

Where You Are

S6 Episode 7 — Living with an Eating Disorder – A Hopeful Journey

Char Black 00:02

This is where you are, a podcast that helps families and their children promote their mental health and wellness. I'm Char Black.

Bryn Askwith 00:09

And I'm Bryn Askwith. Today we're excited to share an episode from *Open Hearts honest conversations*, which is a podcast series from Family Services of the North Shore. The episode is all about eating disorders and disordered eating, which is something that we at the Kelty center get a number of questions on. So we're grateful that our friends at Embody, a provincial program of Family Services of the North Shore, have kindly shared this episode with us.

Char Black 00:36

In this episode, Val, host of *Open hearts, honest conversations*, is joined by Joanna, a registered clinical counselor, and Vicky, a guest with lived experience. They talk about common characteristics of eating disorders, Vicky's own journey, and how family and loved ones can provide support to someone with an eating disorder.

Bryn Askwith 00:55

A brief reminder that we all come to this moment with our own lived experiences. And for some of us, the topic can be challenging and heavy, so as you listen, we invite you to please take stock of how you're feeling and anything that might be coming up for you. If you need to take a break, pause the episode, come back a little later, or reach out to your supports, please do so. You may notice this episode is a bit longer than our usual episodes, but it comes with so many great takeaways, and we hope you enjoy it. We'll be back soon with more new episodes of where you are.

Valerie 01:28

Hi. Welcome to *Open hearts, honest conversations*, a project of Family Services of the North Shore, right here in North Vancouver, Canada. I'm your host. Valerie Dolgin. In this episode, we'll be joined by two guests from our Jessie's Legacy Provincial Eating Disorders Prevention and Awareness Program. What makes this episode particularly

wonderful is that I got to speak to two guests, Vicky and Joanna are both experts on disordered eating and eating disorders and the ways in which people of all genders can be pulled into this very difficult experience. Vicky is one of Jessie's Legacy's Social Justice practicum students, and brings her invaluable insights into her own lived experience with the eating disorder from which she is now in recovery.

Vicky 02:23

On the outside, there was no way, if you knew nothing else about my life, you just saw me walking down the street, the assumption would have just been that I was just the person I never I never looked like. How media really wants us to think about eating disorders, so that made it hard. How could I ever tell someone this? They would look at me and be like, 'No, don't.' Because people literally had, right throughout my life, had literally said, like, 'No, you don't like, you don't need this or this or this, so you don't.'

Joanna 02:48

This is the really tricky part of the really early stages of an eating disorder, is that we often get so much positive reinforcement.

Valerie 02:57

Our other guest is Joanna Zelichowska. Joanna is a registered clinical counselor and the manager of Jesse's legacy provincial eating disorders Awareness and Prevention Program, which is a really important part of Family Services of the north shores community offerings across British Columbia.

Joanna 03:17

Often we're not curious about why somebody's body is changing and the pervasiveness of diet culture means that lots of people are still commenting on how wonderful it is if our bodies get smaller.

Valerie 03:30

In this conversation, we'll get the benefit of both these women's deep knowledge of the topic. Vicky brings her first hand experience, and we'll hear from her about the stages of her eating disorder and how at first, these behaviors helped her feel more in control and more capable in her life. But eventually, that chapter ended, and the eating disorder was running her life. We'll hear about her entry into treatment and what it has meant for her to be able to finally say that she is in recovery. Joanna brings her clinical experience and vast knowledge of the topic as we discuss ways in which the families and loved ones of someone with an eating disorder or disordered eating can best support and help the person they care about, I think you'll find this conversation fascinating. It's hopeful,

and it's a great source of information. I know I found it so, and now let's meet Vicky and Joanna.

Joanna 04:32

My name is Joanna Zelichowska. I'm the manager of Jessie's Legacy Eating Disorders Prevention and Awareness Program. I've been in the role here for just over five years, and my background, I've been working in kind of the field of eating disorders for quite a while. I'm also a registered clinical counselor, and prior to getting my counseling degree, I was working in research at. Around eating disorders. So I've spent over a decade, I guess, in this field, and feel very passionately about it.

Valerie 05:05

Vicky, what about you?

Vicky 05:09

So I'm Vicky. I'm currently completing my masters of counseling psychology, but I also have a lot of really varied experience and kind of community mental health and trauma support, but more specifically here today, because I have echoing the over a decade of experience in eating disorders, but because of my own personal lived experience with my eating disorder and with recovery from my eating disorder.

Valerie 05:32

Yeah, thank you both for being here. It's so important, I think, to really center this story around a real life person. So often we talk about eating disorders in a very kind of generalized way from a clinical place, about numbers and stats and genders, and so it's really wonderful to be able to hear it from from you Vicky today, and I it's, I think it's just incredibly rich, and it's going to help us really understand what the experience is like, and also how we can be helpful and how we can be supportive of people who are having challenges with disordered eating and eating disorders. So Vicky, could you could you just give us just a brief kind of overview of what life has been like for you with an eating disorder.

Vicky 06:23

Yeah, for sure, I my eating disorder really started around 15. There's pockets of like my childhood that kind of point towards it. But kind of from 15 onwards, I really started to struggle with food and really specifically with my body, and that showed up a lot in things like compulsive exercising or over exercising. And I kind of have swung all over the place when it comes to eating disorder, symptoms and challenges with it, and I never fit so neatly into one box. So that experience followed me for a really long time, until I was about 20,21 for when I first actually entered treatment from an eating

disorder, and then did that for many years before feeling able to say recovered. And then more life happened, and felt a little less certain about saying recovered, but definitely feel confident in saying in recovery.

Valerie 07:14

Wow. Well, congratulations. That must feel, it must feel so good to be able to say that.

Vicky 07:20

It does. It does, and it also feels good to say it without feeling ashamed of the fact that it was, like felt really strong in saying recovered, and then that changed, because it changes.

Valerie 07:29

So yes, and I think that's also a great piece of information, because there is a, I think there's like an ebb and flow for people as they are in recovery from, whether, from any mental health challenge, and so we don't have to do it perfectly. You don't have to get it right. Whatever right means you're just, you're on your own personal journey with this. So I think it's great that you mentioned that as well.

Joanna 07:55

Yeah, it's such a beautiful reminder, just that recovery is not linear, right? And as you said, Val in all mental health, I think we sometimes have this idea that we need to reach an end point or an outcome, and then we're good, we're okay, and life continues to happen and evolve. So I love that reminder.

Valerie 08:13

Yeah. And so today, what I think that we're going to do is kind of look at the different chapters of your experience, Vicky, with with eating disorder, because I think that it's really instructive for us to really hear about the different stages of it in your life, and also we'll be able to connect it to other people's experience who are listening, and so that we can really offer some really excellent insights and information. So I wonder if we could just start with, like, the earliest times for you, you said that for you, kind of difficulties with eating and body image started around 15. And if you look back into your early life, was, was there a moment you can pinpoint where it was, sort of the beginning of it all?

