Through True Eyes
The Process of Recovery from Eating Disorders
Teacher Resource

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Dr. Kate Weaver is Associate Professor at the University of New Brunswick and Nurse Psychotherapist in private practice providing long term therapy to persons with eating disorders. She is a member of the Board of Directors, Eating Disorder Council of New Brunswick. She has conducted workshops about eating disorders locally, nationally, and internationally with professional and lay audiences. She was principal investigator of *Through True Eyes: Recovery from Eating Disorders*, a documentary produced by Atlantic Mediaworks, Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada.

The documentary builds upon Dr. Weaver’s Master’s thesis, *The Process of Recovering from Anorexia Nervosa: Women’s Journey of Self Development from Perilous Self- Soothing to Informed Self-Care*. Dr. Weaver is currently engaged in other research about eating disorders including *Voices of Peril and Pain: Analysis of Eating Disorder Narratives* (Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research, Killam Cornerstone Fund, University of Alberta), *Family Perspectives of Eating Disorders: Parents’ Stories* (University of New Brunswick, CIHR Student Assistantship), and *Assessing University Students with Eating Issues* (Harrison-McCain Young Researcher Award).
Recovery Model

The Recovery Process

Women recover from eating disorders through increased awareness of feelings and perspectives, the ability to differentiate their own needs while in relationships with others, and the capacity to regulate and manage uncomfortable emotions. Women strive to overcome not knowing myself (being controlled, feeling uneasy, and constantly comparing self to others) and losing myself to the obsession (being lured by the eating disorder, letting the eating disorder take over ones life, and hiding the eating disorder from others). At a turning point called finding me, women begin to see the eating disorder as a problem and to accept responsibility for initiating recovery. They learn to take care of themselves by working through both eating and non-eating issues, developing positive self worth, and gaining support from others. In celebrating myself, women overcome the underlying vulnerabilities that fostered the development of the eating disorder in the first place. Women invest in relationships that meet their needs and detach from those that do not, adopting a more compassionate informed acceptance toward self and the world. In this way, women are considered to have fully recovered from the eating disorder.
Overview, Key Concepts & Process Questions

In the film, *Through True Eyes* (2nd ed.), the three women move through stages of “not knowing myself”, “losing myself to an eating disorder obsession”, “finding me”, “taking care of myself”, and “celebrating myself”.

**Stage One**

| Not Knowing Myself | Often difficult childhood experiences increase a woman’s susceptibility to developing an eating disorder. In the stage of Not Knowing Myself, a woman experiences a sense of uneasy well being in response to various stressors in her life. She shelters herself from threat of being controlled. She tries to measure her self worth through comparing herself to others. |

**Key concepts of not knowing myself:**

- Societal factors
- Biological factors
- Psychological factors
- Puberty, trauma, loss, low self esteem, roles and responsibilities, stress, social pressure to be thin, personal control

**Discussion Question:** What do women believe contribute to the development of eating disorders?
In succumbing to the lure of an eating disorder, women intensify their weight loss efforts to meet psychological, social and spiritual needs. They become protective of the eating disorder and try to hide it from others. Women eventually take on the identity of an eating disorder.

**Key concepts of losing myself:**
- Factors that contribute to eating disorder worsening
- Normalizing eating disorder behaviour
- Secrecy
- Stigma
- Reward for losing weight
- Identity

**Discussion Question:** How do we sensitively challenge someone who is hiding an eating disorder?
### Stage Three

**Finding Me**

As women begin to see the eating disorder as a problem rather than a solution, they strive to become more in touch with themselves. They accept responsibility for their recovery and take initial steps towards getting help.

### Key concepts of *finding me*

- Recognizing it as a problem
- Understanding health consequences
- Interacting with health care system

**Discussion Question:** What factors need to be present for a woman to begin to find her way into recovery?
Stage Four

Women learn to redirect their energy away from maintaining the eating disorder toward engaging in healthy eating and coping patterns. In struggling to take care of themselves, they begin to figure out why the eating disorder started in the first place and address its underlying issues. They develop positive self concept and slowly let others into what they previously kept secret.

Key concepts of *taking care of myself*

- Managing one’s relationship with food
- Self care
- Challenging societal roles, image and ideals of success

**Discussion Question:** Why is it so difficult for women to take care of themselves?
Stage Five

Women learn to enjoy themselves and their lives without the eating disorder! They actively invest in healthy relationships with food and people. They become stronger and appreciate themselves.

Key concepts for *celebrating myself*

- Re-integrating into family and society
- Breaking free of societal restrictions
- Self acceptance

Discussion Question: How is full recovery from eating disorders possible?
Pre and Post Video Discussions

Pre video discussion questions

1. Why do we need to be more informed about eating disorders?
2. What beliefs do you have about eating disorder recovery?

Post video discussion questions

1. Have you ever encountered anyone with an eating disorder?
2. How is it similar or different from this video?
3. What new understanding do you have of eating disorders now?
4. How do you think the self care strategies in this video would apply to women in other situations?
5. How could professionals intervene with women in all stages of recovery?
6. What do professionals need to learn from watching this video?
7. One of the women talked about having the eating disorder for 30 years and about the “high” associated with it. What do you think causes women to relapse?
8. Do you think the women in this video are “extreme cases” because they required medical treatment?
**Debbie Scott’s Story**

Debbie grew up in the country where she lived with her parents, an older sister and a younger brother.

