

01 Project Overview

Melissa: I think the greatest lesson life has ever given me is that we are not designed to be fixed. We are meant to be understood.

Hey everyone, my name is Melissa Peruch. I'm here with ConnectoPod with my program series, "Restricted." I'm here to talk a little bit about eating disorders. What they are, what they aren't, take down some of the discrepancies and stereotypes that surround themselves around eating disorders. This will be a multiple part series where we help people heal themselves who are suffering from an eating disorder or support those that are helping others who are trying to heal. We will get to interview some amazing individuals and dissect the intricacies around this topic. Thank you so much for joining us.

Quick disclaimer: Throughout this series we will touch on triggering content, including discussions on weight, suicidal ideation, body dysmorphia, dieting, and depression. If at any point the content is harming your own journey toward recovery, please feel free to skip ahead. If you or anyone you know is suffering from mental health, there will be a list of resources down below in the description.

In this episode, Betsy Foldes Meiman from ConnectoPod helps me introduce this project and share some more about my personal experience.

Let 's get into it.

My name is Melissa Peruch. I'm 18 years old. I'm a college freshman attending the University of Southern California, and we're here today with Betsy Foldes Meiman from ConnectoPod.

Melissa: My inspiration for this project is the fact that I went through an eating disorder for several years. I want to say four and a half years and I want to say, like, almost a year now in recovery. And so I was inspired to talk about it because throughout my road to recovery, I was really inspired into, the way that I got out of things and the things that I learned through, like, reading and looking at resources and just finding more things out.

Melissa: If I was able to come out the other end, like I did, I wanted to be able to have a platform where people can talk about it more. And part of that stems from the fact that my family had a very difficult time trying to understand everything that was going on. And I feel like it gives a lot of closure to families. And people that know other people with eating disorders to be able to learn about it

Melissa: And just give out advice and resources and be able to give closure to the people with an eating disorder to let them know that it's not their fault.

And it's not in their hands. And also to the people who know someone who's suffering with an eating disorder, they don't need to fix that person and it's not their responsibility, but there are certain things that they can do. And also just address some of the things that are not helpful and some of the things that shouldn't be said. And at the end of this, I hope it reaches a lot of people and I hope people can learn something from it.

Betsy: Learning about this from you is really interesting. I think you have a very unique voice about it because when we met you, when we were doing the domestic violence awareness project with the library back in 21.

Melissa: Yeah.

Betsy: Right. And it was, you came off as so confident and such a leader, right? So when you came back to us with this idea, that was really shocking to me to know that you were in the throes of this back then, right. And so can you speak to how it often hits people that are very together and very ambitious. That's how they look to the outside world. But can you talk about that dichotomy of what it's like?

Melissa: Yeah, definitely. So ever since I've been little, I've always been like the leader. And I oftentimes take that responsibility because I realized that nobody really had the confidence to take the lead. So I felt like it was up to me, but also I learned to love the role because I found so much freedom and it felt so gratifying to be able to lead different people.

Betsy: How did you find freedom in leading?

Melissa: I think it comes with the fact that you're the one that's calling the shots and letting people know where things are going, how to do certain things. But also I get so attached to people so easily. So whenever I meet people, I automatically care for them. And so it's that sense of care that made me loving the role of a leader because in a sense, not only was I leading, but I was also caring for these people

Melissa: So a lot of the time eating disorders develop in people that are very ambitious so the way that the brain works is very interesting. I'm studying a neuropharmacology class at college. We are all wired for addiction and it comes out in different ways and it's because our brain is wired to recognize patterns. And once we recognize patterns, it brings us a sense of euphoria.

Or it connects us to that, because then we can replicate it and being able to replicate it and gain that independence is what makes it so euphoric. So oftentimes we can see this in everyday life. So, like, when people have, like, a schedule. they know I'm going to get up at this time. I'm going to eat at this time.