Vicky 08:57

Yeah, it's a yes and no answer. It's both. Like, I have a very vivid memory of the first time I really felt like there was the voice of the eating disorder in my head, versus when my kind of challenges first began with food. So I was definitely 15 when those challenges really kind of took hold. But there's like, a really specific moment this

summer that I was 16 out of family barbecue where I'm like, going downstairs to my basement to, like, bring something up to the bar, or whatever it was, and it was just this first moment of like, being like, 'Oh, I don't have to eat today.' And it was, like, really hard to explain, like, where it came from, but it just showed up. And it was the first time I'd seen some of this family in a while, and my body had changed a bit. And so, yeah, that summer, that kind of like standing in my basement moment really feels like the real beginning of it, and

Valerie 09:47

It sounds like it was a pretty persuasive voice. Oh yeah, loud, loud and very clear. And in that moment, I mean, we talk about this with eating disorders, is that it really works in the moment, and when you heard that message, what happened for you inside you? Did it feel empowering? Did it feel good?

Vicky 10:10

Yeah, it was a pretty big relief. There had been a lot of different moving pieces going on leading up to that summer in my life, and a lot of kind of chaos. And so it was the first time that it was like, 'Oh.' I think it was a big sign.

Valerie 10:23

Joanna, do you want to talk a little bit about that moment? Because I think it's important.

Joanna 10:28

I think what Vicky is really kind of articulating there is that oftentimes, especially in those early days, eating disorders can really function as a coping mechanism. You know, Vicky spoke about kind of experiencing life as being kind of chaotic leading up to that. And, you know, eating disorder symptoms can feel like we have a sense of control. We don't. Oftentimes, we have the ability to control what goes in our mouths or how much we move our bodies, and we don't have control. As teenagers, you know, to be able to organize or figure out what's happening around us, so it can feel like a relief to be able to kind of center our focus and our experience on this little pocket of control that makes so much sense.

Valerie 11:22

And I think that's also part of it, right, like it makes sense at the beginning. Oh, it does, yeah. So is there a time, if you look back even further in hindsight, where, just like, the Inklings would have started, like the seeds of that voice?

Vicky 11:40

Yeah, for sure, I have a lot of memories from my, like, my childhood that center around, like food or my body. I was also like a really anxious kid, and that often manifested in, like, stomachaches. And so I also was a big perfectionist. I grew up in a young, very busy family, and I was surrounded by a lot of competition from a young age, I was a dancer, so I was really, really super aware of my body, even just growing up and puberty was like, pretty excruciating, so those pieces felt really important, but also impossible to connect with the time. But I was, I was a dancer, and that was really important in terms of, like, community and friendship, and it influenced how I understood my body, and how I understood comparing my body to other people. And when I was 15, I had a knee injury that took me out for the season. So I very, very quickly lost, kind of, like, my whole entire world, and my body started to change a lot, because I was pretty immobile, I wasn't as active as I was before.

And so that year of 15, I also had knee surgery, and that's kind of when I lost my appetite. But, like, unintentionally, like, I just after surgery wasn't, wasn't it for me, and it kind of led into that turning 16, into that summer where I also was having some other mental health challenges. And so when that, you know, that summer rolled around that barbecue happened, and it was like, 'Well, you know, your body's already kind of changed, and people have noticed, like, imagine what you could do if you were actually trying.' So it was almost like this perfect storm that led up to that moment, totally, totally and it provided a pretty big distraction from some of the other stuff that was going on in my life. That same summer, I was diagnosed with depression, and there was a lot of stigma around that, and a lot of secrecy around that, just in terms of, like, who would know or who wouldn't know. So then by the time I started school again that fall, it was, like, pretty all consuming. Like the eating disorder was a part of everything. It was part of how I showed up to school that first day back, how I made it through kind of that beginning, yeah, and then as my knee started to heal after that, summer is when kind of over exercising, really too cold, because I really wanted to get back to where I was beforehand.

Valerie 13:51

It seems like something that I want to do. I think that we're going to talk about it a little bit more, just about this. You know, in the world of psychology, we would say core comorbidity, where, yeah, eating disorders often appear at the same time as anxiety, depression and other mental health challenges for people. And we don't often talk about eating disorders as part of this continuity of mental health challenges. We really focus on the food, and if you would just eat more, you would be fine. It would just go away. And I think that what you're saying Vicky is actually it's so much more than that. Yeah, and Joanna, I just as we are thinking about this in terms of people who are listening, who might be wanting to think about their young children, who they want to maybe

wanting to prevent eating disorder, or maybe they're watching their child kind of tip over into disordered eating or or a loved one. Is there some kind of intervention or things that families and loved ones can look for in their young people, that can help mitigate the kind of ending up in this place?

Joanna 15:02

Yeah, well, Val certainly, you know, as you described, the connection between eating disorders and some other mental health challenges, and we know that anxiety can really be a big risk factor. So as Vicky described, I think that is a very familiar trajectory in that most often the anxiety precedes the onset of an eating disorder. So a research shows like 24 to 60 something percent of the time, so from 1/3 to two thirds of the time, the anxiety symptoms were first observable, and then that kind of spilled over into some eating challenges. So I think for parents to just be curious and aware that if you have a child that is on the more anxious side or has a bit more of an anxious temperament, to observe how they're interacting with food and to offer skills that focus on kind of self regulation and how they can kind of support themselves in that anxiety, and really talking about ways of coping that are supportive and nourishing and and help the child ground when they're feeling that way.

Valerie 16:17

And when you say, help the child ground. What? What? What does that mean?

Joanna 16:21

Yeah, I mean, that could be a number of different things, but I think regulating our bodies physically can be really helpful to begin so teaching really simple breathing exercises, kind of getting them back into their bodies, into the room, into the space, really, just being curious about encouraging them to articulate their experience can be a really helpful starting place. Vicky, does that fit for you, too?

Vicky 16:49

Yeah, you know, I was really anxious and also really kind of unsettled during that period of my life. After kind of losing dance and kind of pocket of friends that have been really important, I didn't have a place to land. And so even just kind of some simple grounding of how to be in this body, in a space again. And yeah, definitely with coping with, like, how do you feel settled in a body that feels chaotic and wants to move all the time?

Valerie 17:16

Yes, Joanna, you have this wonderful way of thinking about zooming out from the food. And I love that image because it allows us to see people, all of us, in a much more global way. And it's such a valuable approach.

Joanna 17:34

I think, yeah, definitely. I think there is a tendency when we see something happening with food, particularly parents seeing, you know, perhaps their children avoiding food or engaging with food in a way that is worrisome, that creates a lot of distress for parents. And you know, naturally, as problem solvers, we want to focus in on fixing that particular thing or behavior. And I think that can put a lot of pressure on the child, and especially if that's the one thing that's helping them feel grounded and settled. To risk taking that away can be really scary. So I really always want to encourage parents to think about this in that kind of more global way of what's going on for your child. If we can zoom out and think a little bit more globally to try to engage in conversations about, you know, what's happening at school, what's happening with your friends, are you feeling connected? Are you feeling disconnected and seeing those things as kind of the real source and root of why, you know, these behaviors might be kind of expressing themselves, and that can really facilitate, or at least hopefully lay the groundwork for more open conversations about what's going on more broadly with the child's mental health.

