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# The Spectrum of Eating Disorders and A Young Kuwaiti's Vision for Improved Awareness and Treatment

## THE SPECTRUM



Who's to say what's perfect????

In past articles we have focused on eating disorders in various settings, but primarily from the perspective of excessive food intake. However, it is important to identify the fact that all eating disorders refer to abnormal eating habits that revolve around both excessive and insufficient food intake.

Thus, it is essential to consider an issue that is close to the heart, and is presented by a native of this soil - *Riham Al Reshaid*. Pardon the cliché, but Riham is your classic example of a time-honored Kuwaiti woman, who stems from a traditional Kuwaiti family. However, one main distinction is that she has suffered with the debilitating eating disorder, anorexia nervosa, for the past 19 years.



*Peter: When did you first realize that you had a problem?*

*Riham: I realized this at the age of 10 years old.*

Riham, who will be soon celebrating her 30th birthday, was previously convinced that she would not live beyond her twenties. Her ordeal with this complex disorder began at the tender age of 10. She recounts that her battle with anorexia nervosa is rooted in a complex foundation that included her genetic predisposition for anxiety, confusion with cultural adaptations and notions of physical identity, and a self-driven fixation for perfection.

*Peter: What do you think caused this disorder?*

*Riham: My battle with anorexia nervosa is rooted in a complex foundation that included a genetic predisposition for anxiety, confusion with cultural adaptations and notions of physical identity, and a self-driven fixation on perfection.*

As the daughter of a diplomat, Riham continuously attempted to adapt to the highly disparate norms of eastern and western hemisphere cultures, as her family was often transitioned between Kuwait and the United States. This continuous relocation process proved to be quite stressful for the then young child. In an attempt to cope with such stress, she resorted to a regimen that provided her with a strict set of rules for life not knowing at that time, she was ironically developing an uncontrollable fear of foods, and eating altogether as she battled between stages of over and under eating.

*Peter: What was the critical point?*

*Riham: At the age of 21, I realized that I could not even consume nutrients when I drastically needed them without having to purge them. My safe foods, salad and water, were no longer safe for me to consume. I was no longer in control!*

During this period, and throughout her teen years, Riham suffered from having low self-esteem. Many factors contributed to this issue, but she primarily recalls a major initial contributor was the battle to control her weight. With the epidemic proportions of adult and childhood obesity cases, which are still plaguing Kuwaiti and American states, one can easily envision that a child who was interwoven between both societies could fall victim to an eating disorder. In Riham case, this was exactly the result. By the age of 17 she weighed a startling 91 kg. This led her to develop a compulsion to regulate her food intake in an effort to rapidly loose weight. Unfortunately, this fixation spiraled out of control as her body weight significantly fluctuated between obesity and malnutrition.

Then at the age of 18, she reached a crucial juncture in her life. She had always excelled academically and desperately desired to attend university in the United States. When the time finally came for her to depart, her plan was

halted by the tragic events of 9-11. This change left Riham filled with feelings of inadequacy, as she could not achieve her long desired goal to study abroad. Not being able to follow her dreams, she felt as though she had lost the ability to plan and dictate important events in her life. Thus, she decided to take control of the one thing that she believed that she had full autonomy over, her body, and began starving herself. She starved herself for weeks at a time, while withdrawing from the public as that usually presented her with events that involved eating and unwanted views from others on her appearance.

Within the two years that followed, Riham lost more than half her body weight, developed significant cardiovascular problems and was frequently admitted to and discharged from hospitals. Paradoxically, she did not relinquish efforts to control her physical appearance, and actually desired more than ever to amplify her weight loss. This fixation totally consumed her life. There was little time or interest for anything else, and at the age of 21, she realized that she could no longer consume nutrients when needed. Whatever she ate or drank needed to purge from her body, even her safe foods (salads and water). This made her realize that she had drifted from a state of total control to state that left her completely helpless. This loss of control coupled with the turmoil her family was then facing made her realize that she drastically needed help if survival was an option.

**Peter: What changed it all? What breathed life back into you?**

*Riham: The support I received from my family, and my peer group and treatment team at the Timberline Knolls Residential Treatment Center. Specifically, living in a house with 4-hour treatment and 35 other women that struggled with the same issues turned out to be a powerful thing – if people get together and talk about this issues and support each other – it is so helpful. There's a great understanding between sufferers of the issue. There is an innate understanding amongst us!*

After realizing the pain that her family was going through, she began to make every, yet painful, effort to maintain a healthy weight level. This method provided temporary improvements, but did address the underlying issues. Nevertheless, this process continued for the next 8 years, until she could no longer suppress the underlying emotional trauma, and Riham lost the will to continue this regimen and again fell deep into a state of depression. Riham relates that she reached a level where she realized that she could no longer combat this sickness using her then method, but found solace in the fact that even if this disorder was going to be the end her, she would actually be able to still achieve her ultimate goal of being thin.

**Peter: Can you tell us something that individuals that do not suffering with this disorder take for granted?**

*Riham: People take it for granted when do they know that they are full, or hungry, or having a normal meal plan.*

This sobering insight provided her therapists and family with the clear realization that they could not provide the level of care that was necessary to combat this issue. They acted swiftly, and recommended that Riham seek critical care. Taking this advice Riham checked into a treatment facility outside Chicago, called the Timber Knolls Residential Treatment Center July of this year. For 3 months she received round-the-clock support from a treatment team that included a dietician, therapist and psychiatrist. The specialize support that she obtained made it clear that out-patient therapy was insufficient to combat the effects that individuals face with clinical depression, anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorders, and more importantly that it was possible to overcome the debilitating habits that she had mastered across the past 19 years.

**Peter: With a new lease on life generated by the help from your family, support groups and treatment teams, what's do you think awaits**

**Riham beyond her thirties?**

*Riham: Not only do I have the will to live again, but also I realize how critical these groups of people are in helping someone like myself who has battled with an eating disorder. Thus, I hope to raise awareness for eating disorder sufferers across the Gulf States by developing support groups and center.*

Riham recognized that getting to the point where she wanted and needed to get better was a powerful turning point in her life. Furthermore, she could not have come to this realization without the undying support from her family, the medical treatment from an in-patient facility, and the invaluable help from peer counseling groups. These individuals empowered Riham, who is now (re)learning proper eating habits and techniques to cope with the underlying issues that surrounded her disorder. In sum, it is important to recognize the value of family support, and not underestimate the value of peer support in helping an individual acquire habits that are beneficial for life and the fact that these disorders require a complete team to truly aid the sufferer, as the sufferer can never do it alone.

Dear readers, Riham has started awareness complain using social media so if you need assistance or wish to share your story with Riham and other victims of these debilitating disorders, visit her page: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/kuwaitedap>

