

Leave me alone. I'm fine.

An eating disorder conversation

LT: Leave me alone. I'm fine.

TR: Why do you think your parents booked this appointment for you?

LT: Because they are stupid ----- or maybe they don't have anything better to do.

TR: That's a good one: parents who send their daughters to therapy out of boredom. We might be able to do something with that for reality TV. Now we're getting somewhere.

LT: [silence, arms wrapped tight around a big pillow in her lap, head down, not interested in talking]

TR: Well we have an hour to kill so do you mind if I ask you some questions?

LT: Leave me alone. I'm fine.

TR: I know. I got that part. We still have an hour on our hands. A couple of questions?

LT: What?

TR: Thanks.

LT: For what?

TR: For being willing to answer a couple of questions.

LT: [shrugs, holds pillow tight]

TR: What are the rules?

LT: Rules? What rules?

TR: The rules about food and about exercise. Will you tell me some of those rules?

LT: [looks up, eye contact briefly, head back down] Leave me alone I'm fine.

TR: I know. I've memorized that part. You know the rules I'm talking about, don't you? The rules about how much you can eat and how much you have to exercise. The rules about when you can and cannot eat and what you can and cannot eat and about what amount of exercise you have to do in order to deserve to eat something. The rules about compensation -- if you do this, then you have to do that and if you are going to do that you have to do this. And rules about rewards and punishments. Most people have more punishment rules than reward rules. You know the rules I'm talking about, right?

LT: Yes.

TR: Whose rules are they?

LT: Mine.

TR: Yours? Did you make them up?

LT: No.

TR: Who do you think came up with the rules?

LT: I don't know. Me.

TR: No, I'm pretty sure you were right the first time that you didn't come up with rules yourself. My guess is that you don't actually remember when the rules weren't there. Which makes sense --- that you would just assume they are your rules, right?

LT: I guess.

TR: There are a lot of rules, aren't there? Really hard to get everything just right. What happens when you don't get everything just right?

LT: I just have to get it right.

TR: Yeah, but you don't. You can't possibly adhere to the rules 100% all the time. You do screw up, right?

LT: Yes.

TR: Well then what happens?

LT: Depends.

TR: Depends on what?

LT: Depends on what I did.

TR: A lot of this is about deservingness and punishment, right?

LT: Yeah, basically that I deserve to be punished.

TR: You deserve to be punished? When? When you mess up on the rules?

LT: All the time.

TR: You deserve to be punished ALL the time? No shit? ALL the time?

LT: [almost a smile, not quite] Yeah. No shit.

TR: It's not easy being you, is it?

LT: [silence] Leave me alone. I'm fine.

TR: What is that? Like your mantra? Leave me alone. I'm fine. Om.

LT: I'm okay.

TR: I'm not saying you aren't. I'm not even sure that that means. What is being okay for any of us really? We say that all the time. It can't possibly mean the same thing every time any one of us says it. See what I mean?

LT: Can I go?

TR: Come on, I am bound to be at least a little more fun than you thought talking to me would be. Just a little?

LT: Your fine, I just want to go.

TR: Seems like the smarter way to go here would be to do your time with me for this session, if for no other reason, to keep your parents off your back a little.

LT: They're idiots. They don't understand any of this.

TR: Do you?

LT: Do I what?

TR: Understand any of this.

LT: [almost smiles again] I don't know.

TR: Leave me alone. I'm fine.

LT: What?

TR: Just thought I would beat you to it this time. [smile]

LT: [smile]

TR: As long as we are here, do you mind if I ask you some more questions?

LT: Okay.

TR: Has anyone ever asked you about the rules before?

LT: No.

TR: Why do you think that is?

LT: I don't know. I guess nobody else know they are there.

TR: How do you think I knew about them?

LT: [brief eye contact]

TR: You may not think of it this way but here is how I think about it: there is a guy in there [points at LT's forehead] who has been there as long as you can remember and he runs the show. He is the absolute boss of you. He tells you what to do, especially when it comes to food and exercise -- but not just that. He is also the one who tells you that it is not ever okay to stop, to sit still. He is the one who tells you that only perfection is acceptable for you. Period. Perfection. He also tells you how you look and what other people think of you and that is almost never anything positive.