Valerie 18:51

So if we were going to zoom forward now, Vicky, into Chapter Two into you know you you had talked about when you returned to school after that summer, how, how the eating disorder voice was really firmly entrenched in your life. What was it like for you during those years?

Vicky 19:13

Yeah, there's kind of a before and after that happens, even within those years that so that fall, leading into that winter, my depression also got a lot worse, and I ended up in the hospital, and it was while I was in the hospital, it was the first time a psychiatrist had said that I didn't have an eating disorder. Prior to that, I had gotten a referral for an eating disorder program, but that psychiatrist had decided that I didn't, and so that referral got canceled, which really just was a party in my eating disorder brain of like, 'Great. Now no one's watching, no one's thinking about it. Here's your free pass to do whatever you want.' So kind of after leaving the hospital, it was like a pretty, pretty immediate that I went back to a lot of those behaviors. It was pretty easy to tend my way through that time of my life, and I also was incredibly busy and engaged at school, I was like, classic perfectionist, like, was on student council, was in the school play, started a few clubs, had a part time job, went to the gym, had a big group of friends. So my eating disorder kind of really helped me maintain that it was. It gave me at that time in the way that it was presenting, then it gave me lots of energy and really sharp focus, and I could move through things very quickly and easily, which was in big contrast to my

experiences of depression. So it kind of gave me, yeah, a better footing into handling that. But mostly what happened was that it was, it was a huge secret at that time, I had started seeing a therapist who did work in eating disorders, but kind of knowing the context of my life at the time, we never, was never beyond that therapy room that my eating disorder was talked about. So it just got to exist. It got to get worse, and it got to get really bad. And I didn't really talk about it to my friends. Some of my friends knew that I had been to the hospital or that I wasn't well. And one friend in particular knew about my eating disorder, but she herself was also pretty unwell, which I think is like the classic turmoil of high school friendships, navigating like really intense stuff, without really knowing how or what to do. Less than a year after that first hospital stay, I ended up in the hospital again, and I remember being really honest at that time. So I was really exhausted. I was like, 17, just shy of 17, and I just was exhausted. And I was like, here's what I'm up to. And I remember the intake social worker asked, like, 'Well, which eating disorder?' and at that time, what became clear to me was like, I don't fit in one box. At that time, my behaviors have kind of been swinging all over the place, but not enough to really neatly fit into one diagnosis, which for me, then just became not a fault of the system, but a fault of me. It was like, 'Well, you can't even do this enough, so why would you even try?' So then, yeah, those next couple of years were just, like, really deep in pretending everything was fine, and just kind of getting more and more sick.

Valerie 22:08

So if we were to go back to the beginning of that time, I can, I really, I can hear that there are two stages in that period where things were really working for you and then they weren't. Yeah, I think what you're saying is during that period, that earlier time when, when you on the outside, would have looked like a superstar, people would have looked at you and and said, Wow, she can do it all. She's so amazing. This girl is gonna own the world one day. She's, you know, she's really special. And I think this, this is really important to hear as well, is that externally, you had, you had everything, and what did it feel like to be inside your body at that time?

Vicky 22:55

It felt like I wanted to do anything to not be inside my body. It was the same kind of period of my life where I started to self harm or turn to kind of substances, it was like, kind of, what can I do to not feel like I'm here? And it was always kind of shocking to me that no one noticed. I thought it was clear, like I was like, 'How is it not seeping out of my brain? Like it's so loud in here, it's so loud all the time. How is no one hearing this or seeing it?' And it was because I had a really good lockdown on how to present in a really specific way. But it was just, it was loud, it was messy, and, quite frankly, like, really scary. Like, I think about it now, like as an adult, thinking about being a teenager with all of that, just like, floating around my brain, and I was like, 'That's terrifying.'

Valerie 23:43

What were some of the words that were floating around? What was some of the noise that you were hearing at the time?

Vicky 23:48

Oh yeah, it was a bunch of, like, really, not fun names for myself. Like the word, the words fat and ugly and gross were like the mantra in my head all the time. Definitely, like, those, really, I want to say, like, classic self hatred moment, but a bit of, like, a really classic teenage self hatred moment, of like, I'm never going to be enough, even though I was, like, really doing everything I could to be enough, it was like, it still won't be enough. It doesn't matter. Like you aren't going to do anything more than this, like you're not going to make it out of this, like you can't even, you can't even be sick the right way. So it was those messages kind of on repeat, on glass all the time, wow. No wonder you didn't want to be in your body. Yeah.

Valerie 24:30

So if someone had been aware or been able to kind of see through what you said, you know how you had really, you had unlocked the ability to present in a particular way. If someone had really been looking, what would they have seen externally?

Vicky 24:47

I mean, the first thing that came up was the experience of my body constantly changing, like it was, like I was losing large amounts of weight and then I was gaining it all back, and like, in very short periods of time. And I also was, like, self harming and not in really subtle ways. Like, it wouldn't be hard to notice that, or, I mean, that's not fair with people in my life who maybe did notice. It's hard to have a conversation about that. But when I look back on that, I was like, there, you know, I also wasn't sleeping. I would stay up all night, like, because my body was just so full of energy. And sometimes I remember I had one therapist we talked about where it was almost kind of manic when I was really restricting or starving to the point of like, like that wouldn't be like, what you imagine a typical level of like, content or happy teenager to be. It was definitely like past that. But I again, I almost like, it's almost at no fault of the people around me, because I really brushed off any concern very fast, because I had been invalidated by so many professionals, let alone by my peers, it was way too scary to think of like, 'Oh, I could tell someone about why I'm wearing new bracelets or whatever that looks like on that day.'

Valerie 25:55

Joanna, do you want to add anything to that I'm just thinking about? You know, because this, to me, feels like this is the crux of it, right? Like, because when we, when we generally talk from a clinical place about eating disorders, like I said, you know, it's quite external, well, why can't you just eat more? But what you're talking about is, like, this insidious nature of the eating disorder, voice and and if we're thinking about it from a prevention place, which is really where, where we want to be centering our conversation, you know, prevention and awareness, it seems like this. This information seems important for people who know someone with an eating disorder to know that the eating disorder was so firmly entrenched you had just gotten good at deflecting help, and at the same time the symptoms were there.

Joanna 26:46

It makes me think about, you know, the part of Vicky's experience, of really trying to manage, you know, the intensity of her internal experience and the anxiety and how that manifests in doing more stuff. And I think this is the really tricky part of the really early stages of an eating disorder, is that we often get so much positive reinforcement for either doing all of the things, for being super productive, for performing at a high level, and also for our bodies changing. You know, often we're not curious about why somebody's body's changing and the pervasiveness of diet culture means that lots of people are still commenting on how wonderful it is if our bodies get smaller. And so that can be really hard because, you know, as Vicky was saying earlier, it was working at the beginning to kind of manage the kind of internal stress and chaos she was feeling, but then it's just so unsustainable. So I think what's the helpful piece that comes up for me as she was talking is that, you know, any change in behavior could be assigned to kind of check in with what's going on with that person, right? Like a ramping up of productivity, a feeling like we need to do all of the things. All of those things could be signals that something's going on. Certainly also changes in body shape and weight and and, you know, fluctuations happening in a short period of time are definitely a symptom and a warning sign to check in on as well. But I think we're really highlighting the how deeply they can be entrenched, because there's a lot of things that are working well at the beginning.