I know my times for my meals or certain activities that can be deemed a type of addiction. And it's because since you have such a set routine, you know what's coming up, you know what you're doing, so that brings some sort of gratification.

Eating disorders are a form of addiction because you take that sense of control and you're able to plan certain things. And it happens in people who are a leader of their own independence or of their own lives because eating disorders feed on those traits. So, obviously, you have to be super strategic with, like, certain things that you do or, like, the way that you hide an eating disorder in the first place.

Melissa: There's also this prelude to perfectionism. I was once a perfectionist. I loved school and I loved being able to give the best at what I did. And feeding off of like the praise that I got whenever I got like let's say an A or let's say someone complimented my drawing I think it was another external source of euphoria where you feel, people realize it and so that kind of fed into my perfectionism. And so I became a perfectionist and making sure I did this right or oh if I didn't like this I would erase it and start from square one. And also that distorts the way that you view the world because even though it's all fun and games in the beginning, when you're getting praise and everything, it slowly consumes the way that you view certain things. It's not about being perfect anymore, it's about being the best. It's kind of like gaining tolerance to a drug, I would say, where like certain things I used to do aren't good enough anymore. And you kind of have to, like, leap forward and gain a new, like, normal. And so it feeds off of

that, and then you get more and more distorted, and I think that kind of started skewing its way toward other aspects, so it wasn't just like work anymore.

It was also like, oh, I don't like the way my eyebrows look, or I don't like the way my hair looks. And it starts seeping through.

Melissa: And then it becomes an internal thing after it started being an external thing.

Betsy: And that's the terrible irony of this kind of disorder, right? Because it seems like from the outside when you brought this to me, I didn't really know that much about eating disorders, right? And, but you know, what it seems like is it seems like the person suffering it is somehow weak, but it's exactly the opposite. You had said to us that you felt strong, the strongest when you were the most controlling in your disorder. Can you speak to that?

Melissa: Of course. When I started getting into my eating disorder, I felt physically and mentally weak. But, obviously, when I had moments of control, like, when I was looking at what I was putting into my body, I felt the strongest because eating disorders, contrary to popular belief, it's not a physical disorder. It's a mental disorder. And I think that's where this discrepancy of the name comes in.

So, an eating disorder relies a lot about the control or the lack of control, and when you feel a lack of control in certain sectors of your life, an eating disorder helps you take that control back because it directs that control to something that is completely yours.

So the way that you eat, the way that you take care of yourself, the way that you diet, is completely up to you because it's your body.

Melissa: So I feel like it's the maximum sense of control, where it's like you decide what's going in your body, you decide what's coming out. And eating disorders have a very funny way of distorting your reality of things. It makes one think that starving yourself is the way to feel most powerful when oftentimes people don't even realize what they're doing. Like, I know for myself and my part, I didn't even realize what was happening or that it was getting out of hand.

Betsy: What made you realize that you were in trouble?

Melissa: In 8th grade, in the middle of the year, we were doing a standardized thing for P. E. Part of it was we had to do, like, height and weight checks. Me and my friends, we were close with our PE teacher, so we helped with the recording. I was managing the weight line. And I think that's where it really started. I started seeing numbers

Melissa: And society has a very funny way and indirect way of telling you that numbers is what matters the most. And at the end of the day, we're all deduced to numbers. So I was looking at the girls weights, writing them down and I was looking at how low the numbers were.

Melissa: And then it got to me, my turn in the line. And then I stepped on that weight and I saw that number and my heart broke because I was not in the range that they were.

And so I walked away with that, like not knowing how to feel or not knowing how to think. Because there were only two girls that were in that hundreds range or like a little bit above that and it was me and this

other girl. And so just knowing that I was like an outlier to the data that I was collecting made it feel so overwhelming because I didn't know what to think.

Betsy: So as an overachiever, that looked like failure to you.

