

How I broke up with my eating disorder

Mackenzie Millington

Received: 11/11/2023

[citation: Millington, Mackenzie (2023). How I broke up with my eating disorder. DHH, 10(1):https://journalofhealth.co.nz/?page_id=2991].

Editor's note

The following is a frank personal account of a young woman's experience of anorexia and how she survived. In her own words, Mackenzie, shares her experience of the ordeal she had to go through. Mackenzie provides candid a report of her most intimate, emotional and socio-psychological experiences and perceptions. It is important for parents, adolescents and practitioners to be exposed to such an un-inhibited and sincere personal account in order to gain insight into adolescence. As is revealed in Mackenzie's account, it is important to acknowledge and place the adolescent at the centre of treatments strategies.

In acknowledging Mackenzie's bravery and her willingness to share her ordeal with a wider audience, her account has been published without editing [other than some re-formatting]. It is hoped that Mackenzie's story will help to increase our insight into adolescents' thought processes and behaviour, and will help us to interact better with young people in order to support them to navigate adolescence. In this way the impact of emotional turmoil can be lessened or prevented before they develop into emotional adversities.

How I broke up with my eating disorder

By: Mackenzie Millington

Hi, my name is Mackenzie Millington but everyone calls me Kenzie. I have a mental illness called anorexia nervosa. This disorder is like the worst boyfriend that you can possibly imagine yet there is this need to always be near him. He protects you yet harms you. He makes you feel euphoric yet makes you want to die. He makes you feel full yet feel so starved. Starved of not only food but life, freedom, love, any emotion pretty much, and the desire to live. More than 26% of eating disorder patients attempt suicide, that is one death every 52 minutes. Within the first few years of being diagnosed with anorexia, 5% of those patients die and I was almost one of them. It took a miracle for me to make it out alive. A miracle that didn't revolve around force feeding, strict meal plans, yelling at dinner time, families breaking apart, or restrictions, but around love. As stupid as it sounds, love really saved me. Love from my family, my friends, my doctors, and my therapist, but also the love that I gained for myself. I had to love myself enough to eat. I didn't think that I could ever love myself enough to eat but here I am, eating all day everyday, eating whatever I want, and guess what I didn't get fat. For me, anorexia was a form of distraction, escapism, control, and a way that I thought would bring me true happiness, but it never gave me any of that. Well, now looking back I realize it never gave me any of that but in the moment, I thought it did. I was deeply in denial of my situation and thought that I was so happy and I felt so in control of my life and I was distracted from "bad" things in my life but truly I was distracted because I was so hungry. I was starving. All I could think about was food. I would browse grocery stores going up and down each aisle just wishing and imagining what the food would taste like. I would watch others eat on social media, I would smell food but never eat it, I would bake just to be near the food, and all I could think about was food. So because all I could think about was food, I didn't have to think about anything else. Not my trauma, not school,

not expectations, not really anything. Just food. Constantly. Even at night I would dream of food.

Now I think about food often but mainly about how excited I am to eat, or about how amazing that cake was that my best friend brought me from D.C. But, eating disorders are not about the food. Haha I know it sounds silly but the food is the last thing about eating disorders. But in order to recover from the underlying cause of your eating disorder, you have to eat.

Chapter 1: How Donnie came into my life. (Donnie. The name that my family, doctors, therapist, friends, and I call my anorexia. The name “Donnie” comes from someone specific of whom we are not big fans of. Donald Trump. If you are a fan of Trump please skip this part:) Anorexia is a lying, two faced, narcissistic bastard and the first person who came to mind was Trump. So the name Donnie was born! Naming anorexia, Donnie, made it feel less apart of me because my eating disorder does not define me.)