Valerie 28:36

And if someone wanted to check in with a loved one who's maybe their body size and shape is changing, what would be a good kind of intro question to ask that person.

Joanna 28:48

You know, I think the person whose body is changing is very aware that their body's changing and bringing any attention to that piece in particular. I know the tendency is to want to note that, but I would really encourage people to again this idea of zooming out

of a really cautious, concerned approach around asking open ended questions on what's happening, what's going on, and if you can focus more on other changes in behavior or your experience of that person. I think that can be a more helpful inroad. So rather than saying, 'I see you, you know, your body shape has changed in either direction. Hey, I've noticed that, you know, you've seen a little bit more withdrawn, or you see it seems like you you're putting a lot of pressure on yourself to, you know, do X, Y and Z, you know, what do you think's changed the your experience and your focus has changed in this way. Can you talk about that? If you don't want to talk about that, I want you to know that I'm here, and you can, you can talk to me anytime.' So creating kind of that safety and foundation to be curious about more the internal experience, because the person who is focused on their bodies or really trying desperately to not be focusing on their bodies, often that reminder of those external changes isn't helpful, and can, you know, create a lot of of shame or guilt and fear about what that means if I acknowledge that. So I think that I'm curious to hear Vicky, if that seems like that would have been a supportive approach or not. That's a good opportunity to check that out.

Vicky 30:37

Yeah, I think your approach, and that's bang on for naming the like, don't I'm so I was so aware my body was changing. The last thing I needed was more conversation about it. Because that is some of the approach that people in my life took, and I understand why they took it. But if, if someone had just really been able to be like, Hey, what's up? I think that would have made a huge difference. Or creating that, yeah, that just that channel and knowing that I was, like, going to say no to it at first, or like, the first couple times, especially at least in my experience, because I had been invalidated on such, like, a large level about my experience. Like, literal doctors who are supposed to be, you know, good at this, not that they're not good at this, but they were supposed to notice these things and help support me and, like, advocating for care, that didn't happen. So I was really, really hesitant and wary of anyone at all who tried to engage in those conversations. So just knowing that like it, it's so good to try, and it might be really disheartening that the person that you care so much about is like, really deflecting or disengaging from even wanting to engage in a conversation about that zooming out picture. But I think the more you try and offer that, like consistent, stable, like access to like safety and non judgment like that, probably would have given eventually.

Joanna 31:54

Yeah, and I think that's so helpful to hear you say that Vicky, and I think that helps parents and caregivers and friends relieve them of the pressure thinking they've got to accomplish everything in one conversation, right? There's a lot of like anticipatory anxiety, of worry about this person, and 'I want to start talking about this, and if they shut me down, then that channel is closed,' right? And so I think it's really helpful to hear

that it probably would have taken a while. And if we can think about it that way, in terms of, like, establishing some safety in the relationship and openness to have conversations when you're ready, then we have a much better chance of kind of making that connection.

Valerie 32:34

I wish I could just put a big exclamation mark on that, that feels like the best, like, I don't think we have to talk anymore. This is all we need. But of course, there's so much more to talk about, and the piece that I want to just kind of spend a little bit of time on is, is that sort of like what you've alluded to Vicky, which is kind of the slippery nature of an eating disorder, and we know that it does exist, as in the suite of mental health disorders, but how? How are eating disorders different from, let's say, anxiety, depression, bipolar, some of the more common challenges people would experience with their mental health?

Joanna 33:18

Yeah, I think that's a great question. Val, I think, you know, the thing that that perhaps complicates or adds another layer on to eating disorders is that there is, you know, we need food to survive, and so we need to figure out a way to manage the relationship with food for the individual, which means that there's a large kind of behavioural and medical component to this, that that kind of happens alongside, you know, the psychological distress and turmoil. So in that sense, you know, there's the medical and psychological pieces, and oftentimes some very clear and concrete kind of behavioral things that need to happen in order to support the person, whether that means, you know, in supporting them through meal support and how to kind of really get the adequate nourishment, or in terms of symptom interruption, to help interrupt cycles of, you know, for example, bingeing and purging that can also, you know, have dangerous consequences.

Vicky 34:21

Medically, yeah, I'd say also that the difference, at least in my brain, of living with all of them at the same time became like, when I started getting different levels of support for my depression and my anxiety, and even later, for some post traumatic stress, there was like, even though it was really messy, like, there was, like, some pretty, like, tangible coping support, things to work through. I have a handle on it. I can cope with this. I can talk about it. Those were things, at least in my life, that I got to a point that, like, over time, there became less stigma, so I was able to reach out about that. Or, like, I'm just having a really bad low day. People could receive that. The difference with my eating disorder was I had to face it every day, all the time, like when I was really unwell, when I was in recovery, when I was recovered, like if I had to eat, every day I had to

eat, I had to move my body. Even on the best days of feeling recovered, it was still something that was there all the time. So it was a lot different in terms of, like, that internal dialog in my head and what that looked like around it, versus when, like the voice of depression or anxiety or trauma came up. It just, it just sounded different in terms of what it looked like, because there was more avenues to putting that down or saving it for later. But if I'm sitting at a meal with my friends, it's I can't put it down. It's there.

Valerie 35:44

How does secrecy figure into this? You talked a lot about being able to hide it, and how does that figure into keeping the eating disorder in place?

Vicky 35:57

Yeah, I think it was what kept eating disorder in place, if I can be, you know, that transparent about it. It was that it was a giant secret. Nobody was talking about it. I wasn't for a while, like I wasn't either, like, it wasn't me in my head, either confronting these thoughts, it was just they were there and I was doing this, and that's what was happening. A lot of the behaviors themselves happened in secret or in private, like it was stuff that I was doing when no one was around, or stuff that I was doing while people were around in a way that they wouldn't notice. So it's these, like meta layers of secrecy, where it was like, you know, if I but if I keep a smile on my face and stay engaged in a conversation, no one's going to notice when I do X, Y and Z, which wasn't necessarily the case, but it did really foster the loud, messy in my head, right? Like the fact that it was a secret and that no one knew what was happening to the point that sometimes I didn't know it was happening, meant that it got to stick around and it got to really, really root itself into the way my brain operated. Joanna,

Valerie 36:55

you're nodding your head. What do you want to add to that?