Melissa: Yeah. And the fact that I denoted that as failure was like, I've got to do something about it. And then after that, we knew that we were getting ready for like culmination for eighth grade. So we were dress shopping. I was thinking like, like, this is a big day, I want to look and I want to feel good. So, when I was dress shopping and I was trying on dresses, I just didn't feel good.

I started noticing small things, like, oh, my arms look too big in this dress, and so I started watching what I was eating. And I did lose some weight for graduation. And just seeing the number, like go down, I was happy about it. So we went to culmination, we took pictures and all that. And toward culmination, they were promoting like a trip. So my eighth grade was going to do a trip to New York and Washington, DC, so I was really excited and I finally convinced my parents to let me go. This is after we culminated. So we were in summer break. And we had, a few weeks to prepare And so, I was looking back at the pictures with my friends, and I was like, the biggest out of the group in the picture.

Things started not sitting right with myself again. Then the trip came. So when we arrived just reflecting on, like, the pictures I started to make decisions on my own. when it was breakfast, I would be like, Oh, I'm not hungry. Small excuses to, instead of trying to exercise more, I was like, okay, if I want this to work, maybe I should eat less. But unfortunately, I took it to much a dramatic toll to the point where I wasn't just eating less, I was just not eating. I challenged myself to eat the least possible that I can on this trip to see if it makes a change. And so that's basically where it culminated.

Betsy: So you started after eighth grade and then somewhere in your ninth grade year, that's when you were diagnosed. So what, what led to you being diagnosed? When did your parents start realizing something was wrong and when did you end up getting diagnosed?

Melissa: When I came back from the trip. The lack of food, the lack of energy. I came back, like, grumpy, and not the same, And then slowly, but surely I started trying to make up excuses not to eat my mom's food. Or I picked up a regiment where I would like go outside and like run around. and it became obsessive exercise. And then COVID hit, and I was back at home,

Melissa: It started to become more difficult because I had to change my strategies. But I just continued with like the lies that like, oh, I'm not hungry. I started eating less, so I cut it down on portions. Started cutting out carbs completely. Then I went to sugars completely.

Betsy: So how, how is your health at this point?

Melissa: So my health. Wasn't looking too good to be realistic. Like I wasn't eating, because of the lack of energy, I was very lethargic. I was always cold. My hair started falling off.

And so the way that I got diagnosed is one day, my mom was making breakfast. And I went straight to the bathroom and then I come out and I see that there's a plate served on the table, and so my mom's like, "I made you breakfast. Can you sit down and eat?"

I was like, "I'm not hungry." And so it was like back and forth. I was trying to convince her, but she got really frustrated. She stormed out of the kitchen, and so I felt really bad.

At this point I was crying because I hated having arguments with my mom and my sister was there. And so I was sitting there and I was like, well now I got to eat cause now I feel guilty for making my mom upset. But then another part of me was like, I can't eat though. But I tried to make the effort and as soon as I put the bread in my mouth, I was crying hysterically and I was hyperventilating.

Melissa: All of a sudden I couldn't move my fingers and I couldn't feel my legs, I was having a panic attack. And my sister was terrified of the image that was happening right in front of her because she didn't know any better either. And so she was just telling my mom and then I started calming down. My parents were super concerned. So they took me to the ER anyways.

Melissa: And so, they did some tests, and they took my height, weight, and then that's when the doctor came, with the diagnosis on there. And the moment that I heard those words, reality hit me in the face: "You have anorexia nervosa." I was like 80 pounds. They were telling me that it was abnormally skinny for like my age and my height.

Melissa: And I was surprised that they let me go, to be honest, for the state that I was in. I honestly thought that they were going to send me to like an inpatient institution. They actually let me go, and all they had to tell me was to start eating more. And they told me, "because if you lose one more pound, you're not going to live."

Betsy: So, it was at the point of like, you would die if you lost new. And they were just like, okay, here's the packet. See ya.

Melissa: Yeah. They gave my mom the packet. They didn't like read it to her. They gave it to her so she would read in her own time, describing what it was, symptoms like, behavior changes and all of that. Obviously when I heard those words, you hear an actual tangible diagnosis and you're like, this is what I am.

