



# OVERACHIEVER WON'T LET MISFORTUNE WEIGH HER DOWN

As I sit down to lunch with this perky, polished, thirty-something woman, I can almost feel her nervousness. Lynn and I make small talk about her background - a childhood spent in rural upstate New York - knowing that our talk will inevitably turn to the real reason she's here ... to tell us of her journey through the depths of emotional pain and how she turned her life around.

## WEIGHTY ISSUES

"I was an overachiever in school and participated in countless extra-curricular activities," Lynn states proudly. "Except for a weight problem, I had a relatively normal childhood - a brother, two sisters, and happily-married parents."

"Weight problems have been a pervasive theme throughout my life. I was 330 pounds when I graduated high school. Even as a young girl I was always very conscious about my weight and tried every diet imaginable,

but nothing ever seemed to work. But as I look back, it wasn't so much the weight that was so damaging, it was all of the comments and criticisms from other people that impacted my self-esteem."

Although she was never diagnosed in adolescence, Lynn now knows she suffered from a severe case of bulimia. "I remember being so nervous about something that I quickly made a cake batter, licked the bowl clean, and purged minutes later," says Lynn as she revisits her painful past.

While her weight was a constant source of discomfort for Lynn, it didn't stop her from achieving in the classroom. She graduated at the top of her class and enrolled at a college near her home.

Once at college, as she did in high school, Lynn threw herself into academics... and also discovered social activities. An event that took place on campus during her sophomore year would bring Lynn's carefree college days to a sudden halt.

## THE SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS, PART I

"One night while I was working a social on campus I went out to ask a couple of guys to leave because they were not following the rules. All of the sudden they were yelling and taunting me. The next thing you know I was being violently assaulted and raped by two strange men," Lynn says softly.

Lynn kept this traumatic event quiet until after her medical exam the following week. "That's when I told my mom and dad a little bit about it, but I didn't go into any great detail. I think they were overwhelmed and didn't know how to react."

Not knowing how to react herself, Lynn attempted to take her own life. According to the Center Against Sexual Abuse, 46 percent of rape survivors consider or attempt suicide. Lynn survived her suicide attempt, but underwent several psychiatric hospitalizations to get her subsequent depression under control.

## **THE SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS, PART II**

Lynn was determined not to let one painful night destroy her life-long goal of getting a college degree, but she knew she needed to get away from where she was. Upon her release from the hospital Lynn transferred to another local college and soon after graduated with a bachelors degree in sociology. Her academic achievements during her undergraduate years resulted in her being awarded a fellowship to an elite graduate school in Ohio.

The fellowship helped Lynn find the self-esteem she needed to move away from home. In a way, Lynn thought the move would help her cope with the emotional remnants from that awful night; however, she soon found herself in an all-too-familiar situation. While walking home from a local grocery store one night, Lynn was raped again, by a man she had never seen before. She recalls him seeming like “a bum who hung out around the area.”

This second assault and the subsequent rehashing with police and university authorities threw Lynn into a downward spiral of emotional crisis. “I quit going to classes because every time I wanted to leave my house, I was forced to walk by the area where the rape took place,” she remembers. “I tried to keep working, but between my emotional problems and the pressure of attending school I got myself to the point of being completely run-down and developed pneumonia.”

## **AN EXPANDING PROBLEM**

Faced with declining mental and physical health, Lynn seemed unable to return to a healthy level of functioning. Her doctor compounded the situation by treating her pneumonia with steroids, which resulted in her gaining an unmanageable amount of weight.

“I was already very large, but the steroids caused me to balloon up to over 500 pounds,” says Lynn with amazement. “Keep in mind that I am only 5’1” - I was completely housebound, on oxygen, could barely walk, and couldn’t even drive a car.”