Joanna 36:59

Yeah, I mean, as as Vicky was describing that, I my mind just went to the current times that we're living in, and how so many of those conditions are kind of exacerbated right now, right so with our increased isolation and time at home, I've heard Vicky speak about this idea of, you know, the disconnection and the opportunity for for secrecy, and, you know, with our with more and more isolation over these past couple years, I just think about how the pandemic has really kind of created these prime conditions for This kind of behavior to flourish, if somebody's struggling, or perhaps for that to return. So, yeah,

Valerie 37:45

so Vicky, there is a period of time where these behaviors were really working for you and then they weren't. And what was the point at which it stopped working for you? I

Vicky 37:59

think it really aligns with going away to university. My eating disorder had kind of really propelled me through that end of high school and to get to a get to another stage of life and to actually live through it, even though questionable and what the quality of life was. But when I started university, it was this huge disruption to routine in like all areas of my life, in terms of the eating disorder, but also just generally, like I was living with a bunch of 18-19, year olds, and I was at university, I was away from home, I was away from my supports. That was also when my eating disorder really kind of swung a different way, and for the first time, like bingeing was truly a big part of it, and really disruptive, and took over a lot of my time and my energy and my money. It was a pretty like catastrophic transition, because nobody at all was watching me, at least before, even if people weren't commenting or I was resisting the commenting, at this point, there was nobody, so I had a lot of freedom, and that freedom was used pretty destructively, and it took over everything, like I was as a, you know, high functioning perfectionist high school student, all of a sudden I was failing classes in university. I wasn't even going to class. I couldn't go to class, or I would spend my whole day in the gym, or whatever it would look like it became all eating disorder all the time.

Valerie 39:23

Want to know more about that all eating disorder all the time. Was it waiting for this moment of freedom to really take over? I think I think

Vicky 39:34

so truly. I think part of probably what actually got me through that end of high school was knowing that in a few months, it'd be fair game to do whatever I wanted. However I wanted to do it with what felt at the time like no strings attached. But very much so there were strings attached to that. And

Valerie 39:54

what was, what part of the eating disorder was kind of, you know, keeping you from getting to class. And doing the activities that you knew you kind of wanted to do, or that would have felt more normal for you?

Vicky 40:10

Yeah, I think so much of it was hand in hand with my depression, and at that time was also when I started to deal with some, I might say, post traumatic stress. It was just

traumatic stress because I was in a pretty violent relationship, and I'd experienced sexual assault. So it was how I was on top of already having a really chaotic and destructive relationship with my body. Now I was trying so desperately to really not like it was just like neck up, like I was just my head. There's no body below that. How do you cope with that or make sense of it? So it was, how could I, how can I go sit in a class and listen to a lecture on something I don't care about when I don't even want to be alive? I don't want to be in this body. I don't want to be here, but also I am here, and I have friends, and I have new friends, and I, for the first time, have, like, a life in which I get to make decisions and have some autonomy over this. So those are happening equally, like at the exact same time, which made making time for homework seem pretty unimportant.

Valerie 41:11

And were you like looking back at that period of time in your life, did you know that you were unwell?

Vicky 41:20

I think yes, like, I want to say yes, because in my what was it, my first year of university, I wandered past the Wellness Center like 100 times being like, 'I should go in,' like, 'I should go talk to somebody.' And I never did. It was it got too much for me. I also had like, a residence advisor who was like, You're doing great, right? And I was like, okay, yeah, I'm doing great. And so it was more internalizing of what other people's expectations were in me. But in my second year of university, I this was really where I was, like, not going to class, I was starting to fail. I reached out to the therapist I've been seeing in high school, just out of, like, pure chaos, like, how? And she responded being like, I think it's time for you to be monitored by a doctor. And so for me, that was, at first, I was really mad. I was really mad at her, because why I trust her so much as a teenager going through this was she had centered so much choice for me and how I moved through that process, and she was very aware of kind of the limitations of external factors in terms of accessing treatment. And so I also knew, like for her to say that means something. So it meant, it really meant I had, I'm I'm further than I've been before, reached a different level. And if it's if it's at the point where this therapist is saying this, then maybe I need to do something about it.

Valerie 42:46

And then what happened?

Vicky 42:48

And then I called on my university counseling center, and they were, like, six weeks for an appointment. And I was like, okay, and then I think I cancelled it. And so it was like,

another six months before I ended up in that wellness like center room and did an intake for an eating disorder program in the community. And it was the first time in my whole entire life, and I sat in a room and on a piece of paper wrote down like eating disorder as like part of my medical history. And so then that referral went off into the void, and I went back to my life for another long chunk of months not thinking about it. Yeah, before I got a call about starting

Valerie 43:30

the program, wow. And in those months, you know, you in the world of the stages of change, you would have been in pre contemplation, contemplation, and then moving into, actually, you know, taking action and and during that period before you, you entered treatment, was the eating disorder still running your life?

Vicky 43:52

Yeah, absolutely. And it was, it was interesting, because it was the same time of my life that I started being more open about my other mental health challenges. So it was, you know, this really strangely at the same time, I could tell people like, I have depression and anxiety, and I used to self harm, and they used to struggle with these things. It was like, really open conversations with friends online, which changed so much for me in terms of, like, my own like journey into mental health advocacy, but simultaneously not one word about my eating disorder, but that it was currently still there. It was like maybe alluded to in past tense, in very specific circumstances, but it was still driving everything, because I also was still in that relationship. So also provided a huge anchor for coping with that relationship at that time. So it took over my life in a very different way, because it was less, less of like a friendly voice. And I mean, I say friendly voice, and I'm also remembering that I said, but some of the stuff that was saying to me was and so that's not very friendly, but it was even, it was just way more. It was way less welcomed the voice, at least, but I had no way to fight it at that time, like it was. It wasn't friendly, it wasn't helping me be productive, it wasn't helping me look a certain way. It wasn't really providing the same, like positive experience that I had previously at that point. It was just really leading me to a place of kind of even further, like darkness, like it was, like loud and then now dark in my head.

Valerie 45:25

I think that there's so much in what you just said, like, what, what really stands out for me are two things. One is that as we kind of as community, have become more aware of mental health issues. There are certain things that we have become more comfortable talking about depression, anxiety in particular, and you're kind of touching on the idea that there's still a stigma with eating disorders, and so coupled with the secrecy that the eating disorder needs in order to stay in Place, there's this societal or

community wide pressure to not talk about it. And I wonder if you could just sort of tell us a little bit about that stigma, about what you know, what makes it harder to talk about eating disorders than other mental health issues?

Vicky 46:15

Yeah, I think it starts with what we as a society assume that eating disorders to look like, or who it looks like. And I never, even when I was my most like unwell, in terms of like, losing weight, I never, I never looked like I had an eating disorder, which is not true. I had an eating disorder. We looked all sorts of ways, but on the outside, there was no way, if you knew nothing else about my life and you saw me walking down the street, the assumption would have just been that I was just a person I never I never looked like how the media really wants us to think about eating disorders, so that made it hard. How could I ever tell someone this? They would look at me and be like, 'No, you don't.' Because people literally had, right throughout my life, had literally said like, 'No, you don't like, you don't need this or this or this, so you don't', so worse off really became the internalized stigma around eating disorders. Like it was that I was like, back to the point of like, I couldn't even do the eating disorder well enough. Then it was like, 'How can I even begin to unpack that and in myself,' let alone how do I have a conversation with somebody who knows nothing about eating disorders and prepare myself or what might be a really like, unintentionally harmful comment from somebody, literally based off of how society talks about eating disorders, what would have been, you know, in your experience, what was the fear like?

Valerie 47:32

What would be an unhelpful comment someone could make?