When Debbie was 12 years old her father was diagnosed with a brain tumor. After a serious operation, he began having multiple seizures every day. Five months later, Debbie’s 10 year old brother drowned.

Debbie worried about how her brother’s death would affect her father who had fast become an invalid. Her mother worked full time and nothing was ever talked about.

When Debbie started Junior High School, she started fasting, not eating much for 3 or 4 days at a time. She exercised in her room every night and started bingeing and purging. This was easy to hide because her father was in bed a lot and her mother was at work all day. She was often complimented on her slimness which gave her a feeling of recognition.

Nobody ever caught Debbie purging. She often sneaked outside to purge or purged into bread bags and hid them in her closet or under her bed. Later she dispensed of the bread bags at an outdoor toilet. Eventually an odor developed in her bedroom, which drew the attention of her mother. Debbie revealed what was going on but told her mother she wouldn’t purge again.

At the age of 17, Debbie was bulimic. Her eating disorder continued through an 18 year marriage where she gave birth to two sons. At 42 years of age, Debbie divorced her husband and decided to get help with her eating disorder.

Since then, Debbie has given birth to a third son who is now seven years old. She is self-employed and lives in the same settlement where she grew up. Debbie considers herself fully recovered from eating disorders and generously accepts any requests to take part in eating disorder events.
Sarah Lute’s Story

Sarah grew up in a subdivision with her parents and two sisters. In grade 5, she learned that her mother had bone cancer. This was a major stress for Sarah as she took on the role of mother to look after her two younger sisters. Her mother had a bone marrow transplant but Sarah was worried that the cancer might come back.

By grade 8, Sarah began cutting back on sweets, butter, and then meat. Soon it was “fat free” food only and just water on cereal. Sarah felt she had no control on what was going on around her so she blocked everything out of her life and just focused on not eating. She quickly dropped weight. Her parents told her she looked sick. Her friends were complimenting her on her weight loss. She saw skinny girls in TV ads and knew that society supported the “skinny” look. Deep down, however, Sarah knew what she was doing was unhealthy.

Sarah’s parents took her to the doctor. She was diagnosed with an eating disorder and referred to a pediatrician. Sarah kept her weight up to 113 pounds so she could go to camp that summer. After returning from camp, she was losing more and more weight. She knew she was living a lie to herself and others. Sarah felt trapped behind a brick wall. Within weeks, her weight had dropped to 92 pounds and she was admitted to hospital.

A team of health care professionals worked diligently with her as Sarah began to make some progress. Then one day there was an opening in the brick wall, like a ray of sunshine. She realized she had a problem and she needed to get better. She kept working with the team until the whole brick wall crumbled. After several months in the hospital, Sarah was released.

Sarah is presently working at a golf course while taking university courses in preparation for pharmacy school. She also volunteers at the Ronald McDonald House. Sarah plans to get married the summer of 2009 and after her schooling, she and her partner plan to travel and work in various places around the world.
Sara Thornton’s Story

Sara Thornton grew up in a middle class neighborhood where she was sexually abused from the age of 5 until she was 12 years old. By the time Sara reached high school, she had turned to alcohol, drugs, promiscuity and self mutilation as a means to cope with life circumstances. It was in high school when she was having flashbacks of her childhood sexual abuse that she was diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder.

Sara did manage to graduate from high school but university was out of the question. She moved to the other side of the country in the hopes of leaving her problems behind. There Sara worked in a bar wearing a bikini selling beer and become preoccupied with body image. She fell into the diet “trap” where she ate less and less and exercised more and more. Slowly, the problem she thought she had left behind crept back into her life. By now she was involved in an abusive relationship with an older man.

Sara’s weight was at 90 pounds in the summer of 1997 when she returned home to be closer to her family. By January 1998, she weighed 65 pounds.

That same month, Sara was admitted to the psychiatric ward after a near fatal suicide attempt.

Sara was treated in the hospital for two years where she was able to get her eating disorder under control, yet she still hadn’t come to terms with the sexual abuse. This was when she decided to write a book about her life. Once Sara was able to face all the demons in her life she was able to give up anorexia for the last time.

Sara Thornton is now recovered from anorexia. Sara continues to live in the country near Fredericton with her seven year old daughter, Fallon. Sarah is presently enrolled in her third year Bachelor of Arts in psychology at the University of New Brunswick. Her book Facing the Sunshine was released in the spring of 2007.
A Word from the Producer

My daughter, Sarah, was 23 years old when I learned that she had an eating disorder. I was filled with fear and panic as I sought help for her. I read many books, surfed the internet and watched many videos to gain knowledge about the illness. This enormous amount of information floated around in my head as I tried to make sense of it all. I had little hope that my daughter would recover. Then I met Kate Weaver, Faculty of Nursing, University of New Brunswick who had conducted in-depth research about understanding the process of recovery from eating disorders. Kate had a private practice and agreed to work with my daughter. She also provided me with a copy of her research. The research enabled me to see the big picture from how an eating disorder develops to how recovery is possible. For the first time I could see light at the end of the tunnel. I realized the significance of the research and asked my daughter to read it.

Sarah read the research with diligence, highlighting and adding notes in the margins. Her summary was that the research was “right on the mark.” It was Sarah’s response to the research that initiated the making of Through True Eyes: The Process of Recovery from Eating Disorders.

- Daphne Curtis