

Eating and Self Worth

Joanna North

I set up the first *Eating and Self Worth* group just a year ago now. Since then I have run three and am just about to embark on a fourth which will be run at the Complementary Health Centre in Exeter. The groups run for ten weeks, for two and a half hours each week, and consist of between six and ten participants.

I had no idea what I was doing when I set the first group in motion. I was driven really by a desire to make available to others what I felt I had never really had: the opportunity to look at the relationship which we have with food and how it is affecting our lives. Through psychotherapy and relaxation techniques we work towards becoming more aware of the deeper issues which push us into negative eating and life patterns (such as constant dieting, bingeing, starving and negative body image). We also ask ourselves to what extent an eating pattern is simply a symbol of how we starve ourselves of the good things in life. How food has become a substitute for love. The group aims to build a safe environment in which to support the individual's self-healing process.

I feel honoured to witness the unfold-



ing process that has been taking place, not just in participants but in my own process and the process of my work. The point of the work revolves around a very simple truth: we hate ourselves for being born human, vulnerable and fallible. Most of the group work is about looking at and actually feeling the hate that we express towards ourselves. It takes very little to start pulling aside the veils that delude us into hate and start looking at our inherent beauty. It is touching to see ugly ducklings turn into swans — at the stroke of a feather. I was also touched by the story of one new participant:

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'I don't own a swimming costume because I look so dreadfully fat. But we're going on holiday with my three children and my husband can't come so I have got to go swimming with them — therefore I have to wear a bathing suit of some description. I have never tried on a bathing suit without ending up in tears and hating myself. It has always been an awful experience to go shopping for any clothes. I just hate to look in the mirror. I just do not want to look like this. But today I made a decision. I decided to admit that I am fat and that dieting has not made me thinner — ever — not since the time when I was 12 and the doctor told me to go on a diet. I decided that from today I will accept myself as I am and eat what I want and then at least I can stop worrying about being fat. I tried on the swimming costume today — it had to be bought. My little girl was so excited because I would be coming swimming with her and she said "Oh Mummy, you look wonderful". I looked in the mirror and instead of hating myself for being fat I thought what a lot of fun it would be to get in the pool and play with my children.'

This was just the start for this particular participant. But in the first week of the ten-week course she managed to sum up just what the groups are about. We have to start to love ourselves just as we are so that we can start living and it is in the living and loving process that transformation can really start to take place. Under the tyranny of the diet sheet and the scales and super-slim images of the media we become oppressed and depressed and fall into the trap of self-hatred. This very simple process can be seen clearly through

the eyes of a child 'Mummy you look wonderful — just as you are'.

We spend a lot of time looking in mirrors and reflecting on the parts of our lives that have led us this far — the abuse, the inappropriate parenting, the insecurity, the dysfunctional family, the alcoholic mother, the lack of acknowledgement, not being seen, not feeling cared for. It's all there for us to explore, get a handle on, make sense of, share with one another. We can fall to pieces, and find grief, anger and despair, and eventually come into the here-and-now and love ourselves for getting through all of that. How clever to have overeaten to survive the pain. How clever not to eat at all to avoid the pain. We did our very best and now we can stop using food as the way of handling all of this and start to find the words and feelings that come together to build a manageable picture.

These groups have a life of their own; they take their own direction and expand at their own pace. Usually I am left way behind in the river while my clients shoot the rapids and gain a gourmet taste for freedom and adventure. Women in the groups have changed jobs, reorganised new careers, transformed their relationships, moved house, started work after years at home, decided to make new friends and even gone swimming and some — just some — have lost weight too. But weight loss no longer becomes a focus or a must. There is too much life to be lived.

I am so glad that I took that terrifying step and fought with the voice that said 'you're too fat to set up groups called *Eating and Self Worth*.'