Vicky 47:35

Oh my gosh, most, I mean, most comments like, I just think about, like, you know, like, 'What do you mean?' was, is one or like, you don't like, like, 'What do you mean?' Because, 'What do you mean?' for me, always got internalized as like, 'Oh, you don't think I, yeah, I don't look like this.' I don't look sick enough. So what do you mean wasn't helpful, Or like, oh, well, you know, 'I also XYZ,' like, 'I also don't this, this, this' or like, I also it's I also had responses of, like, 'I wish I could do that,' which just really asked this idea of, like, how we glamorize certain aspects of certain eating disorders. I remember a couple friends in high school who had that response to me when I first tried to disclose any kind of struggle, of like, I wish I could do that. And it was like, 'Yeah, you like, great. Take it from me. I don't want it anymore.' But obviously that wasn't the conversation or the response, but it wasn't a helpful one, because that also helped to continue to normalize those behaviors. That it was great, 'Well, then you should do these because other people want to do them.'

Valerie 48:40

So at what point, Vicky, did you kind of admit to yourself that you had an eating disorder?

Vicky 48:49

Yeah, that's a great question. I think there were, I mean, really different times in my life where it was there, like, I think that way back to the beginning, like, of being 16 and telling my first therapist, like, I think I have an eating disorder because of this, this, this, and then that disappeared for really long time. And I actually don't think it came well into when I started treatment, like I showed up to the first kind of, you know, info sessions and my first couple rounds of support groups and talking to people. So I think rather unfortunately, I didn't feel that I had an eating disorder until I had a diagnosis, which I now don't feel like, like I feel like, very clearly, without that diagnosis, it was evident that this was an eating disorder, and even if it had never in my life been labeled, that it was really deserving of support and intervention and care. But I remember sitting the day that I was meeting with like the nurse practitioner for the first time, and I knew this was like it right? This was the day I get a diagnosis or I don't, which would limit my access or not to the program. And I remember leaving being like, 'Hmm, like, Man, I don't know, I don't know if I apply it.' And it was the first time that I had heard about a diagnosis that wasn't just anorexia, bulimia.

Joanna 50:09

I think it's so important that, you know, Vicky, highlighting that at that time it felt invalidating, or wasn't, that her symptoms weren't valid enough to seek support if it didn't fit into this clinical box. And I think that's such an important note that when we think about disordered eating, which is a broader spectrum of bigger umbrella of symptoms, we don't need to fit into these clinical boxes of experiencing X many symptoms for X many months in order to be suffering and in order to be deserving of care. And you know what I heard Vicky say upon reflection, that, of course she was suffering, and of course it made sense, and of course it was valid. And I think that's a really helpful reminder for anyone to reflect on you know, is this disrupting my quality of life? Is this negatively impacting me? Do I wish things were different? Am I struggling and that's enough, and that's enough to be valid and worthy of seeking support?

Valerie 51:11

Yeah, I think that's such a great thing for people to keep in mind. And and also that there that the degree of suffering was really extreme. You were in a lot of pain.

Vicky 51:24

Yea, and I was in even more pain in treatment. I used to think that, like recovering from my eating disorder was the hardest thing I ever did, and I don't need to say that in any kind of way to discourage folks who are considering entering recovery. It was just it required so much more than just starting to heal my relationship with food. You know, all the chaos and nonsense that I've alluded to throughout this like I had to sit in a room with that, I had to face some stuff about my life and things that I had experienced in a way that I had never had to before because the eating disorder provided that out. It gave me the chance to not have to address those things. So starting recovery was so difficult because it was so much more than starting recovery like it was about changing the entire way that I moved through the world, how I experienced myself, what that meant for my relationships, and that beginning of that again, still happened in such secrecy, like I started treatment without telling anybody.

Valerie 52:28

Could you just give us just a sense of what treatment for eating disorders is like?

Vicky 52:32

Yeah, I think there's a really, I mean, it's not that wide of a range, but I think there's a wide range of what it can look like for folks. For me, at least, it involved this, like, kind of outpatient community based style of support. I saw a dietitian and a nurse practitioner and a social worker, and I attended support groups. So it was very based in attending these groups, where I learned a lot of different skills and just did a lot of myth busting, too about eating disorders and body image and what, what all of that means. So it was a it was a lot of actually, just sitting in a room and listening in the beginning, because I still wasn't fully convinced. I hadn't had full buy-in yet that I should change these things. It was going to be so painful. So really, even though I hadn't told a lot of people in my life, or anyone at that time. It was the people in those groups that became very important in finding like hearing stories of shared experience and different experiences. So it was a lot of, there's a lot of collective work, like getting to share space and support each other, and then it was so much internal work in a lot of different ways. I also started counseling again outside of that, and did some trauma work. So for me, it was a large combination of things that helped towards it, and it never involved going to hospital again. But for some folks, that's what it looks like. But for me, it was really based in finding community and understanding what had happened for the last eight years? Like, what was that? And there's a life where that isn't it like, that was a huge question for me. I was like, What do you mean? Who am I if I don't have an eating disorder? How can I be a person if this isn't also there, you're speaking to a little bit about how it became part of your identity? Oh, absolutely, yeah, especially in the time of my life when I couldn't I didn't see it as being unwell or being sick or whatever it was. It was just Yeah. It wasn't eating disorder voice. It was my voice.

Valerie 54:35

What was it like for you to be in a room with people to actually let the secret out?

Vicky 54:42

That's really scary, like I'm laughing, because I just remember being so terrified every time I walk into that room and I kept going, and it was because of hearing so many other people just be able to talk about it that I was like, I guess I can say something. Yeah, and I think it was the first couple of times that I spoke in group, and it was received well by other people. I was like, What? What do you mean? So it was really terrifying. And then became very important to say it out loud, especially because at that time in my life, there weren't really other safe pockets that I could be saying it out loud. So this really became important to hear it in my own voice, the same voice that was in my head that sounded like my eating disorder, saying, you know, that I deserved a life that wasn't this for you.

Valerie 55:32

Vicky, what was the most important thing that you learned in treatment?

Vicky 55:37

I think part of it was just I'd spent so much of my like life, so much of being a young person, really believing that I there was nothing different. There wasn't a future in which I was alive, or if there was a future that I was alive in, it wasn't anything more than this. It was going to always be filled with the chaos of my eating disorder, of my depression, of bad things happening to me that I had no control over, and so treatment was the first time that I started to see a future that I was like, Oh, wait, wait, wait, like, maybe there is a different story here in which this doesn't take up all of my time and energy and space, and I don't spend all of my time hating my body and myself. And I can do other things, like all the space for interest and hobbies like treatment. I also realize I like doing stuff because there had been no room for liking anything while I was in the depths of my eating disorder.

Joanna 56:39

I'm just so struck by what you're sharing, Vicky in that all of the things that treatment provided was like the antidote of the challenging pieces that you experienced, right? Like community, bringing the secrecy up out into the light where it can be revealed, and then, like, connecting to your higher values of what your life could look like and and it strikes me how none of that was really about the food or or about kind of centering in the physical appearance of your body, but really connecting to those larger pieces that you valued in life, and you had Hope to see an opportunity to value those things.

