustaining the eating disorder).

Social media didn't introduce my eating disorder, but it was one of the many factors that sustained it. Through mindless scrolling, I wasn't noticing the vacations people were on or the milestones they were sharing, I was noticing their bodies—their more than likely face-tuned bodies. Their flat stomachs, thin legs, and lean arms. It took too long before I started muting anyone who caused me to restrict because of their pictures. I think originally it was hard to do because it felt mean to "mute" someone, or even unfollow them, but you have to realize it's nothing personal (or maybe it is), it's protecting your mind from things that are harming it in that season.

After learning about my brain type and how it was affected by an eating disorder, I remember thinking was I destined for this? Or was this a consequence of the way I was raised, and growing up in a world that praises thinness and advocates for a woman's worth to be found in everything regarding her physical appearance? As a kid who was raised to never question God, I

started to wonder... if God loves me, why did He make me like this if He knew it would make me susceptible to this disorder, especially in the type of world and society He knew I would grow up in?

When I started therapy in early 2021, I remember being so motivated to figure out what happened that put me in this situation? After months of talking about everything I learned about the disease and recalling every pivotal painful memory from my childhood and adolescence, nothing was obvious— there was always a memory that dated back even further. Eventually, and I believe it was the Lord's grace that helped me realize this, that even if I did figure out who or what exact incident to point the finger of blame to, I would still be sick.

Finding someone to blame would not heal me, if anything it would make me even more bitter. I think it's similar to the Garden of Eden. Adam blamed Eve, Eve blamed the serpent, but at the end of the day did it really matter? Man was now permanently separated from God so we might as well accept it and take accountability for what is. Having this realization helped me not only start to heal but also learn how to have a lot of grace for the people who unmeaningly played a part, in one way or another, in feeding this disease. One of my favorite things about my therapist (and there are many) is that she doesn't always tell me what the obvious right answer is. She knows that unless I go through the hard work to figure it out on my own, the answer will not carry as much weight.

I mentioned earlier how when you start to heal an eating disorder, you don't focus on the what, you focus on the how. What sparked an eating disorder is not that important, but how it is sustained is where the hard work comes in. Every week for over a year my therapist and I talked through what happened in a given week, when I restricted food, why, what the incidents were that caused me to exercise, or what need I was fulfilling by doing so. We determined that, yes, I was born into a world and created with a mind that made me susceptible to stumble into an eating disorder. Unfortunately, the world is not too different from when I was a child, so the thoughts and

beliefs that feed this disease are sustained by the inescapable people and things that surround us every day.

There is no escape from perfectionism, feeling inferior, inadequate, or overwhelmed. This life is exhausting, and people are disappointing. If you also feel the weight of these things (whether you cope with an eating disorder or not), I want to share some of the things that my eating disorder has taught me about them.

The funny thing about perfectionism is that it's such a delusional and hopeless concept. Perfectionism feels like a race with a physical finish line, but the reality is it's impossible to achieve. It [whatever it is] will never be good enough. The line of success will never stop moving. Once you cross the line you thought you needed to cross to be good enough, you celebrate for maybe a millisecond and then watch the line move. You got 100% on a test, great, but can you get 100% in the class? Even if you do achieve perfection in something, it won't be sustainable. As a young adult, I was restricting food to punish myself for not being perfect, while also over-exercising to compensate for the paralyzing anxious feeling that I wasn't perfect or therefore good enough-- nor could I sustain it even if I did think I was finally good enough. In my junior year of college, if I had sustained the body that society and I finally thought looked physically perfect (at the time), I probably would not be here today.

When I had a nearly perfect grade point average in school, the stress of keeping it and pushing it just a little further had me burning nearly three times more calories than I was taking in. On the volleyball team in high school, when I played an imperfect game, I did double the amount of exercise that night. The mentality behind it was that I was a failure, to my team, my parents, and my coach, and I deserved punishment for it. But I wasn't just punishing myself, as Dr. Graham of John Hopkins Medicine put it, my fatal actions were a win-win. While I was punishing myself for not measuring up and being enough, I was simultaneously fixing my body to hopefully one day be enough by also having toned legs and abs-- and that pain felt like a justified reward to my brain.

As a Christian, adding faith to all this can be a slippery slope if you're more focused on religion rather than a relationship with Jesus. If the faith you have is more legalistic and focused on rule-following, then even faith could feed this fire. I knew my role as a Christian was to be kind and patient to everyone, obey God, and only do and say things that please Him.

Unfortunately, it does not matter how hard you try, because of what happened in the garden (Genesis 3), we will never live an entire day without sinning (doing something that does not please God). The weight of feeling like I let people on earth down was heavy, but the weight of feeling like I let my Savior down was unbearable.

The concept of grace is not an additional component when faith is a set of rules instead of a personal relationship. The verse "my grace is sufficient for you" (2 Corinthians 12:9) does not apply when you believe you've only experienced that to be true for other people. In my short twenty-six years, I think most people (men and women) experience not feeling good enough. Whether it's at work, in life, in family, to society, even with friends— life is complicated. Our society has a very bizarre algorithm for what success looks like.

We are surrounded by underlying pressures that if we aren't working a nine to five job in one of the fields that society has deemed as a respected field then we've failed. If we haven't made a certain amount of money to buy a home by a specific age, then we're behind. If we haven't gotten married and started a family by a certain age (and in the Christian community, this age is ludicrously young) then we're also behind. If we don't utilize our twenties to travel the world and experience other cultures, then you wasted your twenties.

Society has a way of whispering in your ear from the moment you wake up why you're behind, a failure, not good enough, and hopeless. There is no accepting or embracing who and where you are, there are just microwave solutions for how to get rich fast, settle to find your perfect match quickly, and buy the house of your dreams— all right now. Not ready for all those things? Too bad, do it or you're a failure; or maybe something's just wrong with you.

I think we all have stories for how others have made us feel depleted and inferior. I've had roommates make comments about my career as a writer, I've been asked why I wasn't married yet, I've been pressured to make financial decisions I didn't feel settled about, I've even been told that I really couldn't get married, as long as I have an eating disorder.

Everyone experiences these feelings. Surprise, marriage doesn't solve all your problems. Plot twist, more money doesn't make you feel more secure. What's broken is broken, and this world will remain broken until Christ comes again. Everyone has their own methods for coping with these heavy feelings, some are just safer and healthier than others.

I've been somewhat of an anxious soul for most of my life. The quest for peace feels like something I'll forever be on. Sometimes God grants me peace as soon as I ask for it, and other times He uses the moment to teach me something. The only difference between when I was a little kid and now is that my mind developed an eating disorder to cope with feeling anxious. If I had an eating disorder at nine years old, I have no doubt I would have been doing squats in the public school bathroom while also reciting Joshua 1:9.

When you're at work and people are depending on you to turn in a project by a certain deadline, you do what you have to do to get the job that you're being paid to do done. I remember telling my therapist once that I didn't understand how the desire to escape somewhere and exercise could be so strong when food wasn't even in the picture. It made sense why I restricted calories and avoided "fattening foods" when I was walking into a situation where there was food and people who made me feel uncomfortable, but why did it feel like sometimes it just came out of nowhere?

Combining food and an emotionally hard situation was a guarantee for an eating disorder to flare up, I didn't even try wasting energy to fight it to be honest. If I knew I was walking into a place with heavy food and demoralizing women, I wouldn't even try to eat, and I just stayed in fight or flight until it was appropriate for me to leave. I had already made up my mind that it was worth exercising and prolonging healing rather than dealing with the pain for two hours.

I didn't understand how a day in the city with my family triggered anxious desires to exercise throughout the day when food wasn't even involved sometimes. Again, eating disorders are a reaction to something unsettling, distressing, or uncomfortable. They are so layered and complex, they affect everything in a person's life. It's not a choice, it's a learned way of life. Overstimulation (introverts especially know the feeling) feels like anxiety, and the racing thoughts and increased heartbeat that come with anxiety are only relieved through one measure for someone with an eating disorder— food restriction and exercise. It's a learned bad habit.

The city, a concert, a party, a big group of people, and a loud environment are all scenarios of overstimulating situations that send off alarms and signals in my brain that scream, "Burn calories! It doesn't matter if you haven't eaten anything today, just burn something! Otherwise, we won't calm down." It doesn't matter who it is, or what it is, if the brain associates a person or place with a distressing feeling, that's how you can identify if it is used to sustain your disorder.

I've been asked before what it looks like to go about a normal day with an eating disorder, and I'll be honest, I'm happy to share with whoever asks. While I know it sounds crazy to some people, I also know that I can't help how my brain is wired, and the more people who learn what it's actually like to live with an invasive eating disorder, the less poor assumptions there will be.

Imagine you just got to work, the news headlines share about war breaking out in other countries. You're anxious because there's nothing you can do and you're selfishly worried that it might make its way over here. Then, you get in your head about being selfish for worrying about your own safety and you feel like a bad person. You are now completely submerged in anxiety and restlessness from the news and feeling like a terrible person, and it's only 9:15 in the morning.

You're trying to ride the wave but the feelings are not subsiding, if anything they are growing, and no matter what kind of calming jazz music you play, you cannot get your mind off the feelings of extreme distress and anxiety. You have work to do, deadlines to meet, and you're on the clock, so now you're anxious about being a bad employee. After two minutes which feels

like sixty, you're so desperate for the chemicals in your brain to calm down that you give into what you know you shouldn't do and find a secluded room or space and exercise until your legs burn and you've relieved these distressing feelings. Yes, you just pushed your chances of healing back, but at least you can continue with your day in some peace.

Later, you're invited to lunch with colleagues at an Italian place where there's lots and lots of bread. You know that if you don't eat, you will suffer the consequences of not eating, but you also know that if you do eat, you will suffer psychological consequences of eating (bread is a carb that makes us anxious, right?).

The lunch conversation is about how people used to be so much thinner fifty years ago because they didn't eat "this kind of stuff" (as they laugh and take a bite out of their fettuccine with no thought about it). Your heartbeat increases as you smile and tell yourself "All food is good, there is no such thing as bad food" like a broken record.

The conversation turns into what vacations, routines, dinners, or funny conversations each person had with their spouse recently, to which the only thing you can contribute is a smile and encouraging comment between spoonfuls of soup broth. It sounds like a wonderful life everyone has, but it also comes across as the only life you should have. Why doesn't my life look like everyone else's at this table? Maybe it's because I'm not good enough—and I know what fixes that feeling.

Now within the last hour since arriving, you've already used all the energy from the broth you ordered to fight off the distressing feelings of "I'm starving, but I can't eat the bread, I wonder how much water it will take to feel full, all food is good food, there is nothing wrong with your life, you, or your body and your life is exactly where it is supposed to be even if it looks nothing like anyone else's.

