

Battling Body Image

ONE WOMAN'S STRUGGLE WITH AN EATING DISORDER

WRITTEN BY CASSIDY STRAWN

PHOTOGRAPHED BY LAUREN PRESSEY

Confident and poised, the accomplished Kathleen Gleeson looks a far cry from her former self. Just seven years ago, at the age of 20, she looked starved, living on a diet of coffee, energy drinks and lettuce with ketchup. After going through Torrance Memorial's Medical Stabilization Program for Patients with Eating Disorders, the lost and unhappy girl transformed into a goal-oriented woman who is now graduating from Cal State Long Beach in May and getting married this summer.

While the process was far from easy, Gleeson starts to cry as she explains, "It was Dr. Schack's office; that's what kept me going back. They made me feel good." Gleeson's personal physician and medical director of the hospital's in-patient eating disorders program, Linda Schack, MD, treats adolescents and young adults who have eating disorders with medical complications or have reached a dangerously low weight.

"It is very gratifying to take care of these patients," says Schack. "They come in scared, anxious, very sick and sometimes fighting with their families about whether

Kathleen Gleeson, former patient at Torrance Memorial's Medical Stabilization Program for Patients with Eating Disorders.





Gleeson is set to graduate from Cal State Long Beach and engaged to be married.

or not they need treatment. Within a few days, they almost always see that we are there to help them recover, and they appreciate that and respond to it.”

Gleeson’s disordered thoughts started at a young age. “From very early on, I was very restrictive and obsessive, and it probably came from the fact that I blossomed early. I felt so insecure and not like all my other friends, because they were all small and petite and skinny,” she remembers.

Her obsessive dieting continued throughout high school. When she graduated and moved to Santa Monica to attend community college, her illness became more severe. Disappointed with her decision not to go to a university like her friends and ending a four-year romantic relationship, Gleeson became more depressed and lost more weight. “At this point, it was correlating with my mood. Deep down, I knew I needed help and I wanted it, but I also didn’t want to accept it,” she explains.

Both Gleeson’s mother and her employer were worried about her apparent unhappiness and her continued weight loss, and they encouraged Gleeson to go see Dr. Schack. After months of them “nagging” her to go, Gleeson reluctantly agreed but refused to check herself into the hospital. For roughly four months, she saw Dr. Schack every other

week, but she was unable to change her lifestyle, and her health continued to deteriorate. So finally, Schack, Gleeson’s psychologist, Bobbi O’Brien, PhD, and Gleeson’s mother held an intervention. “I kicked and I screamed and I swore, but then finally I caved, and I went in,” Gleeson says.

Schack is one of 500 board-certified adolescent medicine specialists in the U.S., treating teens and young adults with eating disorders for nearly 20 years. Patients who enter the program generally stay for two to four weeks in the hospital, getting individualized meals, plenty of support and individual as well as family therapy.

“It is very much a team approach, with everyone helping the patient toward recovery,” Schack notes. “The South Bay is fortunate to have this program, which is one of only a handful in the nation that treats the sickest eating disorders patients comprehensively. Our clinical psychologist, Dr. Bobbi O’Brien, worked in the eating disorders field as a registered nurse before pursuing her PhD in psychology, and she has played a key role in shaping the program. Drawing on her prior experience as an RN, Dr. O’Brien has been able to train and support the nursing staff, so they are extremely competent and comfortable with this type of patient.”

Gleeson stresses that Schack was the pulling force that got her through it. “I fell in love with Dr. Schack from day one. There was something drawing me to her. On one of my first nights in the hospital, I got overwhelmed and afraid of this huge change that was happening. I wanted to go home and back to my old habits, and I almost signed myself out. Dr. Schack told me that I was free to leave, but if I did, she wouldn’t be able to continue as my doctor. And I immediately was like, ‘No, don’t leave me.’”

And even though Gleeson has come a long way—with a wedding and a bachelor’s degree ahead of her—she still insists on going to Dr. Schack for all of her medical needs.



For more information visit torrance.memorial.org/eatingdisorders.

WARNING SIGNS OF AN EATING DISORDER

Eating disorders are common in adolescents. If discovered early, they can be treated successfully, before they lead to serious health problems. Here are some warning signs to watch for in your teen. None are proof of an eating disorder, but you should consult a physician if your child displays two or more.

- Progressive weight loss, especially if coupled with persistent comments about “being fat.”
- Constipation.
- Deterioration of dental hygiene.
- Recurrent complaints of abdominal pain.
- Menstrual periods absent for six months or skipping three or more menstrual cycles.
- Absence of secondary sex characteristics by age 14.
- No onset of menstrual period by age 16.
- Use of laxatives or diet pills. Consuming products designed for weight loss.
- Preoccupation with preparing food (especially sweets) for family members without eating the prepared foods. Skipped meals. Ritualistic eating behavior: cutting food into tiny pieces, taking too long to eat, eating all of one type of food on the plate before starting another, etc.
- Announcement of “eating healthy” or becoming vegetarian. Frequently “on a diet.” Elimination of food categories, such as red meat, fats, gluten, dairy, etc.
- Disappearance of large quantities of food from the house without explanation.
- Hyper-exercise: doing bedroom leg-lifts, crunches, etc. Working out more than one hour at a time. Exercising seven days a week, even when sick with a cold or flu.

Information provided by Linda Schack, MD. To learn more, visit DrSchack.com.