

IN YOUR OWN WORDS

Reflections on Living with Obesity

EDITED BY ELLYN SPRAGINS



In Your Own Words

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The letters in this book have been written by people who have been living with obesity, a chronic disease that affects millions of people. This book, edited by Ellyn Spragins, explores themes of grief, guilt, and the journey to overcome the bias, stigma and shame so often associated with one's weight. The views and opinions expressed are not representative of Novo Nordisk and should not be considered as treatment advice.

Novo Nordisk has permission from all participants confirming their consent to use their letters and personal details in the In Your Own Words: Reflections on Living with Obesity book.

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Introduction from

ELLYN SPRAGINS

How many of you have looked back at an arduous passage in your life and wished you'd known then what you know now? Most of us, probably. This desire is so common that we have shorthand for it: 20/20 hindsight. Who knows better than you exactly what your younger self was struggling with—and that perfect piece of wisdom that would have smoothed the way?

For me, this idea led to three books filled with letters that I collaborated on and a speaking career which allowed me to bring the Letters To My Younger Self experience to life for hundreds of people in seminars and workshops. From the letters that emerged, I learned that everyone, even the seemingly invincible, has struggles. Very few letters, however, were about a physical or health problem. And yet, wouldn't it be extremely helpful to know how other people have handled—or mishandled—a health challenge, so that we could gain from their experience?





ELLYN

This is the thinking that led to *In Your Own Words*, the book in your hands. It contains eight letters from people living with obesity. Together, the letters are a testimony to the pain created by the stigma associated with obesity and the many assumptions surrounding it. Though obesity is considered a medical condition, the letter writers felt their weight caused them to be keenly judged—to be lazy, for example, or undisciplined. The authors of these letters have much to share with others who are living with obesity, as well as with people for whom weight has never been an issue. It will take an attitude shift by both groups to eliminate the humiliation that is so frequently heaped on overweight people.

Food played a part in letter writers' experiences, of course. But it was the way their efforts to protect their mental health connected to food that is the most important theme here.

For Brian, whose teenage confidence was routinely undermined by those close to him, eating became a comfort that grew even more essential in his twenties when he was in a job he hated. For Tara, who grew up comparing herself unfavorably to her tiny sisters and to friends, bingeing in secret was like an addiction, providing a "high."

As you will read, the condition of being obese had a terrible impact on mental health. These eight people experienced grief, guilt, bullying, and social alienation, to name just a few of the happiness crushers. As a result, they felt bitter and self-loathing. The pain and shame of being fat was the most universal sentiment carried by the men and women in this book. Though some of them endured insults or criticism because of their weight, no outsider treated these eight people as harshly as they treated themselves.

Recounting an experience with his therapist, in which he was asked to speak to a photograph of himself as a young child, Andrew said: “When I first spoke to the photograph, all my internal words came out. The disgust and anger were unbelievable. I would never talk to a real kid the way I had been talking to myself.”

The advice that our letter writers offer their younger selves varied. But almost all of it entailed grappling with one’s mental and emotional patterns. No one mentioned diets, calories, or food. The letter writers encouraged their younger selves to recognize that things are not as bad as they perceive them to be. They suggested learning to restructure one’s thoughts and to discover new outlets for stressors. Talena told herself to be brave enough to ask for help, boldly, without shame—and repeatedly if needed. Tanya asked her younger self to stop putting everyone else’s needs ahead of her own, and to say “No.”

Most importantly, the eight people in this book wished they had known how important it is to unyoke their weight from the stifling and restrictive set of beliefs they associated with it. As Tanya says in her letter: “What you need to know is that your weight just doesn’t matter. It doesn’t tell you whether or not you can travel the world. It doesn’t determine how smart or dedicated you are. Your weight means nothing. We give it so much power, but, truly, it doesn’t have that power.”

I hope that reading these frank and heartfelt letters will help readers who are living with obesity feel less alone, less judged, and fully empowered. There are a host of options that are available for this medical condition. If any of the eight people in this book were standing in front of you right now, they would say: “If I can do it, you can too.” I also hope that those who have never struggled with serious weight issues will reflect upon how they might help erase the stigma felt by people living with obesity.

My thanks to the special eight who were generous enough to open up their hearts and minds in this booklet. May their letters and In Your Own Words light the way for many others.

-Ellyn Spragins
Malvern, PA



Andrew says he has always been different. Alone. By himself. One-of-a-kind. Weird.

His life started in sadness with the tragic, sudden loss of his biological mother when he was four months old. Though he grew up surrounded and supported by the love of his family, he created a narrative around the untimely death of his 32-year-old birth mother. How could someone die so young? He decided his birth must have caused it, though in fact it was an undetected heart defect. So, he lived much of his childhood, adolescence, teenage and adulthood with unconscious grief, guilt, and shame.

As a child, Andrew used food to medicate these feelings. At around 5 or 6 he also used it in immature attempts at humor with his peers, eating off of the floor, for example, or letting kids throw food at him. Nicknamed “Piggy Wiggy” by other kids, he always found himself on the outside looking in. Weird. Silly. Disgusting.

He began to revile himself as a child and his state of mind only worsened as he grew older. Already socially ostracized, he felt even more alone when he realized his identity as a gay man during his teenage years. Living in rural southwestern Ontario, Andrew knew no one like himself. The urge to expose his authentic self did battle with the fear of revealing his sexual orientation. “I was made fun of and bullied, so I don’t know what could have gotten worse—except the idea that maybe even my family wouldn’t accept me if they knew the truth,” says Andrew.

He suffered in pain and silence for many years. Yet his desire to be seen and acknowledged continued, in an unarticulated form. His body spoke for him. “I began to eat extraordinary amounts of food to gain weight in order to be seen,” Andrew remembers. “Somewhere inside I felt maybe if I gain enough weight I will be seen, and someone will accept me for who I am.”

