



Turning the Tables on Anorexia

by [JUDITH SHAW](#)



At the age of 53, Judith Shaw finally realized that she had been suffering from an eating disorder for most of her adult life. How she she got help — and found her calling

I was living what many consider a charmed life. The suburban wife of a partner in a prominent New York law firm, I lived in a house overlooking Long Island Sound and sent my kids to private schools. Today — 58 years old and single — I live in a condo in St. Louis, Missouri where I am an artist and yoga teacher — feeling joyful, sane and filled with purpose.

It's a transformation that even I have a hard time getting my head around. What led to the about-face? The unexpected disintegration of my 33-year marriage and my admission that I was severely anorexic.

Having an eating disorder didn't cause my divorce, but had to have played a part. For years, I rose at the crack of dawn to swim miles of laps. My mania interfered with everything — socializing, family vacations, meals and holidays. I was moody unless I got in several hours of exercise daily. Finding something I would eat was always an issue, whether we were at a Michelin-rated restaurant in Europe or the kids' favorite pizza joint. Would there be something Mom would eat? became everyone's concern. Yet no one said a word.

"That's just the way my mom was," is what the elder of my two sons once said. Neither of the boys, now young men aged 25 and 30, are willing to share much about what it was like to put up with my eating disorder. It had to have been as toxic as it was for me.

After getting myself to treatment several years ago at age 53, while still in the throes of the divorce, I asked my husband if my anorexia contributed to his leaving me. "I don't know," he said. "I don't know that much about eating disorders."

He's not the only one. Doctors in a position to recognize the tell-tale signs often miss them. My own case went unnoticed despite my suffering from anemia, low bone density, multiple bone fractures and a steady weight loss over a span of about 15 years. Not considered a disease of middle age, eating disorders are baffling. It takes specialists in the field to understand what goes on in the mind of someone with anorexia, bulimia or a binge-eating disorder and to know how to treat these illnesses effectively.

I myself was in denial for years. Always a healthy eater, I did all the things the myriad of lifestyle magazines, fitness gurus and health nuts advised.

Skimping on food gradually became an obsession and, when coupled with excessive exercise, put my life at risk. Diet and exercise *became* my life. I lost interest in everything else and everyone else. Jokingly, I said my tombstone would read, “She died fit.”

It started in my late thirties as a desire to get in shape after having children. I chose to be a stay-at-home mom but found it challenging and at times unfulfilling, having left a position as senior vice president at a successful Madison Avenue PR firm. On the partnership track, my husband was preoccupied at work, leaving little time for me and the kids. Tacitly, I bought into this arrangement.

Grappling with inner angst and bouts of depression, I clung desperately to the attention and admiration I got from losing weight and reshaping my body. It provided a purpose, something I could master with the drive and dedication I put behind most things I tackle. In this way, the eating disorder disguised a deep-rooted sense of worthlessness and the fear, pain and shame associated with it. I have found no words to capture its vise-like grip.

Everything changed when I entered McCallum Place, an eating disorder treatment center in St. Louis. That was five years ago. I was in residential treatment for two months and step-down levels of care for several weeks. The program not only saved my life, it brought me back to life. Fully engaged in recovery and the infinite rewards of living.

To track my healing journey, I created a sculpture series called “Body of Work: The Art of Eating Disorder Recovery.” It began in treatment with a life-size paper tracing of my body that I made to explain the issues that contributed to my anorexia and the battle raging inside me. I never made

art before, but today consider myself every bit an artist – full of creativity and a passion to reshape not my body, but the way eating disorders are diagnosed and treated.

The fact that Columbia University Medical Center is exhibiting the work in March is a dream come true. Originally I wanted to crack the art world, but now I now see my work's value as a teaching tool for doctors. Washington University Medical School in St. Louis first approached it this way. Med students there were hungry for information about eating disorders. The sculptures present a case study in a way not accessible in the classroom, clinic or from textbooks.

My work also creates a space where important messages from the medical community can be heard: that millions of Americans suffer from eating disorders; that eating disorders are associated with high medical and psychiatric risks, including a high mortality rate. And, most importantly, that eating disorders can be successfully treated.

From the time I was a little girl, I wanted to be a doctor. It is one thing I never followed through. It tickles me, though, that I found a way to get into medical school after all — as a teacher, if not as a student. I'm honored and overjoyed.

Editor's Note: Judith Shaw is an artist and yoga teacher. Her exhibit: Body of Work: The Art of Eating Disorder Recovery has been featured at Washington University and will show at Columbia University Medical Center from March 16 through April 6, 2011. A former New Yorker, she currently resides in St. Louis, MO.