

“The doctor told me that because I wasn’t underweight, I had nothing to worry about.”

THE MYTH *of* Eating Disorders

You can’t always tell if someone has an eating disorder just by her appearance. Here, three girls share how their illnesses went overlooked. BY JENNI SCHAEFER

Kelly Stewart

AGE: 22

HOMETOWN: Cherry Hill, New Jersey
In September 2000, when I was 14, my parents got a divorce. My life felt out of control, so I coped by controlling what I ate. I started eating only what I considered “safe” foods, but I didn’t lose much weight, so no one said anything. I knew I had a problem, so in September 2001, I asked my mom if I could see a therapist but didn’t tell her why. When I confessed how I’d been restricting calories, the therapist told me I wasn’t underweight and therefore had nothing to worry about. Then, when I went for a checkup with my regular doctor and hinted at my problem with food, she joked that she *wished* she could eat like me. Even though I was crying out for help, it seemed no one believed I was really sick. I continued restricting food for years, and even though I wasn’t losing weight because I didn’t do it consistently, I was losing myself—I felt worth-

less and scared that I’d never be normal. I also began losing interest in things I loved, like playing basketball. Senior year, 2004, I quit the team and ended up gaining weight from being less active. So I joined a gym and started obsessively exercising and weighing myself. I even started purging after eating normal meals. In September 2004, I saw blood in my vomit. I panicked and called an eating disorders intervention line. When they said people can die from complications from purging, I got so scared that I confessed everything to my mom, who was extremely shocked. She booked me a consultation at the Renfrew Center in Philadelphia.

I immediately began outpatient treatment and was diagnosed with EDNOS (Eating Disorders Not Otherwise Specified), a catchall diagnosis for eating disorders that don’t fit the rigid criteria for anorexia or bulimia. I met all of the criteria for anorexia except one: My body fat was

not considered low enough. I’d always been a perfectionist, so being diagnosed with EDNOS and not anorexia or bulimia made me feel like what I had wasn’t as real. But in therapy, I learned it can be just as life-threatening. That month, I also started college. I finished treatment a year later, but in November 2005, I had a relapse—I fainted from not eating enough during a weekend sorority retreat. The ER doctor had never heard of EDNOS and just told me to start eating more. He also said I couldn’t be treated there for an ED unless I was underweight enough to need a feeding tube. I knew from my treatment that he was wrong. After that, I knew I needed to help other girls who aren’t taken seriously, so I got involved with the Eating Disorders Coalition, which helps dispel myths about EDs. After my relapse, I got back on track and I’m now healthy. My hope is that no one else has to cry out for help while her illness goes overlooked. →

Do you think I’m fat?” I would ask people when I was only 4 years old. I asked this same question when I was 5, 10, 15, and every age in between. The answer was always “No.” I was at a normal weight, and everyone thought I was silly for asking. No one knew that my question was a sign that I was struggling with body image issues. No one noticed that I divided food into good and bad categories, often skipped meals, and by high school, had begun to binge and purge. No one noticed my eating disorder, and at the time, how could they? I *looked* healthy. Things got worse when I started college. Scared of gaining the “freshman 15” (which studies say is actually a myth), I restricted food more than ever before and lost weight fast. When friends and family expressed concern, I told myself they were just jealous. After graduation, I finally saw a doctor about my issues with food. He took one glance at my not yet scary-skinny body and declared, “You don’t *look* like you have an eating disorder.” The thing is—and I’ve learned this from years of work with fellow eating disorder sufferers and survivors—people with eating disorders do not *look* a certain way. EDs don’t discriminate by weight, ethnicity, age, gender, or body type. Some who suffer from an eating disorder are alarmingly thin; many others are not. But their ED can be just as dangerous, even if it’s disguised in seemingly healthy behaviors like exercise. I’m not writing this story to make you start suspecting everyone of having an ED. I’m writing it so that if you think someone might be struggling but she or he doesn’t fit the stereotype, you won’t assume there isn’t a problem. Here are the stories of three young women who may not look the part, but whose struggles with EDs are just as serious as those who do.

Editor’s note: Certain details about the girls’ struggles have been omitted to prevent triggering similar behaviors in readers who may be struggling with eating disorders.

Latria Graham

AGE: 22

HOMETOWN: Spartanburg, South Carolina

I was simply not built to be thin. My mom is a former model, but I take after my dad. When I was 9, I started dieting. By age 11, I hated my body and was devastated by my parents' divorce, so I started bingeing and purging. I hid it from my parents and 8-year-old brother and stopped hanging out with friends. I even asked to go to boarding school for high school so no one close to me would find out.

