

Heart to Heart - Surviving an Eating Disorder by Elsa Al-Attar and Vironika Tugaleva

*EA: What was it like growing up with an eating disorder?*

VT: Well it was a secret. I didn't have enough friends to tell about it. I didn't think my problem was that I didn't like myself. I didn't understand what was wrong with me or that other people didn't hate themselves. I think it wasn't until my early 20's that I realized I really need to love myself, that's really the issue here. I didn't even know I had a secret, I guess was the thing. When you are so deep in it, when you are young, you don't know that other people don't live like that. You don't know that inside of other people's head is different. You just think everybody feels like that.

*EA: How many years did you face living with an eating disorder?*

VT: On and off probably ten years. Sometimes it would be okay, and then I would come out of it, to get another one. I would starve myself for a bit, and then try throwing up for a bit. I tried chewing my food, and then spitting it out. I tried all the ways.

*EA: Why do you think this occurred?*

VT: I think it gets passed down in families, the same way it was passed down in my family. It was a lot about the way things were presented and things were said. I basically had really bad self-esteem and didn't understand what it meant to love myself, and I think it really runs in cultures. There's not really a dialogue about you are still worthy, regardless of everything that happens to you. There's just a culture of criticism.

*EA: What would you say to yourself now?*

VT: I don't know if I would say anything to her to be honest. I would just sit there and listen, and hug her. I think that girl just kept a lot of things inside. There wasn't really anything you could say to her. I would have just tried to meet her where she was at. You know with all those problems she was saying, "Oh I need to be this way and do this, or else no one would ever like me". I would have just responded to that, and I would have said, "What about the fact that you can write? What about the fact that you can sing? What about the fact that you really like speaking to people?"

*EA: What would you tell young girls now, who are going through a similar experience?*

VT: I would tell them that they are not alone. I would tell them that there are other people out there who also struggle. I just thought I was tainted, permanently tainted in some way. If I was in front of a bunch of young girls, I would tell them that's not who you are. You can be healthy just like anybody else. It's just a state of mind, it really is, and with treatment, with community, with self-love, you can really get over that. You don't have to live like that.

*EA: Do you consider yourself in recovery?*

VT: I wouldn't say recovery, I would go with survivor. Anything that I've gone through, I see myself as a survivor of. I see myself as really strong and powerful now, and I think there was

just a deep hunger there. As soon as I found out how to feed that hunger, I could move on to other things. I was just hungry for love, two decades of my life; I was just so hungry for love I couldn't focus on anything else. I couldn't focus on building a good relationship or career; I just focused on that more often than anything. I would think about what I wasn't, and what I wanted to be. I would look at other people and be like I want to look like that. I want that, and I want that from you. Taking up so much space in my head, I could not do much else. And if I did, it was a numbing thing. I had a big problem with drugs too; it was like numbing that stuff, numbing all those dialogues inside of my head that was what all the drugs were about. And when I removed one thing, it was like all the threads came apart. And now I'm just not hungry anymore.

*EA: What has changed in your life that makes you someone who doesn't identify with having an eating disorder?*

VT: I think it's going from an outside in, to an inside out, kind of validation system. What I mean by that is, I would depend on other people to tell me I was good enough, beautiful, funny, and this happens very rarely. Even now, I don't know how often it is people compliment me. But sometimes I go days, just like anyone else, but for me that was my food. I wasn't complimenting myself. I would be hungry for that, and try to get it from other people. Sometimes I would starve because I would be isolated or alone. I couldn't live, I couldn't survive like that, and all I gave myself was insults. So when other people didn't give me compliments, I would basically rot into the ground. And I think what changed was that I changed my relationship with myself, and I should be giving myself that. Giving myself those compliments, building that relationship with myself, and once I started building that relationship with myself, it didn't really matter what was going on around me. It didn't really matter what other people said. Paradoxically enough, other people started being nicer to me, too, because I was being nicer to myself.

*EA: Do you see this as a social epidemic?*

VT: Oh yeah. Your external appearance, this is your identity. It's like everywhere in the media. There's just this huge misconception about what life is, in our culture, I feel. If you go on a nature trail and you find dead branches lying very peacefully on the ground, the live leaves and flowers, they all coexist. Life and death coexist. Even the dying things coexist. You know with these beautiful minds that we have, we have developed a way to judge ourselves, in a way we won't judge nature. But we are part of nature. We are part of this unified experience, and we've really forgot about how to just exist. Not just how to survive without struggling too much. Trying to survive in a way a flower never would. Even the instinctual animals never would. But at least they experience life. A wolf doesn't go around asking "is it ok to be a wolf? Is it ok to have this fur on my back? Is it ok to have claws? Is it ok my eyes are this colour? Is it ok I have this belly pudge? Is it ok I want to eat raw meat?" He would go crazy. But we are learning, and there are movements. Change is happening.

*Vironika Tugaleva is an author, speaker, reformed cynic, people lover, and a different kind of spiritual teacher. She helps people heal their minds and discover their inner strength. In this dialogue, Vironika shares her feelings about her struggle with an eating disorder. Elsa Al-Attar has a BA and is a freelance writer and photographer. She will be pursuing her MSW in a couple of years. She currently works with dual-diagnosis youth in York Region. Vironika and Elsa*

*worked together with adolescents who have autism, and have maintained a friendship over the years.*