Now 45, it wasn’t until ten years ago, after experiencing some serious health problems and losing more than 100 pounds, that Andrew went to therapy and began to unravel the knot of his emotions around food. After working through the loss of his mother, he and the therapist started on his self-hatred. “I brought in a photograph of myself as a child and we literally spent sessions talking to that little boy. When I first spoke to him, all my internal words came out. The disgust and anger were unbelievable,” remembers Andrew. “I would never talk to a real kid the way I had been talking to myself.”

Andrew chose to write to his younger self during his early thirties. He lived in Toronto, Ontario, and had “come out” in his private life. Working professionally in the education sector, he did not feel it was safe to live his true identity in the workplace. He badly wanted to meet a potential life partner, but as an obese gay male, he continued to find himself solo. The words still reverberated inside: Disgusting. Fat. Alone.

One evening, he went to one of his favorite pubs on Church Street in downtown Toronto with friends. As a fat gay man in the close quarters of a bar, he frequently needed to apologize for taking up so much space when moving to the bar or the bathroom. On this night, he found a chair in the corner and tried to blend into the background. He just wanted to disappear, but simultaneously very much wanted to be seen and approached. And he was approached, with devastating results. More than one guy at the bar that night told him: “You’ve got a great face, but I wouldn’t be interested in a guy in that body. Sorry.”

Even twenty years later, these words burn. Andrew is writing to himself at this moment in the bar.





Dear Piggy Wiggy/ Andy Roo:

Ashamed. Embarrassed. Devastated. This rejection has only further ingrained the shame and guilt that you have felt since childhood:

Fat, silly, stupid, disgusting kid.

Weird, gay teen.

Overweight, fat, obese slob of a man.

Will you ever find a companion, or a life partner? The answer seems to be a permanent “No.” But Andrew, you need to know that this moment has no true power over you. That rejection is on them, not on you. It is not a reflection of you as a person. It is a reflection of the inability of those individuals to see you for all of your beautiful gifts.

In the heteronormative rural community that you lived in as a teen, you were never part of the crowd – always on the outside looking in. This is a pattern in the way that you have perceived your interactions with others throughout your life. You need to understand that this perception—your feelings of exclusion and rejection—are not as pervasive as you imagine.

You have been living this perception of rejection since childhood. Your birth mother rejected you – she died. You were never accepted as Piggy Wiggy despite your best efforts to make people laugh and find you endearing.

Dear
ANDREW

ANDREW

The world does not see you with the shame, guilt, and self-hatred that you are feeling right now. Those insensitive and unpleasant words do not reflect who you are, and they are not the way that most people see you. They see the real, beautiful you.

You need to walk through the world like you belong here. The world needs to make space for all of you in all of your magnificence. You have extraordinary talents and gifts to offer. Show up and be present. Be aware that people love, respect and relish in the beautiful person that you are.

People always say that you must love and accept yourself first, before expecting others to love and accept you. And it's true. It's easy to say, but hard to do. You will have to learn, very slowly, to dismantle the monstrous image you created of yourself and rewrite the horror story of a pariah that you've always told yourself. And you can, with the help of a talented therapist and the support of your life partner.

And Andrew, look what will happen as a result: You are going to leverage these traumatic experiences for such powerful good. You're going to use your pain to mobilize change in support of positive physical and mental health. You will start to speak differently to the young child you were and the adult you are now:

Attractive, funny, thoughtful man.
Smart, talented, influential professional.
Worthy, desirable, lovable person.

Your biggest supporter,

Andrew



At the age of 30, Brian was given two curt words of advice about what he needed to do to be promoted to VP at the consulting firm where he worked: “Lose weight.” Co-workers saw he was getting heavier. No one wanted to deal with an out-of-control consultant, he was told. If he could go back in time and give himself advice at this moment, he says, it would consist of three definitive, incisive, and imperative words. “GET OUT NOW!”

Instead, he stayed in consulting. He didn't try to lose weight because he felt it would be hopeless. He didn't know how he'd find the time to exercise and eat better while working 12 hours a day. In fact, the job was extraordinarily detail-oriented and pressured. But that is not all that Brian was wrestling with.

As a youngster, he had an unspecified learning disability, which made him ashamed. Then, starting in his early teens, his natural confidence seemed to trigger resentment among peers, and sometimes among adults who were supposed to be mentors. Some of the people around Brian tried to verbally rip apart his self-assurance.

By the time he graduated from university, Brian's confidence had unceremoniously been stolen from him. Insecure and confused, he felt pressured to take the “good” job in consulting that he was able to land—and he succeeded in it. But the strain of analyzing thousands of numbers, knowing that a single numerical mistake could blow up an entire project, drove him to use food for comfort. He was blind to this habit, and also to his weight gain. Having always been thin,

with a fast metabolism, he believed he was unaffected by overeating. “I thought I was genetically blessed,” he explains. “I could eat whatever I wanted for the rest of my life and I would never gain weight. That was also a way that I tried to hold onto my youth.”

By age 33, he needed to lose 100 pounds. He quit the consulting job to start his own company and he began losing weight. Instead of finding a permanent solution to his weight and food issues, he entered into years of hellish “disordered thinking,” dieting and secretive exercise routines before he landed on a treatment plan that worked for him. Today, 53, and an accomplished psychotherapist in the field of weight loss, he understands the historical psychodynamics that made him use food to comfort. He also recognizes the underlying forces that caused him to go on a 15-year roller coaster of distorted eating, comfort eating, and weight gain that almost ruined his health forever. This is his letter to himself in his early teenage years.

A portrait of Brian, a middle-aged man with short, graying hair, wearing black-rimmed glasses and a dark red V-neck sweater over a white collared shirt. He is smiling slightly and looking directly at the camera. The background is a plain, light gray.