LT: [silence]

TR: You know who I'm talking about, right?

LT: That's me.

TR: No it's not. That's what you have thought. But when you think about it, it actually feels more accurate to think of it the way I'm describing it, doesn't it? More like you are a hostage or a prisoner or maybe even like you are possessed by this controlling guy. He is not you.

LT: How do you know this?

TR: Long story. But let me ask you this: if there was even a slim possibility that you could get free from this guy and all of this rules, would you want to try?

LT: I don't know. No. I don't know.

TR: Makes sense. My best guess is that since you cannot remember a time in your life when he wasn't there, when he wasn't making and enforcing the rules, it would be a very scary thing to consider letting any of that go? Scary, right?

LT: Yes.

TR: Okay, so my question about whether or not you would want to try to get free is way premature. The better question to ask for today is this: would you like some help figuring out what is going on in there [pointing to LT's head] to see if there might be something we can do that could help you feel better about yourself?

LT: I'm not going to eat.....

TR: [interrupting] I didn't say anything about eating. I asked if you would like some help figuring out what all this means. You feel trapped, right? You feel stuck a lot, right? Basically you feel like shit about yourself I think, right?

LT: Pretty much.

TR: And you have to admit that you are at least a little impressed that I know about the rules and all that stuff. Right? Huh? Come on – just a little impressed?

LT: [smile, shrug] a little

TR: Well there you go. I'm at least a little bit smarter than some of the people you have been talking to about this, so do you want my help? We are almost out of time today. So you have successfully done what you agreed to do in sitting in here with me for the hour. I told your parents that I would only see you once with them forcing this on you. After this I'll only meet with you if you want. I am seriously not in the business of trying to help people who don't want help. But I'll tell you what --- after spending just a little bit of time with you, I am pretty sure you could use some help. And I'm pretty sure that if we approach this as collaborators, we can figure some stuff out here together.

LT: But my parents want me to eat...

TR: Honesty is everything in this. I would never ask you to trust me if I was not committed to being totally trustworthy --- radically honest. So I'll tell you this: you have an eating disorder. If you are going to be okay you are going to have to make some pretty drastic and terrifying changes with your food and probably with how you exercise. I swear though, I think there is a part of you in there that knows all that. But that is not where we are today. If you want my help, we will set up another time to meet and I will tell your parents to not expect any changes in your eating for now. But the trust has to go both ways. If I do that you have to promise to show back up here for our sessions. You can't skip out on me. You will be tempted to run and hide and say that everything is okay. But if we are going to do this, we need to shake hands and agree that we will both show up and both be radically honest. That is a lot to ask, especially since you just met me less than an hour ago. But what the fuck? Right? Why not? Want to? [extending hand for handshake]

LT: [long pause, thinking, brief eye contact, then letting go of the pillow in her lap, LT extends her hand and shakes]

TR: Great. Cool. This is a big deal. Don't think it's not. I'm already kind of proud of you. We're going to do this, right? Even though neither of us know exactly what "this" is yet. Right?

LT: [smile] Right.

TR: One more thing. I think you and I should have a sort of personal motto we can use to greet each other and to say good by.

LT: [looks confused]

TR: And I think it should be this: Leave me alone. I'm fine.

LT: Okay.

TR: So I say, well it was good to see you today, I'll see you at our next session, and you say.....

Leave me alone. I'm fine.
Thom Rutledge

LT: Leave me alone. I'm fine.

TR: Perfect.

Thom Rutledge is a psychotherapist and author of several books including *Embracing Fear*, *The Greater Possibilities* and co-author (with Jenni Schaefer) of *Life Without Ed*. For more information about Thom's work, join him on Facebook: www.facebook.com/thom.rutledge.9 and/or visit his web site: www.thomrutledge.com. Check out the free download page on Thom's website. There are several eating disorder recovery articles there. Please feel free to share any or all of this with anyone who might benefit.