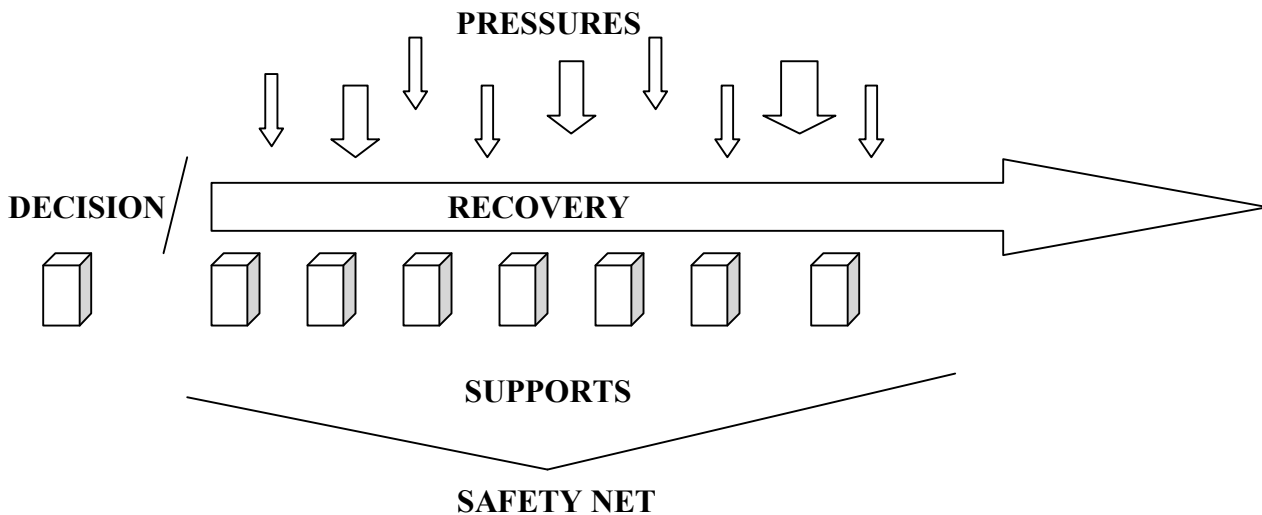


HOW TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR EATING DISORDER RECOVERY

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1. DECISION. Your decision to recover is where it all begins. It is easy to look at the difficulties Ed creates and complicates in your life and say, “I have no choice but to recover,” but to take that position is a mistake. You do have a choice. And it is your responsibility to hear both sides of the argument (to recovery and not to recover) and make a decision that feels right for you. It will not work for you to make a choice based on what your family wants or on what your therapist wants. It will not work for you to make a choice based on what you think you *should* choose. As long as you are uncertain about whether or not you are willing to do what it takes to recover, you need to acknowledge that you have not yet made a solid decision. Spend as much time and invest as much energy as you need in order to be sure that the choice you make is your own. And if and when you do make a decision to recover, stand tall and shout it out: “I’ve had it with Ed. Enough is enough. My recovery starts right now.”

2. RECOVERY. Once you make the decision to recover, the next essential step is to define what recovery is. When you don’t define recovery, it is like saying “I am leaving this place,” but having no destination in mind. That will leave you wandering aimlessly and will no doubt lead to your return to what is familiar: Ed. When your recovery definition is vague, it is like saying, “I am leaving this place and heading west.” If you plan on getting somewhere, you need to be more specific, as in, “I am leaving this place and heading west to Denver, Colorado.” Your specific recovery definition will become increasingly personalized as your recovery progresses, but initially, your definition must include specifics about food and exercise behaviors and daily practice with the separation technique (if you are using that method). This is the equivalent of an alcoholic beginning with a recovery definition of abstinence from all mood-altering chemicals. Later, your recovery definition will evolve into a description of the life you want to be living.

3. PRESSURES. Once your decision is solid (and you will need to reinforce that decision just like you have to put gasoline in your car) and your initial recovery is specifically defined, it is time to take inventory of the many things in your world that will be working against you. Some of these things are external: the stressors in your life, such as work and family responsibilities. Some of these things are associated with the “cultural eating disorder,” such as constant exposure to eating disordered values in the media and in other people in your life. Other pressures working against your recovery are internal. The exploration and confrontation of these internal pressures to return to your eating disorder will be the essence of much of your therapy, support relationships and journaling. When you are paying close attention, you will be able to determine when certain pressures are greater

than others. It is your responsibility to identify the pressures so that you can do what must be done to counter those pressures with support.

4. SUPPORT. Next comes what will probably be the toughest part of early recovery for you: establishing and utilizing a strong support system. No one can recovery alone and you are not, in spite of what Ed tells you, going to be the exception to that rule. Yes, I am talking to you. You are not an exception. Over time in recovery, your support system will change and grow, and take on a life of its own. Down the line, there is really not much of a distinction to be made between a recovering person's life and a recovering person's support system. Initially, however, developing a support system will feel anything but natural. It may be one of the hardest things you ever do, but know this: if you are going to recover, you are going to have to do it. Support can come in lots of forms, but initially, your supports need to include professionals who understand eating disorders and other people who are in recovery. Family and friends, who love you, but don't have eating disorders, can certainly be part of your support system, but they will not substitute for other people who have been where you have been and who working to recover, just like you.

5. SAFETY NET. Your job in recovery is to maintain each of the preceding four (4) elements of responsible recovery. They will need regular maintenance and that is your responsibility. Don't forget that the most important part of maintaining recovery is remaining in contact with your support system. When you isolate from your support system, it is just a matter of time until Ed will be back in charge of your life. Knowing that Ed does not give up easily (to say the least), you need to establish a disaster plan, just like we design fire escape plans or make plans for what to do in the event of a tornado or hurricane. There is nothing fancy about a recovery safety net. It involves only two things: direct and immediate contact with a trusted member of your support system and your willingness to hang on by your fingernails, if you have to, until that contact can be made.

THE SECRET TO LONG-LASTING RECOVERY: INDEPENDENT THINKING

The bottom line to all of this is the realization that you have been living your life according to other people's beliefs and values. Take a close look at your life, examine what you really believe, discover how much of this has been automatically accepted from other people's perceptions, and then how much of your beliefs about yourself come directly from Ed, and his good friend, the condemning Bully in your mind. No two objects can occupy the same space at the same time. Until now there has been no room for your thoughts, for your perceptions, for your values, for your opinions. This method of separation will help you take a giant step back from what everyone else around you ---- family, friends, colleagues, even your treatment professionals ---- is saying, and ask yourself the most important question of all: "What do I think?" This method of separation will help you take another giant step back from what Ed and the Bully are telling you inside your own mind, and ask yourself the very same question: "What do I think?"

Learn these questions and keep asking them: What do I think? What do I believe? What do I want? If you have been living a life possessed by other's opinions and beliefs, the first answer to these questions you will discover will be "I don't know." Don't let that stop you. There are many worse things than not knowing. Here's the promise: keep doing this work, don't let up. When you fall, get back up. Keep asking yourself these questions ---- and before long, you will know. You really will.

*Thom Rutledge is a psychotherapist and author of [Embracing Fear: How to Turn What Scares Us into Our Greatest Gift](#), and co-author (with Jenni Schaefer) of [Life Without Ed: How One Woman Declared Independence from Her Eating Disorder & How You Can Too](#). Thom is available for telephone consultations, and he facilitates a weekend retreat, ***Beyond Eating Disorders***, three times a year. For information: www.nutshellwisdom.com*