Betsy: And did you agree with their assessment? Or was it like, well, they don't really know me.

Melissa: It's funny because when you're developing an eating disorder, you know that it's wrong but it's kind of like another voice invades your head. I like to describe it like there's two people in one body because oftentimes I'd have my normal thoughts, and they would compete with like distorted thoughts that would come in.

So, I agreed with that, the diagnosis. I felt like it was relevant to what was going on. The fact that he just told me to eat more. That didn't really sit well with me because like, you don't go in and tell depressed people just be happy or you don't tell people with OCD just stop their rituals. Yeah. So it was like, if it's in the realm of a disorder and there's obviously something going on here, like, how do you just tell a person to just eat?

Betsy: Why do you think that is like, what sets that up in our society where we can look at all those other disorders and have empathy and sympathy, but when we look at young, young girls, especially, I know eating disorders are across genders, but when we look at young girls, we're just like, Oh, get over it. Why do you think that is?

Melissa: I feel like oftentimes that happens because, since eating is a survival instinct, there's no thought to it. If you're hungry, you just eat. So it's like. If you're not eating what's wrong with you?

With girls, there's a lot of notions of she's not eating because she wants attention, but it's just the lack of knowledge that goes behind eating disorders because it's, it's a real thing.

Betsy: So how did you begin to work your way out of it and how long did it take you?

Melissa: It took me very long. Because it was in COVID, it was so difficult. So it almost felt like I was never able to have a fresh breath of air because I was always in the same place. And it was always the same things that happened. And I would always brace myself for the same things. It became so much tension that I would always have at least one argument every single day.

Betsy: So the process of acquiring this disorder goes from comparing yourself and becomes physical, and then it's a body dysmorphia, and then it's about control and controlling your life and your choices of what you're eating. And then it becomes, actual fear of the food, right?

Melissa: And I like to compare it with like people who develop a drug addiction because like starvation was my drug. And once you acquire it, you need more. So you start eating less. So you gain more tolerance and you can't dissociate from it. And I think the process of realization really came, it was one dream that I had. I was at a park. I was on a swing set and I was looking around at the park. There was this mother and her child. They turned to the swing set and they, they see me, and the child stares at me and he points at me and he starts crying because he's scared. They quickly run away, and so, I got, like, a mirror out of somewhere beside me, and I looked at myself, and I was horrified with what I saw. And so I realized if I keep losing weight, this is what I'm going to look like.

And so that was the first realization, but unfortunately I don't think it was enough for me to actually launch into recovery. But what really hit me was my mom had a dream. She was just sitting somewhere and she couldn't see anything because it was all misty. All she heard was a voice. That's it. And the voice told her, "take care of your daughter and make sure she gets better because she has a bright future ahead of her." She told me the morning of and I was just crying because at that point I did not envision a future.

Melissa: I was unfortunately proactive in self harm. Or it was more of like the idea of self harm and like small things. I felt so guilty for being such a burden to my family and I started seeing it more and more because I would see like, I didn't even have the energy to play with my brother. And so it just became heartbreaking because I couldn't be the sister that he wanted me to be, I felt like I couldn't be the daughter that my parents wanted me to be, I couldn't be the support system that my sister wanted me to be. I was like, they're happy when I'm not there. So what difference does it make if I'm not here anymore? So when I heard that it, it was something like a wake up call. So that's when I accepted like, okay, yeah, I need to recover. And so I started my journey from there.

I think what was most helpful is I read a book on eating disorders and I, I read a book of a person that had an eating disorder for 20 years. And she wrote a book about her experience. That's when I started realizing that, like, I was blaming myself all these years for being such a horrible person, but there's such a clear distinction between who you are and who you want to be, and what an eating disorder convinces you to be or convinces you to want.