At this point in her life Lynn saw no way out. “No matter how hard I tried snap out of my depression, or not think about the rapes, nothing I tried was ever powerful enough. Visions of the assaults would just pop into my head out of nowhere. I couldn’t even sleep because I would have nightmares about the incidents. I was just suffering all the time. So I decided to put myself out of my misery. I drank a bottle of Amaretto mixed with vodka, swallowed about a hundred tranquilizer pills, and slit my wrists all at once.”

Heavily sedated, Lynn made a desperate attempt to assure her dog’s survival after her passing. “Because I was so unattached, it suddenly occurred to me that I wouldn’t be found for a while. In a frantic state, I attempted to drive my dog to my office, because I trusted that one of my co-workers would look after him for me. I thought I could drop my dog off and get out of there in time, but I lost too much blood and passed out in front of my office door.”

To everyone’s amazement, Lynn once again recovered, but only after several months of hospitalization. Lynn declined her parents’ invitation to move back home, and she and her roommate withdrew from school and moved back to the one area she felt safe - the rural town in upstate New York where she obtained her bachelor’s degree.

While the bucolic setting may have provided a safe haven, it lacked the appropriate medical attention she needed. Lynn’s weight kept her housebound and unable to work, and she was barely able to survive on her social security insurance checks.

## **A DIFFERENT PATH**

“My roommate and I were unable to afford living on our own, so we decided to pack it up and move to her hometown of Akron, Ohio,” says Lynn, a smile creeping over her face.

Once settled in, Lynn was encouraged by her roommate to contact Portage Path Behavioral Health. “When I first came to Portage Path I weighed over 500 pounds, I was tremendously agoraphobic, physically ill, depressed, and was barely making it from day-to-day. In fact, for a number of years, the only time I left my house was to come to Portage Path and that was it.”

As she had done with her studies, Lynn dedicated herself to recovery.

“I joined the Intensive Treatment Services (I.T.S.) program, which was so helpful. I.T.S. gave me the motivation to get out of the house and begin socializing again in society,” says Lynn, her thoughts drifting back. “It was in the I.T.S. program when I first started making changes.”

From then on, Lynn took advantage of a variety of services at Portage Path. She graduated from the I.T.S. program, continued receiving individual counseling, and participated in countless coping skills and self-esteem groups. As time went on Lynn knew that no matter how stable her mind became, she would not be able to live life much longer if she did not make a drastic change in her weight. Still weighing over 500 pounds, Lynn decided to undergo gastro-intestinal surgery.

“I knew that it was a risky operation, but when I woke up out of recovery I was so proud of myself,” recalls Lynn. “That moment was the biggest turning point in my life.”

From that day on, Lynn’s life has been looking up. She lost over 250 pounds the first year after her surgery, and continues to exercise and control her eating habits. She is currently feeling the best that she has ever felt and is optimistic about the future.

“I started kick-boxing and I found it empowering. It helped me with my problems like agoraphobia and being so fearful all of the time. Don’t get me wrong, I am still afraid of a number of things, and there are a lot of areas I won’t go into - especially campuses.”

Now engaged and employed as a licensed social worker, Lynn feels as if she has truly gotten back on her feet. She thanks counselor Jill Lowery and psychiatrist Sameera Khan for all of their support.

“Jill Lowery and Dr. Khan have really been good to me throughout the years, and they continue to meet my ever changing needs,” says Lynn as she smiles with gratitude.

Lynn’s story is a perfect illustration of why agencies like Portage Path are so valuable to our community. It also provides a glimpse into the elusive, almost indescribable things that make our jobs so meaningful.

“My life is more full now than it has ever been - my plan is to keep expanding my world and to develop more on the personal, professional, and social level,” says Lynn with a look of determination. “I now take time out to appreciate the small things, such as walking, being with friends, and actually driving a car.”

“I still struggle with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression ... I mean, sometimes the depression will come out of nowhere and for no reason I will start crying and feel horrible. The main thing is that I am able to keep functioning now. If I didn’t have someone to support me and help me through this it would have been just another time in my life where I would have crashed and burned. That is the difference counseling makes.”