BRIAN



Dear Brian,

You have so much potential and so much confidence. But during these tender and vulnerable years of your life, your confidence is under threat – in fact it is under attack. You need to look out for people who want to tear you down and put you in your place. That’s what happens to people who are confident.

The worst of the people who are dismantling your confidence are those closest to you and those you rely on the most. In the future, Brian, you will have many qualified therapists tell you that these people operate just below the surface—they will function in such a way that their damage will go undetected by you.

I am here to give you permission to not listen to those people, and also to advise you not to try to change them. You have an annoyingly quick wit that will make you want to try, but don’t waste your breath. You will learn later in life that the best thing about beating your head against a brick wall is simply stopping.

More broadly, there will be many people in your life who try to break you and betray you. This will sting, but it is a part of life. That is just a matter of bad luck for you. What I am here to tell you is that you can handle the rejection and that you can, should, and must change.

Dear
BRIAN
BRIAN

Unfortunately, you will not have role models in your life who will teach you self-reliance, resilience, or how to handle rejection. One key piece of advice: See people for their ability to be humble, vulnerable, and genuinely wise – not their perceived successes or their outward images. Seek out adults who understand vulnerability and recovery from failure. They will help you learn how to look around you and realize that things are not so bad as rejection makes them seem. You will understand how to restructure your own thoughts and that will prove a powerful practice.

You are growing up in a time and a community where it is not ok to be uncertain or to fail. People will strip you down out of their own sense of insecurity. Don't take that in!! Please learn that you can be intimidating to some people, whether it is because you are successful, smart, funny, or (dare I say) thin and handsome.

Also, you need to evaluate whether your career and your relationships with others are nurturing to you. You must learn to let go of what harms you and people who seek to put you down. When you are in a good relationship you will know how to change yourself, or make a person feel comfortable, because the relationship will be mutually beneficial.

If you do not take this advice, you will slip into exercise bulimia, binge eating, extreme weight gain, and a wholly unsatisfying career in consulting. To save yourself from the discomfort of your life, you will want to hold on to your youth by eating what you want, thinking that you will never gain weight because you've always been thin, and praised highly for it. You will not realize that you are using food for comfort and to address the confusion you feel about not being happy in a life that others wanted for you, but you did not want for yourself. You will use food to hold on to the person that you should have been, and the confidence that was stolen from you.

However, you can and will address these impediments through decades of intensive personal growth, and it will work for you. You will turn your issues with eating into a very successful career that you both love and want. You will find those mentors. You will learn the value of vulnerability. Brian, you will succeed on your own terms and, despite it all, you will not have any regrets in life. Somehow, even at the tender age of 12 - 14, I think you know that already.

With a protective heart,

Brian



When Lili was 51, a wonderful opportunity presented itself: a job managing business-to-business accounts for an airline. Having been an office manager previously, she was very excited after a month of interviews and tests to land the new position. Now 56, Lili says: “I love it. It’s more me. I’m very social and just love meeting different people around the country.”

Initially, however, there was a big health problem that she didn’t know how to solve. She was exhausted. And she had gained a lot of weight fairly quickly. Only 5’ tall, she was shocked to realize that all her clothes were sized “L” or “XL.” Her feeling of anxiety about her health was overlaid by crippling self-consciousness about how she looked.

Her job required her to attend press conferences and trade shows. How would it feel to have so many people looking at her?

In her new job she also had to go to a meeting in the U.S. once a month. “The board room where the meeting took place was so small that I was unable to squeeze behind the chairs in order to get to my chair. People would have to move to let me in,” Lili remembers. That was shocking to her. And terribly discouraging.

Tired and overweight, she thought. I guess this is going to be my life.





Dear
LILI

Hello Lili,

The hopelessness that you feel is real. You are trapped in a body that you do not know. You also do not recognize the clothes in your closet. You feel you are living someone else's life.

Your initial approach was to go to the gym several times per week and eat clean. But the results were disappointing. You blamed it on menopause and getting older. Well, this is your life sentence, you thought.

So, now it feels like there is no way out. No solution.

Lili, there is a solution and there are answers. You have not explored alternatives for the simple reason that you don't realize there are alternatives to this life and how you are feeling. Seek out some answers, starting with your family doctor. She will discover that you have an underactive thyroid and refer you to a specialist.

The journey from there will be so positive. You will find a medication that works, but also realize that it is not a cure-all for the extra weight.

You will have to work on all fronts, by also becoming more active and changing your eating habits. The rewards? You'll be surprised that the rewards are so much greater than just losing weight. You will get your energy back. You will recognize yourself and your life again.

And you will have tremendous pride that you have achieved so much when you had no hope. All the times you felt like giving up, you were nevertheless so consistent. It was not an easy journey, battling the anxiety and depression that you felt, but you chose to be kind to yourself and to believe that you are worth it. You chose yourself and health above all else!

With admiration,

Lili



To offer a deeper perspective on their personal experiences, the author has chosen to write in the first person.

It was the spring of 1993. I was 30 years old, fat, bald, suffering from chronic insomnia, rife with pain and vomiting daily. My diagnoses included alopecia areata, rheumatoid arthritis, and Hashimoto disease, yet I was told multiple times these conditions were not related. I was working at The Hospital for Sick Children (HSC). It was meaningful to be working alongside caring medical staff as they looked after children and families during life-altering illnesses. In addition to my work in the Rheumatology Division, I would go the HSC Theatre on Thursday nights to volunteer with the kids during the weekly production of Tails, a play about being different and having value. My job was to help the kids pin on tails and ears and move amongst them to sing and act out the parts... “Quincy Tailor, that’s my name come and see my wagon.” To see the smiles and laughter through breathing tubes, pain pumps and life sustaining machines taught me how strong the kids’ spirits were. My health challenges seemed insignificant some days, knowing that others battled for their lives and breath.

