

-- Speaker 1 00:00:26 Welcome to another episode of the Dr. MC self-care cabaret podcast. I'm Theresa Melito-Conners, a PhD level, self care expert in the greater Boston area with a passion for helping others care for themselves. Today's episode is entered around eating disorder recovery.

As my listeners know, I'm in recovery from disordered eating exercise, bulimia and atypical anorexia learning to reject the diet mentality and culture and embrace my body was a powerful journey. There were many tools and techniques that I used along the way. And if this is an area you struggle with, I invite you to just start by bringing more mindfulness into the act of eating as you relearn to get in touch with your body and the act of feeding your body from a place of love. Here are a few ways to get started before you eat, just breathe mindfully, bring awareness to your emotional state.

Speaker 1 00:01:24 Any thoughts and body sensations you may be feeling before you begin to eat a nice way to do this is a few rounds of deep breaths in through your nose and a long exhale through your mouth and try to make the exhale longer than the inhale that helps to activate the parasympathetic nervous system and really engage the rest and digest response. Another tip for mindful eating is to notice how you feel after eating a particular food. Does certain food make you feel energized or satisfied or depleted and just kind of Ugh, or even sleepy or happy really get into how you feel after eating different foods. Another tip is to bring something pleasurable to your mealtime, such as flowers or candles or music, or take out those fancy dishes that you only use once a year and use them on a regular night. Don't save them for a special occasion.

Speaker 1 00:02:24 And you can also remind yourself that it's okay, this won't be perfect and you can eat when you're not hungry. That's totally fine, no judgment, but just try to get into the reasons as to why you may be finding yourself, looking to eat at times when you're not feeling at actual hunger and just know that it's okay to not, you're not gonna be perfect with this a hundred percent of the time, and that's fine strive to offer compassion and forgiveness and acceptance to yourself as you work to heal your relationship with food. And today we're going to chat with author eating disorder, recovery specialist, and peer support mentor Betsy Brenner, Betsy published her memoir last year, titled the longest match rallying to defeat an eating disorder in midlife. And I'm thrilled to welcome Betsy to the podcast today. Welcome Betsy to the Dr. MC self care cabaret podcast.

Speaker 2 00:03:35 Thank you. I'm so happy to be here.

Speaker 1 00:03:38 I'm excited out with you. I am really excited to learn more about your book and hear about your journey. So we're just gonna jump right in and, um, tell me about your book, the longest match rallying to defeat an eating disorder in midlife.

Speaker 2 00:03:52 Well, thanks for asking. I, I love any opportunity to share. It's very empowering for me. Um, I never put plan to be an author actually, but the pandemic gave me the gift of time. And I had always been told my life story had the makings of a book. So I literally started writing in March of 2020 and completed my manuscript in January of 2021. Wow. My book came out in may of 22, 21, and it's just been incredible. It is a story of my entire life. Going back to my childhood in Rochester, New York. A lot of it is about the development of my eating disorder, which wasn't diagnosed until I was in my forties. Um, and I've recovered in my fifties and now in my late fifties, but in preparing to write my book, I looked back through old diaries journals and the seeds of my eating disorder were really planted throughout my childhood.

Speaker 2 00:04:48 And it still surprises me to this day that I did not develop a full blown clinically diagnosed eating disorder earlier. Yeah. Um, so the process of writing and reading through old journals and putting pen to paper, I mean, it gave me a, a degree of self-awareness. I think that I didn't have before just really understanding myself better. And, um, how and why I responded to events in my life, the way I did. I sort of feel like I was putting together a jigsaw puzzle of my own life and seeing how all the different pieces fit together. So I've learned a lot and like I said, I never planned on being an author, w --

-- riting a book, but writing my memoir was a truly incredible experience on many levels, grateful that I've had this chance.