The conversation goes on and on, to which you still can't contribute, you're anxious about the meal, you're overstimulated from the company, you're still thinking about how people used to

be so much thinner “back in the day” and as you sit there and smile, the thoughts get louder and louder to the point you can’t hear what anyone is saying anymore, the war in your head gets bloodier and bloodier, you swear your thighs are getting bigger by the second, and you know if you don’t get up to relieve the pressing distress and put an end to all of this right now you’ll— Excuse yourself to the bathroom, find an empty stall, and you exercise, and you pray, and you cry, “God, please! I can’t do this anymore!” until your thoughts, the war, the lies, and the feelings in your legs feel completely burned off. You dry your eyes, take a deep breath, and rejoin the day and group who is now looking at the dessert menu. Oh good, sugar.

As Dr. Redgrove of Johns Hopkins Medicine stated, and hopefully it was explained and demonstrated above, it’s an addictive-like behavior that feels rewarding by producing a physical desired outcome while also relieving the person of some intense feeling of distress.⁹ Exercise and food restriction not only relieved me of intolerable feelings of distress, they also convinced me that the behavior was inching me closer to being what I all along was desperate to be: enough.

While my brain rewired itself to develop the understanding that relief from distressing feelings of perfectionism, overstimulation or inferiority came from over exercise and burning calories, it’s important to emphasize that the cause and variety of things that sustain it are no one’s fault. There is no person, group of people, or even a society to blame for my brain being the way that it is. Doctor Graham of John Hopkins Medicine said, “once a person goes beyond dieting or excessive exercise and the behavioral pattern really develops, it becomes self-sustaining.”¹⁰

As I mentioned earlier, there is no escape from these humane feelings because our world is filled with triggers that will always set it off. Eating disorders are not about food, and they don’t only affect meals, they impact every. single. thing. in a person’s life. My eating disorder is not to be blamed on my grandma, my mom, my dad, mean girls at school, those colleagues, that boy, that school, that workplace, that church, that sport, that social media app, or even those careless comments I heard all throughout growing up.

Unfortunately, that quote from *The Hunger Games* movie holds a little too true, “it’s the things we love most that destroy us.”¹¹ The hurtful comments and actions from the people we love the most tend to do the most damage, and that goes for anyone whether they have an eating disorder or not. However, they are not to be shamed for their comments and behaviors that may have triggered my mind to hurt itself. I am not in the position I am in because a woman at work talked about the “consequences” of fatty foods, or because that person or group of people made me feel like I didn’t belong. It’s not their fault for unknowingly sustaining a beast that is trying to make it’s forever home in my mind, and it’s not their job to screen everything they say either— it’s my disease and therefore my job to learn how to not let others and the brokenness of this world send me to my death.

14. Some Won't Understand & That's Okay

Like most mental disorders, some days are just harder than others. While I have been able to identify some common patterns for why some days are more intense than others, sometimes living with the disorder isn't necessarily the hardest part; it's having to live with it around others.

I remember when I knew I needed to stop working on this book with others around. Recalling memories, old or recent, and writing about such a serious and consuming topic in my life was causing me to get anxious, emotional, and very in my head, and it didn't feel comfortable or fair to those around me.

It felt similar to the feeling when friends or co-workers would bring treats for my birthday or some kind of celebration. How do you explain why you're not partaking? Or in this case, how do you explain why the content you're trying to write is causing tears and subtle panic? Sometimes all I wanted was for people to just understand— but most won't.

There was a time when all I wanted was for my family to understand, but then I realized that if the only way for them to understand was by going through it themselves, then I hope they never do. If you know you know, and it can be hard to accept that some people will just never know, and that's okay. You don't need other people to understand it to take this seriously.

In all honesty, I have told people about my eating disorder that, for that very reason, I absolutely regret telling. You can't blame anyone for not knowing how to respond, but let's be real, it's hard when someone clearly doesn't know how to respond. People who had authoritarian titles have made me feel forced to share this burden, just to abuse this knowledge later from lack of understanding, or to continue to make comments and gestures to try and relate when in the long run it only ends up being more harmful. People have also abused God's special gift to us of prayer to hear the personal details of my eating disorder to later exclude and disclose that personal information with others but disguise it as a holy intention. I accept anyone's asking to pray for me, but you need to earn trust first.

It's hard to tell people, whether they can honestly relate or not because again I think everyone knows the disheartening and discouraging feeling of not being understood. You feel isolated and out of place. Instead of accepting that they don't understand the disorder or doing their own research on it, people try to relate to it, or solve your problem in the moment— like thanks pal, you know, in the last ten years, it never dawned on me to “just eat the piece of pizza.”

Eating disorders are not the same thing as avoiding bread because it makes you feel sluggish afterward. Eating disorders are also not cured through extra measures of self-care (as much as I do love an excuse to use a face mask and diffuse lavender). Sometimes, there is just no amount of self-care, rest, vitamins, gratitude, consumerism, attention, or even love to fix what God has allowed to become a disordered mind.

My heart goes out to every person who has had to sit and smile through ignorant comments, but I'll tell you, while you need to be careful with who you confide in, you need to tell someone (or a few). Real friends are people who truly know you and love you despite what burdens you carry. True friends will not try to fix you or use this against you; whether they can personally understand or not, they will see you no differently but rather be there to support you however you ask them to.

Proverbs 17:17 says, “A true friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity. “I had two good friends tell me the same thing, years apart from each other, when I apologized for burdening them with this heavy information. They both assured the truth about a true friend and referenced Galatians 6:2, “Carry one another's burdens, for in this way you will be like Christ.” Eating disorders are heavy burdens to carry, but God never meant for you to carry it alone.

To anyone who cannot personally resonate to your friend or family member with an eating disorder, sometimes you're just not going to be able to relate to someone, and that's okay. It does more damage to the person and your relationship when you do. I'm not a victim, and I'm not

someone to feel sorry for. I'm just a woman created with a purpose and a different kind of mind to fulfill it.

15. The Consequences of Healing

The thing about healing is that it's not linear, and it does not happen overnight. While I've learned that all foods are good and I'm not defined by my body or performance, that doesn't mean I live with that mentality every day.

For a while, healing was the process of learning those things, but healing today is slow and completely invisible from the outside. Healing is trying to resist the urge to restrict and over-exercise while also leaving room for grace knowing that progress doesn't look like perfection or mastery. Healing is slowly but surely rewiring my brain that, after ten years of damage, needs to learn that feelings of overstimulation, inferiority, or perfectionism are not solved by self-harm.

Healing is sometimes joyful and hopeful, and it looks like going out for ice cream with friends and having no fear or desire to workout afterwards. Healing also looks like allowing your hair to be the color it naturally is and surprisingly loving it.

Other days, it's filled with nothing but tears. Healing looks like eating a sandwich on top of a mountain in Utah with your mom, then crying while quietly exercising in your friend's parent's bathroom a week later (true story). Healing looks like telling your therapist you think you're okay to meet once a month, and then three weeks later relapsing and burning an entire draft of a book on the subject (rest in peace the second draft of this book).

Healing looks like having to make painful, soul-crushing decisions, like saying goodbye to people, places, and even an entire church that, despite how much you loved, and fought to keep, the truth was that it was doing more harm to my mind than good in that season. Healing looks like taking a step back from activities that despite how much you love, you know you need a break from to heal. Healing looks like accepting that some friends are only for a season, even if it was a long season, and trusting that God has your best interest in mind.

A defining moment that happened at the beginning of this healing journey was when I was sitting by myself in a place I once loved filled with people that I loved too. The truth was that

despite the love I had and my long to stay, I hated the way it all made me feel. I wanted to feel like I belonged, but I never felt like I did, and the pain that it consistently gave led me to restrict food and harm my body in a desperate attempt to get rid of that pain.

I can't express in words the weight I felt in my lungs from the familiar feeling that I think every human knows-- feeling unwanted, misunderstood, and out of place. I felt like I had a tug-of-war game being fought in my heart where one side wanted desperately to push through and stay while the other knew deep down it was probably the end (at least for a while).

It took every cell of energy to keep from crying and excusing myself to relieve these distressing feelings through exercise in the bathroom; but that was until I felt the Lord speak that verse from earlier to me, "Never will I leave you, Hannah, never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5, personal emphasis added). I knew as much as I wanted to stay, I was prolonging healing there, and shortly after I confirmed that part of what I felt was true, I walked away and didn't look back.

Healing is long, messy, complicated, isolating, and misunderstood; it's like grieving, and experts say it normally takes a human eighteen to twenty-four months before they're even able to start grieving. But this uncomfortable kind of healing is also simultaneously beautiful because, without these moments, there's no proof you're getting better.

You can partake in the same harmful things over and over again, or, you can choose to endure a new kind of pain by breaking old, harmful patterns. Both hurt because grief hurts; the difference is that the new, unfamiliar pain holds something that the familiar one didn't—hope. There's no hope in a never-ending cycle, but when you choose to interrupt it, even if it takes a long time, there is assurance that the pain will end.

I'll never forget the morning when everything started to look different. After a long time of trying to convince myself that a variety of my habits weren't making my eating disorder harder, the Lord eventually gave me the strength to do something with the truth I didn't want to accept.

Good places can still do damage, and good people can still hurt. That doesn't make either of them bad, pain is just a sign that it's time for something to change. I was so depleted, exhausted, and unhealthy at this point, that I finally realized choosing a new way to do things in order to live maybe wasn't selfish after all.

I'm a creature of habit, so changing things up was scary and hard for me to do, but I knew the Lord was with me, and I knew things needed to change if I was ever to get better. I gave myself the most grace I had probably ever given myself in this season. I let myself rest on weekends, I didn't try to solve this new pain through food restriction or extreme amounts of exercise, and I spent hundreds of hours journaling my thoughts and emotions to the Lord.

The weight that I had been carrying for so long was finally gone, and while my body may have been fragile, I certainly was not. While I was nowhere near cured, I felt a new sense of freedom, and like my life was a bit of a blank slate for God to get into the crevices of my heart and start healing me from more than just "bad foods." I wanted to be healed completely, and for God to make all things new (taken from Revelation 21:5).

There's a saying out there that says to enjoy the process, and while the process of healing involves hard work, grief, strengthening our trust muscles and so much more, I'll never forget that season of genuinely taking it day by day and relying on my God. As mentioned, I'm still in the process of healing (re-wiring the brain takes a long time), and sometimes when I think back to that season, I'll still cry a little about losing pieces of that season that I miss. But from that dark isolated season came a worthy revelation that I would have never found without it. If God is all that you have, you have all that you need.