In boarding school, when I'd come out of the dorm bathroom after purging, my roommate would ask, "Why is your face so red?" At the time, I thought my excuses—like "I turn red when I'm emotional"—made sense, but looking back, I suspect she was the one who told school officials. In March 2003, they told my mom. She and I have never talked about how she felt when she found out, but she immediately took me to a doctor. My body was absorbing calories I was bingeing on before I could purge them, so I'd gained weight. The doctor knew I was purging, but he just wrote "obese" on my chart and told my mom I was going through a phase. Because of my size, he dismissed the idea that I could have bulimia. I felt like a freak. I grew up in mostly white communities, but the black women at my church said we were *supposed* to be curvy, so I never thought other black people could have EDs. When they heard I had one, they said, "Girl, you've been hanging around too many white people." But I don't think my white peers influenced my ED. It was just the unhealthy way I coped with my depression. Like my doctor, the women at church dismissed my problem, but I was so sick that inside, I was often contemplating suicide.

By the time I started Dartmouth College in September 2004, I was having frequent black-outs due to lack of nutrients and often lost my voice from purging so much. I had dental erosion and lots of cavities, my hair was falling out, and I was cutting. I tried to look pulled-together, but people began to notice I was falling apart. Finally, in June 2006, I decided to go to the Renfrew Center in Florida for one month of inpatient treatment. At Renfrew, I was the only African American and the only overweight patient. I felt like a double minority. I'd lost hope for myself, but my therapist convinced me I deserved a better life, so I stuck with it. I graduated this past summer and still struggle with negative thoughts about my body, but I now have the tools to help me stay in recovery, like knowing how to ask for help. Because I have shared my story on and off campus, I've met other black women with EDs. I wasn't surprised that most didn't seek help because they were scared that no one—especially in the black community—would understand. But I do.

"I was the only African American and the only overweight patient in treatment. I felt like a double minority."



PHOTO: CHANNING JOHNSON. HAIR AND MAKEUP: DONNA COTNOR FOR CINDERELLA MODELING AGENCY.

For more on Latria's story—and other essays from ED survivors—check out *Going Hungry* (Anchor Books), in bookstores September 9.

Sarah Whitworth

AGE: 19

HOMETOWN: Austin, Texas

I developed early and from sixth grade on, I was aware that I was curvier than my friends. In eighth grade, in February 2002, I gave up chocolate for Lent and also started counting calories and exercising. By Easter, I'd lost a little weight and was happier with how I looked. I became terrified of gaining it back, so I started panicking around food and kept restricting calories. Then, in May 2002, I challenged myself to run three consecutive miles, and I did it. After that, I ran every day, increasing the distance each day. I was becoming addicted to exercise.

When I started high school in August 2002, my friends would tell me how fit I looked and I'd feel proud. Deep inside, I knew I had a problem, but I was certain I could pull myself out of it if things got "bad." No one realized my addiction was part of an eating disorder, and it was only getting worse. Thoughts about food and weight consumed every moment of my day. I pushed my friends away and couldn't keep a boyfriend because I avoided all social situations involving food. By August 2004, I was running several hours each day in the Texas heat. People in the neighborhood would yell, "Run, Forrest, run!" (like in *Forrest Gump*). Even though I was very thin, friends and family still supported my exercise. My parents did worry that I was overdoing it, but they wanted to trust me when I said I was fine. That same August, I was driving with my 11-year-old sister and passed out at the wheel because I'd been overexercising and undereating. I totaled my truck, and my sister and I were covered in blood from the windshield shattering on us. Thank goodness we weren't seriously injured. Still, I convinced myself I'd passed out because I was tired—I even ran the next day.

For my parents, the accident was the last straw. They came to terms with the fact that something was very wrong, and a week later, they insisted I go to inpatient treatment at the Center for Hope of the Sierras in Nevada. I didn't want to go, but part of me was relieved I would finally get help. My insurance wouldn't cover treatment, so my dad wiped out his retirement account to pay for it. Three months later, I walked out of the center with my life back. I wanted to help other ED sufferers, so in March 2005, I spoke on behalf of better insurance coverage for eating disorders at a press conference at the Texas House of Representatives, helping to bring attention to the cause. My ED reminds me of the imaginary people that John Nash invents in the movie *A Beautiful Mind*. Nash's "friends" never go away; he just learns to ignore them. I don't know if my eating-disordered thoughts will ever go away completely. But it helps to remind myself that I will no longer let them stop me from being the happy person I want to be. ★

"No one realized my addiction to exercise was part of an eating disorder, and it was only getting worse."



PHOTO: GLYNNIS MCDARIS. HAIR AND MAKEUP: SONOMI OGINATA FOR NARS. EXPERT: ADRIENNE RESSLER, LMSW, CEDS, THERENFREW CENTER, FLORIDA.

Jenni Schaefer is the author of *Life Without Ed: How One Woman Declared Independence From Her Eating Disorder and How You Can Too*. She tours the country speaking about eating disorders and recovery. For more information about EDs, go to myneda.org.