My hair had fallen out completely, but it was ok because I saw children go bald from chemo. I tried to encourage them and joke around, showing them my bald head in support. But, being fat and bald, that is a devastating combination. I remember children who refused to take their prednisone and other medications if it made them gain weight or puff out their faces. In the case of prednisone, this effect is called “hamburger” or “moon” face. At school, these children would get bullied mercilessly. Severely ill children would rather reject life-saving meds and be sick, than be “fat” and tormented. This is the culture we live in.

As a fat girl, I regularly experienced ridicule or disapproving looks on people’s faces. I heard comments like “You must have been pretty.” or “You could be so pretty” all the time. My mother told me every day, “If it wasn’t for your pumpkin, you would look good.” Store clerks dismissed me, saying, “Sorry, but we do not have anything for you here” as I was browsing. I had to always look my best to

bust the stereotype that fat people do not care about themselves. I did not know that the greatest humiliation I would face because of my burgeoning weight would be at the hands of a doctor, an endocrinologist who was a highly regarded specialist in the field. Here is what transpired that afternoon, when the long-awaited appointment arrived.

I arrive for the appointment, wearing my new taupe suede jacket and matching animal print dress. My wig is freshly styled so that I look like a fat girl who cares about her appearance. In the reception, I hang up the jacket and sit with my back to the wall. As a victim of physical, mental and sexual abuse as a child, I am constantly looking for the safest spot, where I can see what is around me and who is coming and going.

A portrait of a woman with long, wavy, light brown hair, smiling warmly. She is wearing a bright pink, textured blazer over a black top, and a multi-strand pearl necklace. The background is a plain, light color.

RACHELLE

I am nervous with hope and anticipation. Maybe now I will be diagnosed properly and get the treatment I deserve. Maybe my baldness, chronic bone-crunching pain, insomnia and weight gain will go away.

The nurse calls me to a large examination room. She says, “Please take off all your clothes, except your panties and put on the blue gown. Take off your wig.” Being semi-naked is scaring me because bad things happen when you do not have clothes on.

As I survey the room I wonder... why am I in this large room? It is triple the size of a regular exam room. The bed is behind me, a small sink to my right, table and chair to the left. In front of me is a Netter Medical Illustration of the Endocrine System. This is familiar to me because Sick Kids, where I work, has the Netter illustrations all over. I like to look at them to educate myself.

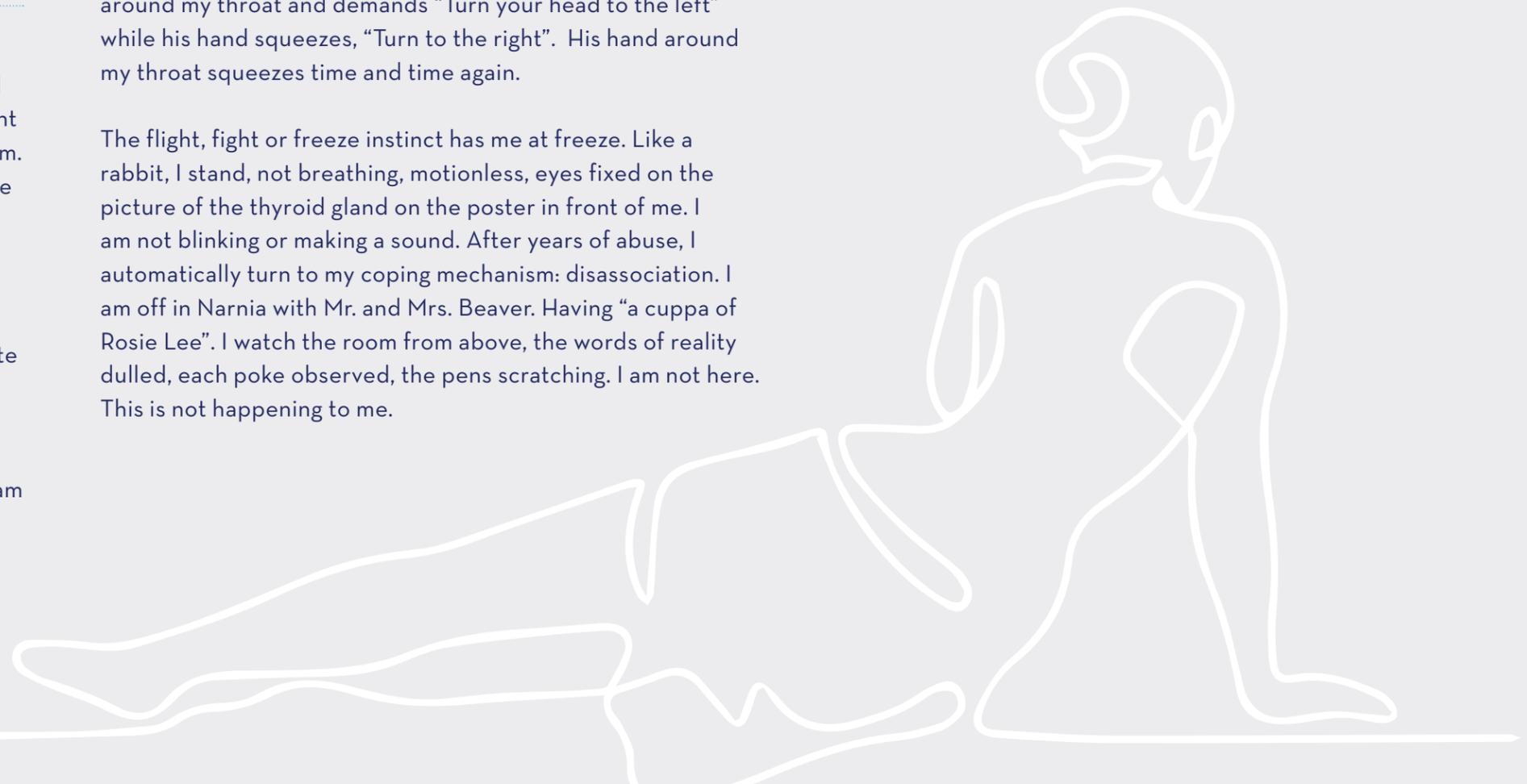
I stand cold, frightened, exposed, with no wig on. The door opens and five people – three men and two women with white coats and stethoscopes around their necks -- file in. They surround me; one blond woman to my right, a young man to my right front, a brown haired man straight in front, a grey haired man to my left front and a petite woman to my left. I am surprised. No one prepared me for this mob.