As beautiful as creation is, it will never deliver peace and healing the way God can. The distressing feelings that cause eating disorder behaviors will never be relieved by a person, a place, any amount of money, education, a satisfying job, a routine, a comfortable home, or even a loving family. The more you look to these earthy things to give you peace and comfort from these

distressing feelings, the worse your eating disorder will get because you will be repeatedly disappointed and therefore more and more anxious until you stop looking horizontally for your healing and finally look vertically—to Jesus.

That's not to say family and friends who care can't help and support you; having family and friends who pray for me, care about me, and encourage me to get better has absolutely helped me get better, but it's not their job to cure me (they can't) so you can never expect that from them. Healing your brain, your body, your heart, your story, and your relationship with food and exercise is not done through self-care, self-help books, sleep, time, three-hour walks around the lake, unplugging, deleting your social media apps, quitting your job, or ostracizing every person who hurt you. It's done through Jesus.

16. The One Behind It All

“Jesus replied, ‘You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand’ (John 13:7).

My story about my eating disorder didn’t start the first time I was sent to the hospital, nor the semester in college when I cut out three major food groups. My story started the day I was born. We are born into a world that is not operating the way God intended it to— with sickness, mental disorders, pain, tears, and hatred of oneself and others.

When children are raised, everything they experience is not teaching them about the world God made, it’s teaching them about the world that He will save. Everything we experience as children is what God uses to make us into who we are as adults— both the good and the bad. I wanted to start this book by sharing my upbringing and the culture’s ideation that I was raised in so that readers would hopefully experience what I did; the slow-growing, undetected disorder that took almost twenty years to become what it is today.

When you’re diagnosed with an eating disorder, everyone usually wants to know two things: where did it come from, and how do you recover from it? As a young woman who’s not healed, I’m not going to tell you how one heals from this. Besides, patients and their families don’t want to hear another piece of recovery advice for a disorder that has no absolute cure. Maybe healing in this circumstance doesn’t look like the stereotypical healing that we picture. Maybe healing looks like obtaining what every other document and resource seems to lack— hope. People want to know that even if they are never fully healed the way we picture healing, there is hope and maybe even joy in the daily suffering. After half a decade, this is the healing that I have found which has given me a purpose for sharing my story— the story that I have been chosen to write.

I shared the importance of knowing what eating disorders are from a medical perspective, but the most impactful thing I learned from the science was how powerful and attentive to detail our God is. He made the human body operate seamlessly, and it did until sin entered the world.

When Adam and Eve ate the fruit that God told them not to eat, everything changed (Genesis 3:6). With sin came separation from God, death, and disease—the chance of having a perfect and healthy body. Because of sin, we suffer from physical and mental diseases and disorders, in other words, eating disorders are a product of sin.

Since Jesus has conquered the sin of the world, I know He has the power to heal anything. After over a year of therapy, and asking God to heal me of this, I discovered that perhaps my eating disorder is my own personal thorn in my side. In 2 Corinthians 12:7, Paul talks about the metaphorical thorn he had in his side and how God put it there to humble him; remind him that he is not independent, he is not self-sufficient, he exists only by the mercy and grace of his Creator—and so do I.

Biblical scholars do not know for certain what Paul's thorn was, but we do know that if God didn't have a purpose for it, then it wouldn't have been there. Paul's attitude towards his thorn is what inspires me to not grumble, whine or complain to God, "Why?" Even though, if I'm honest, there are certainly some days that I do. My eating disorder affects every element of my life, as shown earlier, and there are people and things that feed it without even knowing that they do—but when I keep my mind on heaven, I'm able to see each temptation to restrict and exercise as a reminder that I can't do anything apart from God, "apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5b).

If my body is restored to a healthy weight and my mind to a healthy state, I will know that it was nothing I did. God sometimes uses things on earth to heal, likewise therapists and medicine, but we must not put our hope in any of those things for God is solely responsible for healing and recovery whether He uses earthly tools or not.

Something I think we all need to be reminded of is that there really is evil in this world and an enemy who lurks around the whole earth. He never rests at trying to steal our joy and peace, and he knows the fragile spots in each of us that will increase his chances of doing so. When I was

nine-years-old, the social worker asked me “Where did your fear of throwing up come from, Hannah?” I told her, “Mr. Fear.” The street name my mom and I gave the devil who was trying to steal the peace of a third grader.

The panic attacks I routinely had at school taught me the purpose of the devil, the power of God, and the reality of spiritual warfare. “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12 NIV).

My warfare as a child was constant fear of throwing up, and as an adult it’s the daily temptation to restrict food and burn off any food I already ate whenever I feel distressed. Spiritual warfare is any example of the enemy trying to keep you from God’s perfect plan, or any attempt to convince you that God is not good, He is not powerful, He is not loving, and we can’t trust all those promises He told us. Some of my favorite promises in the beginning of unraveling this disorder with God were:

“This is my command, be strong and courageous, do not be afraid, do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9).

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?” (Matthew 6:25)

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38-39)

“Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you.” (Hebrews 13:5)

The enemy knows just as much as God that He is who He says He is, for if the enemy didn’t believe in the power of God, he would not be so relentless in trying to convince us otherwise.

Think back to the garden, the snake (Satan) knew the power of the fruit and that's why he was so persistent in telling Eve to eat it. If he didn't believe that God was who He says He is, he would not have bothered in trying to get man as far away from God as possible.

However, while it is true sin and the devil are the reason for why we suffer pain and temptation, and nothing happens outside of God's control, I want to share a powerful and important realization I gained back in February 2023—no one, not even God or the devil are to blame for my eating disorder. It was hard, and there were a lot of tears, but one of the first things I needed to do to start healing was to forgive things I would never hear an apology for. All of the people, comments, and experiences in my life that fed (and sustained) my eating disorder, I needed to give grace to.

Somehow certain comments and behaviors carry so much more weight when they come from someone we care so deeply about— and when we believe they care about us too. Maybe that's why feeling unloved and forgotten by God, our Creator, comes with an indescribable heaviness and pain.

I've believed for a while that the worst human emotion to ever experience is not feeling wanted or good enough. The times I have felt that my lungs feel like they're being sat on. My brain feels like it's in a fog, and all I want to do is escape and cry. From the time I was a little girl, and I imagine most little girls know the feeling, the concept of feeling good enough felt so fragile—like a chemist mixing the exact amounts of solutions to produce a perfect product. Unfortunately, if you finally get to a point where you feel good enough, the pressure to stay enough is just as worse as not feeling good enough. For the last ten years, I've used food restriction and excessive exercise as a coping mechanism for not feeling good enough and a means of ensuring that I was good enough, the few times I felt it.

I was angry that my family's comments about my physical appearance and performance caused me to over-exercise in high school. I was angry that the friends in college who made me

feel less than caused me to restrict my food intake. I was angry that the group of friends post-college who made me feel unseen caused me to skip meals and excessively exercise before seeing them. I was angry that those who made me feel unwanted, tolerated, and out of place every Sunday caused me to lose hunger cues, skip meals, hate everything about myself, and exercise more than any other day of the week. And I hated that harm was my mind and body's reaction to all of it.

I mentioned earlier that the reason why eating disorders are so hard to break is because the results of the behavior are more powerful than the known consequences. I may not be able to convince my friends and family that I'm good enough, but I can numb the painful feelings by excessive exercise. I may feel ostracized and out of place at my church, but at least starving and feeling the burn from too many leg and ab exercises calms the urgently, anxiously racing and heavy feelings that won't leave my brain alone.

My mind was desperate with a felt need, and since people weren't meeting that need, I found ways that did— whether it was harmful or not, hurting my body was the only thing I knew was guaranteed to meet the need in the moment. The people weren't the ones who sustained my eating disorder, the anxious and heavy feelings were; it was just unfortunate that the enemy used them to instill the feelings that he knew sustained such a fatal disorder.

Every single person and experience that the enemy used to feed my eating disorder I knew I had to forgive. I can honestly say that I love, more than I can say, every single person, who unknowingly and unmeaningly sustained my eating disorder, causing pain I would never wish on anyone. I had to realize I didn't hate any of them, I hated how they made me feel.

Each person did not personally instill suffering, but they were used, in various ways, to sustain my disorder's suffering. If you can relate to feeling like the people around you are to blame for what you're doing to yourself, don't let the enemy convince you of that. I can almost promise you that if they knew how their words and behaviors were impacting you, they would feel devastated. If you need space from them to heal, there's nothing wrong with having some space,

but do so graciously, and do not ostracize them. If you feel comfortable telling them about what's going on, I encourage you to do that. If you don't feel comfortable being honest about what's going on, there is a way you can kindly have space without hating or canceling them. Because again, they are not the ones who you should be upset with; be upset with the one who used them to feed your disorder.

It wasn't anyone's fault that the enemy used them or their words (or lack thereof) to cause me to feel so inferior and unworthy, but I needed to take the time and pray for God to soften my heart and help me forgive. The word *agape* in the Bible means to love someone the way that God loves us— unconditionally, no matter how much they hurt or disappointed you, and this is what I needed to do. Jesus says you're to forgive your brother and sisters seventy times seven (Matthew 18:22) and love your enemies while praying for those who persecute you (Matthew 5:44).

I don't think the term enemy is constrained to someone who is actively trying to hurt you. I think anyone who has severely hurt or disappointed you can feel like an enemy, and God has one command for what we are to do with our enemies: "Love them." When I was in a dark time of feeling hurt, forgotten, disregarded, and angry at everyone who hurt me, I remember God clearly telling me in my room one evening "Love them anyway, Hannah." It felt like a long seven months to learn how to forgive a decade of hurt, but that's what I learned to do. Every morning on my drive to work I prayed that God would bless and be kind to my enemies until eventually I genuinely meant it.

It's also very easy to blame the society we live in. The impossible expectations to be perfect and to hit all the milestones that society says you need to be successful. Especially for women, who are more prone to this disorder, the overwhelming pressures that we need to be thin, but also strong, with soft personalities that's also confident but not too confident, containing flawless skin, and full but natural-looking hair. Be independent but also submissive because while "our bodies are not objects" the underlying theme that most women are pressured to feel is that we're nothing

without a man's assurance that we're desirable. If society had legs it would be a walking contradiction. It's disturbing that based on what society says is the "perfect woman," she doesn't exist, and yet there are women who are willing to die trying.

I don't know what the world was like when my great-grandmas settled in the upper peninsula of Michigan and the city of Chicago, but I wondered if they experienced such intense pressures from the society they lived in? I like to imagine that a world without social media and a simpler way of life produces more happiness (even though they had plenty of trials of their own living in the late 1800's and early 1900's), but the point is, as tempting as it is to blame society and wish I was born in another generation, it's critical to remember that God is sovereign and He doesn't make mistakes.

When I journaled these thoughts to God about wishing I was born at a different time in history, the verse from Esther kept coming to mind, "For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14) If you believe that God wrote the entire history of the world in Genesis 1, and I certainly do, then I have to believe that I was placed in this country, in this society, at this time for a reason. God is the most intentional being we will ever hear of— He does nothing with no purpose behind it.

