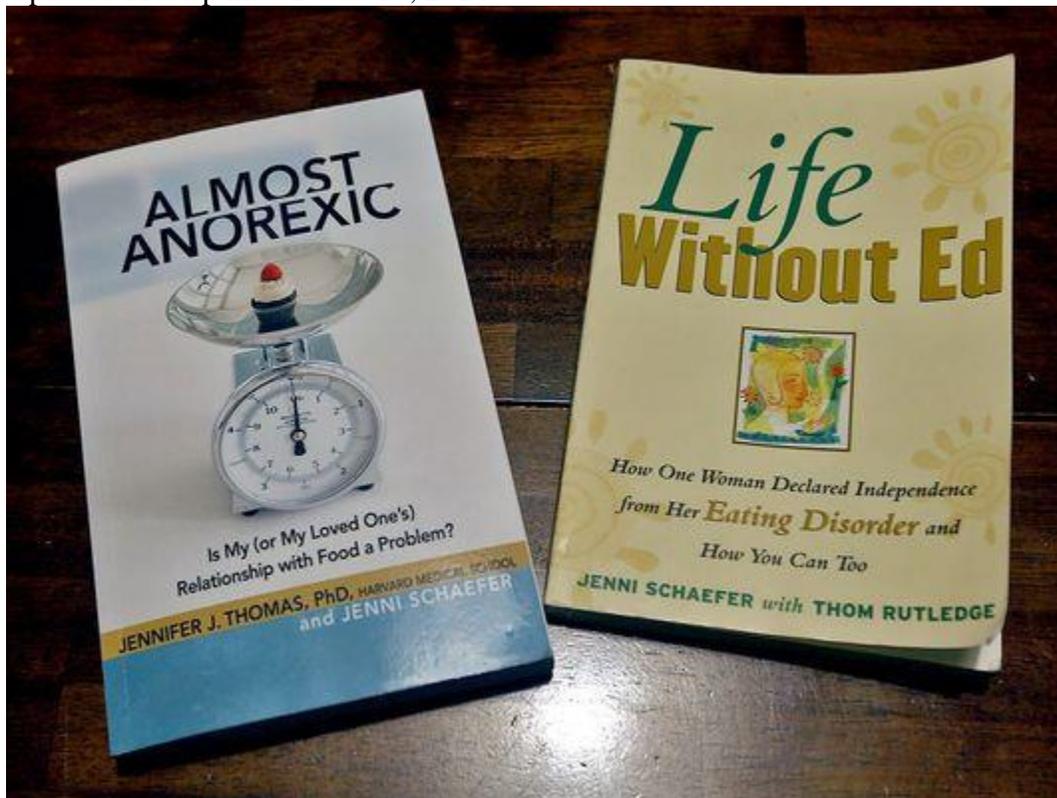


Battle against eating disorders never ends

Estela Villanueva-Whitman, Special to the Register Published 11:00 p.m. CT Oct. 19, 2014 | Updated 11:03 p.m. CT Oct. 19, 2014



Jenni Schaefer, author of two books about battling eating disorders, will speak at a coalition fundraiser Thursday. (Photo: Bill Neibergall/The Register)Buy Photo

Ann Christiansen likens eating disorders to the troubles drug addicts and alcoholics face: all are searching for a substance to help control their emotions. The difficulty for individuals trying to overcome an eating disorder, however, is that food is a substance we need every day, she says.

Christiansen is a 14-year-survivor of anorexia and bulimia. For years, her coping mechanisms included restricting calories, vomiting and over-exercise.

“I have to wake up and make a choice every day that I’m going to stay in this place and not go back to those behaviors,” she said.

Finding healthy ways to cope with emotions is an important part of recovery, says Christiansen, 38, of Grimes.

Getting to the point where she was willing to share her story took time. She became a founding board member of the Eating Disorders Coalition of Iowa nearly four years ago and today speaks openly to groups about her experience. Hope is her main message.

“Recovery is a long and sometimes frustrating process, not just for the person struggling, but also for the loved ones who are working to support them. But it is worth it and it is possible,” she said.

The coalition is hosting its first fundraiser on Thursday, featuring motivational speaker and author Jenni Schaefer. Schaefer has written several books on her relationship with anorexia, most recently “Almost Anorexic,” co-authored with Jennifer J. Thomas.