Now, I don't specifically remember when donnie first made his appearance but i remember my age. I was around 12-13 years old. I am 18 now. I was a competitive figure skater and I loved figure skating. It was my life. It was my joy. It was my form of escapism. It was my distraction. It was my control. Around this time was when my dad was battling alcoholism. This time I don't clearly remember but I truly lost my dad for 4 years. He was in and out of rehabs, would relapse every 3 weeks, would lie to us, would be either drunk or hungover, slept 24/7, was a slob sweaty mess, and was a horrible horrible person. Each relapse was somehow worse than the last. I was terrified. He drove me skating drunk and would say that he hated me and that I was the reason for the family's problems. This still sticks with me and impacted my eating disorder greatly. I remember he was always yelling in the middle of the night for God to take him and that he wants to die. I know that was not my dad. Now I have my dad back and he is the complete opposite of who he was when he was an alcoholic. He had his own Donnie and I know that is not him. My dad would never want to hurt me, my mom, our family, or himself. Just like how I developed Donnie he developed a Donnie. I love my dad so much and I am so proud of his recovery. He truly inspires me everyday because hey if he can do it! So can i! Amidst this time, as a competitive skater, people at the rink would make comments about our bodies and compare our bodies. The desire to stay under a specific weight or have specific body measurements. Even if we were ¼ inch over the “desired” measurements, we were considered “bigger or bulky”. This seemed to stem from social media and the internet. I would look up celebrities, models, and famous figure skaters to see their weight, measurements, and diets so I could do exactly what they do to be like them or smaller. Also a lot of diet culture talk and demonizing food and eating in general. I remember starting to view food as a sin pretty much and feeling full as the last thing i ever wanted to feel. I would seriously abuse laxatives and take diet pills from CVS. It was very disgusting to say the least. Eating anything made me feel guilty, whether it was a rice cake or a real cake, I felt insanely guilty. For what though?! Just for eating. The act of eating felt like I was doing something illegal. Also due to the stress of my family life, my appetite decreased but I didn't notice that at the time. I started to notice my body was less compared too, and I lost weight. I was actually then encouraged to eat more. I also noticed that I was starting to not feel any emotion. At the time that was a “good” thing because I didn't feel any effect from the trauma from my dad's alcoholism. I also felt that I was protecting my mom from seeing how in pain I was. I thought I was helping her because I was “fine” when really I was extremely numb. Numb from fear and sadness but also joy and love. I thought that not eating had too many benefits to stop. So I kept going. Many people outside of my family and the

rink started to notice that I was not okay. I remember going to a PT appointment for an ankle injury(which happened due to off ice training and healed very slowly due to malnutrition), and when I got up I passed out. My dr contacted my coach saying that there is more to this “injury” than just a sprained ankle. He was right. I didn't love skating anymore and my family life was falling apart. Emotionally I was not there anymore too. After my dad's last relapse on my 16th birthday I had a tea party to celebrate at this beautiful mansion. I was surrounded by all of my amazing friends and my mom. My Dad was not there as he was in the ICU and was very close to death. Somehow I knew he was dying yet I was so numb that I didn't feel anything. I knew that the possibility of not seeing my Dad ever again was very high. I hardly ate anything at my party and fainted there too. I found out my Dad survived and from the hospital, he was sent to his 4th or 5th rehab which was his final. I felt a weight life off of me because he was safe and in good hands away from my mom and i. So, I decided to leave the rink after that day and take a long 2.5 year break. The stress from my dad's situation and the malnutrition left me in a not so great place physically or mentally. Now that I felt safe at home, I didn't want to leave. I was so traumatized that I could hardly leave the house. I couldn't even go shopping and I love shopping! I could barely go for a neighborhood walk because I felt so unsafe. When I felt safe from the ice rink's negativity and felt safe from my dad's alcoholism it felt easier to eat. For a while, Donnie was in the back of my mind yet still there. I was still eating but there was always that voice in the back of my head saying “you can't/shouldn't eat that, you will gain so much weight!” But for a good amount of time I heard the voice but I didn't respond to it and didn't really acknowledge or listen to it. I was eating because I finally felt a bit safer, but I was still following Donnie rules, just not too extreme. This went on for a little over a year of still living with eating disorder thoughts just not really noticing them. Subconsciously, I was living with these rules like eating under x amount of calories, sneaking into my mom's room to weigh myself each morning, only eating under a certain amount of carbs, fats, sugars, etc. I lived like that for a while but thought it was normal. I didn't want to lose weight but somehow I did as I thought it would make me feel safe and happy, which is what I really craved at that time. Things were okay but progressively got worse, somehow.