Ephesians 2:10 says, "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." God wrote my story long ago, just like He wrote yours (Psalm 139:16). He is a God who doesn't make mistakes (2 Samuel 22:31), so you and your story are purposefully happening right now. If you really want to blame someone, I suppose you could blame the devil, but from my experience, I don't even want to blame him. What he meant for harm, God is using for good (just like Joseph's story in Genesis 50:20).

When the devil tried to steal my peace and logic as a child, God used it to provide me with the knowledge I don't think many nine-year-olds had. He also used it to show me what a personal relationship with Jesus looked like, and by revealing Himself then, He gave me the wisdom and tools to know how to fight the battle that only He knew would continue ten years later. I discovered that He also, in the most brilliant way, used my fear of getting sick as a child to protect me in my eating disorder later.

While I have gone to extreme measures to lose weight and burn off the food I just ate, I can't even fathom the idea of self-induced vomiting. After seventeen years, the sight, sound, and smell of vomit triggers my mind to the exact state of fight or flight that I experienced as a kid. Thanks to the fear that tried to steal my peace everyday, I can confidently say that my teeth, and the lining of my stomach and esophagus are safe, because I could never make myself sick. As mentioned earlier, bulimia destroys the lining of one's esophagus and stomach, and it's a fatal branch of eating disorders that is very hard to detect and overcome.

The enemy is trying to use this disease to harm me, but the wisdom and relationship I gain from God makes, may I say, having this disorder worth it. "And we know that in all things, God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28).

When I learned that there were certain brain types more susceptible to disorders of the mind, I remember wondering "If God doesn't make mistakes, why would He make me like this?" My sister and I were raised the same way, so why didn't she adopt this disorder? I will be honest though, as much as I was confused why she had such a different reaction to our culture and upbringing, I am so grateful that she never did develop an eating disorder. As much as I wish she could understand what my mind is going through at times, and she wishes she could too, the only way she would understand was if she went through it herself— and I would do just about anything to keep her from understanding.

I remember learning about the genius, and complexity of the brain and thinking “Who but God could have designed such a fragile and complicated organ?” After many months of learning about the brain and how it impacts the, equally intricate, human body, I understood scientifically why eating disorders are so hard to overcome. The things that sustain an eating disorder create a pattern that teaches your brain there is only one response to feelings such as this (just like an addiction).

When I realized that the eating disorder wasn't what I needed to target, it was the sustainers, I spent a very long-time journaling, and talking to my therapist about what my personal sustaining factors are. For me, the things that cause distress and sustain my broken eating behaviors are lies. “I am not smart enough, I am not athletic enough, I am not thin enough, I am not pretty enough, I am not talented enough, I am not loud enough, I am not tall enough, I am not good enough.” Paul says in 2 Corinthians 10:5, “We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”

How do we take captive the thoughts we think and hold them against the Truth of God? It's very easy for me to run away with a thought, maybe it is for you too, like when I feel like I don't belong amongst a group of friends, that thought turns from a feeling into a truth. Not only do I feel like I don't belong, I believe I don't belong. When I feel unaccepted and unloved for who I am, it's way too easy for me to immediately believe I am unaccepted and unloved for who I am. There's a saying that goes “Feelings aren't facts” and for a while, I didn't know what that meant.

I think it's important to acknowledge every feeling you have and I believe in the power of experiencing that feeling deeply— even if it hurts a little, but you can acknowledge a feeling without believing that what you feel is true about you. People will make us feel left out and unwanted in various moments, but that doesn't mean we don't belong *somewhere*. I think this is what Paul means when he says to take every thought captive and make it obedient to Christ.

When you feel unloved, put that feeling on trial with God. God I don't feel loved, but Your Word says in John 3:16 that I am loved. I can promise you every time that He will prove to you that you are loved, wanted, chosen, and enough. For every lie, heavy feeling, and belief that suggests self-harm for relief, there is an even more powerful truth that provides peace— I promise.

17. Ready for Battle

The Apostle Paul says, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” People may be the source of what’s making us feel worthless and inferior, but they are not our enemies.

People say and do hurtful things, but the reason we internalize them is because the enemy is right behind us trying to manipulate those hurtful things into truths about ourselves. There’s a reason the Bible warns us to be on guard for the enemy. He’s clever and he’s sneaky, and he knows the unique pain points in every person.

The enemy knows the culture and society I grew up in put so much emphasis and worth on a woman’s appearance, and he also knows that that’s where I found so much of my identity as a kid. He likes to sneak up behind me and catch me in my most vulnerable state to whisper to me that my distorted brain and body are to blame for any failures and enslave me to the thought that the only thing I can do is to constantly try and fix them.

But the truth is that every part of me was intentionally made as I was knit together in my mother’s womb, “for I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14-15). I was also made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) and the image of God is flawless. Therefore, even a mind that has been labeled distorted is not evidence of a mistake from God. When I look in the mirror and feel screamed at about my legs being too big or my hips being too wide, I like to say the verse from Song of Solomon 4:7 “You are altogether beautiful, my love, there is no flaw in you.”

If I’m honest, even on the sunniest days sometimes getting out of bed feels a lot harder than it should— whether I ate enough the night before or not. The minute I open my eyes I’m bombarded with the thoughts of “I was betrayed by her,” “I wasn’t good enough for them,” “I will never measure up for him,” and knowing I will be given, what feels like, no option but to restrict

and hurt myself various times throughout the day to respond to those thoughts makes me exhausted and defeated before the day even starts.

This is why it is so important to have your own armor of God. “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

Therefore, put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.

In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Ephesians 6:10-17). The devil’s schemes and the arrows that he throws are the lies that come at you from any person or platform, and when they come, we need to be ready. I unknowingly started building my armor when I was nine-years-old with Joshua 1:9 about not being afraid for anything.

Over the years, I have built an extensive armor personal to me, and with it an intimate relationship with Jesus. I’ve learned who God is, “I AM WHO I AM” (Exodus 13:4), who He says I am “A child of God” (John 1:12), as well as a truth that crushes every lie. I started writing these verses down and displaying them where I could see them so that every morning and every night, I could read through them to be ready when the enemy attacked.

When people ask me how words that were written thousands of years ago still apply today, I tell them it's because “The word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword;

it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

A couple of years ago, I told my mom I was exhausted from feeling like a never-ending fix-it project. I was tired of feeling like I needed to over-exercise everyday in order to ensure I was good enough, I was tired of restricting certain foods because they would give me pimples or fat hips and legs, and I was tired of feeling like every single thing— even the color of my hair— was in a constant state of needing “fixing.” (While food restriction and over-exercising was used for more than just to “fix myself,” the point was that there were multiple reasons for why I was doing what I was doing to myself, and I was exhausted).

As I mentioned earlier, I was born with bright blonde hair, but by the time I got to middle school it was starting to darken and my mom and grandma strongly encouraged me to get highlights to keep it blonde. While I enjoyed going to the hair salon to talk with the hairdresser and my mom for a couple of hours, I didn’t like the feeling that over the next eight weeks, it was going to darken and I was going to have to do all this expensive work again. I didn’t like feeling like I had to spend money on special shampoo to keep my freshly blonde hair blonde, blow dry it every time I washed it, and not put it in a ponytail or hat because “otherwise you can’t see the nice blonde color you paid so much for.”

Put simply, I was desperate to love *something* about myself, just the way it was, and while I couldn’t rewire my brain to see food, exercise and my body as a good thing, I could start with what I could control— the color of my hair.

I told my mom I wanted to learn to love whatever color God put on my head, whether it was a shade of blonde or brown. My mom, who watched me hate so much about myself for years, wanted to make this a special day as the first step in what we both knew would be a long journey of healing ahead. We went to a salon that was in a sweet town about an hour from our house, we

got breakfast in the morning, and then went to a family friend's hairdresser to match the rest of my hair with the color that was growing from the roots.

After nearly a decade of getting my hair highlighted blonde in order to please others and ensure I was good enough, Tammy the hairdresser took the towel off my head to reveal a light brown head of hair. I remember both her and my mom looking at me with cautious anticipation because they weren't sure how I would like it, but when I saw my hair brown for the first time, there aren't words to describe how much I loved it. Finally, after over a decade of feeling like nothing on my body was good enough the way that it was, it felt like a hopeful weight off my shoulders that there was finally something naturally about me that I loved— and it was only the beginning.

The pressure to be perfect, perfect-looking, perfect-performing, and perfect-behaving, otherwise I need to punish myself for falling short of these societal expectations is a whole sandwich of lies from the enemy, for God does not expect perfection from us. If He did, Jesus would not have had to come. 2 Corinthians 12:9 says, "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'"

There is no evidence of God saying you deserve punishment or need to hurt yourself for not being absolutely perfect. If anything, I think it makes God quite sad when you hate and hurt the body that He intentionally made for you. "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the holy spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?" (1 Corinthians 6:19) I remember for the first few years after college, I had incredibly high expectations for myself.

I needed to be perfect at my job, so that meant waking up at six in the morning to do my devotionals, get ready and be out the door by seven-thirty so I could get to work and be productive (with no distractions) for eight hours straight (seven and a half if I allowed myself lunch).

During the day, I was to be a Proverbs 31 woman, so that meant no gossiping, no cussing, no secular music, be patient, don't think anything mean about someone, and in all ways be kind to

everyone. I'm going to be honest, I don't think I was all of those things at once for one day of my life, so when I got home defeated, I rationalized an apple for dinner and excessive exercise because I figured God needed help punishing me for letting Him down that day.

Again, another lie disguised as self-discipline that helped sustain my eating disorder. If I claim to believe the gospel, then to also believe that I need to further punish myself for falling short of perfection, is showing a lack of belief in the power of the gospel. If Jesus came to live a perfect life and die for mine and every person's sin so that I won't have to, then how can I say that while also punishing myself for not being completely perfect in every way?

For me, after years of journaling and praying about longing to lose my eating disorder and wanting to know how to not let others sustain it through comments and actions, I realized that generally not feeling good enough broke down into feeling these specific ways: incomplete, unloved, unwanted, unchosen, and unknown. I knew that these were specific lies the devil wanted me to believe because they fed my eating disorder, and if I wanted to start doing the hard work of denying my brain and body of the toxic relief it wanted (food restriction and excessive exercise), I needed to find the truths in the Bible that proved all those heavy, sustaining feelings to be wrong.

When society makes me feel incomplete or lacking (for being the age that I am and not married, a homeowner, nor wealthy enough to be able to afford all of the nice things we're told we need) Colossians 2:9-10 says, "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is head of over power and authority."

