

LIVING MY NEXT CHAPTER

I am often asked if I plan to write another book. The answer I give is “no, I’m living my next chapter.” Four years have passed since the publishing of my memoir, “The Longest Match: Rallying to Defeat an Eating Disorder in Midlife.” Now is a good time to write about that next chapter.

When I was writing my memoir during the 2020 Pandemic, I wasn’t even thinking about publishing a book. I viewed this opportunity to put my life story into words as a long-term project with the sole purpose of helping me heal on the deepest level possible. I ended up writing my entire manuscript in ten months. I had always been a very private person, preferring to listen to and care for others. When my memoir was published in May 2021, I literally became an open book!

The word that comes to mind now is freedom and I frequently wear a beaded bracelet with the word spelled out. I have changed in ways I never could have envisioned. Freedom means I am no longer controlled by ED. I am free to be me, free to be fully present in my life, free to live authentically, and free from worry about what others think. For better or for worse, I have found my voice. I can ask for what I need, feel my feelings, express my emotions, and engage in self-care without guilt. I am free from ED’s control and able to enjoy food, free from compulsive compensatory exercise, and continue to discover who I am without my eating disorder.

I went through most of my life so tightly wound. I was scared to be wrong, scared to disagree, and absolutely had to be in control at all times. I had to be the perfect good girl, rule follower, and always the caregiver and people-pleaser.

Don’t get me wrong; my life has been amazing, but it was because of the immense blessings and privilege, for which I am so grateful, that I was not able to acknowledge and feel anything negative without tremendous guilt. Anxiety has permeated my life yet wasn’t diagnosed until I was in my 40’s.

One of the biggest lessons I learned in recovery from my eating disorder was that we can feel conflicting emotions at the same time. I could be grateful for the blessings yet also feel sadness and negative affect.

From the age of 7 after my parents' acrimonious divorce, it was modeled for me that when something traumatic happens, we just go on as if nothing happened. Vulnerability was equated with weakness and strength meant always being positive.

As a result of my inability to feel emotions, when each of my parents died after difficult cancer battles, instead of allowing in grief and sadness. I focused on the gratitude for the two good years I had with each of them before their untimely deaths ten years apart.

In recovery, I learned not only that I could feel conflicting emotions at the same time, but I literally learned in my 40's that I could be HUMAN – anxious, emotional, and imperfect. By allowing in vulnerability for the first time ever in my life, I learned to articulate, feel, and express all the emotions I kept deep inside for decades. It was only in the safe space my therapist and my dietitian provided that I could begin to unravel the layers and layers of suppressed emotions.

So back to freedom . . . I was anxious when I first shared my book cover on my social media, yet opening up about my struggles publicly has freed me from the shame and secrecy that is so common with eating disorders, especially in midlife.

Even after my book was published, I thought maybe only my family and friends would humor me and read it. I was still anxious, because at this point, I had let so few people in.

I was both surprised and thrilled when I started receiving emails from women around the world who were struggling with eating disorders, especially women in midlife who could easily relate to my experiences. My story is hardly extraordinary, but rather ordinary, and many women can relate to my experiences. I hear from women who thought they were the only ones struggling at their age and that recovery was not possible. Many expressed feeling alone and isolated. I have been told that my story gives readers hope; hope that recovery is possible at any age. They feel less alone. I respond to every email I receive and even offer to set up a time to chat and share resources and encouragement. I am so grateful that writing my memoir and

sharing it publicly has both helped me heal on a deeper level and has given hope to those who are struggling and inspires them to seek help, feel less alone, and believe that just maybe recovery is in fact possible.

My eating disorder developed as a maladaptive way of coping with emotional trauma, anxiety, profound grief, and chronic illness. Fortunately, with professional treatment, my anorexia diagnosis in my 40's, the culmination of many challenges, became the catalyst for healing and it is my healing and recovery that has brought freedom and transformation.

I am still “me” and have been shaped by all the experiences in my life, the good and the bad, the joy and the sorrow. I am human and there is room for it all. I am grateful for the people in my life with whom I can be my authentic self. “It’s never too late to be a work in progress,” the last line in my memoir means there is no finish line as we can all continue to grow as well as embrace the twists and turns along life’s journey.

I was a peer support mentor and co-facilitated support groups before my memoir was published. But now, it has become my passion and purpose to help those who are struggling to navigate their recovery journey through all the ups and downs, twists and turns.

In 2023, I founded Gifts of Recovery, LLC, “sharing my lived experience through mentorship and group support.” The people I work with must be medically stable and under the care of a licensed clinician. I offer peer support. I’m the one who “gets it,” and is the support that is there in between professional appointments. I mentor individuals and facilitate support groups, both virtually and in person in Providence, Rhode Island.

Everything I do is a gift of my own recovery. I have had the privilege and opportunity during my “next chapter” to travel throughout the United States and Canada, sharing my story and presenting at major eating disorder conferences and at treatment centers at all levels of care. I speak from my heart with no notes other than quotes I share from my book. I’ve come a long way from the shy girl who was scared to speak up in class for fear I would be wrong, even when I knew the answer. I have come a long way from being terrified in law school that I would be called on and not well-enough prepared, even though I thoroughly read the materials. As a

hospital attorney, I presented on medical-legal topics to the medical and nursing staff at the hospital where I worked, always with an overly detailed outline, and I was tremendously relieved when it finished and went well.

If you had told me that one day I would love public speaking, I would have never believed it. I am very grateful for this next chapter and the opportunities that have come my way. I love my road trips and exploring new places. I have met so many wonderful people in the eating disorder professional community and have dear friends among them. When I speak at treatment centers, it is my hope that each patient takes one thing from my story and the lessons I have learned that help them move forward, even baby steps, in their own recovery journey. The virtual world is here to stay, and, with it, unprecedented accessibility. I have appreciated the opportunity to present through webinars and be interviewed on many podcasts. My virtual support groups provide connection and support in a safe, virtual space where people, separated physically by miles and miles, can form deep connections through the zoom screen.

Though most of my work centers around women in midlife, I am doing more and more in the athlete mental health space. As a former Division 1 college athlete and long time high school coach, I have a lot to offer to former and current athletes who too often have not embraced that they too are human and are a whole person beyond sport. My own tennis career gave me so many gifts but also became entangled in developing an eating disorder in midlife

I am grateful for the opportunities and experiences that have filled these past four years. I am excited to see where this “next chapter” takes me and hope that I can continue to share my story and give hope to those who are struggling that health and recovery are possible at any age. While recovery is hard work and no one can do it for you, I can say that it will be worth it. I am forever grateful to my dietitian and my therapist without whom I would not enjoy the freedom recovery brings. My therapist continues to help me navigate my life’s journey as it continues to unfold. I thank everyone who has supported me and continues to love me and accept me for who I am.

On a personal note, earlier this year we downsized from our home for 25 years. It was the home where we raised our three children. We hold cherished memories in our hearts forever as our next chapter now includes our new home just steps from the beach I love. It's the beach where I have collected sea glass for years, the beach I have gone to when I am happy or sad or have a big decision to make. It is where I feel at peace no matter what is going on, where emotions naturally rise to the surface. And it is where I can savor the gifts of my recovery.

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