In seconds, the power dynamic is established. The man to my left front is the specialist. The dominant alpha. No one introduces themselves. There is no eye contact, just heads down writing on notepads. The doctor steps forwards and addresses his students. “Here we have a 30 year old obese menstruating female specimen, presenting with...” Even now, 29 years later, as I write and recall this doctor’s treatment of me, anger and humiliation rages through me. No one addresses me. No “How are you Miss Hansen?” “Could you tell us about what brought you here today?” Nothing. He calls me a specimen... an obese specimen...

I stop hearing what he is saying because of the tidal waves of blood rushing in my ears. The doctor steps forward, and with his left index finger he pokes my head to the right, then to the left, then to the front and then to the back, surveying the remaining tufts of hair. Poke, poke, poke, poke. His left hand grips around my throat with the order to “Swallow”. He feels around my throat and demands “Turn your head to the left” while his hand squeezes, “Turn to the right”. His hand around my throat squeezes time and time again.

The flight, fight or freeze instinct has me at freeze. Like a rabbit, I stand, not breathing, motionless, eyes fixed on the picture of the thyroid gland on the poster in front of me. I am not blinking or making a sound. After years of abuse, I automatically turn to my coping mechanism: disassociation. I am off in Narnia with Mr. and Mrs. Beaver. Having “a cuppa of Rosie Lee”. I watch the room from above, the words of reality dulled, each poke observed, the pens scratching. I am not here. This is not happening to me.

The five doctors file out of the exam room without a word, leaving me trying to process what just happened. My mind drifts back. Is it safe? Are they coming back? Can I put my clothes on? Can I put my wig and some dignity back on? The nurse wanders by the open door to my left. “Is the appointment over?”, she asks. I whisper, “I don’t know.” A few minutes later she is back and says “You are free to go.” I exhale, cramming my wig on to my head, putting on only my dress and bra, no time to put on my slip and pantyhose. I tear out of the door, down the hall to my left and out of the office, leaving behind my new jacket. I don’t care. Get the hell out of here! is all that is pounding through my head. I never go back for my jacket.





Dear Rachelle,

You are worth MORE.
You are HUMAN.
You have VALUE.
You are LOVED.

Replace the sentences running through your head with these truths. You are sitting on a bench in Alexandria Park, across the street from the doctor's office, howling your eyes out. Right now you feel humiliated, your spirit broken beyond repair.

You're fat...you're stupid... you're ugly...you're fat... you're stupid... you're worthless... no one loves you. You are an obese specimen, not even a human...

The doctor just said so. Not just one doctor, but the four others who were complicit in their silence.

You are nothing.

At this moment, the façade of who you believe yourself to be is completely eviscerated. No matter what you try to tell yourself. No matter how many pep talks you give yourself, it has just been proven to you by five doctors that you are worthless, less than garbage, an obese, fat, stupid girl who clearly has nothing wrong with her. You never hear from this doctor again. There is no follow up. Nothing.

Trust me, my dearest girl, you will learn your value.
You will make a difference.
You will make your dreams come true.
You will go and live in England, My Lionheart.

Dear
RACHELLE

You will trek up the Virunga mountains twice, walking in the steps of Dian Fossey and her beloved Digit. You will go to Cameroon to help heal baby orphaned chimpanzees in the sanctuary. You will follow the path of Dr. Jane Goodall and work with chimpanzees.

You will be a voice for the abused and voiceless.
You will make your home a safe haven for hurt children.
You will fight for your life and win.
You will do the work and heal the past traumas, including this one.

After many years of trying to find an answer and being seen by rheumatologists, gastroenterologists, dermatologists and endocrinologists, you will finally find a doctor who will do a simple Vitamin D test that unlocks the main cause of your battered body. It will become strong. The pain will dissipate. You will shed the excess weight. Your hair will grow back lusher than it's ever been before.

You will learn to stand up for yourself and never allow yourself to be vulnerable, exposed and naked again.

You will never, ever, go unprepared for a medical appointment again. You will check who will be there beforehand and bring someone with you for safety.

You will NEVER let something like this happen again.

Through all the abuse and trauma, they did not break you.

You are here.

With love,

Rachelle



Jeff grew up in a family where food was not only nourishment for the body but also nourishment for the mind and soul. You would rarely hear “I’m sorry” in his suburban Toronto home. Rather you’d hear “Would you like some fruit?” Food became the way he said, “I love you.” In addition to conveying emotions, food was also how he bonded with his mom. The youngest of three, he loved cooking with her and made his first cheesecake in third grade. In college, he regularly prepared dinner for groups of friends. Food was not only part of Jeff’s identity, it was his language of love.

Despite this focus, Jeff was a skinny kid, teenager and college student, until the end of his time at university. During his third year there, he gained 100 pounds over the course of 6 months, yet somehow did not internally process this physical change for a while. Then one day, having returned to Canada after studying business in France, he attended church with his family. At the end of the service, as his family got up to leave, he noticed an “auntie,” or close family friend, waving emphatically at him to come over to her in the sanctuary.

