

Olivia's Introduction: Sarah moved to Fairlee, Vermont in June of last year and works at Hulbert Outdoor Center as an Outdoor Educator.

Introduction:

Hello! My name is Sarah Townsend, and I would like to thank everyone who is here to participate in today's walk. Whether you are here recovering *or* you are supporting a loved one, thank you. I believe in a future where eating disorders are no longer stigmatized so that folks can get the help and healing they need. And that all starts right here. Second, I want to take a moment and thank the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) for making events like this a reality. This work is extremely important to me and I'm grateful for this space to share my story.

Story:

From a young age, running has always been my passion; my dad is still my inspiration for running as he has completed countless marathons and other distance races in his lifetime. In high school, I got serious with the sport as my times improved in cross country and track. By the end of my freshman season, I earned a spot on the varsity team... and before I knew it, my life turned into going to school, going to practice, doing homework at the library, getting home around 7pm for dinner, and falling asleep just to do it all over again the next day. Looking back on my high school running career, I definitely can recall plenty of fond memories with my teammates and on the bus rides to meets on Saturday mornings... but when I *really* stop to analyze what was happening, there lies a deeper truth.

My eating disorder emerged from this increasing pressure to perform and be "perfect" at everything. I somehow contorted "perfection" with "being in control", and this sense of "control" over food and exercise provided me with *some* emotional stability, but ultimately, the comfort was only ever fleeting. And it certainly was not sustainable.

I have since learned that there is no greater exhaustion than chasing perfection and never allowing myself to wholeheartedly believe that I am *enough*.

My competitive running career continued into my freshman year of college - but came to a startling halt when I obtained what would be my first of many tibial stress fractures. This particular injury healed, but last year, I dealt with a similar bone stress fracture that continued to delay in healing until medical intervention was needed.

The months of exhaustion from, and disappointment in, my body's inability to heal and rebuild itself was my turning point; I was tired of my eating disorder dictating my life – while simultaneously hiding behind just how much pain it was causing me. I wanted to seek out professional help and actively choose recovery because struggling through meals and ignoring my body's need for rest was crushing my soul. From this desire to repair my body and soul, I chose to attend an intensive outpatient treatment program in Tampa where I was formally

diagnosed with an eating disorder... something that I can now trace back to when my relationship with food and running first began to sour. Tackling my ED in treatment was one of the most challenging things I have ever done, but I wouldn't change a thing about it. I developed a deeper sense of purpose *beyond* my eating disorder, and for that, I will be forever grateful.

As many of you may already know, recovery from almost *anything* is not linear. In fact, if you would have asked me a few months ago about my recovery, my answer would be completely different from today. Presently, I am going through lingering health repercussions from my eating disorder, as I've recently sustained another bone stress injury in my *right* tibia. I am grateful I stopped running before it digressed, but nonetheless, the physical and emotional pain of an additional bone-stress injury has me confused and sad. The reality is that eating disorders can have long term effects on the physical body. Bone health, for example, may take a longer time to build back up after years of being weakened from my eating disorder.

So it's clear to say that recovery is a *journey* - not a destination. However, since graduating from my program, it's been beautiful to see new hobbies unfold, all of which have nothing to do with exercise. I have found passion in songwriting, experimenting with different recipes, and I've also found a lot of solace in maintaining friendships. Additionally, fueling my body has helped me to have the energy and stamina to fully enjoy my job in outdoor education; I have the privilege of working with and learning alongside the wide variety of students and participants that visit our center, and I know that my instructor role would not be made possible without the intentional work of healing my relationship with food. The ups and downs of my recovery journey thus far have allowed me to embody my strength, capabilities, and worthiness of a life without an eating disorder.

If you take anything away from this story, please know that compassion and love for yourself - above all - is what matters. Your true essence lies beyond who your ED voice is telling you to be - even though it's difficult as heck to remember that sometimes.

To my future self who might slip up, I forgive you. Keep going. **Recovery is worth it because so deeply do I want to live a life free of the shackles of my eating disorder voice telling what I can or cannot do.** I am sharing this story because I felt so alone in the beginning of my eating disorder; no one around me was speaking up about eating disorders - even though they are *serious* mental health illnesses. This is a difficult conversation but it matters. The happiness I feel for the life I am living now, actively recovering from something that was so suffocating when I was in the thick of it - this freedom and joy allows me to celebrate my body in ways that I couldn't before. We are healing, one moment at a time. May our journeys be blessed with simple reminders that joy exists in everything and life is worth living.

Thank you!