

## To self-destruct or not - That is the ?

I came from a very affluent family. My parents were professionals and workaholics. I had a nanny who did her best for most of my primary years. Once I was 14 I got the use of a gold credit card. I would go shopping with my friends and could basically have what I wanted when I wanted. The one thing I really wanted was my parents. To have a meal together, to give me time instead of catch up with paperwork when they were home, to give me big hugs to show me that they loved me.

I did not feel loved, in fact, I often felt that I was not wanted, a mistake. Maybe my mother should have had a termination. Crazy things would go through my mind as I lay in bed. I would lay and dream about how I wanted it to be, then I would come back with a thud to reality.

To soothe myself, I began a habit of sucking the ends of my chest length hair. I had been complaining to mum that I kept getting stomach pains and cramps and that I felt as though I wanted to vomit all the time. She and Dad put it down to growing pains, pre-menstrual tension and the junk food I was always eating.

Just before my 15<sup>th</sup> birthday I had terrible pains in my stomach and they thought I may have appendicitis, however, on further investigation they found a hair ball as big as a tennis ball blocking my intestinal tract - I think that's what they called it. The outcome was emergency surgery.

I could not remember the last time my parents were both together with me before I went to sleep and when I woke. This is what happened when I was sent to surgery and I came around to them holding my hands, one on each hand. I loved every moment of them being with me and then I was discharged home.

It did not take long for my parents to go back to their old ways. I too started back at my hair habit, except now I was trying to eat it, knowing that if I did there would be a greater chance of another hairball blockage. This would mean that I would get my parents back again.

It took a few months and I knew something was happening because I was getting the pains again, only this time I did not tell them until it became acute and I had to be rushed to hospital again. Neither of my parents had noticed the significant reduction in the length of my hair from where I was eating it. Bingo! It did the trick and there they both were by my side and holding my hands. This time the doctor suggested that my parents should look at ways of how to stop my hair sucking habit. Discharge home saw my parents organise for me to go to some counsellor who I told what I wanted her to know which was not much.

I continued to eat my hair at quite a rate of nots and the counsellor did comment on if I had been to the hairdressers. The suggestion of a trim was enough to get her off my back. Then after a discussion between my parents and the counsellor, it was decided that I was cured of my hair sucking addiction. Agreeing to this was not a lie as I was no longer sucking, but rather eating my hair.

A couple of months later, my parents found the time to move house and state to accommodate their work needs. It was nice having them home for a couple of weeks and we did the packing together, ate together, sat in the garden together, argued together and did many more things together, even the cinema followed by dinner together. I felt so special and wanted, I did not want this to end.

After moving into our new house, they were home for 3 weeks before they had to go back to work. Togetherness became an infectious part of my life until the thud to reality came and they went back to work and their old ways.

I would spend hours upon hours alone at home. Eating alone, watching TV alone, doing everything alone. I at least had my friends before, now I am the new girl in town to be ridiculed at school and to come home to the ultimate depths of loneliness. I asked my parents for a pet. They make the house smell and leave mess everywhere suggested my parents as the reason for not being allowed a pet!

My comfort came when I started getting the cramps and pain in my abdomen again. Surgery and togetherness would be imminent very soon. It was in fact 10 days later. This is now my third surgery. Hello! Parents, is there a message here?

The doctors were lecturing me of how I need to stop sucking my hair otherwise hairballs will continue to build up and cause blockages. My parents thought I had gone back to my old habits and maybe needed to see a counsellor again.

I tried so many times to tell them that all I wanted was them. It was like talking to a brick wall. Like when I played tennis against the garage wall and the ball would just keep bouncing back and I would keep hitting it. Echo! Echo! Echo! Is there anybody out there?

My parents were so engulfed in their work and their need to work so hard in order to give me the best things in life. The trouble was their perception of the best things in life did not correlate with my perceptions of them being my best things in life.

The cycle continued, telling the counsellor nothing because she had the same view that my parents were trying to give me the best in life, so it was pointless wasting my energy and simply fed her the biggest load of bullshit ever and what she wanted to hear. It was great that she believed me; however, I did try hard not to contradict myself in any way in case it encouraged further investigation on her behalf.

I was becoming more and more withdrawn, lonely and I would now say extremely depressed. My grades and schoolwork reflected this going from straight A's to C's and even D's. Surgery and togetherness needed to happen soon or I was thinking maybe trying some tablets or something else, what I was not sure of.

Surgery and togetherness finally eventuated. This time the doctor spoke very openly with my parents in front of me suggesting that there was an issue that needed to be addressed sooner than later. The doctor suggested that what had started as a self-soothing habit to comfort myself had turned into a form of self-harm. Explaining that I was using my hair eating and the consequences of this behaviour as a way of trying to communicate and obtain some attention from my parents. **WOW!** It was like the doctor was reading my mind. Finally, someone has got it!

By this stage the doctor realised that there could be an eating disorder happening too and he was right.

The doctor suggested that my parents and I approach the SAFE program to get some help. We did this, I joined a SAFE program group and support group and the SAFE staff worked with my parents to educate them and started a Carers, family and friends group which helped my parents, and many others, understand what was happening with my thinking. It helped my

recovery because we all had the same vision. My parents always say to this day that the most powerful tool they learned from SAFE was honesty, transparency and consistency - Annie's favourite 3 words!

The program highlighted just how many parents, family and friends do not know how to talk about this issue honestly and openly. They are scared to talk about it in case it leads to increased self-abuse or even suicide. They walk on eggshells which further breaks down relationships.

My experience was that once my parents and I were able to talk honestly and openly, without blame, about my behaviour it made me feel better about myself and my ability to change and stop what I was doing to myself. It was obvious that I did not need to do this behaviour anymore because I was now being listened to.

That is a very simple analogy and expectation. The reality of this behaviour is that it is not that simple to stop. Your body has become used to what you do and you have twisted your thoughts to believe what you have been doing is right and you need to keep doing it to feel good.

The SAFE program taught me week by week how to change my thinking, how to self-soothe, problem solve and communicate my feelings appropriately, it replaced my self-abuse with safer and healthier alternatives that lifted my spirits and gave me control back over my life.

I completed my SAFE program in 2001 and have been living self-abuse free since my graduation from the program.

I am a successful artist now, and not the doctor my parents expected of me. I live life to the fullest and continue to manage my life triggers using the awesome tools that the SAFE program taught so many of us to use to take from paper and use in mind.

And, the answer to the question, in my experience, is **NOT**. Self-abuse offers the quick fix short-term that is outweighed by the horrific long-term consequences and outcomes, at all levels of one's life, from this behaviour.

If you are not SAFE, get SAFE...

I did.

Wendy