



To 72 Pounds and Back Again—I'm Lucky to be Alive

Melissa Moss' Story In her own words...

I am privileged to be a volunteer with MHA. I have great passion for mental health advocacy because I battled anorexia nervosa for 5 years and nearly lost the fight.



I am fortunate to be alive.

Onset of Illness. At the age of 15, I made a conscious decision to get in shape and lose a few pounds, as I felt this would ensure my place as a flyer on our school's varsity cheerleading team. I had been a cheerleader most of my life and I loved nothing more. It had become my life.

The Progression. Soon 10 lbs. became 15 lbs. and then 20...by my senior year in high school, while my peers were concerned with dating, college, and parties, I was getting up at 5 a.m. every day to work out before school. I would go to cheerleading practice after school for 3 hours. By the time I had graduated from high school my weight had dropped to 95 lbs. I became very secretive and deceptive about my behaviors. I never let on that I was dying on the inside.

Moving Away. I made the cheerleading team at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. I was now 700 miles away from home and I could exercise as much as possible and eat as little as I wanted. I thought all was well in my world. I dove into my life in Charlotte, getting a job, going to class and attending 4 hour practices 3-4 days a week. Exercise bulimia – my days revolved around food and exercise. Many times, I didn't have enough energy to go to school or work, but oddly enough, I always had the energy to work out.

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Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and Depression. I weighed myself 15 times a day. If I gained a half of a pound, I exercised to get rid of it. Depression really set in when I was 18. If I wasn't exercising, I was sleeping. I didn't have any energy; I had given up on most things, including school and cheerleading. I was down to 85 lbs.

The consequences were far reaching. My way of keeping my weight down was through withholding fluid intake so I was constantly dehydrated. I was cold to the bone. I no longer recognized myself in the mirror. My body, which was once muscular and fit, was now simply skeletal. I'll never forget going home to NY for Thanksgiving that year and the way my family looked at me – a mix between horror and pity.

The Realization. The disease had destroyed my body and although I was completely aware of how I looked, I couldn't change my habits. I had lost control. I got down to 72 lbs. before I had come to the realization that it was time to get help. Admitting that "defeat" was the hardest thing I've ever done. This was the day my mother and the rest of my family had been waiting for.

The Treatment. I sought help through the school's mental health professionals and they referred me to the mental health hospital where I was admitted. I was on the verge of kidney failure. I was immediately administered an antidepressant. I saw various therapists, but my mom was the one person who stayed by me and pushed me when I got weak. Finally, my goals had switched – every pound *gained* was a victory.

The surprising conclusion. I wouldn't have changed any of my experiences with mental illness. I am a stronger, more compassionate, more driven person as a result. People often ask me if I am completely recovered and there is no simple answer to that. I believe an eating disorder will always be part of my life, but it no longer defines or controls me. There came a point when I realized that my life was just too valuable and I needed to fight for it. If you or someone close to you is going through something like this, know that this is an illness you cannot heal alone—[a mental health professional](#) can help in the fight!