

Michelle's Story

I am here today to share a part of my personal experience with you all, in the hopes of perturbing you and to make you aware of the reality and urgency of this issue. Hopefully, I can inspire you to become more aware of your own mental health and how you can help others, including people you love and care about and your future students, become conscious of the state of their own mental health.

I am able to be here today, alive and well, thanks to a realization on my part that I needed to get help for my own mental health problems and thanks to the people around me. My support system, made up of family and friends, loved me and cared enough about me to see me through, put up with me through the worst moments, and just never gave up.

Ever since I was a little girl, I was concerned with my body. As early as 9 or 10 years old, I can remember thinking that I wanted to be thin. But here's the thing- I was! I did not have a weight problem, I was extremely active, and I had no other so-called 'problems'. But, I desperately wanted to be thin and pretty; for me, they went hand in hand. As I got older, this sentiment only deepened and developed into a core belief upon which I based my self-worth. When puberty hit, my gymnastics coach told me and some other girls to start watching our weight. I realize now that I was not overweight; I just grew hips. But to this day, I can still remember the bodysuit I was wearing, standing next to the bars in the gymnasium, trying to hold back tears. Needless to say, I didn't stay in gymnastics much longer.

There are so many factors that I believe contributed to my depression and eating disorder. Obviously, it is hereditary in my family: my grandmother, bless her heart, was a depressed hypochondriac all her life, my aunt struggles with depression, which includes major anxiety and panic attacks, and my sweet, beautiful cousin Audrey was plagued by paranoid schizophrenia and took her own life in 2008 at the tender age of 17. I believe other influencing factors are society and the media images that constantly bombard us. As a teenager, I definitely fed into the idea that *thinness = beauty = happiness*. But the influencing factors are not limited to just these; the elements that may contribute to an individual's mental health problems are numerous and different for each person, considering each of us has a different background and different life experiences which will build our character and personality. My hope is that as educators we can positively impact our students' lives and work together, with the students, their parents, and other school staff, to prevent mental health problems from becoming life-threatening, debilitating disorders from which recovery is a long and arduous road.

I believe that, as teachers, we have the opportunity and ability to help our students. So please, do. When I was 16, in grade 11, I was on a trip to Florida

with the class. I was so nervous to wear a bathing suit in front of my classmates because I was so insecure. I made sure to not eat too much, and if I had to eat I had only fruits and vegetables. One teacher said to me, "I think you have anorexic tendencies" Those exact words. But that was it. She didn't try to talk to me about it. She didn't help me. She never addressed the subject again. But I wish she had. Because you know what I thought when she told me that? I thought to myself, "Yes! I can do it! I can be anorexic and be thin so I can finally be happy." Maybe, just maybe, if she had done something more... Anything, even a small gesture... Maybe I would not have fallen into a dark spiral of bulimia and anorexia a few years later.

I was diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder in 2008. For the next three years I was living on a rollercoaster of downs and more downs, extremely insecure about my body image, going through cycles of bulimia and anorexia, consumed by negative thoughts and harmful behaviours.

I couldn't work more than 4 hours a week, and sometimes not even that because of extreme panic attacks. The only thing I continued to do routinely, until 2010, was dance as a cheerleader for a professional football team. When I think back, I find this to be hilarious! Let me explain... Picture a girl, who is extremely depressed, suicidal, has been hospitalized for a suicide attempt, has an eating disorder, and whose self-esteem is so low it is near debilitating, and she is putting on a skimpy uniform and dancing in front of 25,000 people. Looking back, this scenario makes no sense. But in my mind back then, I couldn't see anything wrong with it. I believe the act of putting on makeup, smiling to fans and being girly and flirty reinforced and justified my belief that I had to be thin and pretty for people to like me. Even for me to like myself. (Don't get me wrong- even though this was the worst of my life it was also the best. I got to do what I love, dance, and had the opportunity to experience many things I would not have otherwise such as 4 Grey Cups, volunteer work in the community, and various other enriching experiences.)

But I am here now, and the past three years of my life have been my trek up Everest: a steady climb to happiness. With each step, my self-esteem improves, I learn to love my self, my WHOLE self, a little more, and I come to terms with and embrace my depression as a part of who I am, but I do not let it define who I am. Once in a while I stumble. Sometimes I even fall. But I keep climbing. It is a continuous struggle and sometimes I question whether or not it is worth it... But then I look at the heart tattoo on my wrist, and I am reminded of all the people I love and who love me and I know that it is all worth it.

One of my goals as a teacher is for no student to have to go through what I went through. And I know that's impossible. But I'm going to try. And I want you all to try too. If we can raise strong children, they will be equipped to handle the difficult moments. If these children have strategies for dealing with negative or self-deprecating thoughts, their insecurities, and other challenges they are faced

with, they won't need to start from scratch to rebuild themselves. If they know they have outlets for their emotions, people they can openly communicate with, places they can go and be safe, these children will succeed in building themselves into strong, confident individuals who will be free to just be happy on their own terms.