

## EATING DISORDER RECOVERY FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTION (FAQ)

### Does the inner chatter ever shut up?

The very nature of our consciousness is inner chatter, so the short answer to this is no, inner chatter does not end. One of the ways people remain discouraged with recovery efforts is mistakenly thinking that getting the voices to shut up is the goal. Lots of therapists make this mistake too.

You probably have already noticed that the harder you try to quiet the chatter in your head, the louder it gets. One of the reasons you might have trouble letting go of ed behaviors is that those behaviors have been the only way you have known how to get relief from the noise in your head.

Now that may seem like bad news but it really isn't. I'm just saying that we have to change the goal. What you are going to do instead of silencing the chatter is change the way the chatter goes. We are going to change your relationship to the chatter. We are going to do that by first abandoning all efforts to shut it up. Think about how much energy that will free up, how much energy you have been giving to do trying to silence the chatter. We are going to stop running from the scary, destructive messages and deliberately turn around to face them. This is the first assignment I give almost all ed clients: write down what Ed says to you. Take the "I" pronoun away from Ed. Write each message with your name in front of each message and write each message in the second person. Example: Don't write "The only way I can deal with this feeling is to purge. I have to purge." Instead write, "Thom, the only way you can deal with this feeling is to purge. You have to purge." Instead of "I am fat and disgusting," write, "Thom, you are fat and disgusting." You very likely have already done this exercise if you have used any of my material in the past, but I am reminded again and again that in the case of separating from Ed, repetition is always a good thing. Only when you can get really, really good at distinguishing Ed's voice from yours will you be in a position to learn to ignore the chatter. The concept of separation can be helpful but only dedicated practice will transform you.

We are not going to shut the chatter up AND we are not going to have a debate with Ed, the master chatterer. The reason we learn separation is because we cannot directly quiet Ed, but we can learn to disqualify his thoughts, his instructions and demands. Find the rebel inside (I know you have rebels inside all of you) and get ready to stand up, not to fight Ed, but to learn to tune him out so you can get on with creating the positive chatter that we all need. That is the irony here: we are not going to get rid of any chatter; we are going to add some --- but it is going to be the messages you need to be listening to you. In the beginning thinking of THE NEW CHATTER as your own voice may not have much credibility. So if it is helpful, give the new messages the voice of a trusted friend, support person or your therapist. It really helps as you create the new messages to have someone read these messages aloud to you. That is hard to do but it is a first step to letting the voice of recovery in.

### I have never made it past 6 months behavior free. What are some tips on sustaining behavioral recovery?

Your using the word "tips" reminds me of a Facebook message I received not long ago from someone I have never met, who wrote, "I have suffered with anorexia for 25 years. Any tips about how to recover?"

Your question, however, is more specific – asking for suggestions about getting past that treacherous 6-month mark. One important suggestion is that the next time you are ed behavior free and have been for 5 months, gather every bit of support you can possibly find, even if you are feeling strong and great. Get ready to be ambushed. Ed knows that even if he has not been successful getting you back earlier, he can get you as you approach the 6-month mark. Or so he thinks based on your history. You have to assume that he is going to try to get you there every time. Just like the twist on not trying to silence the chatter, we are going to turn this one around too. This is the method of any of you experiencing some success with recovery followed by relapse. We are not going to hope to not hear from Ed. We are not going to hope that you are not tempted to return to behaviors. The opposite: you are going to go looking for the temptation. You are going to learn to not be intimidated by Ed's threat of relapse. Of course you do this with plenty of support. I know there is a question here about why support is necessary, so we'll talk more about that in a bit. But in the mean time this is an excellent example of the power of support.

Try this in your group: ask someone to role-play the threatening voice of Ed. Sit directly across from that voice. Listen to that voice tell you,

“Don't be ridiculous. Don't think you are going to be able to sustain your recovery. Whatever recovery you have, you have only because I allow it. I can have you back anytime I want. You belong to me and you know it. You know it, don't you? You and me --- that's how it is, that is how it will always be. Other people may be able to recover, but not you. Nope, not you.”

You may want to change some of the details in that script, but that one is pretty universal. If someone reads that aloud in your group, I imagine that many of you will have some kind of sick feeling in your gut or your chest will tighten up or you will all but stop breathing. Pardon the clinical jargon, but Ed is a mean mother-f\*&%&\*.