Chapter 2: August 2022

Around August of 2022, anorexia took me over. I was overrun by donnie. I completely listened to the eating disorder and all the rules which got even more extreme. Numbers got lower and lower and lower, the “goal” got smaller and smaller, and I slowly was losing my mind and in deep denial. This was the lowest I have ever been in my life physically and mentally..

Hardly eating and over exercising, harming my body and dying. I was in complete hell. There was a point where I prayed to God that I wouldn't wake up. My family and I went on a caribbean cruise over christmas and that was the most miserable i have ever been. I mean a cruise has the most amazing food and I hardly ate. We went to an extremely fancy restaurant and I ordered steamed broccoli. Like come on girl!!! A plate of steamed broccoli oh and absolutely no oil, not even spray oil! WTF!! I look back and laugh but at that time that was all I could do. I pity that girl because at least I ate something even if it was steamed vegetables. *eye roll*. When we got home, pretty much I got worse and worse. I was in the hospital in January and even after that I still didn't eat. My parents got me into a virtual Renfrew program which literally was the worst form of “treatment” ever for me. I mean it may work for others but it certainly didn't work for me. Eventually, Renfrew wanted me to go in-patient and I said absolutely not! I bawled my eyes out as they didn't even tell my parents before telling me. I was called into a zoom with the counselor, and she said “well you aren't progressing fast enough, so you're coming to our inpatient facility in downtown

Philadelphia.” Bawling, I ran downstairs to my Mom and begged her to not make me go. As a family, we decided that I will not be going no matter what Renfrew says. How can that form of treatment work for me? It can’t. We were so lost. My parents were worried sick for me. I didn’t want to get better. I didn’t see the light at the end of the tunnel. And I was still in so much denial. What else is there to do now?

Chapter 3: How my Mom ended up finding my savior who was only 30 mins from home, randomly on the Internet.

After Renfrew dropped me, my parents started to panic. What else is there? Residential? I was scared to the bone as I thought for sure that in less than 24 hours, I would be sent to a residential treatment center, of which from there I would end up getting worse, most likely.

My

Mom found Adolescent Medicine in the Lehigh Valley. Now, I have been there before for anxiety but never fully committed to their care. We didn’t even know that they treated eating disorders.

My Mom found Dr. Omar who specializes in mental health and suicide prevention. So my mom booked an appointment! One day in March, my dad and I went to see him. I was scared yet so over it. Honestly, I didn't want help. I didn't want to eat. I didn't want to be forced to eat. I didn't want freedom taken away from me. I didn't want to become a vegetable and my only real purpose is to get through a day of eating. No way. Well, when we met Dr. Omar, it was like the universe finally giving my family and I what we wanted. Dr. Omar is the kindest, most gentle man ever. Almost like a grandfatherly figure. I broke down crying after 15 minutes of being with him because for the first time ever I thought, wait maybe I can recover? Maybe I do want to get better?! We gave him a synopsis of what has been going on and pretty much said that there are no restrictions. No fighting over food. No tears or yelling. If I want to exercise, I can but don't over do it. Make sure you eat, but it doesn't matter what you eat, just eat. I admit, Donnie was happy to hear this. I could eat diet foods or low calorie or sugar free foods all i want, i just have to eat. I can walk as much as I want to as long as I eat. He said that I must drink at least 3 Ensures a day. I tried to get away by filling up the bottles with water, but it didn't work as I got caught. He put me on meds for depression, intrusive thoughts, a thyroid med, and an appetite inducer medication. After I was under his care, I was dropped from school and focused on recovery and refining my love for myself. I was meeting with my therapist, Mojca, at least 3 times a week either in person or over the phone. Mojca also really saved me and we still to this day talk weekly and have a strong connection. She is almost like an older sister to me. I can talk to her about anything and she knows exactly what to say. She encouraged me and said that in order to recover from my eating disorder, I need to get out pent up emotions and release. This was so hard for me as I was taught to shove down emotions and fake happiness. Now with this new form of care, I felt that I almost had some hope. Maybe I will try Dr. Omar and Mojca's way.