Vicky 57:24

Yeah, absolutely. And I think the only thing that, not the only thing, but one of the important things about the body that came out of that time of treatment for me was the idea of body neutrality. It was the first time that I learned I don't have to love my body like, 'whoa. My gosh.' What a relief that was. I was literally like, jaw dropped when I was sitting in a room and heard about body neutrality for the first time. I'm like, I don't have to like, Wow, what a weight off my shoulders that I can just exist in this body. I can acknowledge that it has gotten me to this point and will get me to more points after this. It has survived a lot of things, and a lot of those things, it had no choice over and it did the best that it could, and it's okay if I don't love it, like it's it's really okay if it's not this, like, toxic positivity moment of like, I love everything about my body. It's like, that wasn't the marker of recovery for me. Like, just being able to have a body and put clothes on it, that was it, yeah.

Joanna 58:19

And appreciate the function rather than the aesthetics. I think so much of what we hear in Yeah, in the kind of body, love, acceptance, still focuses on the esthetic qualities. And what I hear you saying is like, yeah, like, it's a vehicle for me, and I can be grateful for that and for its function and that. I think that could be really healing for folks to to connect to your body as an instrument rather than as an ornament.

Vicky 58:49

Yeah. And it even helped in terms of, like, later in my life, when I encountered some challenges with chronic pain, it's hard to love a body that isn't doing what other bodies are doing. And so it was way more important for me just to be like my body's been through a lot. It's held a lot for me, and it's doing what it needs to do right now to work through some of that stuff, and yeah, like that. Having to love my body wouldn't have helped me get through learning how to cope with chronic pain after that. Self

Joanna 59:14

Compassion doesn't mean you have to love your body. It's just kindness and grace. Beautiful.

Valerie 59:20

This is such an important piece, also, I think, in the world of prevention, eating disorder prevention, if from a younger age, if we talk to ourselves and talk to children and young people in our lives, to talk about their bodies in terms of what they can do, strong arms for lifting, fast feet for running, you know, a back that is strong enough to carry a

backpack or a heavy load, as opposed to how they look or how your clothes look on on that body.

Vicky 59:49

I also think it adds an avenue for folks who do have, you know, physical considerations, to find a home in, you know, the body acceptance movement too, of like, yeah, maybe my body can't do those things, and that doesn't. Change its worth, or its value, or my value as a person, like it's also okay if I can't, if I can't run, or I can't lift up the backpack, it's great if I can, and it's okay if I can't, because, again, it's not about my body doesn't decide my worthiness as a person. The fact that I am a person is what counts.

Valerie 1:00:18

Vicky, if we just return to that experience for you, of treatment, what we talked about, the most helpful thing that you learned, and what was, what was a difficult part of that process for you? Yeah,

Vicky 1:00:32

And, I know I haven't talked about the food piece, but I would say the having to eat piece was really awkward, having to, you know, give up all of it. There was a, especially in the beginning of treatment, there was a phase where I was like, 'No, no, no, no. If I could just get rid of these behaviors, I can keep these ones.' And that's fine. That's recovery. And it really wasn't. It really just held me in place when I was starting to learn all these new ways of moving forward. So one of the really hard parts was actually just learning how to confront food every day. I had to change everything about my relationship with food to really be able to move forward in the way that felt like I wanted to move forward.

Valerie 1:00:18

How has your relationship changed now?

Vicky 1:00:22

Yeah, it's changed multiple times. I think when I gone to I was in that program for almost three years doing different support groups, checking in with my support team, doing trauma counseling, and I did a year of a group about relapse prevention, before I kind of got to a point where I was sitting down with the team, and I was like, 'I'm recovered.' And I, like, literally whispered it because it was like, mind blowing, like, I don't, I don't know what you get to picture for that, but literal, blowed my entire brains out because I was like, 'What do you mean I'm recovered?' This was everything, and it wasn't scary to say that was the difference. So much of the fight in the beginning of treatment was like, I'll never be recovered. So that's not the goal. And I mean, spoiler alert, that's true, but it

was like that moment of being like, 'Oh, I'm recovered.' I did this okay, and then I felt really good. And for like, a couple years after that moment, I felt really solid in who I was, the person where I wanted to be, what I wanted to do. My relationship with food stayed okay, like I, you know, I had some challenges, and I coped with them, and that was really wild to me. Like there was a, you know, the first couple times when afternoon, I wasn't seeing anyone in that group anymore and wasn't seeing my support team, and I encountered my first, like, big life stressors or triggers or challenges, and I got through them, or I slipped, and then I got back up, and I was okay, and I kept moving. That was wild. I was like, 'Wow, cool.' And then it just wasn't on my brain all the time. And then the pandemic hit. And I think, like, for a lot of folks, and kind of, like, what we've talked about in terms of the things that foster an eating disorder to maintain itself, showed up again in my life. And so it was the first time in kind of years of feeling really solid and saying I was recovered and that no longer felt the case. And so then my relationship with food changed again, and my relationship with my body changed again. But I think in a really, like, understandable, typical way, as the rest of the world was doing this as well. And then the difference was that I knew, like, as much as the eating disorder voice was back in the in a way, there was also, like the voice that had been through treatment and recovery and pulled myself out of that knew there's a life in which I'm alive that had to be like, 'Hey, still here.' So that, yeah, that's it's just changed a couple times, and I'm sure it will continue to change. But I think the difference is knowing that there is a version, there's still a version where this isn't everything all the time, even if sometimes it shows back up and takes off space once you had more space in your life that was not being filled up with eating disorder, behavior, eating disorder, voice, what were some of the things that you did to fill your space, fill your time, yeah, um, I think a lot of it was like, just being able to, like, be present. I know that might sound really simple, but like I had had lots of friends and done lots of things with friends while I had an eating disorder. But the difference in when it was less space is like I was there, like I was there and I could, I could wear a bathing suit and swim, and I wouldn't think twice about it. I could eat a whole entire meal. Oh, and then go get dessert too, and not think about it. It was this whole new level of being around and I actually think I learned so much more about the people that I cared about, because I was really able to be there, because my brain wasn't half the time clocked out and, you know, engaged in these behaviors. It was, it was, I was there. I was a whole person. And then it just had so much time to, like, dream about, like, 'What do I want to do?' Like, what's that going to look like? And I also, like, volunteered, like, had time to, like, go do stuff. I had energy. So I, like, really, I spent a lot of time working in, like, outdoor education and camps, and, like, working with kids, because I love kids and they're hilarious, and I had energy to keep up with them. And also, then noticed when I worked with kids and stuff around their body or eating came up like it didn't trigger me or make me upset, and I felt we were able to handle sharing that space. And it also really motivated me to stay in

recovery was like the power of knowing, the power of knowing somebody else who'd gone through this and that they can maintain it. And there it's a life where this changes like that was, that was motivating, even if those kids never know that, right? Like, it wasn't really ever about having to tell them that. It was just me knowing this. Of like, I, you know, I have an impact on people, and it matters. So, you know, I also have to think that I matter again.