This means that the same spirit that lived in Jesus, and made Him full and complete, also lives in me (and anyone else who accepts Jesus as their personal Savior) which makes me full and complete— not lacking anything. Psalm 34:10 also says that "Those who seek the Lord lack no good thing." Our culture may tempt us to believe that we need many earthly things in order to be complete, successful and be able to say we have good things, but God says that we only need one— Jesus.

For those who believe in Jesus, we don't need to fear that we will be deprived of anything we need because Philippians 4:19 says, "And this same God who takes care of me will supply all your needs from his glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus," and Matthew 6:8 says "Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him."

Your heavenly Father loves to hear your voice, and He encourages you to bring any and all desires and concerns to Him, "because He cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7), but you do not ever need to worry about lacking something you need because the Lord who created you knows what each unique person needs and when they need it.

When someone we love makes us feel unloved, God Word assures us that this feeling is not true. We may feel unloved by a parent or dear friends, but that does not mean that we are blatantly unloved. There are so many verses in the Bible about how much God loves us and I encourage you to look all of them up on your own (meditating on God's love notes to us builds an intimate relationship with Him that is incomparable to anything else), but these are some of my favorite ones:

"For this is how God loved the world: He gave His one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16)

"Your unfailing love, O Lord, is as vast as the heavens; your faithfulness reaches beyond the clouds. Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, Your justice is like the ocean depths. You care for people and animals alike, O Lord. How precious is Your unfailing love, O God! All humanity finds shelter in the shadow of your wings." (Psalm 36:5-7)

"Such love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced His perfect love." (1 John 4:18)

The biggest lie that the enemy likes to emphasize is that if you don't feel loved by that parent, the person, that church, that group, then you are not loved. Timothy Keller said in his book "The Meaning of Marriage" that every person wants to feel known and loved, "To be loved but

not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God.” I have found that sometimes you need to experience the heaviness of all of it in order to allow the magnificent, incomparable, mighty love of God to show you that even if all of those things were true (you are not loved by any of those examples), you are still unconditionally loved more than you even know, and actually His love is all that you need.

Similarly, when I feel unwanted and I want to numb that painful feeling by escaping to the closest deserted room to physically burn (exercise) the pain off, I try to remember what God’s Word says in 1 Peter 2:9, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into wonderful light.”

We have all known people and been in situations where we don’t feel wanted or like we belong, but while these heavy feelings can try to hold you in bed in the morning, remember that these are just feelings and they are not true, no matter how intense the feeling may be. You may be unwanted by that group, that person, or even that place, but that is not an indication of the general truth– You are chosen and wanted.

God chose to create you. “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight” (Ephesians 1:4).

God knows you. “And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered” (Matthew 10:30).

God calls you by name. “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name, you are mine” (Isaiah 43:1).

God chose you. “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit– fruit that will last– and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you” (John 15:16).

God loves you. “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness” (Jeremiah 31:3).

God wrote your story. “Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be” (Psalm 139:16).

God is for you. “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (Isaiah 41:10).

God has a perfect plan for you. “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord. “Plans to prosper you, not to harm you. Plans to give you a hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11).

It does not matter what anyone says or does to you, because nothing and no one compares to what God says about you. “With whom will you compare me or count me equal? To whom will you liken me that we may be compared?” (Isaiah 46:5)

People will treat you poorly, and people will be unnecessarily cruel. Society will always be there with advertisements and social media apps to tell you that you’re not good enough until you obtain these certain things, but if you remember why you’re here on earth and cling to God’s truth, all of those comments, behaviors, advertisements and temptations will all just be noise. When I get overwhelmed with everything I’m not, I force my heart to look to Jesus.

He says that He is enough, and as long as I have Him, then I am enough too. 1 John 2:15 says, “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them.” God created a beautiful world for us to enjoy, but as beautiful and appealing as the created things in this world are, they are not life-giving and they are made to point us to the Creator who made them.

During a season that felt like a substantial season of loss (many friends, my church, my health, and more) I remember, after a long day of having little food and over-exercising because of it, I was walking around my favorite neighborhood and I realized that even if God took

everything away, even the things I had left, I still had everything I needed (John 14:8). Realizing this took away the power of fear and the desire to grip onto the things I had left.

Somehow the power that these things held lessened so much, that knowing God may take what remained too did not cause me to want to skip meals or hurt my body as much anymore. I understood for the first time that day that with or without them, I was enough, and God's grace is too.

I can't always help that specific places, situations and people overstimulate or make me anxious, but I do know that I will not blame the Creator for making me like this. I may only be familiar with an anxious spirit, but I know I was not born with one. "For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love, and self-discipline" (2 Timothy 1:7). I learned in my third grade classroom that while fear does not come from God, He can use anything for His glory and my good. It is no coincidence that there are 365 verses in the Bible about not needing to be afraid (one for every day of the year).

I love how the Lord intentionally planted in my heart the first verse I ever learned, Joshua 1:9, because He knew I would carry it with me into battle for the rest of my life. The enemy uses fear to try and steal my peace and inflict harm, but nothing is more powerful than God and His truth. Do not get me wrong, I am not perfect, and sometimes the fear of the unknown future and the daily overstimulation in life are still addressed with food restriction and burning more calories than I took in, but it's important to recognize that even if you were only able to say once "I did not harm my body as a coping mechanism" that is progress to be proud of.

Are you distressed by tomorrow? Take a deep breath and read Matthew 6. Are you drowning in the fear of lacking protection and provision? Breath in through your nose, out through your mouth and read Psalm 23. When God says not to worry, there are no exceptions to this command. God does not say to not worry unless... He says regardless of what you're facing, do not fear for He is with you, and He will never leave you (Deuteronomy 31:8).

Earlier I mentioned that scientists say that the brain can only remain in such an intense state of distress for a period of time, eventually it will subside, and that's why therapists encourage the strategy of riding the wave. Instead of responding harmfully to the high intense feeling of distress, doctors and therapists say that if you can teach your brain that it doesn't have to engage in such behaviors in order to relieve the intense feeling of distress, eventually this will rewire your brain and neurologically take away the power of an eating disorder.

The Maker who designed the brain knows much more than we do that this is how the brain works. It's almost like He included verses into His Word that He knew would help those using all their energy to mentally ride the wave. Psalm 46:10 says, "Be still and know that I am God." In a fast-paced society that is always telling you to do something about what you don't like, God is saying in those moments of extreme panic to deny the flesh of what it's being told to do and be still— let Him take care of you. Exodus 14:14 says, "The Lord will fight for you' you need only to be still." Or Isaiah 26:3, "You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in You." Jesus is the prince of peace and there is no internal or external war that is too big for Him to handle. Psalm 91:15 says, "He will call on me, and I will answer him; I will be with him and honor him."

No matter how intense the feelings of distress are, nothing and no one is higher than even just the name "Jesus." "Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9–11).

God has not healed me of my eating disorder, but He has made a way for me to live with it joyfully and with hope. Hope is found in the Truths that counter every sustaining lie. Hope is found in the truth that one day, when this vapor of a life is over (James 4:14), I will have a perfect body and mind forever (Philippians 3:21). Hope is found in the truth that what seems to be a

mistake and hindrance in my life is actually completely controlled by a good God who loves me more than I will ever understand. Hope is found in knowing that because He chose me and calls me by name, the disorder that tries to take my life little by little every single day is actually being used for a bigger purpose. Hope is found in proclaiming that even if He does not heal me on earth, He is still good.

Friends, if I was not blessed with this disease, I would not have had the opportunity to learn about the beautifully complex human body and mind that God brilliantly designed for every single person. Without the chance of learning about this misunderstood, shameful and complicated eating disorder, I would have not had the chance to walk with God through the fire of suffering for Him to personally show me who He is and who I am to Him, a most prized possession (James 1:18).

I now know, and I hope you will too, what Paul means when he says, “Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance, character; and character hope” (Romans 5:3-4).

Epilogue: Life Is More than A Board Game

After four years of therapy, learning about and trying to explain this disorder to caring family and friends, I've lost count of the number of times I celebrated (with my Bible study and ice cream sundaes) what I thought was a final victory over my eating disorder. The hard reality that no one—including me—wants to hear but needs to hear is that a good day, week, or even month does not indicate cured; it indicates progress.

I mentioned earlier how I went from feeling (literally) on top of the world eating a sandwich with my mom on the top of a mountain in Utah— to feeling devastated and discouraged when I, out of nowhere and for no explainable reason, relapsed all the way back to where I started in my eating disorder recovery journey three days after we got home. Maybe it's where I geographically live but I remember noticing almost immediately in the state of southern Utah how the residents didn't seem worried about covering up imperfections, having perfect-looking hair, or having aesthetic workout clothes... They were just there to enjoy the hikes in nature, and my mom and I were too. It was refreshing.

I remember the sinking feeling when my friend at Bible study pulled out two tubs of ice cream and toppings to celebrate what I prematurely announced what I thought was my final victory— and I realized I was afraid to eat it. After experiencing a healthy relationship with food and exercise for over a month, and even cutting my therapy appointments down to once a month, I wholeheartedly believed that was the end of it. It was hard to accept that God's perfect plan was that in reality, it was only a part of it.

These moments I feel like are perfectly captured by David in Psalm 13:1-2, "How long, Lord? Will you forget me? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?" Except that, as David learned too, God sees and He never forgets. He knows, and I am learning, that the benefits that come from the process of healing far outweigh the immediacy of

healing sometimes. Paul speaks about the joys of suffering, and the faith, character and perseverance that only come from walking with God through trials.

Therefore, to those struggling with an eating disorder, and to those who know someone who is, recognize this— that victory doesn't come at the end of healing; victory is to be recognized and celebrated throughout the entire healing process. Eating because you are hungry is something to celebrate. Eating a meal without the desire to get rid of it, or worrying about what “consequences” may come from it, is something to celebrate.

Eating your own personal “bad foods” without hesitation is worth celebrating, as well as trying something you've been avoiding or afraid to eat. Choosing not to try and control your food or body in response to something that is out of your control is worth celebrating— even if the very next day isn't as successful.

With an eating disorder, you're not waiting to celebrate a final cure, you celebrate the long, hard work process of healing. Even if others don't understand the energy, effort and determination it took to eat that hamburger, pizza or treat, just know that I do, I'm proud of you, and I hope you enjoyed every crumb of it.

For those who don't personally understand, let me tell you that I think people with developed eating disorders can be some of the best actors and actresses. To put it plainly, everyday is hard. Like any illness or disorder, some days are easier than others, but everyday is a different degree of hard. You know that you're expected to perform at the same successful level in work, school and life (just like everybody else), so you learn how to live with the constant draining energy it takes just to force yourself to eat, restrain from getting rid of it, and generally function without having enough fuel in your body.