Was I ready to surrender?

Chapter 4: Spring 2023-Late Summer 2023

I did not surrender just yet. I was not very compliant or I was doing the bare minimum. Some call this quasi recovery. I did want to get better by this point but I was still in the trenches of anorexia. Numbers kept dropping and as they dropped my life became smaller and smaller. I couldn't leave the house, people stared at me with pity, my friends didn't want to hang out with a sick girl, Mojca had to drop me for a bit as she suggested Residential as I was not progressing, I was quickly dying. I was over exercising and not eating enough for my body to

even function. I thought I was being cunning or deceitful and covering up my Donnie behaviors and actions but everyone around me could see right through. It was pretty apparent as I would wake up sicker and sicker each day and I could not control my emotions.

Essentially, I was extremely hungry

24/7. I was verbally abusive to my parents and myself. I was a bitch all the time lol. Every little thing pissed me off and I would always be yelling or stupidly defensive. I was in complete hell all day everyday. The only "peace" I got was when I was asleep and I would be so disappointed that I woke up the next morning. I was in the most awful place ever. I truly wanted to die. I didn't want to live. I didn't know how I was going to make it. I truly thought I was going to die, whether I died from anorexia or suicide. This was the worst time of my life as I looked like crap and I felt like crap. I could not rely on my body. My bones were brittle. My bladder was incontinent. I was always constipated or severely bloated. I was always freezing. I used a heater in the middle of Summer. I even had burns on my legs from how close I was to my space heater. My hair, skin, and nails sucked. I freaked out anytime I had to sit or eat. I walked all day in 100 degree summer heat. My life was nothing. I was nothing but a bag of bones. I had no humor, no love, no joy, no desire to live, and no family. I pushed everyone away and then no one wanted to be around me. I didn't even want to be with myself. I hated myself. I was hurting myself because I hated myself so much. This was the most insecure and alone I have ever felt in my life. I was ready to die. I was ready to give up. I wanted to go home.

Chapter 5: The beginning of something greater than good. The beginning of my life.

In August 2023, I went back to school. School gave me a sense of purpose as I was expected to be at my classes. Mentally, I was still in a horrible place but eventually I slowly crept my way into a better place. Around my 18th birthday, I had an episode where I had a seizure. I woke up to use the restroom and I fainted. I quickly got back into bed and I started flailing my arms and witching. I was conscious but I had no control of my body. My Mom heard my fall and saw me having a mini seizure. She was panicking, I was terrified, my mom was going to call 911 but somehow she didn't. Once I stopped seizing, I chugged 2 Ensures and fell back asleep. My mom slept with me that night. I was back at school at 8a.m the next morning completely unaware of what just happened that night. This continued for a few weeks where I would faint and my mom would find me unconscious. Sometimes this does still happen. Dr. Omar said that this is due to dehydration so when this happens I drink a zillion ounces of water with electrolytes. I began to get so tired of this life. I was miserable. I could not trust my body to even go down the stairs. My school work was getting worse and I was getting worse. One day I woke up and chose to eat.

Chapter 6: Choosing to eat and to decide to live.

As strange as it sounds, I woke up one morning and chose to eat. I was so hungry. So starving.

My way was not working. Starving myself was not working. I was killing myself and everyone around me, so one late morning I decided to eat. I didn't look at calories or track anything, I just ate. I ate whatever I wanted. I ate chocolate, bread, chips, ice cream, and so much more.