Okay back to the group exercise. Sit directly across from the person role-playing Ed. Imagine her/or him to really be Ed. Listen to what she/he is saying to you. Don't say anything. Just pay attention to how you feel in this position: how discouraged, how sad, how shamed, whatever the specifics. Feel the power of your recovery drain from you. Have Ed read the script again and attempt to have eye contact. Not easy.

Now get one of your group members to sit on your right and one on your left, all 3 of you facing Ed. Link arms with your support. All 3 of you sit up straight and tall. Have Ed read the script to you as you are literally linked into your support chain. Again, you don't have to say anything. This is an exercise of increasing awareness. How do you feel differently with your support on either side? Add other members of the group to your support, facing Ed with you. Feel what that feels like. Try it standing up.

Now if you are going to actually do this in your group, be sure you do this part before you finish: Replace the person who is role playing Ed with an empty chair or a pillow or something that can represent Ed. Invite the person who has been role-playing Ed to join the rest of your support. We don't want to leave him/her over there in that toxic bullshit. She is part of recovery after all. If you want, once everyone is on the side of recovery and you guys are facing Ed together, decide on something you want to say to him. Not to convince him of anything, but just to feel your power, the power of recovery. Try just saying NO. Try telling him to go to hell. Try saying SHUT UP! Whatever your gut wants to say. Feel what you feel like when you are bigger than Ed, when you have more power than Ed. And I suppose this is at least in part a response to the “why support is necessary”

question. The only way for you to be more powerful than Ed, or for that matter for me to be bigger than my alcoholism is to be connected with our support. Me + you is a power greater than either of us individually.

I may have gotten off the subject of what to do to get past the previous 6-month limit to your behavioral recovery, but you can certainly apply this. As you approach your next dangerous 6 month mark, remember this exercise, gather all your support, with each other you are all bigger than Ed. (And yes, I just said “bigger,” and no, I am not calling you fat. That is Ed telling you that.)

## Why is support so important in the recovery process?

Let's just go with the above as a response to this one. But if there is more you want to ask about this that I have not addressed, let me know.

## How do you create an identity for yourself without ED?

I love this question because it is what recovery is all about. The only reason we use the Ed metaphor, the only reason to go to all the trouble to master the separation technique, is to make room for your Recovery Identity. This is also related to the longer response above. Think of your Recovery Identity as a rechargeable battery. You plug into support to recharge. At first, you will not hold your charge very well --- that's why you need such frequent contact with support and treatment. But even later when you are holding your charge better, don't forget that all batteries need recharging. That doesn't change. I love my iPhone and it does a great job holding a charge, but when I take that for granted, when I forget, the battery will be drained. Recovery is the same way.

Back to creating your Recovery Identity. Ed's ideas, insults, control, etc are always unsolicited, right? You never have to go to Ed and say, “Hey, Ed, I would love to get your thoughts about this.” In case you doubt that he has an identity all his own, separate from yours, just consider how quickly Ed's thoughts show up in your head. You don't go looking for them. You don't do any thinking to get to those thoughts. He is just there, front and center, totally unsolicited. He comes to you.

Now think about people you know who are very controlling. Aren't they the same way? They are not respectful at all. They are constantly offering their thoughts and advice, totally unsolicited. But wise people you know are different. Wise people are not invasive. Wise people do not grab you by the collar and shake you and insist that you listen to what they have to say. Wise people are available to us, but we have to seek them out, we have to make the effort to identify them, the effort to ask for their input, and the effort to listen to what they have to say.

Your Recovery Identity is the same. This is the inner wisdom we focus on in our weekend retreats. Create a section in your journal where you write only what you want/need your Recovery Identity to say to you. Don't wait to believe the messages before you add them to your journal. Write what you know you need to hear. Use what you hear each other saying. Write down the wisdom you offer to your friends but have trouble listening to yourself. If any of you are connected with me on Facebook, go to the section of my photos that is called Nutshell Wisdom. You will find lots and lots of recovery messages there --- you know, to help start charging your recovery battery.

What would you say is the key to recovery? What is the piece of advice that is most important for recovery?

DETERMINATION: REFUSING TO EVER GIVE UP. NEVER EVER QUITTING, NO MATTER WHAT.

HUMILITY: NOT THINKING YOU ARE DIFFERENT FROM OTHERS. NOT BELIEVING THAT YOU ARE WORSE, THAT YOU ARE HOPELESS WHEN OTHERS ARE NOT. THAT IS WHAT I CALL NEGATIVE ARROGANCE AND IT IS JUST AS DESTRUCTIVE AS ANY OTHER ARROGANCE, MAYBE WORSE.