I've been accused for not coming across joyful enough sometimes (some people believe that you can only demonstrate the love and power of Christ by portraying visible signs of joy), and as hard as it feels to be misunderstood, I don't blame people for putting that accusation on me.

You don't know what you don't know, and for this reason I believe those suffering from eating disorders can be some of the best actors because most people have no idea that their friend or family member is sick. There have been times within my ten-year eating disorder journey where I didn't think my friends or family realized just how sick I was. The lack of energy, constant exhaustion, fear and brain fog I experienced (along with physical symptoms as well) honestly just became a part of my everyday life for a while.

The truth is, since developing an eating disorder, joy hadn't always come as naturally as it once did. With all the energy my body used just to stay alive some days, it sometimes felt like I didn't have any energy left to express joy— even if the Lord generously let me quietly feel it. But I'll be honest about something else, sometimes I still get very envious of people who automatically do the things that take so much energy for me to do. Those who can eat “junk food” with no second thought or reservations about it. Those who can carelessly go on a run or workout without needing to assess if their body can physically handle it today.

Or those who don't resort to dangerously restricting themselves as punishment when they feel they have failed. On my course of healing, I dream about the day when I can go running without wondering if I'm doing it for the right reason, or if my body and heart can handle it. I dream about the day I can play volleyball with my friends in the hot summer sun without worrying if my mal-nourished body will be okay. Even the simplest act of eating a piece of pizza simply because it sounds delicious gives me the determination to keep pushing towards healing.

Right now, these simple acts are anything but simple, but I look forward to the day when they become second nature again. For now though, I choose joy through gratitude for what my body can still do, and for how God has slowly allowed my mind to heal. Towards the end of writing this book, I had a meeting with my therapist where she told me something she had never told me in our three years of meeting.

It was during a season in my life where I chose to leave my friends and normal routine behind for a while to be with my family during a very difficult time. In the midst of being there for my family, worrying about the future, missing my friends, and tackling the unknown, I had subconsciously resorted to consuming less than a fourth of the number of calories my body needed. When this fact became evident to my therapist, she looked me in the eye and made it very clear that if I continued in what I was doing, I would not survive.

Without knowing what damages may have already been done to my malnourished body, the weight of this fact and the urgency to make a change had never been so vital. For some reason in that moment, God chose that time to open my eyes so that the concept of *living* carried a whole new weight and meaning that it never had before. Since my eating and exercise behaviors had become so natural to my everyday life, the concept of what it was slowly trying to do to me had never clicked with such urgency before.

While I was never afraid of post-life because of my faith in Jesus Christ, my desire and drive to live the gift of life that I was graciously given had never been so strong before. Within two weeks after that meeting, I went from fearing I would need to go to an Eating Disorder Recovery Center to being more conscious about eating enough at every meal and motivated to push through all reservations to give my body the food it needed. I discovered a deep desire that surpassed the concept of merely existing, so eating disorder or not I remember driving to an appointment and crying to God, “I want to live” and I was willing to eat whatever quality and quantity it took to do that.

This world is sin-stained and messy, but science proves that the gift of life is truly a miracle. God created you and me not just to exist on this earth, but to live in it. To enjoy His further gifts and blessings of seasons, friendships, nature/creation, delicious food, laughter and emotions, and so much more. This is the day that the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it (taken from Psalm 118:24). These days, after writing the entirety of this book, I spend my days celebrating the

victory of progress that God graciously offers. I continue to regularly meet with my therapist as well as a nutritionist to help me understand food and my body as best as I can, and every day I consciously choose both food and joy.

Food for Thought

Karen Carpenter, my favorite 70's singer as a kid, unfortunately, did not have the resources to recover from her eating disorder the way we do now. While there is still a lot more research to be done about eating disorders, there are so many good resources available now to help you, or your loved one, start the journey of recovery. I have included some of those resources in the back for you.

To the family members and friends, I know it's hard to watch someone that you care about suffer from this relentless disorder, and I know you may feel helpless, but there are things you can do to help. While we understand that you could never completely understand what it is that we're going through on a daily basis, one way you can help is to educate yourself as much as you can about your friend's disorder. Whether it's eating disorders in general, or the specific branch that he or she is suffering from, the more you understand, the more you can help.

I included a lot of information about eating disorders in this book, but there is certainly more you can research and understand. The National Alliance for Eating Disorders is an organization dedicated to helping family and friends support their loved ones who are suffering from an eating disorder. You can go to their website and get the education and support that you need.

Secondly, it's important for you to let your loved one know that you see them, care about them, and are available to listen if they want to talk to you about what they are struggling with. I'll warn you that what they tell you will probably be concerning and you probably won't understand, but it is so important that you make it clear that you are willing to listen to them and help in any way they ask you too.

Chances are, your friend or family member isn't going to tell you that they're struggling (whether from self-denial or because they know you won't understand), so you can't expect them to come to you first to communicate how they're doing. Just because they haven't brought it up in

a while, does not mean they are doing better or cured. It's a scary and complicated disorder that everyone, even those suffering from it, knows is confusing and misunderstood by society. It's important to have open communication with them and notice patterns in their life.

If your family member or friend struggles with not eating enough, pay attention to their behaviors and quantities at mealtimes. If you don't believe they have enough, I encourage you to gently ask them, "do you want more?" They may say no, but they may also say yes. Encourage them to eat, refrain from negative talk about food or body image, and don't be afraid to ask them privately how they are doing.

A lot of the damage that happens from eating disorders is done internally so no one can see. Never ever assume that your friend with an eating disorder is okay just because their physical appearance isn't skin and bones. You don't need your ribs sticking out to prove that your heart is failing. As mentioned earlier, eating disorders can be very hard to detect. If your friend is noticeably tired, cold, exercising or eating small quantities all the time, those are some of the most common indicators that there is more going on than what seems. Understand that recovery from this is extremely slow. Eating disorders are not like the common cold that go away within a day to a week. They can take years, even decades, to fully recover from, and some are never cured. I had friends ask me if I was better after six months of therapy. While I knew they didn't understand and I didn't blame them, I'd be lying if I said it wasn't discouraging.

Lastly, and I believe this is the most important thing you can do, pray for them; but not just for healing from their eating disorder, pray for healing from the past, freedom from the lies they believe about themselves, and that they would find relief from distressing feelings in God's Truth and rest. Having a healthy relationship with food and exercise is important, but it's not the most important relationship to have—a good relationship with Jesus Christ is the only way to true freedom.

It's overwhelming to go throughout your day sometimes wondering how your body is doing what it's doing on such little food, and it can feel very isolating when you know most don't understand. The best thing you can do for your family member or friend if you want to help them is to support them, take their struggle/disorder seriously, and encourage them to get help. No one wants to be treated differently or to be perceived as weak and incapable, so while you're mindful that they may avoid certain foods or modify some situations, do not exclude them.

We know our limits and how to live with our disorder, so it's not your responsibility to determine what we can or can't handle. Treat your friend as you did before you knew they were sick, just be kind and mindful about what they're going through. Our bodies may be more fragile at times, but that doesn't mean that we are.

For family and friends: The National Eating Disorder Association (NEDA) provides very detailed information on how you can help your loved one struggling with an eating disorder. From tips on how to care for them, and encourage them to get help, to education on the disorder and what signs to look for, NEDA provides well-rounded, thorough support to help you in turn help someone you know who's struggling.¹²

For parents specifically, NEDA offers a Parent Toolkit PDF that you can download for no charge. This toolkit provides you with the support you need to support your son or daughter.¹³

If you're the one struggling with an eating disorder, or wonder if you are, I encourage you to confide in a family member or friend and talk to a professional. Even if you think you have your disorder under control, it may be bigger than you think and can escalate to a level that can take control instantly.

I suggest you start by talking to a counselor or a social worker who is educated on how to treat eating disorders. There are both in-person and virtual options, and all of these options provide further information on the disorder, signs, treatment plans, effects, and other helpful information to know.

The National Eating Disorder Association: <https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/get-help/>

Eating Disorder Recovery Center: eatingrecoverycenter.com

Equip: equip.health/virtual-eating-disorder-treatment

Acknowledgments

While thinking about how to express in words my gratitude for the people who I've been more than blessed to have with me on this journey, I don't think the right words have been invented yet. I am so thankful for all of the people, many who are not named, who I know have been praying for both me and this project. All of these people are very important to me as they have been there for both the hills and the valleys of this eating disorder and the journey of writing a book about it. I am so grateful for how God has used every person in my life and they all mean very much to me.

To my mom, who has been standing in the gap praying for me since I was a little girl. I have the faith and relationship with Jesus that I do because of her, and I confidently call myself a writer thanks to her encouragement for the gifts and passion God gave me. I appreciate and look forward to her weekly phone calls when she calls just to hear my voice and know how she could pray for me. She's been through so much in her own life since the start of this book, and yet has always been there with an encouraging word, note, or coffee when she knew I needed it. Thank you, mom.

To my dad, who I know loves me more than I'll ever know, and while I know he won't understand the disorder I go through, he has always supported me in every way on this bumpy road to healing and recovery. I am so grateful for how he has supported me in all my endeavors my entire life, I know I gained my love of learning from him, and I am so grateful for him and his willingness to always listen. Thank you, dad.

To my sister and forever best friend, Leah, who has always been there to make me laugh on a bad day, send a prayer up to God for me, and drop whatever she was doing, wherever she was when she knew I needed her. She's been my best friend my whole life, always having my back, supporting me in all that I do, by my side through truly all of this, and she's shown me unconditional love from the very beginning.

To my grandparents who, most, are smiling down and cheering me on. They never failed at making me believe I could do anything and were always interested in any hobby or achievement I picked up. In their own unique ways, they made my sister and I feel like a prized possession, and while none of them will unfortunately be able to read the final version, their positive impact on my life is part of what allowed me to be able to write this, and I know they would be proud.

To my friend Sarah, who taught me soul sisters are real. Without her and her consistent friendship, I probably wouldn't have gotten the treatment we both knew I needed on that February day back in 2019. She's carried so many of my burdens with me, and we've watched each other change so much, but in spite of it all, her friendship never changed. I will always be grateful for that February day in college when she skipped class to sit with me because she knew something was wrong (I went to the hospital with undiagnosed anorexia nervosa one week later). I will always admire her strength and appreciate her support and endless patience with me.

To my friend Lizzy, my best friend and number one hype girl. Who listens to all fifteen minutes of my voice texts and sends seventeen-minute responses back. Even states away, she carves out time to talk to me, listen to me, or book a flight or train to come visit me. She has always encouraged and made me feel like I could write and conquer anything.

To my friend Taylor, who has been one of my biggest prayer warriors. I am so grateful that despite the Lord taking her all over the country (and probably soon the world), she doesn't neglect time to talk to me. I am forever grateful for our phone call marathons, her intentional questions about how I'm doing, and her patient willingness to teach me any of the science I want to know behind my disorder. I know I can tell her anything and that she's always cheering me on.