Afterwards, I felt so guilty and awful and tried to throw it up. My Mom caught me and I just cried in her arms, but then I realized I saved myself from death. Eating saved me. Choosing to eat saved me. Yes, I freaked out by how much I was eating but I couldn't stop. I was always hungry. Some call this extreme hunger. I was a bottomless pit. I ate full candy bars each day, I would go through almost a loaf of bread in a day, I ate bags after bags of popcorn everyday, I ate pretty much everything in the kitchen! I used to always hoard food in the

hopes of one day eating it and now I did! The kitchen has never been cleaner! This went on for a few weeks and I still sometimes experience this. I can't describe in any other way than just being constantly starving no matter what you eat. It is a bit annoying but I was making up for so much lost time. The more that I ate, I realized nothing bad happened and I did not get fat. All that yummy delicious food went to my internal organs and repaired the damage Donnie did to me. Mentally, I was also improving. My emotions were more regulated. I started to have energy and started looking so much better! I began to get a glow in my face and just was better. I was becoming Kenzie again.

One morning, I developed edema and this really messed with my mind. It was due to my body adjusting to food. I was holding quite a bit of water weight. My body was holding on to extra water as she did not trust me to feed her. She was just being cautious in case there was a food famine again. Honestly, this messed with my mind as I thought I gained fat overnight but I was reassured that I didn't as that is impossible. I saw Dr. Omar again and I was prescribed a diuretic. Before starting the diuretic, I was sent to the hospital to ensure that there was no water in my lungs because of how much was in my extremities. Luckily, I was completely fine and started the diuretic. Slowly the edema went down. I continued eating. Everyday, more and more extreme hunger and trying new foods. The more I ate, the further I got from Donnie, the happier

I got, the more peaceful I became, the stronger I became, the more beautiful I became. After weeks and weeks of this, Dr. Omar said that I am a lot healthier now, probably healthier than I have been in a while. And that doesn't mean that I gained a thousand pounds and now I'm healthy again. I gained my personality back and my beauty back. I am no longer a scary ghost. I am no longer in the danger zone and I am mentally so much healthier. He allowed and encouraged me to exercise safely. I now love to run, walk, do pilates, etc all for fun and for my mental health reasons. I don't push myself. My only rule is if I move, I eat before and after. I make sure I police myself. Whether it's a 10 minute run or a 30 minute pilates class, I eat. I now move to improve my mental health and I no longer think about burning calories or obsess about the amount of steps I take in a day. As insane as it sounds, something clicked in my head and I began to truly recover and heal my relationship with my body, food, and emotions.

Chapter 7: Where I am at now

Today, I am happy. I choose to be happy. I say affirmations to myself each morning. I always journal. I am open about all my struggles. I am learning to love my body for how resilient she is. I can trust my body again. Of course, I still have horrible bad days but I have tools now. Some days really suck. Some days I cry over food or my body. Some days I have the desire to restrict but at the end of the day, I eat, no matter the mindset. I eat and I get to eat! I have no reason to restrict anymore. I never want to be in that hell ever again. I don't want to die. I am slowly seeing that there is so much to live for. I appreciate all aspects of life. Like right now, I'm looking out my window and it is a beautiful autumn morning with the shining sun coming through my window and lighting up my room. My room is now filled with the golden light of the sun. And that gives me a reason to live. If the sun goes down every night and still rises in the morning, then so can I. Life sometimes really fucking sucks but the majority of the time life is exquisitely amazing. During that horrible time of my life, a lot of good things happened. I processed years of stuffed down emotions, I got my first car, I made new friends, I got back on the ice for fun, and I truly learned to love myself. I began to love food as well. I am so lucky to live in a world where I can eat whatever I want whenever. I think I love food now. I love life now. I love my family. I love my support team. I love my friends. I love myself. I love that I went through hell but now I am more free and at peace. In the end, it all

comes down to love. As my hero Audrey Hepburn says “Love is the best investment, the more you give, the more you get in return”. The more love you give to yourself, the more love you give to others, therefore making you love yourself even more. I am surrounded by love and I love myself so much now, enough to eat. I’m done being hungry and empty. I am full of life, love, and delicious food. As Audrey Hepburn also says,” Let’s face it, a nice creamy chocolate cake does a lot for people; it does for me”, and that says everything I feel.