I am not my eating disorder. And I think another thing that plays into it is the fact that when people develop eating disorders, it's always anorexic, bulimic, or binge eater, and I think we need to stop that

because it gives a notion that you are your disorder, rather than saying a person with anorexia, a person with bulimia, a person that's struggling with a disorder, not a person who is a disorder.

Betsy: Wow. And so then did you do therapy? Did you go like a traditional route or did you, figure this out on your own.

Melissa: Throughout COVID, my mom was trying to convince me. But I think because I was so sick, I had two big fears. My biggest fears were, one, they were going to take my control away. Or two they were going to send me to inpatient.

I didn't want to go into any of those institutions where they focused on forcing me to eat when I wasn't ready. So long story short, I never actually went to therapy, but I did find therapy through different sources. And like I said, I started reading about it. I started learning about it more. I started reading personal accounts. And so that became my primary mode of therapy because once I started uncovering it and learning about it is when I started being able to defeat it and develop strategies now to try to counter it.

And it's, it's very funny because oftentimes eating disorders come from a sense of wanting control, but when you develop an eating disorder, you lose control and that eating disorder makes you think you have control, but once you start recovering from it is when you actually gain your control.

Betsy: Wow. So you said before that you think. It shouldn't be called an eating disorder. What would you call it?

Melissa: Maybe there's not so much an issue of where the name comes from. I think there's more of an issue of how people interpret it. Because it distorts the types of treatments that are provided and it's not about the patient, it's about the appetite.

I felt like, in every interaction I had with my eating disorder, everything was a surface level of it, and they were just trying to get me at a healthy weight, without actually trying to understand me. Those interactions that I had, they, they like opened my eyes to like the medical community.

Betsy: And that's what you want to do now, right? You're pre-med, right?

Melissa: Yeah, so I'm in school on a pre-med track to be a Pediatrician. And a lot of people start in the pre-med track and then towards the end they, they drop out.

But I really have a passion to be a Pediatrician specifically because I told myself that if I start from the root of things, I can prevent things from happening. So if I'm treating children who are going to have increasing use of social media, and they're going to see more and more things that are going to influence their own perception of themselves, I want to be able to start from that, from the root to give them a healthy sense of what track they're in, what health should be, so that then they won't have a distorted view of what it is, and they won't hopefully develop things like an eating disorder, body dysmorphia, or other things that could prevent them from a happy, healthy life.

Betsy: Where does your, where does your eating disorder stand now? Have you fully conquered it? Is it still there? Are you in recovery?

Melissa: So I fluctuated from anorexia nervosa to binge eating disorder, but now I'm in a good place. I'm in a point where I understand what eating disorders are. I have read about it, I have lived through it enough to be able to talk about it. I'm in a place where I've grown beyond that

I don't necessarily regret what happened because I'm in a place where I understand it wasn't my fault in the first place. I didn't choose to have an eating disorder. I can talk about it and I know enough about it to help other people.

Betsy: Yeah. Right. Your empathy is so built from experience. It's really authentic.

Melissa: It's been a lot, but it's helped me grow a lot as a person. I've met a lot of people who have told me I sound much older than my actual age. Life experiences that you live through very much determine how mature or how old you are in experience and wisdom. So I feel like at the end of the day, regardless of what happened in between, one, I was able to conquer it, and two, I'm still here, and three, I came out better than I expected.

Betsy: And also you got to understand your family's relationship was tested as well and they were strong behind you and like that, that even makes you stronger in another way to like to know that the support around you is real and that it would survive any kind of tribulation like that.

Melissa: I feel like we've learned so much through it. And I feel like more than me growing, I think we all grew together from either witnessing it or dealing with it personally. Or just seeing things happen.

Melissa: We hope you enjoyed this episode and stick around to hear what other individuals have to share in future ones. You can listen to Connectopod on Podbean, Spotify, Apple, or wherever you get your podcasts, and visit [Connectopod.net](https://connectopod.net) to see all of what we do and have in store. Thank you for listening!