When he walked up to say “Hi,” her jaw dropped. “Wow, you got fat!” she exclaimed loudly. A deathly quiet descended upon the congregation, which had gathered nearby to socialize. Jeffery was scalded by the public humiliation.

That event ushered in months of self-torment. “I recall the countless times I’d be thankful that I could not see without my glasses because I did not want to see my ugly self in the mirror,” recalls Jeff. “The shame, embarrassment, self-loathing, and discomfort with myself continued to bubble

and permeate into everything I did.” He closed himself off from interacting with anyone because he believed everyone thought he was hideous. After months of struggling with his painful emotions, he finally mustered the courage to confide in his best friend. “I opened up about my insecurities and told him how I wanted to buy some new clothes, in order to not feel so ugly,” Jeff remembers. This was Jeff’s best friend of over 15 years. They had grown up together and shared everything from first heartbreaks to landing first jobs. But, instead of being supportive, his friend said: “I wouldn’t buy clothes now. They don’t make nice clothes for people like you. People of your size.” Numb with hurt, Jeff continued walking to the grocery store where he would buy food that he planned to cook for a dinner party he was hosting. That night, Jeff didn’t eat the dinner he prepared because he felt so fat and disgusting. In fact, food became something he hated. A year or two later, he embarked on a starvation diet, ingesting nothing but cucumbers and lemon water for months, and lost just over 90 pounds.

Now 28, Jeff is writing to himself at 24, after his friend’s callous response to his confession of self-loathing.





Dear Jeff,

You feel humiliated and betrayed. He is your best friend and yet he completely stabbed you in the back. You feel broken and wronged, as you try to smile off what he just said, while continuing to walk towards the grocers. You're fighting off tears. How will you get through this day, in which you still have to cook a 6-course meal for your friends? You are alone, ashamed and ugly. It feels like no one in the world would ever love you.

The happiness that was once inside you from being able to share food and bond through dinners suddenly went cold. Part of you just died.

You are telling yourself that never again will you open up; that you need to project a stronger and more confident persona. But deep inside, there's a new layer of shocking pain: You already felt ugly and undeserving, but it appears you are so very ugly and undeserving that not even your best friend could empathize with you.

Dear
JEEFF
JEEFF

Jeff, you should have stood up to him, told him how you felt and that his response wasn't okay. You will prepare a delicious meal tonight, but not eat a single bite. This new hatred of food could grow and dominate your life in a way that injures you. Yes, it will cause you to lose weight. But rejecting food, and all its joys, sentences you to a life devoid of shared happiness.

Remember who you are and how big a role food plays in your life. Take a deep breath and close your eyes. Think back to the time when you'd run down the stairs excited at dinner time.

When you were excited to inhale that pungent medicinal soup smell that fills the entire room - the smell of home and happiness. Food is your language of love. Don't let someone rob you of that love, or the rich well of positive emotions that you infuse into every serving of roast lamb, pasta Bolognese and tiramisu. It's not only possible to love food and maintain a healthy weight—you will be fully capable of doing it!

As you grow older, you'll have a billion opportunities to laugh with friends around a cheese board and a million chances for your friends to drool in anticipation of a seared duck breast. Your true friends will always love you for who you are inside because that is why they become friends with you. Who knows? Maybe your cooking is what will help you find the love of your life.

Keep your head held high!

Jeff



Talena has always carried extra weight. She can't tell you how much weight, because as far back as she remembers she's always borne it. But it's not just physical weight—it's an inner burden that she bears as well. It stems from her family, she believes. "Sure, they meant well, but sometimes good intentions have extra weight on them," she says.

Key family events contributed to the load. So did core family values: self-reliance and a certain amount of secrecy, particularly about development that could be seen as a weakness. Both of those traits played an exaggerated role in Talena's young life. She lost her father, who died of brain cancer at age 39, when Talena was only 18. The six years before that, he spent in and out of the hospital. So from 12 to 18, Talena began shouldering a lot of responsibility for her younger brothers while trying to avoid bothering her parents with any of her own problems.

Even so, things looked incredibly positive when she applied for university. She was elated when she received her acceptance packages from all—that's right! —all the universities she applied to.

She got a full scholarship at one of them and set off, living away from home. But then, when she was 19 and at the end of her first year at university, she learned that her mother had cancer. She transferred to a university close to home so she could help care for her mother and her brothers. After her mother died three years later at age 40, Talena found herself immobilized and silent. She continued attending school but was unable to engage, skipping classes and exams. She would not let herself be with friends, much less confide in them. In fact, she told no one about her mother's death—or that she was now an orphan. A daily McDonalds dinner order became her chief solace, and she gained over 90 pounds during the year her mother died. Acquaintances and family friends didn't recognize her. She received a letter from the university informing her that she had failed all of her classes.

Eventually, Talena emerged from this dark hole. But it took time. She began going to the gym and lost 100 pounds. She enrolled in college, got her social service worker diploma, then her bachelor's degree in social work, followed by a master's degree. But she says it wasn't until 14 years later that she addressed the deep pool of grief inside of her by attending a grief support group.

Talena chose the time after she learned that her mother had cancer as the interlude she wanted to address her letter to her younger self. She was in a student apartment that she rented with 3 other girls. Upon hearing her mom's words, she moved with the phone into her closet, because she thought she had misheard. "I have cancer," her mother repeated. Talena's heart stopped, then thudded heavily in her chest. Tears started flowing, silently, hard and hot. "Mom!" she cried. "I'm okay," her mother said, gently. Talena didn't believe it. Her family has a long history of keeping things in and sharing information only when they need to. She felt extra weight land on her shoulders and neck, moving slowly, like a caress she never asked for.





