



Strength Lies In Talking About It

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As many as one million men in the United States struggle with an eating disorder, and it is critical that we start talking about it to encourage males who struggle to reach out for help. As a survivor, my message to other men is that recovery, without a doubt, is possible! This National Eating Disorders Awareness Week, February 20-26, 2011, you can be one of the thousands of people across the United States educating your community and directing those who struggle to potentially life-saving information.

After years of telling myself I was not “good enough” to ask for help or reach out to those around me, I finally opened my mind to the fact that every challenge can be met with a more progressive stance on what strength and masculinity really mean. Masculinity is not achieved by holding on to all of our pain and struggles; it is often the process of letting go and accepting the support and help of others that really makes us stronger.

Strength can come from insight drawn from within ourselves that we need help to recover. Fear of a reaction from loved ones can be a barrier to getting help, but with treatment and a strong support system, the march towards healing is definitely within reach. Contributing factors to an eating disorder in girls/women also affect males. Issues such as family struggles, trauma, perfectionism, self-doubt, anxiety or depression, unrealistic aesthetic standards and the interaction between environment and genetic predisposition can affect us all. Did you know that 1/3 of males use unhealthy ways to control their weight, such as skipping meals, fasting, smoking cigarettes, vomiting, and taking laxatives? A study of 131 football players conducted by Cornell University in 1994 revealed that nearly 40% of players engaged in eating disorder behaviors to control their weight. Eating disorders often develop from what begins as an attempt at weight loss, or for many men, a drive for muscularity. 11 years down the road, statistics continue to be alarming. For males, hospitalizations with eating disorders increased 37 percent from 2000 to 2006. Our culture continues to place a high premium on superficial standards of

attractiveness for both men and women, and recent scientific studies have documented the negative impact of the lean and muscular ideal on boys and men.

Eating disorders are complex illnesses that arise from a combination of long-standing behavioral, biological, emotional, psychological, interpersonal, and social factors. While eating disorders may begin with preoccupations with food and weight, they are most often about much more than food. People with eating disorders often use food and the control of food in an attempt to compensate for feelings and emotions that may otherwise seem over-whelming. Help is available and recovery is possible. Recovery is a beautiful thing. It encompasses who you are, what you will learn about yourself and it can allow you to process and deal with the roots of your illness. When we decide to reach out, we may realize that we have not been fully living while in our eating disorder. A life ruled by calories, numbers on a scale, how muscular we are or the hours at the gym does not leave room for what life could be. Oftentimes, the decision to simply say, "I need help," can be terrifying and can be one of the hardest hurdles to jump over, but reaching out and committing to recovery can be the best decision you will ever make.

Recovery is an opportunity to appreciate each moment in our lives and finally come to a place where we can build our life from a house into something we call home. Recovery is hard work, and at times it can seem much easier to go back to old ways of thinking, but I encourage you to remember that you are not alone in your journey, and with support and treatment you can live a full and healthy life.

My experience taught me that knowing yourself can be one of the hardest things to figure out. Who am I? Where am I going? What do I want from life? George Bernard Shaw once said, "People are one of three things: What they think they are, what others think they are and what they really are." Recovery, to me, is accepting ourselves for who we really are and knowing and appreciating our unique strengths.

I believe there is hope for everyone affected to recover. This National Eating Disorders Awareness Week, remember that *It's Time to Talk About It*. Join the thousands of people across the country doing *just one thing* to start the conversation in their communities, schools and families. To learn more about the many fun and easy ways that you can be a part of this national movement and to register today, visit the NEDAwareness Week homepage under Programs & Events at www.NationalEatingDisorders.org.

NEDA's free national **Helpline**: 800 931-2237