To my friend Emily, who always reminded me that my weakness was my greatest strength. She always has an encouraging word from God's Word when I'm in need of one. I appreciate our multi-hour walks to talk about the beauty and muck in our lives, and her willingness to speak

honestly with me about the ways we are feeling. I am so grateful for her omnipresent friendship in my life, and her support for my book.

To Becky, Nicolette, and Rachel, who are always there to listen to me cry, go with me to appointments, teach me about nutrition, remind me to eat a snack, and make me laugh. They have been a steady encouragement throughout my recovery journey, and I am grateful God brought us all together to work in the same place, even if it was just for a little while. Becky, thank you for always genuinely asking how I am and caring about the answer. Rachel, thank you for advocating for me and for sacrificially taking the time to teach me the straight facts about nutrition you knew I needed. Nicolette, thank you for listening to me while walking around one of my favorite places and encouraging me throughout the whole process of healing and writing.

To my friend Hailey, who generously provided design talent to help create the cover, and to my friend Bianca, who has one of the most servant-hearted souls I have ever met. I thank her for lending her photography skills to help take photos for this project, and I thank her for her generosity, friendship, and for always being willing to listen over a cup of tea.

To my therapist Sheri, who has heard every detail of this journey, even the details that weren't included in this book— from the beautiful epiphanies that made us convinced we had allergies, to the ugliest truths that this disorder made me do and believe. I know with certainty that God hand-picked her for me, and I am even more certain that I may not be here without her. I credit her for the wisdom I gained and was able to share in this book, and I thank her for her devotion to praying for both me and this book.

To my friend Erin who's always reminded me that true friends happily carry their friend's burdens. I appreciate her genuine curiosity of always wanting to know the truth about how I was doing (no matter how bad it was) and never letting me feel like my struggles around food were too much to not be my friend.

And to my friend Ethan, who's always encouraged me to get better and never quit writing even when I felt unqualified to write on this subject. I appreciate his willingness to read any portion of this book, give honest feedback, and listen to me talk through thoughts and ideas for it. He was one of few who watched this book turn from an idea, four years ago, to what it is today, and I am grateful for that too. I appreciate his patience, understanding, and willingness to listen and help me however he could.

“I thank my God when I think of you.” (Philippians 1:3)

Notes

Niv bible. (2007). . Hodder & Stoughton Ltd.

Chapter 8:

¹ *Anad Home: ANAD - National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and associated disorders.* ANAD National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders. (2024, January 18). <https://anad.org/>

² YouTube. (2015). *Thinking About Eating Disorders: John Hopkins Experts Answer Key Questions* . YouTube. Retrieved January 20, 2024, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sBEb-EGgfs8>.

Chapter 9:

³ Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research. (2023, March 28). *Eating disorders.* Mayo Clinic. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/eating-disorders/symptoms-causes/syc-20353603>

⁴ Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research. (2023, March 28). *Eating disorders.* Mayo Clinic. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/eating-disorders/symptoms-causes/syc-20353603>

⁵ *Orthorexia.* National Eating Disorders Association. (2024, January 5). <https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/orthorexia/>

⁶ Clear, J. (2022). *Atomic habits: An easy & proven way to build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones: Tiny Changes, remarkable results.* Cornerstone Press.

Chapter 10:

⁷ *Eating disorders.* Eating Disorder Treatment | Binge Eating | Amen Clinics Amen Clinics. (n.d.). <https://www.amenclinics.com/conditions/eating-disorders/>

Chapter 11:

⁸ YouTube. (2015). *Thinking About Eating Disorders: John Hopkins Experts Answer Key Questions* . YouTube. Retrieved January 20, 2024, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sBEb-EGgfs8>.

⁹ YouTube. (2015). *Thinking About Eating Disorders: John Hopkins Experts Answer Key Questions* . YouTube. Retrieved January 20, 2024, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sBEb-EGgfs8>.

¹⁰ YouTube. (2015). *Thinking About Eating Disorders: John Hopkins Experts Answer Key Questions* . YouTube. Retrieved January 20, 2024, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sBEb-EGgfs8>.

¹¹ Jacobson, N., Kilik, J., Craig, P., & Strong, D. (n.d.). *The Hunger Games, Mockingjay, part 1.*

Closing Thoughts and a Note to Family and Friends:

¹² *Eating disorder resources help a loved one - neda.* National Eating Disorders Association. (2023, December 13). <https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/grace-holland-cozine-resource-center-loved-one/>

Researching the science and faith of eating disorders

The concept for this book was planted in my heart when I was twenty-three years old. From the age of fifteen to twenty-three, I engaged in restrictive eating, excessive exercise, obsessive weight loss and self-harm without telling anyone. I didn't know why I felt like I couldn't stop the behaviors I was doing, and I felt afraid and alone knowing there was something wrong with me. After my second trip to the emergency room, I was diagnosed with anorexia-nervosa having no idea what that meant and how to get out.

There are many medical articles about eating disorders, but if you truly want to understand the disorder, you need to take the time to go deeper. When I was initially diagnosed, I wanted an easy solution and fix, but in this case that doesn't exist. There is still a lot of research that needs to be done on eating disorders as medical professionals have not found an absolute cure or an obvious cause to provide prevention strategies. If you look up faith-based articles on eating disorders, your faith and God's character will be questioned as the underlying message is that prayer and a strong enough faith will convince God to take it away.

More than anything, though, while it helped me to understand the psychology of eating disorders and how it impacts the brain and body, I wanted to know I wasn't alone. Due to the misunderstandings and misconceptions about the disorder from society, patients often feel shamed, judged, embarrassed and forsaken by God. I knew that whether I was healed from my own disorder or not, I was going to provide the resource that my seventeen year old self was desperate for. I don't have groundbreaking discoveries or solutions, but I do have a story, and that's what this community needs to hear. I have a story that shares more than just what foods I restricted, I have a story that shares the who, what, where and why factors that sustain my eating disorder today. My story also shares an element of hope that doesn't come from complete recovery (or the promise that I ever will be), but allows me to have joy in the suffering, and it encourages others that they can have joy too.

The works that I have included in this annotated bibliography are resources that I have used to understand my disorder, the brain that God gave me, and the perfect character of God, and how best to write my story. They are a mix of medical articles, resource books, as well as other written works by authors who have experienced the same trials with this disorder. I will break each material down to explain its content, how it is helpful in my research process, and what my takeaways are. I believe it's important to have a mix of informative medical articles, along with other accounts and perspectives of this disease. In terms of my own story, the real hope came from understanding personally who God is and what He had to say about my own personal disorder, which readers will see that this disorder is not directly spoken about in the Bible.

Amen Clinics

Dr. Daniel Amen is a psychotherapist who has devoted his life to neurology and understanding brain function. His findings have been groundbreaking as he provides physical evidence that just as no two people are the same, neither are two brains. Most people have heard of personality tests, but Dr. Amen has developed a brain test with similar testing structure. Through these assessments and brain scans, he discovered how those with eating disorders have such a hard time breaking the harmful habits they have implemented. Through thorough but simple explanation, he describes what parts of the brain are impacted by eating disorders and what their normal healthy functions are. He also explains further how this malfunction impacts day-to-day life. This helps those who are either suffering from disordered eating, or generally want to know more, understand better how the brain and this disorder work together.

In my own experience, learning this knowledge gave me a sense of freedom to have grace for myself. This complex disorder appears like a choice from the outside, but there are so many factors involved that make reversing these thought patterns and recovery so much more difficult for some people. Gaining the understanding that this was more than just my own doing to myself, made me want to share this with others who are either shaming or feeling shamed for this. I thought his research was extensive and clear, and I appreciate how he explains it in a way that makes it easy to comprehend for someone who has no previous medical background or knowledge.

Eating disorders. Eating Disorder Treatment | Binge Eating | Amen Clinics. (n.d.).

<https://www.amenclinics.com/conditions/eating-disorders/>

National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders

The National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders is an organization whose mission is to find answers for eating disorder cures and recovery options. There is still a lot of research to be done about eating disorders, and this organization is one of the most trusted and reliable resources when it comes to general up-to-date facts about eating disorders. They provide the most current research on what eating disorders are, and they provide options for support and recovery for anyone looking to start their healing journey. They are currently the leading nonprofit in the United States, and have very information on almost question someone may have about their disorder from, the types of eating disorders, what the warning signs looks like, what the effects are, how to support someone with an eating disorder, what the presumed causes are, and a variety of options for treatment. Perhaps the biggest and most helpful component they include, which makes them stand apart from the others, is that they provide a sense of community to help those struggling feel less alone.

I have used this nonprofit for current statistics about how popular eating disorders are, and how many people lose their life by it. I trust their research and I have especially appreciated the facts that give more than general statements about the disorder. I have learned things about this disorder that have shocked me, and therefore I know will shock others. For example, how many people have an undiagnosed eating disorder, how many causes are from assault, and how many people die without the direct cause being recorded as an eating disorder.

Anad: Free eating disorder support groups & services. ANAD National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders. (2023, October 24). <https://anad.org/>

Jane Friedman

Jane Friedman is a writer who never expected to write a memoir, but did. In this article on how to write a hybrid memoir, she shares her journey on how she went from writing a science-based nonfiction article to a creative memoir (with scientific facts involved). In this article she shares how her editors kept pushing her to share more and more of her story, which forced her to spend time recalling memories that she chose to forget forever. They were painful memories, but ultimately necessary for her story to be relatable to readers. Her article talks about the delicate balance of including story and scientific fact, and how writers need to accept that they will never satisfy every reader. Some readers will demand more story while some will demand more science. All in all, there is great power when a writer masters the art of telling his or her story while intermixing scientific facts.

The creative memoir that I am writing intermixes my story with a lot of scientific facts. While my purpose is not to teach my readers about eating disorders, a major part of my journey has been becoming a scholar of the brain and how it's impacted by eating disorders. I found this article very encouraging and inspiring as I attempt to keep away from a nonfiction work and solely write a creative memoir with scientific facts involved. The advice that Friedman gives on how to balance both is very helpful for me to consider as we both needed to learn how to incorporate heavy, psychological science into a story that is meant to be resonating, comprehensive, and helpful for others who have experienced similar things.

Barton, A., & Adriana Barton Adriana Barton is a journalist. (2023, March 16). *How to write a hybrid memoir*. Jane Friedman. <https://janefriedman.com/how-to-write-a-hybrid-memoir/>

“Breaking Free from Body Shame: Daring to reclaim what God has named good”

Jess Connolly is a Christian writer who wrote about her struggles with body image in her own memoir “Breaking Free from Body Shame.” She emphasizes the feelings that most women and teenage girls feel when society and social media suggest that their bodies are not good enough. She speaks honestly about the pressures to look perfect and the traps that women fall into when they believe their bodies are a never ending fix-it project. As a Christian woman, she shares how she found her freedom by focusing on what God says about the body that He created. She pulls key verses and passages from Scripture that combat the lies that women believe about their body being something that’s ugly, unworthy, invaluable, too big, too small, or in extreme cases, the reason for all of their failures.