My dearest, dearest Talena,

I know you're in unimaginable pain, and you think by not admitting it you can push on and continue to keep on keeping on. But, here's the thing: everyone needs a break, especially you. This is not the life for you, Talena. And I know, deep down in a place where your stubbornness can't protect you, you know it too. You know it when you absentmindedly rub the back of your neck after sitting in the uncomfortable hospital chair next to Mom, who can't eat anymore. Instead she slowly chews ice and drinks the juice from oranges and clementines while spitting the fleshy parts on a small semicircle teal tray she holds to her mouth.

You know it's wrong when you skip an exam, see your failing grade, and try to swallow down the bile you feel rising from the pit of your stomach.

You feel it most profoundly when you make plans with your friends knowing full well, you'll call to cancel. How long will you live like this? You live, eat, and sleep the family value of not airing out your dirty laundry. Where did that saying come from? There's nothing dirty about the help you so gravely need.

Dear
TALENA
TALENA

Your continued silence is broken when you're alone. The blinds are drawn, the TV is on, and your nightly order of McDonald's Big Mac combo with supersize fries, large iced tea and a caramel sundae with finely chopped peanuts beckons you like a moth to a flame. You hear the soft crunch of the fries. It blocks out your internal screams of agony. The repeated bites of your Big Mac dampen the unbearable loneliness of your self-imposed sequestering. The sweet swallow of the caramel sundae brings back the "remember when" of happy memories when you were just a kid. Not a kid with responsibilities too big and heavy for her. Not a kid who was going to be an orphan soon. Just a kid who played with her friends and dreamt of the glitz and glamour that came with being an adult.

The extra weight of silence has led to you failing all of your classes at university. I know now what this extra weight is.

It is the unbearable weight of inherited pain, intergenerational dream deferment and the unspoken loss of self. Both of your parents carried sadness. Your Dad: His mother left the family when he was a child. Your Mom: She never got to bring any of her dreams into reality.

Now, you are staunchly refusing to share your sorrow, weighed down to the point of immobility. Yes, you are upholding a family value, but Talena this is detrimental to your health and well-being. It's harming you. Somehow, you believe letting someone know what happened would be weak. You think something is wrong with you for not being more resilient. You were raised to pull yourself up by your bootstraps. And your parents' combined illnesses tutored you in keeping your problems to yourself.

But, listen carefully. Asking for help is not a deficit. You are not deficient if you ask for support. If you ask for help and you don't find that the assistance speaks to your needs, ask someone else. Keep asking, again and again until the extra weight gets lighter and lighter and you're free. That's right, free.

Love, love and oodles more love,
The older, seasoned, beautiful, and unstoppable version of you.

Talena



If you met Tanya today, you would have trouble believing that for years she lived life with strict constraints. She is a passionate advocate for clients of a weight-management clinic in Ontario, in particular stressing their capacity for dramatic growth and exploration. “We don’t need to adhere to the limits our families or society puts on us,” she explains. “We have the control to create our own stories and to be supported in dreaming big.”

It’s a principle that Tanya, a natural-born people pleaser, did not act on herself until recently. She spent decades putting others’ needs ahead of her own, and focusing very narrowly on a set of goals she had formulated as a young teenager. Tanya’s mother was a teen mom who struggled financially with paying bills and, sometimes, with putting food on the table. Tanya remembers clearly thinking at age 14 or 15 that her goal in life was to own her own house (with a pool ideally) and a car, be happily married with two kids, and to not ever worry if she had enough money to buy food or pay a utility bill. She would often envision this and conclude: “That’s what happiness and contentment would be.”

She also vividly remembers thinking that she didn’t want to rely on a man to have those things--she wanted to achieve them on her own.

As she grew up, Tanya began turning to food for comfort and gradually became overweight. Still, she enjoyed friends and a full social life. But then, one summer night changed almost everything. Tanya was 16 and out with a bunch of friends, including a boy whom she liked and who liked her in return. Looking deeply and caringly into her eyes, he kissed her and said, “You know, you are so pretty. If you lost weight, I would be your boyfriend.” Now 50, Tanya says the memory still stings as badly as the words did that night. She is writing to her younger self at this moment.



TANYA

A close-up portrait of a woman with long, wavy blonde hair, smiling warmly. She is wearing a black top with a colorful, intricate pattern. The background is a solid blue color.

Hey Girl,

Nothing has prepared you for that comment. It's the second time the rug has been pulled out from under you and you were unprepared for the hurt and pain.

The first time was at 12 years old when your dad left your house on New Year's Eve, never to return.

Now, again, you feel like you've been punched. All the air has been pushed out of your lungs and you can't catch your breath. At first you can't find the words to respond. But then those words do come: "Yeah. I know that's something I need to work on."

What you don't know is that that boy never gave his statement a second thought. He didn't realize it would stay with you a lifetime and heavily influence your inner thoughts and feelings. This pivotal moment is the beginning of a lifelong battle with your weight. And not only with your weight—a battle with your psyche. You will begin to believe that you need to overcompensate because of your weight. You'll think you need to be funnier, more easygoing, more adaptable, and more accommodating. This is when it starts to become important for you to supply people with reasons why they should want to be with you, love you, and need you, despite your weight.

Dear
TANYYA
TANYYA

You will become so worried about how others think of you, that you will never, ever wonder: *How do I view myself? How do I want to view myself?* You begin to believe that others' thoughts and perceptions of you will make you feel happy and provide you with the love and acceptance you are searching for. However, the stress of pleasing everyone but yourself will continue to drive you to find comfort in food.

Tanya, I'm writing to you now in hopes of redirecting this trajectory. I don't want you to shut down your inner desires and your identity for a decade in your 20s because you are searching for your worth in a man. I don't want you to put his career and his needs at the forefront, or for you to overlook the way he desecrates your relationship by being unfaithful. What's more, I want you to hold onto your dreams of travelling to Australia and Europe—and do it! Don't keep yourself in the straight-jacket of believing you have to work harder than the average person, be better than the average person and keep your eyes very sternly on the goals of a house with a pool, a car and paying bills without worry.