Valerie 1:05:54

There's so many moments in this conversation where I feel like we've said it like, so beautiful, because what you're talking about, and Joanna, you mentioned this earlier, that the antidote to the eating disorder is connection, right, and connection authenticity, letting the secret breathe and actually come out into the light and not allowing the stigma to keep you quiet. And I just hear the brightness in your voice and the richness of your life now that you didn't have before when the eating disorder was more in control, and it's such a wonderful way to think about treatment and recovery that this is what's on the other end. This is where you can be for people who are contemplating treatment, who are still in that contemplation stage about making the change, what would be your advice to those people?

Vicky 1:06:54

I think that it's okay, like I think so much, at least again, in my experience of my day disorder, but also in supporting folks in a lot of different capacities with their journeys with food and their bodies. It's like, it's okay that that's where you are right now. It does have to be a decision that you make for yourself, and that can feel really hard, and it doesn't have to look like saying, I'm going to recover, like I'm going to follow everything everyone tells me to do. Like, that's just, you know, like, using the eating disorder in a different way. So it's, I don't know if that's too simple, but it's just like, it's really okay to be right where you are, and it's going to be really hard, but oh my gosh, have you survived worse? Like, you got through all of these things to get to this point? So the fact that you're sitting there even considering treatment like it's there when you're ready, hopefully, and if it's not like there's time and there's space and there, there is a life outside of it. And but I say that, and I'm like, internally rolling my eyes, because I didn't believe anyone who told me that at that time. So I think I also have, I just have a real soft spot for that, because I also remember so much of my beginning of recovery was just wanting to hear from people who weren't at a place of staying recovered, that it was just recovery was a process, and it's something that you might face forever, and that doesn't have to be devastating, doesn't have to be devastating that just because you enter treatment and you learn these tools that you might not hit a speed bump later on and have to learn some more tools or try something different.

Joanna 1:08:24

Yeah, what I love about what you said, Vicky was just, I'm almost hearing it's like permission to explore and be curious about how life could be different. And it doesn't have to be kind of this unilateral decision, you know when, when we're really suffering too, because it's really scary to consider, 'I'm just going to give this up.' 'I'm going to work towards recovery,' as this kind of goal post that can mean so many different things and can be really intimidating. It's like saying 'I'm going to go and I'm going to climb Mount Everest.' Well, let's go for a walk first and explore what that's like. So I think that it's really beautiful to it's a slight shift in perception, but a really important one to have curiosity about how your life can be different, and to give yourself permission to dream about that, to touch in with that in little ways and all you need to do is take one step and see how that feels, and you don't have to commit to the end piece, but take a step and evaluate. Because I think this all really comes down to you get to decide the quality of your life and how you engage with recovery, and it can the path is not the same for everyone, for sure, and not linear, as we've talked about many times

Valerie 1:09:47

So Joanna and Vicky so often historically, the conversation about eating disorders has really centered on the experience of women and girls, and we recently. Started talking about boys and eating disorders. But of course, eating disorders affect people of all genders. And I think it's important for us to just mention that that is a whole other conversation in itself. And I just wonder if for both of you, one of you, to just kind of talk a little bit about how eating disorders affect different genders differently, or just some of the things that we should be aware of as we're contemplating all people who can be affected by eating disorders.

Vicky 1:10:35

I think at least in my experience, it wasn't until very recently that I could think about the impact of gender and my eating disorder, especially in terms of, like, how I saw my body, like my relationship to my body, my gender, feels much more fluid now than it was. I don't know, you know, at different times of my life. And definitely like being raised as a woman and that experience versus now, it's like putting different puzzle pieces, and I only have the energy and capacity to start thinking about it and having a relationship with my gender because of all the work I put into my eating disorder recovery in the first place. But I know that that's playing a new piece now that I'm thinking about a lot in terms of what does that look like for my relationship to my body, and I know that's like pretty common for like, trans and gender non conforming folks who are dealing with changes in their bodies at very in in very different ways than CIS folks might be, and they think it is just about like being able to start that conversation of like eating disorders. Don't discriminate. They root and find home, kind of anywhere,

and that might look different. I know, you know, sometimes for boys and men, it might look like pursuing a very different type of body, or, like, super muscular, what that looks like. But also, like, same for some women, right? And also, like some men also experience the desire to be thin. So it's kind of about flip flopping the entire idea of gender on its head, like thinking about the impact for folks who have eating disorders.

Joanna 1:12:00

Yeah, I agree. I think there's that stigma around or the misconception that it always looks a particular way, or it's always about fitness or leanness, and also that folks might have different reasons for wanting to achieve different body shapes, and that's where some of the gender conversation could come in. So there's no one way that this shows up. And if that's what your experience is, you know it's equally valid, and it doesn't have to kind of follow this narrow box of what we've thought about. So if we can just highlight that for folks to be curious about their own experience and know that suffering is suffering for whatever reason and for whatever body shape you might be in at the time

Valerie 1:12:47

Vick, before we say goodbye today, I just want to thank you so much for bringing your story and your whole self and your articulate, heartfelt words. And what I want to ask you is, how are you different now than you were before you were in recovery, before you were in treatment?

Vicky 1:13:09

Yeah, I think the basic that's different is that piece, like some that cliché, but sometimes it feels cliché to be like there's a future that I'm alive, and I don't mean as a cliché, because it's also like for folks that have that experience of really not seeing a life that they're alive in, it's really terrifying to be like, wait now I get to make choices and plans. Like, what does that even mean? I know I said terrifying and then said it in a really, like, delightful way, but it's because now it feels delightful to think about, what do I want to do? What is that going to look like? So the difference now, I think, is that even on the days where it's really difficult and really challenging or it feels all consuming again, there's just a bit more of a safety net to catch me when that happens, and that I still do stand by the fact that there will be a future that I'm alive in, that I get to, you know, build a whole, entire life for myself, and that might look different at different times, and that's okay. So I think there's also just maybe a lot more acceptance of things are going to happen and they're going to change, and I can handle it.

Valerie 1:14:19

I was so appreciative of Vicki's candor and Joanna's commentary in this conversation. Thanks so much to both Vicky and Joanna for bringing so much of themselves to this

conversation. If you would like to learn more about Jesse's legacy and the work that we are doing to raise awareness of and prevent eating disorders in the province of British Columbia. Please visit the Jessie's legacy website at jessieslegacy.com and we'll put more information in our show notes as well. And thanks to you for listening to this episode of open hearts, honest conversations. Until next time, I'm your host, Valerie Dolgin.

Bryn Askwith 1:15:09

A big thanks to our friends at Embody for letting us share this episode in our feed today. If you're interested in hearing more episodes from *Open hearts, honest conversations*, head to the link in our show notes for trusted resources for parents and caregivers on supporting a child before they develop an eating disorder. Head to embodybc.com formerly known as Jessie's Legacy. You can also listen to our podcast from season three on how parents can play an active role in eating disorder recovery. It's one of our most popular episodes. That link can also be found in our show notes.

Char Black 1:15:40

This episode of Where You Are is brought to you by BC Children's Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre. Our show is produced and edited by Jenny Cunningham, with audio engineering by Ryan Clarke, audio production by JAR Audio.

Bryn Askwith 1:15:54

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