

Noreen's Story

It's taken a lot of time in therapy for me to acknowledge that I have a story someone might want to read. My friends at Suppers have been working on me for months to start the telling.

I come from one of those big Irish families where every generation loses a couple members to alcoholism. In our family, I'd say about one out of six of us has a big problem, and two died with the disease in my memory. Whether or not my father is an alcoholic depends on who you talk to in the family. Most people in my family don't even own that there's a problem. My mother, well, she's just heavy. And me, I am one of the blessed ones who never spiraled down. But alcohol is somehow mixed in with my health problems and my difficult relationship with food. So are abuse and neglect. I feel disloyal using these words, but these are the words I would use today to describe our household growing up.

I hate myself when I gain weight. Hate. I go through phases of exercising like a nut. I binge eat. Sometimes I stop eating all together; that's when I get depressed. There have been times when I've eaten really conscientiously, but my idea of "conscientious" is subtracting everything that is bad for me. I have yet to establish the habit of adding things that are good for me. I'd be really proud of myself for all the eliminations, except that the motivation comes from a place inside me that is terrified of food. Gaining weight is the enemy.

Still, there have been lots of benefits to avoidance. When I stopped drinking beer and eating junk food, my joint pain just went away. That was big for me because I was feeling like an old woman at 35. A chiropractor told me I had to stop eating dairy, which seemed crazy. Milk is supposed to be good for you. But when I stopped, the pain in my gut, the constipation, and the back pain just went away. Who knew? Anymore I still want a piece of pizza, and boy do I pay!

Sugar and baked goods have been hardest. Even though my rational brain tells me to stay away, I still crave and eat junk. It's senseless. My mother is ill, and I go over and take care of her every morning. I know as well as I know my own name that if I eat a doughnut in the morning when I go over I will spiral down. I'll hate myself. I'll ruin the whole day for dieting. I'll promise myself to start again tomorrow. Then I'll starve myself or drink detox tea all the rest of the day until I feel desperate to eat. Then I make another bad choice.

I am so ashamed. I know that this is crazy, sick, but that's what I do. And I usually don't want to talk about all this. But people keep telling me that if I won't tell my story for my own sake, then I could at least think of all the people I'll help if I share this.

There's something else about me. Nobody knows about my panic attacks, not even my sisters or husband. In the community people admire me for all I get done. Everybody thinks I'm happy-go-lucky; they don't know when I'm dying inside. I almost took my own life two years ago; I had it all set up. But thoughts of my youngest child held me back. I don't want to medicate for these problems, and I have to slow my therapist down. If I flood from all the emotional triggers, I have to run away for a while. At least she taught me my problems are real.

So here I am 43 years old and I feel like my whole day is built around the goal of not falling apart. My diet is lousy, and I know that makes everything worse. But there are days I still pop that doughnut into my mouth and hate myself.

I can be really resilient. And one of toughest things about me is my denial about my relationship with food and all the issues that are wrapped up in it. I'm like a dog with a

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bone about those doughnuts. People at Suppers keep telling me my story has value. They keep saying I have a lot to offer, even though I don't live by all the wisdom I've accumulated. I guess I will keep examining my life until I'm good and ready to let go of that bone.