I found her book very helpful as I searched for similar works that I wanted to adopt styles from. While Connolly doesn’t necessarily address the psychological problem with eating disorders, she does touch on a major part of it, and that’s the issue with the body. I like the way she speaks about how God designed the human body and how only He determines if it’s good enough and worthy, and I like how she incorporates verses that women can speak over themselves when they feel envious, tempted to compare, or hatred for what God has created and deemed good. I like the soft but direct style she uses as she talks about such a sensitive topic, and I like how she unapologetically talks about it too. While most women can relate to feeling like their bodies are not good enough, I believe few talk about it or seek help because it’s seen as selfish or egotistical— much the way eating disorders are seen by society.

Connolly, J. (2021). *Breaking free from body shame: Dare to reclaim what God has named good*.

Zondervan Books.

The Eating Disorder Sourcebook: A comprehensive Guide to the causes, treatments, and prevention of eating disorders

When an author wants to include true, scientific information on a topic, it's important to become extremely educated on it. In her resource book, Costin provides the all-encompassing knowledge about eating disorders from the causes to the recovery plans. She provides digestible content on a topic that, almost twenty years later, is still so misunderstood, and tactical steps on how to heal from one. This is a mix of a self-help book along with a nonfiction, informative book, similar to the workbook “The ACT Workbook for Perfectionism” by Jennifer Kemp MPysch. Her straightforward approach helps readers understand the disorder as a whole and how to prevent someone from falling into this disorder.

While the information in this sourcebook is almost twenty years old and slightly outdated, I appreciate having an older material on the subject because I believe it provides me with two critical pieces of information. First, in 2007, the digital world was just starting to emerge and social media was not a factor—today, researchers suggest that social media is one of the primary sustaining factors for why eating disorders are so hard to overcome. However, with Facebook and Instagram not being a factor, I am able to really learn more about the disease without that lens, and that’s helpful to know. This is not a twenty-first century disorder, it dates back much further than the creation of social media. I also like having a source that provides the theories about this disorder before we gained the research we do now. It helps me better understand how and why society has always painted eating disorders to be something much more glamorous than they are.

Costin, C. (2007). *The eating disorder sourcebook: A comprehensive guide to the causes, treatments, and prevention of eating disorders*. McGrawHill.

Johns Hopkins Medicine

The Johns Hopkins Medical Institution is one of the top ranked hospitals in the United States. Their resources and research have allowed them to make very impactful discoveries and procedures for patients with irreversible ailments. Their research and findings about eating disorders are unmatched to any other hospital in the United States. They produced an informative video eight years ago about how eating disorders are a psychological condition– not a choice. Some of the best doctors in the field spoke on the disorder comparing it to other well-known diseases for better understanding, and they used clear and concise metaphors to help viewers understand why the cause is unknown, the cure is nonexistent, and why the cause is not the problem– it’s the sustaining factors. They provide treatment plans that are thorough and clear for what the motive is, and they are honest about the facts and the amount of research that is left to be discovered.

I found the Johns Hopkins Medical Institution to be the most helpful when I was trying to understand the disorder in myself. I appreciate how they provide more than just a surface-level definition, but instead a deeper and more thorough explanation that includes the psychological piece of it instead of the generic “a poor relationship with food and exercise.” This resource has been my favorite and the most helpful as I continue to learn about every element of this disease and how I can explain it to my readers. It is much easier to give my personal life examples paired with easy to understand research when the scientific data is precise, concise, and exhaustive. I was able to quote their research and the metaphors used to help nonmedical personnel understand.

Eating disorders program. Johns Hopkins Medicine. (n.d.).

<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/psychiatry/specialty-areas/eating-disorders>

Beauty Sick

This is a self-help book written by Renee Engeln PhD, who has studied the psychological effects on women who live and grow up in a society so obsessed with image. This is more of a nonfiction work, rather than a memoir, so it is a collection of this doctor's studies and findings on how the culture we live in is slowly destroying how women perceive themselves. She honestly exposes how women feel internally torn and confused by hating the way society talks about women's bodies, and wanting to dismantle or rise against this belief system, but also giving into the extreme pressure to look a certain way. While this isn't a piece specifically about eating disorders, it talks about one of the primary factors to what is suspected to cause an eating disorder, and that is the unattainable expectations for how a woman is supposed to look. She includes real women's stories and tactical solutions on how to overcome and resist the temptations of doing whatever harmful activity it takes to be seen as worthy in the eyes of our culture today.

I found "Beauty Sick" to be a very helpful resource while I studied the specific elements of eating disorders. As there are many factors to eating disorders, I was able to understand the disorder in a holistic sense by studying each contributing factor individually. I did not realize the cultural damage in my life until I was forced to think back about my childhood and the belief system that I was raised in. It was not just the culture that I was raised in however, it was the culture that my mom was raised in, and my grandma, all of which the effects continue to be passed down to the next generation. The research that she did and shared in this book was very helpful in my understanding of how this disease and the belief systems form.

Engeln, R. (2018). *Beauty Sick: How the cultural obsession with appearance hurts girls and women*. Harper.

Mayo Health Clinic

The Mayo Health Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota is another highly respected and trusted medical organization in the United States. They are a nonprofit medical organization whose mission is to “Solve the world’s toughest medical problems one person at a time.” Mayo emphasizes their sacrificial commitment to putting their patients and their needs first, and with that has brought some of the most thorough research and discoveries on diseases and their cures. The work this organization has done on eating disorders is very thorough, and they have identified the various categories of eating disorders and what makes them unique from each other. They have also provided research on more than the well-known cases of bulimia and anorexia-nervosa, but they have not neglected to research other categories of eating disorders including orthorexia, avoidant disorder, binge disorder, and a few others that have been overlooked.

Mayo’s research and devotion to finding more successful prevention plans and treatment options has been a very helpful resource for me as I attempted to understand this disorder in all realms, similar to the work of Johns Hopkins Medicine. I have mainly used this resource to help me understand what makes each category of eating disorders unique from each other, and how treatment needs to be different depending on the type of disorder and the person who is suffering from it. Mayo does not go into the psychological depth that Johns Hopkins Medicine does, but they are more thorough on the causes, treatments and characteristics of eating disorders.

Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research. (2023, March 28). *Eating disorders*.

Mayo Clinic. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/eating-disorders/symptoms-causes/syc-20353603>

Life Without Ed

Jenni Schaefer is the author of “Life Without Ed: How One Woman Declared Independence from Her Eating Disorder and How You Can Too” and this resource falls into the genre of self-help books. While Schaefer shares her own story with her eating disorder, she provides tangible advice for how someone else can find the freedom from their own eating disorder as she did. She breaks down the thought patterns and how she saw her eating disorder as a toxic relationship that she needed to “break up” with. Her story is encouraging and helps others feel empowered and hopeful that they can recover too.

Schaefer’s book was certainly empowering and gave me a lot of hope that if someone else was able to recover from this low recovery disorder, then I could too. I enjoyed reading her perspective of eating disorders and her strategies that helped her, because it gave me more insight into how other people handle their eating disorder, however her perspective lacked the element of faith and it didn’t take into consideration that due to the complexity of this disease, some strategies that work for some, don’t work for others. Schaefer is certainly educated on the topic of eating disorders and she has also published another book called “Goodbye Ed, Hello Me” that became a bestseller. Her work is more nonfiction rather than memoir, even though she has included her own story to guide readers through the journey of understanding the disease and how these recovery strategies directly helped her, but it has been a very helpful resource in my endeavor of understanding the disorder both medically and personally.

Schaefer, J., & Rutledge, T. (2014). *Life without ed: How one woman declared independence from her eating disorder and how you can too*. McGraw-Hill.

Holy Bible

For followers of Jesus Christ, the Bible is both a well-known and misunderstood book of story, wisdom and instruction. It tells us where everything that we see comes from, who sustains the universe, who controls every good and bad situation, what the meaning of life is, what life after death looks like, and for those who believe in God, it instructs us on how to live a life that glorifies and honors God. It's a book of hope and direction for every trial and valley of life. It reminds human beings of where worth, value and purpose comes from, and it contradicts all of the messages that society culture believes— about ourselves, other people, and the world.

I needed to learn what the disorder was from a medical and scientific standpoint before I could start understanding how it was impacting my own life. Once I understood it as best I could, I started reflecting on how the disorder was impacting more than just what I ate and meal times. I began to understand what elements were sustaining my disorder, and I figured out what lies were sustaining my broken behaviors. As a Christian, I knew God cared about and was involved in every part of my life, and while eating disorders are not directly spoken about in the Bible, the elements of what cause and sustain an eating disorder are. After spending years reading God's Word and praying for His healing and presence in this situation in my life, I learned things about this disorder that my years of medical study never taught me. Recovery was found in more than just rewiring the brain, recovery was found in the peace of knowing our perfect God uses everything for good.

The holy bible: Containing the old and new testaments translated out of the original tongues and with the former translations diligently compared & revised. (1986). . American Bible Society.

Conclusion

Writing a memoir about eating disorders is not necessarily what seems like the obvious need amongst the eating disorder community, but it is. There are plenty of medical articles on the disorder and there are a handful of recovery strategies that have helped other people recover. However, as there is still a lot of research to be done, one thing that is made clear is that this disorder is extremely personal. What caused the disorder in one person is not what caused it in another, and the factors that sustain one person's eating disorder are not usually the same things that sustain it in another. Eating disorder survivors need to hear that they are not alone, and I want to do more than that. I want to provide a story along with hope that even if we are never fully recovered, there is joy and a good purpose in the suffering.

The resources I named have been crucial in my understanding of the disorder, how it's personal to me, and ultimately where my hope is found. The medical materials helped me gain neurological and biological knowledge about eating disorders, and the sourcebooks and self-help books helped me learn about other causes and sustainers that were different from my own. It was also beneficial to see how others coped with their disorder, and even more importantly how they wrote about it. As a follower of Jesus, the Bible was the most important resource I used. All of the scientific education pointed to a brilliant creator and loving God who does not make mistakes and uses everything for a greater purpose. Some of these resources provide information on recovery, but with no absolute solutions, I do not want to offer a solution for healing—because I also don't want to try and get in the way of something that God and His brilliance might be doing— I do want to offer an answer for hope and joy. These are two things that can feel lacking in the daily life of someone with an eating disorder, and I want to show how gaining the knowledge from these materials showed me that hope and joy don't come from a promised recovery.