Michelle Roling, co-founder and president of the coalition and a certified eating disorder specialist, said the group is addressing the need for more intensive, cutting-edge treatment for Iowans. With only the University of Iowa offering inpatient services, Iowa lacks treatment options and many families travel out of state for care.

There’s also a need for partial hospitalization programs as a transition step.

The National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders estimates 24 million people suffer from an eating disorder. Less than one-third seek treatment, however, and eating disorders have the highest mortality rate among all mental illnesses. Many individuals don’t recover or struggle for years to reach that point.

“The battle is so long and so hard it’s really challenging to keep the piece of hope present so that you have that motivation for recovery,” Roling said.

The face of eating disorders is also changing. The ranks of retirees and men of all ages with eating disorders are growing at rates faster than that of women. For retirees, a loss of identity and coping with change play a role. Mental health issues such as depression, substance abuse and anxiety also make individuals more susceptible to an eating disorder, Roling said.

For Christiansen, the problems began at age 14. Although a few factors contributed to her eating disorder, the main trigger was a boyfriend who told her she would be beautiful if she just lost a few pounds. She managed to do that, but things quickly spiraled out of control.

“I was a perfectionist, a good student and I did everything to 150 percent. I started with restricting my eating and a lot of over-exercise. People don’t realize that is a way to compensate for calories. When you’re doing it for that reason, it’s not healthy,” she said.

She also forced herself to vomit and turned to laxatives and diuretics to control her weight.

“I knew it wasn’t normal. But it was helping me see the results that I was trying to achieve. It was helping me feel in control of the situation that I wasn’t able to control any other way,” she said.

Christiansen dropped enough weight that people began noticing and paying her compliments. Teachers who’d struggled with their own weight wanted to know how she did it. A concerned friend eventually approached her parents, who enlisted the help of a counselor and dietitian. She later underwent 2 ½ months of intensive inpatient treatment at a facility in Sioux City.

Christiansen doesn’t talk about how much she lost, instead focusing on the health consequences. There’s more to eating disorders than weight loss, she said.

“I wasn’t realizing all the problems that were occurring that you couldn’t see,” she said. “That’s the biggest thing people don’t understand. An eating disorder doesn’t have a certain appearance.”

Among her health issues were electrolyte imbalances, which can cause a heart attack. She passed out frequently, had iron deficiencies and irregular menstrual periods.

Christiansen said her eating disorder and health issues continued through college. When she started a family in her 20s and her oldest daughter turned 2 years old, she realized she didn’t want to pass on those behaviors to her. She still had the tools from treatment years earlier and was finally at a point to use them.

“I relapsed a few times, but was always able to pull myself back in mostly because I knew I was needed as a mom,” she said.

She’s now a school counselor and the mother of three daughters, so she says she sees things from a new perspective.

Her interest in raising awareness of eating disorders was sparked by a 2010 Des Moines Register story about the Fischer family, whose daughter died from anorexia. Christiansen reached out to the Ankeny couple and later met them at an Iowa State University event where Schaefer happened to be the featured speaker. Schaefer’s first book had a great impact on Christiansen, who said it was the first one to reflect her own feelings on the subject.

At that same event, Christiansen learned the coalition was being formed and spoke with Roling about helping with the group. The Fischers also became involved.

Since forming nearly four years ago, the coalition has discussed several options to address the need for services, such as partnering with an out-of-state group or existing institutions to offer an inpatient treatment program in Iowa, or trying to build a program from the ground up.

Because the group currently has no paid staff, the fundraiser is a major step to fulfilling that vision, as well as the dream of having an actual building to offer more support groups, Roling said. For individuals and families looking to take that first step and reach out for help, the coalition can be a starting point for them, she adds.

“There is always hope for recovery, regardless of how long someone’s been struggling, even if someone’s been struggling in silence, even if they haven’t started a recovery plan of any sort. It’s never too late to start that process,” she said.

Eating Disorder Coalition of Iowa Fundraiser

An Evening with Jennie Schaefer

WHEN AND WHERE: 7 p.m. Thursday at Community Choice Credit Union Convention Center at Veterans Memorial Iowa Events Center, 833 Fifth Ave., Des Moines. Schaefer, a motivational speaker and musician, will talk about her latest book. “Almost Anorexic,” co-authored with Dr. Jennifer Thomas. Free admission; donations welcome.

INFO: For more information on the Eating Disorder Coalition of Iowa, go to www.edciowa.com.

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