

STORIES OF HOPE

DYING TO BE THIN



Maryjeanne Hunt, right, with her husband Russ and daughter Taylor

For 22 years, Maryjeanne Hunt kept a secret that could have killed her: She often skipped insulin injections as a way to lose weight and stay thin. What she didn't know is that type 1 diabetes and eating disorders have become frequent companions, mainly in females.

"When you put them together, it's absolutely toxic," Hunt says. "The way I used to abuse my body, I'm surprised and grateful that I'm fit and healthy with no damage to my eyes or kidneys or my feet."

Hunt, 50 and fit, survived the condition dubbed "diabulimia" through an equally powerful combination of exercise and empowerment. Now a Boston-area wife, mother of 18-year-old twins, financial planner and personal trainer, she shares her story of transformation and renewal in an upcoming book, *Eating to Lose* (Demos Health Publishing, 2012). She decided to write the book after reading about a teen who died from skipping insulin to lose weight.

"I'm healed. I can make a difference," she recalls thinking.

Hunt developed diabetes at age 10. She remembers looking in a mirror at age 13 and being shocked to see that she was no longer a skinny girl. "You're just getting a little chunky," her mother said.

Hunt first tried dieting with little effect, since she had to eat to cover her insulin injections. By age 14, she began reducing or withholding insulin for a day or more to let her blood glucose rise and binging on forbidden treats to push it higher.

"I would buy whatever I wanted to eat with my babysitting money and go somewhere alone and eat," Hunt recalls.

Without insulin, pounds melted away as cells unable to use food for energy burned fat instead and her body flushed fluids and unused glucose through urination. But controlling weight with uncontrolled diabetes is a lethal balancing act.

Her parents repeatedly took Hunt to the emergency room for diabetic ketoacidosis (DKA), when fat-burning cells produce acids that build up in the blood. As the body poisons itself and becomes severely dehydrated, DKA spirals into a life-threatening condition that can lead to diabetic coma or death.

At 16, Hunt suffered DKA and collapsed lungs following what she calls a "binge-a-thon" of cookie dough, ice cream, almost an entire can of chocolate frosting, and no insulin. She denied breaking the rules on food and insulin, so the doctor attributed the episodes to hormones.

"After a while, I learned how close I could get without landing in the hospital," Hunt recalls, noting that she avoided the ER after high school. "It's horrendous. How could I ever have done that on purpose?"

Looking back, Hunt thinks the eating disorder evolved from influences of America's worship of skinny women, a hyper-focus on food in diabetes management, and behaviors she observed in her own mother.

"Shame underlies everything," Hunt says. She was ashamed of every "collapse of will power" – failing on a diet or giving in to foods loaded with sugar – and for skipping shots, starving herself, lying to her parents and doctors. Rather than risk further shame, she became very good at hiding everything she was or wasn't doing.

"Secrecy is the biggest part of an eating disorder," Hunt says. "It's viral. The eating disorder feeds off of the secrecy."

Her "warped body image" continued to drive self-destructive behavior. Frequent high blood glucose increased her risk of developing assorted complications. Starvation threatened her heart, her brain, her reproductive system.

"I didn't even have a name for it," Hunt says of the eating disorder that convinced her to withhold insulin. "I was fully aware that my abusive relationship with food threatened permanent damage to my body, but it didn't stop me."

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Her first breakthrough came soon after marriage. Then 25, Hunt joined a clinical study on the effects of aerobic exercise on people with diabetes. She stopped skipping insulin upon discovering the ability to burn calories through regular exercise.

"If I don't make that shift, then it's fatal," Hunt says. "Fitness transformed my health. It gave me a real, impactful way to be thin."

However, the eating disorder was not cured. Hunt still obsessed about being thin. She continued to restrict calories, and intense physical activity soon became her preferred method of purging. She trained seven days a week.

"If my schedule was too full, I would get up at 4 a.m., go in the back yard and climb the deck stairs with weights and jump rope for 90 minutes," Hunt recalls. "It was always about fear of getting fat."

She signed up to run a marathon, knowing she couldn't possibly gain weight while training for a 26.2-mile race. Through overtraining, she dropped to 92 pounds.

Hunt's life began to change when she became pregnant. Hunt says she detached from her body obsession while gaining 45 pounds with twins.

"I had such an internal conflict," she says. "I always wanted to be a mother, and I loved feeling the movement inside. I knew that being thin would endanger my babies."

After Travis and Taylor were born, their schedule ran things at home and Hunt, 32, returned to a job she did not like. "I felt like I was not in control of my life," she says. "The only thing I could control was my weight. That set me off again, and I became more desperate to be skinny."

She started skipping insulin again, which renewed the feelings of shame and made her worry about passing on her "brokenness" to her children, especially her daughter.

"I never wanted her to step one foot into that space," Hunt recalls. "I told myself, 'I know this is not good. I have to do something to heal.' I knew I needed help."

After confiding in her physician, Hunt was diagnosed with anorexia, an eating disorder involving an obsessive fear of weight gain. Soon after, she learned about the increasingly common dual diagnosis of diabetes and an eating disorder.

"I felt so validated," she remembers. "I wasn't the only one. For the longest time, I thought I invented this weight-loss strategy."

According to a recent study, up to 30 percent of women with type 1 diabetes at some point restrict their insulin to lose weight. Those who did, the study found, were more likely to develop complications, were 3.2 times more likely to die over the 11-year study period, and died an average of 13 years younger than those who didn't restrict insulin.

For Hunt, healing was a slow, painful process. In time, her dedication to physical fitness led to an inner fitness and the realization that life is so much more than what her body looks like.

"Somewhere in that darkness, I found the greatest treasure a person can find: a deep connection with true self," she says. "For me, true self was understanding that I am not my body. Your body just contains you. What is in me is so much bigger than what contains me." ▲