

Chat Room Log

webmaster: Welcome everyone to our first on-line chat! We are so excited to have Trisha Gura, author of *Lying in Weight: The Hidden Epidemic of Eating Disorders in Adult Women*, a book that reveals how marriage, pregnancy, parenting and other mid-and late-life events can trigger eating disorders, joining us this evening. We will begin taking questions at this time.

webmaster: Trisha, perhaps you can start us off with what led you to write this book?

trishagura: It was a conversation with a friend. She is an author who was telling me that she had bulimia as a teenager, got better and relapsed after having her first baby. I had been writing about obesity for Science and was really into eating issues. But more so, I had been diagnosed with anorexia at 19 and I had a really hard time after having my child. So I wondered if there were other adults who might have eating disorders. I had thought they went away after adolescence. I went digging around and found out that there are lots of people struggling when older.

Chatter1: I would like to know what TG thinks about current treatment for eating disorders and whether a different model of treatment is necessary for adult women...

trishagura: I think adults definitely need more than is offered. The group support is great. Also if you have kids and are trying to go through treatment, it's tough. In terms of CBT or meds or other therapies, those pretty much are solid at any age. The thing that I've heard is that adults often have more life experience and are tired of doing all the stuff that goes with an eating disorder. So, many are more ready to recover.

Chatter2: I haven't seen many other books or articles on this topic - why do you think so little attention has been paid to eating disorders in adult women?

trishagura: First of all the studies all cut off at age 25, mainly because the researchers tend to recruit from the campuses where they are. But also, many older women have not come forward because they don't think they are sick, because they are older. Lastly, more women are getting EDs and relapsing in middle age.

Chatter3: I have to say that as a 27 year old woman actively in recovery it was great to have a book based on things that I would be dealing with in the next few years. The questions of dating, marriage, and children are rarely talked about. I knew of people who: 1) were in recovery but not dealing with those topics, 2) not in recovery dealing with those things, or 3) not eating disorder and dealing with those things. It was a great thing for my Fiancé and I to read and discuss together. My fiancé has never seen me at my worst-so he often sees *me* as a different person than my eating disorder. I think he's concerned whenever something could be a trigger-we both know that starting a family will be something completely different for us than our friends who made the decision very easily.

trishagura: Do you then feel you are the eating disorder sometimes?

Chatter3: I've been in a solid recovery since we started dating-so I don't feel like I am my eating disorder anymore. But I am also very aware that our wedding, or the Honeymoon, or starting a family could cause me to relapse. And my relapse would no longer be about me - it's about us.

Chatter1: I think as an adult that I feel like I have a whole life to recover for, but I also find the relapses that much more frustrating, and I was wondering whether you had any advice in terms of preventing relapses at the "trigger" life events you talk about, or at least a way to stop from a full relapse?

trishagura: To prevent, it helps to be aware of the signs that you are going under. For me it's starting back to skipping meals and exercising. It helps to have lots of support around you and a creative endeavor. Most of the women who were doing best were writing, painting, doing advocacy etc.

Chatter2: How common is it to develop an eating disorder for the first time in adulthood or later adulthood?

trishagura: That's a tricky question because sometimes a person who develops an ED say after a marriage, was dealing with something else before. One woman in the book was drinking and doing drugs and quit right when she got married so her husband wouldn't know. Then she developed bulimia as a substitute. Most people have had something before. But there was a woman in the book who developed anorexia for the first time at the age of 68.

Chatter2: so it is more likely to be a substitute for something else rather than just "appearing" out of nowhere?

trishagura: Yes. Older women either have been struggling for a very long time and so the habits are entrenched (and so is the biology). That makes recovery harder. But older women are often more motivated to change. Often physical things start showing up hair falling out, bad teeth etc. and they get sick of being sick.

Chatter1: Do you think that physically eating disorders are more dangerous for older women or is the damage not age specific? How about emotionally? I have heard both what you said that older women are often more motivated to recover but I have also heard that the rates for recovery are worse...

trishagura: The damage depends not just on the age but the severity of the ED. Emotionally, a long term ED changes the brain chemistry. There are MRI studies that show this. That is why the recovery rates can be worse. But, that being said, there are a heap of success stories in older women. So, I am wondering if the stats will be updated with the new population of older women who are now getting treatment.

Chatter1: Thanks, that is a hopeful way of looking at it.

Chatter2: Trisha, how much should mothers share with their children about their disorder and their treatment process? I'm sure it depends on age but how much do you divulge to help them understand what's going on with mom?

trishagura: The kid thing is very age specific. I can speak out of experience on this one. Real young kids pick up all kinds of cues. Like you are eating salad and dad is eating Adkins and the kid is eating mac and cheese. Kids learn things like "mommies don't eat," etc. So you can't really hide it. Teens will get the whole thing and you do have to have conversations.

Chatter4: You do what you have to do. I was lucky b/c when I was in treatment at St Joe's my daughter was 3. All she knew was mommy was "sick" but that she would be back very soon. I was gone 2 weeks and cried a lot, needless to say but let me say it was THE best thing I could do for myself and my family.

Chatter5: Can you suggest any recovery tips that are geared towards older women?

trishagura: Recovery tips. First of all amass your supports be that family, friends or activities. Spirituality is a big part of it, and that does not necessarily mean religion. Finding a support group in your age range is great, if it exists. I've also heard of play groups where the moms are recovering.

