‘Christmas with my eating disorder’ - a blog by Champion Hazel

Every year it gets to this time of year, when the adverts start, when the music begins, when everyone starts making plans for parties and nights out and MEALS...the very start of the “Christmas season” - which feels like it starts earlier and earlier every year. To most this seems to be an exciting and happy time. People seem to love making plans, decorating their homes and planning parties for family and friends. But this is not the case for myself or for many others similar to me.

You see I have a long history of eating disorders, more specifically I fluctuate between other specified feeding or eating disorder OSFED (purging disorder) and bulimia and have done for many years. Obviously this is not a Christmas specific issue, it’s a constant problem and it effects huge amounts of my life. However, there are key moments throughout the year where the issues feels worse, and one of these is Christmas. It is a time where food and alcohol flows, and where all social gatherings seem to resolve around food and it seems to be a social expectation to over eat, and over indulge in general. And for someone who not only fears certain foods but who often feels out of control around foods this can be extremely anxiety inducing.

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I will spend a good portion of the year panicking over what this year’s festive season will bring, I will try to avoid the gatherings and parties, but this just results in people calling me a “party pooper” or “a Grinch”. I hate that people call me these things, I know logically that mostly they are joking, but it still hurts. However, usually just accepting people’s criticisms and jokes feels easier and safer than
telling anyone the truth. Being called “scrooge” for a few months of the year feels preferable to having people potentially see me as weak, pathetic, vain, or attention seeking all year long. To make it clear I don’t hate Christmas as such, I simply hate/fear the culture of overindulgence that often comes with it. I fear being around all those people, both feeling like they are judging me for eating but also that I will be unable to sneak away to purge so any food I do eat will just sit there...So much fear of being judged for my behaviours and disorder, but also being judged for the avoidance that the fear causes.

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Eventually I will get sick of the jokes, sick of people nagging at me to go, eventually I give in, and I will attend the parties, only to end up either spending most of the event finding ways to avoid the food and drink or ending up totally losing control and having to sneak away to purge. Either way I will feel awful about myself for days, or even weeks afterwards. I can't enjoy the social event because every aspect of my being is focused on the food and if I can /can’t /should or shouldn’t eat any of it. Focusing on if I can purge, where the toilets are, how soon I can leave, how much exercise I need to do tomorrow to make up for this. Trying to decide how much I can get away with drinking before the calories get too much of my control will slip and I will end up eating. Working out the social expectations and weighing them against my fears and constantly checking my own body as if just being near the food is somehow making me larger. And then there’s the chocolate EVERYWHERE, almost staring at you, tempting me to binge. I am fully aware that this is not rational but that doesn’t make the thoughts and feelings any easier to deal with.

Every year I will put so much pressure on myself to ‘recover’ before the Christmas season starts, and every year I fail in this – making me feel so much worse. Some years are better than others, some years I will have “safe foods” that most people serve at their parties meaning I can eat something at least without panic. Other years though the closer it gets to Christmas the more serious my bulimic behaviours become, almost as if I am trying to pre-compensate prior to the event.

“...the closer it gets to Christmas the more serious my bulimic behaviours become”

One thing I have found that has helped hugely though is opening up to my friends. Unfortunately I don't feel able to open up to my family so those events are still fraught with stress and fear, but my friends are more aware and so there are so many less “jokes” about how awful I am for not joining in with the Christmas spirit. Now that my friends are more aware they will do things like tell me what foods there will be before an event, ask me what my current safe foods are so they can provide them, and not pressure me to eat or join in with the drinking games, etc. On the flip side it also means that people are aware of what warning signs to look out for, and how best to help me when things are slipping. It has taken MANY years to get to this point. The amount of times I have simply pretended to be fully recovered and gone back to hiding what I am doing because I was ashamed and scared about how people would react.

Eating disorders thrive on secrecy, so all I was really doing was allowing myself to fall further and further into my fears and felt like I had less and less of a reason to recover because I could just hide it, so why bother recovering? Obviously this isn't a great mindset, and I should want to recover for myself and not out of shame, but once you fall into the eating disorder mindset this sort of stuff rarely occurs.
“One thing I have found that has helped hugely though is opening up to my friends...eating disorders thrive on secrecy...I am so glad I was able to be open and honest with those around me”

It took a lot of effort and planning to feel able to admit to my friends that no, I am not as recovered as I lead people to believe, and yes I am still really struggling with any event that includes food. Even though I have known these people for many years, I still feared what they would think of me. The myths and stereotypes around Eating Disorders are huge and, at the age of 34, even I often feel that I should be past this by now. But as terrifying as it was to tell people this I am really glad that I did because it has helped so much and now means that I am able to engage with others are attend events, even if it is with some accommodations at times. I still get anxious, and I still experience an increase of symptoms around Christmas, but I am so glad I was able to be honest and open with those around me.

**Eating Disorder Support in England**
- Beat Eating Disorder charity (national) [www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk](http://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk)
- SEED Eating Disorder (local) [https://seed.charity/](https://seed.charity/)
- Contact your GP

**Time to Change York**
If you would like to join us at Time to Change York please take a look at our website where you’ll also find links to our social media, YouTube channel, and our blogs; [https://www.yorkcvs.org.uk/time-to-change-york/](https://www.yorkcvs.org.uk/time-to-change-york/) or email our Coordinator Emma on timetochange@yorkcvs.org.uk