SUPPORT: PART OF HUMILITY. DON'T EVER FORGET THAT NONE OF US – NONE OF US! – CAN DO THIS ALONE. IT TAKES MORE GUTS TO REACH FOR SUPPORT THAN IT TAKES TO ISOLATE AND BELIEVE THAT STRENGTH IS ABOUT NOT NEEDING OTHER PEOPLE. HIDING OUT FROM SUPPORT, REFUSING TO ADMIT WE ALL NEED EACH OTHER AND THAT YOU ARE NOT THE EXCEPTION TO THIS RULE IS NOT BEING BRAVE AND STRONG. QUITE THE OPPOSITE – TAKING THE STUBBORN “I CAN DO THIS ON MY OWN” POSITION IS NOT STRENGTH. IT TAKES GUTS TO REACH FOR SUPPORT AND IT TAKES GUTS TO LET SUPPORT INTO YOUR MIND AND HEART. DON'T BE A CHICKEN-SHIT. YOU HAVE GUTS, RIGHT?

Not sure why I felt the need to shout that answer (as in ALL CAPS) but I did.

What sort of other imagery can I use other than the ED metaphor?

One of the things I teach in my professional training seminars about the separation metaphor is that if a client doesn't identify with it, if it doesn't work for someone, then change it --- or forget it and find what does work. Having said that, I have frequently found that people who initially say it doesn't work for them or that it seems silly, etc are actually having a really hard time with the idea of separating from their eating disorder. Keep in mind that before being introduced to the separation metaphor, you are so identified with Ed that you are possessed ---- meaning that you don't experience any distinction between Ed and yourself. Ed doesn't want you to be able to know where he stops and you start. For him, that is the beginning of the end of his reign of terror. He will fight hard for you to not succeed with separation. And he loves to tell people how silly the metaphor is. He loves to make fun of this work ---- he is not initially threatened. But think about what we did earlier: when you are linking arms and gathering the strength of your support to stand up to Ed, he will be threatened.

Okay, having said that, sometimes, for whatever reason, the metaphor just doesn't resonate with someone. I don't necessarily have specific alternative metaphor systems. What I do is work with the individual client to create a system that does work. So the first question would be to you, if you want an alternative: What ideas do you have about what might help you?

And then we go from there.

Don't ever let a therapist tell you that there is only one way to do this work.

## How long does the physical discomfort last? Will I ever see myself as others see me?

How long does the physical discomfort last? How long does the emotional pain last? How long does it take to start to feel better? I have no idea. What I do know is that it does get better and the only way for that to happen is for you to stick it out for as long as it takes. I also know this: relief doesn't come all at once. You will be in excruciating discomfort for a while (like an addict in withdrawal – because that is what is happening) and relief will come in small ways at first. There will be a day that wasn't as hard as the days before. You will not recognize relief when it comes. You will see it with hindsight. You will have an awareness like, "hey, for the past week or so, I have not been constantly feeling Ed's pressure," or "I just realized that when I went out to dinner with friends the other day, I was actually able to focus on the dinner conversation."

Will you see yourself as others see you? Probably not. I don't think that is a very good goal because it is so unlikely. Actually, I don't think those of us who don't have eating disorders, but who are self-conscious with the way we look (I have been this way since I was a kid) will ever see ourselves as others see us. The whole body image thing is tough. Jules, my retreat co-facilitator, is better with this subject than I am. She has developed a workbook that is largely about body image stuff ---- and so far I have not been successful in getting her to publish it in a form so other can benefit. She uses the exercises with our workshop participants. What I know from watching her work is that there is not much distinction between body image work and the work of self-compassion in the bigger picture.

What I teach people with body dysmorphic disorder is to learn to disqualify their own perception. If people you trust are telling you that you are wrong about how you think you look, there comes a time when you need to choose to trust that you really don't have a clue what you look like. And no amount of compliments are going to fix it. If you perceive yourself as big as a house, you can't change that in the present moment. Others can tell you that you are too skinny or maybe they tell you that are gorgeous --- you will still feel big as a house. We try to help families understand this so they will stop torturing you guys trying to get you to see what they see. Bottom line, I have become pretty practical about this: if you are going to insist that you see yourself as others see you in order for you to recover, you just may not recover. If you have a nutritionist or a doctor or just someone you trust telling you that you are underweight, you ARE underweight. In spite of what Ed tells you, those of us out here trying to help you, do not have secret agenda to make you fat. Long ago I lost count of how many times I have been accused of being part of that conspiracy.