Chatter3: How do you suggest women prepare for pregnancy with a history of an eating disorder?

trishagura: Pregnancy: Lucenne Wisniewski who counsels pregnant women with EDs is very firm on this. Get some counseling while pregnant. There are two issues: what the ED does to the pregnancy (baby) and what the pregnancy does to the ED. (Usually stopping symptoms for awhile). A group of supportive friends that you can talk to about body image stuff is a great thing! I have a group of women friends and we go out once a month for dinner together. Talk about all kinds of stuff. Feels good to be myself.

Chatter6: We have talked about how to talk to your child about eating disorders but I wonder how likely is it that if a parent has an eating disorder the child will develop one too?

trishagura: If the parent has one, the child may identify with the parent and get one too. But not always. Two moms in my book each had two daughters. In each case one got the same ED and the other daughter was fine. Go figure. So it's not a matter of one to one. But when a parent has an active ED the kids are affected in some way. One daughter of a mom with an ED wants to be a psychologist when she grows up. Family therapy.

Chatter5: Can you tell me how you think eating disorders are different for older women verses younger women?

Chatter3 Older women deal with bigger obstacles to receive the treatment necessary. Finances, kids, husband, job, it's a bigger deal to "step out of life" and get treatment.

trishagura: Absolutely Chatter3. I would hope treatment centers find ways to deal with the complexities of life. I had one woman who left her three children at home with her husband to go to treatment for 3 months. It was tough on all of them. But they have the most amazing story. She came home. He fell into depression/exhaustion. And she took over. Now the two of them have started a foundation to help people pay for ED treatment, called the FREED foundation.

Chatter4: I am a married 35 year old mom with an 8 year old daughter and have a history of anorexia. Right now, I am maintaining good health; however, I still struggle with those not-so-good thoughts. They always come up when I am stressing about something. My husband has been wonderfully supportive; however, I think some of the "nitty gritty" of what EDs are truly about scares him. I have so many books I am trying to get him to read so he can just understand me better.

trishagura: The stressing part is often part of the ED. The brain researchers think anorexia develops out of a super sensitivity to stress. And the ED is a way to damp it down. I'm curious as to ways you all find to manage stress. Healthy ways. For me its time out to write, say in a journal or just to reflect. I don't get much so I have to make it a point. I go back to the idea of creativity. That kept resounding in all my interviews of women in recovery. Just some way to feel visible and important.

Chatter3: I think , like you said, it is the healthy friendships that make the stress better

Chatter1: Managing stress is certainly a tough point for me but I find that being assertive - with work, with friends, with family helps manage it some (seeing limits, being real). More chronic stress unfortunately, I still find myself turning to ED things

Chatter2: talking about things out loud with friends, family or my therapist gets me outside of my own head! It is so helpful because I can hear how distorted the thoughts are.

Chatter1: So mindfulness (writing, reflection) - did you have to teach yourself that or did it come naturally. It is hard for me to calm myself down enough although when I do it is very obvious that it is the way to full recovery

trishagura: Mindfulness and reflection was learned. But by accident. I was asked to write a piece for the Yoga Journal about menopause. I had no idea what yoga was and took a class to write the article. Got hooked and that led me to meditation.

Chatter2: So how does one know they are "recovered"? Or, would you not say that, considering the reality that the ED is always something you have to be aware of, no matter how healthy you are?

trishagura: There is no line (sick on one side and well on the other). Recovery is also a strange word. I think after the ED symptoms start to wane, then its about personal growth. For me its about making up for lost time, all the years as a teen that I missed stuff because the ED was in my head. I have to learn things now that I didn't when younger. I always have to be aware of the ED. I look at it this way. We would never ask an alcoholic, so are your cured? Nor would we ask an alcoholic to go into a bar three times a day and have only 1 beer. With EDs we are asking people to eat three meals. So its harder to start healthy because you cannot abstain from food.

Chatter2: How did you find so many women who were willing to talk with you about their eating disorders for your book?

trishagura: Word of mouth. Everybody knows somebody. Once people knew I was writing, I found a lot of women willing to talk. Mostly they felt alone like they were the only one. So talking with me was an outlet. And you'd be surprised where I found them. Its pervasive.

Chatter3: How did it feel to open up in your book about your history? I feel personally that its something to be kept a secret - that unlike someone who is a breast cancer survivor, I can't talk about being an eating disorder survivor. Its still shameful

trishagura: I was terrified to write this book. Imagine how I felt among my journalist colleagues. But the book changed my life. Really. EDs can be very private and that's totally cool. There came a place for me to write about it because I had the medical background and I felt that older women where totally off the radar. They needed something I could give.

Chatter3: I wish it was something I could be proud of-its been a huge thing for me to overcome. I wish more people felt that way-I think there could be some huge role models for recovery.

trishagura: One last word because I am going to have to sign off. I have a waiting preteen in the background. But I want to leave a take home message. Really its your life and you have it in you to take charge. You don't have to walk through this alone. The best part for me was connecting and reconnecting to others.

webmaster says: We would like to thank Trisha Gura for taking the time to join us this evening and for all of you that came and participated and made this discussion such a success. While we have to end the chat here, we encourage you to continue this discussion in the discussion forum. Tune in.... there will be more live chats to come!! Thank you again!!!