I was in grade 7 when I first began to learn about eating disorders. I remember watching a few of my close friends begin to skip breakfast and lunch every single day to help them lose weight fast.

The other type of eating disorder that seemed terrifying to me was bulimia. Unknowingly to me, this type of eating disorder was going to become something I would become much more familiar with in my adult life.

During puberty, my sister gained a bit of weight and became the chubby one in her friend group. She remembers grade 8 as being a time when she truly hated herself. She believed the only way you can be happy is to be skinny and cute, and unless you achieve that, you don’t deserve to be happy. In grade 9 she decided enough was enough and she became very invested in exercise and eating more healthily. She slimmed down quite a bit and she was feeling better about herself, however she always remained hyper aware of her own body and compared herself to the people around her. My sister is someone you would describe as a perfectionist and thrives off of having control. These characteristics are very important to understand how and why things went so wrong for her with food and exercising.

In her grade 12 year, Ainsley had gained about 5 lbs right before her graduation day. She felt the pressure to look perfect in her grad dress and began making herself throw up as a quick fix. Her plan was to only do it until graduation and then stop.

However, this was not the case. She began by only purging a few times a month to a few times a week and by her second year of university she was making herself throw up 3 times a day. The weird thing about eating disorders is that they have nothing to do with food, and everything to do with control. So as a perfectionist, her eating disorder became her way of giving herself a false sense of control over her life. Even when she was throwing up three times a day, she felt she still had complete control over things and could easily quit purging whenever she wanted to.

One reason my sister didn’t think bulimia was so terrible was because in movies and TV Shows, girls who have eating disorders are all beautiful and their eating disorder is just a little quirk about them. Nothing serious. It’s just something that makes them vulnerable and interesting.

Both my sister and I did our first degrees in Saskatoon and we lived together during that entire time. My sister and I were always close growing up because we are only a year apart in age. However, at some point during our time in Saskatoon, there became a great divide and a lot of tension between the two of us. I had no idea my sister was making herself regularly throw up until I was about the third year of my degree. Looking back, her unhappiness towards herself and her anger towards me are directly connected to how her eating disorder was progressing and taking over.

Her anger towards me is something that caused a lot of pain in my own life. It’s easy to take out your pain and anger on the people who love you the most. So that is exactly what she was doing. I was her punching bag because she knew I would love her no matter what. She made me cry several times a week and I avoided going home out of fear of starting a fight. I once discovered her diary and it was the most heart breaking thing I’ve ever read. There were two main topics she liked to talk about. 1. How disgusting she was for not being a certain weight And 2. How much she hated me. She never did tell me about her eating disorder directly. I eventually just figured it out on my own.

I remember when I did figure it out, I’d intentionally make comments when my parents were around because I wanted them to do something. Knowing that puke eats away at tooth enamel I’d say things like “wow, your teeth are basically see through” It was probably the wrong thing to do at the time but I was just so frustrated that she was doing this to herself and I guess I assumed if I made her feel stupid about what she was doing, she’d stop.

Her eating disorder made her obsessed with her weight. She would weigh herself constantly. She’d weigh herself right when she woke up, before and after she ate anything, before and after she purged, before and after a 3 hour cardio session, and before and after she went to the washroom. My brother and I would know first thing in the morning if she liked what she saw on the scale because it would set the mood for the entire day. A bad number meant the day was ruined and we would steer clear of her out of fear of being snapped at.

There are a lot of awful and painful side effects that go along with bulimia that I don’t think many people even know about. My sister experienced chest pains, stomach pains, a sore throat, blood shot eyes, peeling lips and headaches. She says she remembers running her fingers through her hair one day and pulling out a large chunk of hair. She also had breakouts and was always dehydrated, causing muscle pain and extremely dry and cracked skin. On top of this she was always absolutely exhausted. Regardless of how exhausted she felt, she would still force herself to do hours and hours of cardio.

A common misconception about bulimia is that people with this mental illness will be very thin. However, when my sister’s bulimia was at its peak she actually gained 30 lbs in 2 months. When you throw up, your hormones are thrown off balance, which causes you to have intense food cravings which puts you right back in the kitchen binge eating again. Her major craving was anything sweet so she would often just eat spoonfuls of sugar. It didn’t matter if something was healthy or not, even if she ate a carrot or an apple, it needed to be thrown up. She says there were times where she’d binge on our roommate’s food and it became very expensive for her because she would have to go out and buy the food to replace everything she had eaten.

People began asking her if she was sick because she just looked so terrible. She wouldn’t go to the dentist because her teeth were so worn down. She wouldn’t go to the hairdresser because her hair was thinning so much. People would ask why she had cuts all over her knuckles. Cuts caused by constantly shoving her fingers down her throat. She was 30 lbs heavier than she had ever been and none of her clothes fit anymore. At that point she realized bulimia wasn’t cute and it wasn’t a viable option for achieving the perfect life. Her eating disorder was something that completely consumed her life but at the same time it was something she was trying to keep hidden from the world. It all became too much and she wanted to change.

She said recovery was hell. She feared gaining more weight and losing all that believed control over her life. The first step in recovery was to admit she had a problem and talk to someone about it. A part of her wanted to cling to her eating disorder because it had almost become part of her identity. But she needed to let go of that prisoning self-hatred and begin to love herself and her body. But that is a lot easier said than done.

She didn’t quit all at once. She took baby steps and had a lot of failures along the way. In the beginning there was an added physical obstacle she had to overcome. Her body had become so accustomed to throwing up after each meal that she could feel her stomach and throat begin to prepare to throw up any time she would eat.

Her knuckles are permanently scarred. Her metabolism is a little slower than it should be. And she still gets the urge to run to the bathroom and purge. She feels she missed out on three years of her young adult life because she was struggling with a horrible eating disorder.

But on October 1, 2017 my sister finally got to the point where she was done purging. And since that day she has only had one set back on July 24, 2018.

She does not claim to be 100% recovered. But she is doing much better now and currently lives in St John New Brunswick with her boyfriend, her cat and they will soon be adding a new puppy to their family.

Thank you for listening.