What you need to know is that your weight just doesn't matter. It doesn't tell you whether or not you can travel the world. It doesn't determine how smart or dedicated you are. Your weight means nothing. We give it so much power, but, truly, it doesn't have that power.

Just as important, realize that you can say "No" to someone who needs something from you. Once you learn your boundaries, exercise them! When you don't want to do something, don't. When you do want to do something--something just for you--be confident and do it. This is how you will train your brain to realize that your beliefs, needs and choices are just as important as everyone else's.

You will get the house, car, happy marriage, child and bill-paying ease. But Tanya, you can choose more than that. Raise the roof and recognize the only limits in life are the ones you create and choose. You have the ability to change your thoughts, feelings, and choices no matter the circumstances.

With a newfound lease on life, go out and SMASH it!

Tanya



“Lately I have been really depressed. I just want to die. I’ve been trying to starve myself so I will lose weight and look like Jenny, but it’s not really working because I only lost 2lbs and I still weigh 125lbs.... SOOO FAT!!!”

“The boys always like her more than me. I think she looks like a model. Why do I have to be so ugly and fat?”

“Sometimes I really wish I could just die. Would anyone miss me? Probably not”

These are entries from Tara’s diary when she was 13 years old. And was she so very large and ugly? No. But growing up in a household with three particularly tiny sisters, a mother who was small and a father who routinely brought home pastries and sweets, Tara came to believe she was big and fat. “Everyone would eat, but no one would gain weight. I was the only one who did, or thought that I did,” remembers Tara.

“I wasn’t big as a kid or a teenager. It was more of a mental body dysmorphia.” She grew to feel uncomfortable letting anyone see her eat and began to take her food into her room.

Over time, comparing herself unfavorably to other girls and eating in secrecy would become entrenched twin drivers to what Tara now calls a food addiction. But it wasn’t until she began dating her husband at 18 that she began gaining weight. Ashamed to show her food cravings to anyone else, she seized opportunities when she was alone. It might be driving home from work, when she would stop at McDonalds to get an ice cream cone before going home and eating dinner, followed by dessert. If her husband went out, she would walk to a nearby convenience store, buy a four-pack of ice cream sandwiches

and eat them before he came home. “It was a lot of hiding and bingeing,” she recalls. “Followed by incredible shame and anger.” Then came attempts to diet.

The circuit breaker in Tara’s cycle of bingeing and dieting was a kid’s two-wheeler bike. Because she had gained so much weight, trying to teach her oldest daughter to ride a bike proved impossible. When she tried to run, her ankles couldn’t take it. Tara was devastated. That’s when she began to look into bariatric surgery.

The preparation for surgery included an enormous amount of self-reflection and psychological development, guided by a social worker. “It takes so much work to retrain your brain toward normal ways of looking at food. All of those years, if I was sad or happy, I turned to food,” says Tara. There was another issue, too. A sexual molestation when Tara was a young child also played a role in her turning to food for emotional gratification. Working through all of that before the surgery, at age 35, Tara has succeeded afterward. She explains: “Now I love walking. I just went on a 2 hour hike last night. That’s what also changes my mindset. If I’m emotional, I’ll try to hike 2 to 3 days a week.”

Now 39, Tara is writing to her younger self in her late twenties, as she sits in her car consuming three donuts and a box of ice cream sandwiches after work.



TARA



Dear empty younger self,

I know that this type of high you are experiencing while sitting in your car, which is almost like a drug addiction, and the ensuing extreme self-hate, shame and regret shall pass. I want you to know it too.

As I sit here reflecting on the many years of yo-yo dieting, shame, embarrassment, sadness, and regret that I know you face every day, I am filled with so many emotions.

I know you look in the mirror now and hate the person looking back at you. You're dying on the inside and mentally feel empty. It's sad to think there are so many lost years that you will never get back while feeling this way. It breaks my heart to think that at the age of 13 you wrote in your diary that you wished you could die. Such a young girl, and always comparing yourself to your friends. No one should have to experience body dysmorphia, but thirteen is an especially tender age to have it - and I'm so sorry you did.

Dear
TARA
TARA
TARA

Believe it or not, against a lot of advice from friends and family at the age of 35 you will embark on a new journey that will forever change you. You will have gastric bypass surgery. Please know this will not be an easy decision as there are a lot of sacrifices that you will have to make in order to succeed. This is in no way an easy way out and it will forever be a work in progress, but you are and will forever be perfectly imperfect. This decision will save your life!

I know it's impossible to believe right now but you will break through this dark hole you have dug yourself into. You will have a lot of emotionally and mentally challenging days and sometimes it will feel like you're not going to succeed, but when you look into both your daughters' eyes, that will push you to keep going.

That's right.... I said daughters! You're going to have two precious girls who will look up to you and will always remind you that life is worth living.

I promise you that one day food will not be your emotional escape anymore. You will no longer feel incredible shame and anger after secretly eating donuts and ice cream sandwiches in your car on your way home so that no one will know. I promise that you will be able to stop taking the anti-depressants you have been on for so many years. And surprise: You will love hiking! You will even run a 10k race and climb the CN tower in 24 minutes! Can you believe it?

You weren't physically able to teach your older daughter to ride her bike, but I promise that you will teach your younger daughter and it will feel incredible! You will wake up each day with no more pain. You will be able to walk down the street with your head held high instead of avoiding eye contact with everyone around you. I can't wait for you to discover this incredible form of freedom. But for right now, please be kinder to yourself and remain strong because you can and WILL do this!

Sincerely,

Tara



In Your Own Words

This activity is organized and fully funded by Novo Nordisk.