Body image distortion is painful. I know that it is. If it persists I suggest that you deal with it like someone with chronic pain deals with pain. They learn to live with it, they learn how to not let it stop them from reaching their potential. One thing to consider is that if you have several people telling you that you are beautiful, whether you like it or not, you are probably beautiful. Maybe you have to live with that.

## Will I always have to manage my eating disorder or can I fully recover?

The people in the eating disorder recovery biz who will tell you that "recovering" and "fully recovered" are 2 different things really really piss me off. For some of these people they just aren't thinking it through and others --- sorry for the cynicism --- are just using the distinction as a marketing hook to sell books.

I'm a recovering alcoholic. I have not had a drink for 30 years. I don't really think about drinking much. I don't consider it an option for me at all. I don't live with paranoid fear of my addiction returning, but I have never

been without appropriate caution. I have a friend who has been sober just a few years less than I, and he says that he still deals with temptation to drink on a fairly regular basis. He is one of the best A&D counselors I have ever seen work. He is not less recovered than I am. And the quality of his recovery is not less than mine. That is just his experience and my experience is my experience. Same with eating disorder recovery. I have known some people who say that they just don't hear from Ed anymore at all. And others who have to be more careful. My wife is recovering from an eating disorder. I don't perceive her as struggling at all, but I do see her have awareness of what she needs and doesn't need. Last week, I suggested that we go out for Mexican food. I saw her think for a moment and then she said, "Not a good night for Mexican food." She is not walking on some edge of relapse, she just knows herself well enough to make choices like this.

Do not let anyone tell you that someone who doesn't hear from Ed anymore is in better recovery than someone who hears from Ed on a regular basis and is still taking care of herself. I have an article with more about this so-called controversy of recovering vs recovered on the free download page of my website. Many other free downloads there.

### What are some techniques that your clients find helpful with anxiety (My anxiety often leads to ED behaviors?)

Most importantly, it is your job to accept responsibility for experiencing and expressing your feelings instead of medicating them. Techniques or strategies will vary --- we are always looking for what helps. Have an experimental mind --- try something for a while and if it doesn't help, try something else. The simplest, most basic thing is to be sure you are talking about your feelings. This can include journaling. Journaling is a good way to get feelings out, but if you have a history of isolation be sure you don't stop with just writing it down. Share it with someone else. Part of what we do to heal ourselves emotionally is take the risk to tell people we trust what we are thinking and feeling. Only by doing this can we learn that what we feel is quite normal and that we don't need to be ashamed of our feelings.

Anxiety is fear. If you haven't read *Embracing Fear*, you might want to consider it. Basically with *Embracing Fear*, I am dealing with fear with similar methodology as we use with eating disorders.

Last point about anxiety: because Ed has overprotected you from anxiety, one thing you will have to do is build a tolerance for anxiety. We all live with some anxiety. Sometimes we make it worse by being anxious about being anxious. Know what I mean?

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*Okay, that's it. Not comprehensive but hopefully thought provoking. Everything about this recovery work is collaborative for me. Responding to questions is one of my favorite ways to write. If you have a question about eating disorder recovery, send to: [thomrutledgeauthor@gmail.com](mailto:thomrutledgeauthor@gmail.com) and please put "Ed Question" in the subject line;*

*Take good care. I wish everyone who reads this the very very best.*



Thom Rutledge



Thom Rutledge, LCSW is a psychotherapist, workshop facilitator and speaker based in Nashville, Tennessee. He is the author of several books including *Embracing Fear*, *The Self-Forgiveness Handbook* and *Nutshell Essays*. He is the co-author (with Jenni Schaefer) of *Life Without Ed*, a book that has had made a significant impact in the field of eating disorder recovery and eating disorder recovery treatment programs. Thom's work has been featured on NBC's Today Show, The Fox Network, CNN's Anderson Cooper 360, Australia's Channel 10 and he has consulted with the Dr. Phil Show. For more information about Thom and his work please visit his website.

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Thom's most recent book is *The Greater Possibilities: 125 Reflections on the Method and Meaning of Genuine Success*.

The power of true success is revealed when we can see past our daily distractions, setting illusion aside in favor of the real magic that emerges from deep within us. Only then will we discover the greater possibilities. —from The Introduction