Speaker 1 00:05:40 Wow. Yeah, no, that's be thank you for sharing. It's it's funny. I have, as my listeners know, and I've talked about being in recovery myself for an eating disorder and, you know, I can think back to those kind of early childhood days too, and, and pinpoint, you know, the, the moments that kind of the seeds as you so beautifully put it, planted the seeds, um, kind of along the way. And I didn't really get help until I was in my, uh, early thirties, late, late twenties, early, early thirties, um, somewhere around there. And, um, yeah, it's kind of fascinating though, that we kind of, you know, what we accept as kind of normal behavior or because society is set up that way to make us feel, um, you know, certain ways about our body or that we need to change our bodies. So I'm wondering exactly

Speaker 2 00:06:27 If we, we don't know anything different when we're growing, it's not until we get older and, and realize the impacts, um, for better or for worse, different things have had on us, including in society in the media. I wasn't diagnosed. I was in my forties. Yeah.

Speaker 1 00:06:42 Yeah, no, it's really interesting when we start to kind of peel back those layers and really look at the messaging that we get all around. It's not just in, you know, society, even from our parents and friends and other people, we work thin just, it can be difficult to unravel all of that and start to really see it for what it is. So I'm wondering you, you kind of answered this already a little bit, but what made you decide to kind of just go for it and share your story? Cause I think it's a powerful practice and you did explain a little bit about kind of that process.

Speaker 2 00:07:16 Well, thank you. I mean really two, um, definite purposes in sharing my story one was to allow myself to heal on the deepest level possible. I had written my recovery story several years ago, um, around 2017, 2018, and had the opportunity to share it at different treatments at centers, mostly in the Boston area. And that really, um, empowered me and helped me heal. But writing my memoir helped me heal on the deepest level possible understanding, uh, the past traumas in my life and how they impacted me and really learning to accept, acknowledge and understand that it was more my parents' issues than my issues and forgive and understand and learn the other, uh, reason, uh, behind my book is I wanna help others. I, I feel like it, I can recover from an eating disorder life than anybody can. I was always such a private person.

Speaker 2 00:08:24 I kept all my emotions inside and through the recovery process, I have just been freed free to be me free to use my voice free, to be vulnerable and authentic. And I feel like this, this way of sadness and emotions that I've been carrying around my whole life finally feels lighter. And just my book has just sort of allowed me sort of given me for lack of a better word, the street cred <laugh> yeah. To share my story way beyond, um, the eating disorder world specifically, but the freedom, the voice, the authenticity, um, all goes back to finally allowing myself to be vulnerable in recovery. So I really wanna give hope to people who are struggling, hopefully inspire them a lot on their own roads to recovery and, and make it very clear. There's no shortcuts. There's no quick fix,

Speaker 1 00:09:19 Right? No, there is not, <laugh>

Speaker 2 00:09:21 No journey, but it is possible. It

Speaker 1 00:09:24 Is possible and it's worth it. It's totally worth it

Speaker 2 00:09:27 Worth

Speaker 1 00:09:28 It. Yeah, no, that's beautiful. The kind of free to be me and the way you describe, you know, the process sounds, you know, rather, and I've, I've experienced that too. I, I've not written a memoir yet, I will say, but, um, I have had to write some pretty intense papers. That dissertation was no joke that I had to write to earn my doctorate. And, um, it, one of the actual benchmarking papers throughout the program is the, we had to write our kind of social cultural perspective. And P I piece of that was really examining all the pieces that make us who we are getting into like the depths of your stuff really. And I found parts of that really challenging to cuz we had to do research about it and kind --

-- of back up what our experience were with the research and examine our bias and all of that. And of course this was an academic paper, but it really, at times I found that very difficult to, you know, not just go into my own little shame spiral, um, of, of my past experiences and past traumas that I've overcome. And just to really examine it from that lens, it was quite cathartic on the other side, but it was hard. It was very hard to do and hard to get through. So I, I commend you in, in doing that and your willingness to help people with this too.

Speaker 2 00:10:41 Thank you. And the more, the older we are, the more chapters of our lives we've been through. Sure. So those layers to unravel and understand and learn about, um, it's, it's quite a process, quite a journey.

Speaker 1 00:10:53 Yeah. And I love to help people in this area as well. And I always share it when I give self care workshops almost every time I say, listen, in the interest of full disclosure, when we start talking about the nutrition, hydration domain, I always say I'm in recovery and you know, it's it, to me, I've had some really beautiful experiences after a workshop where people have come up to me and been like, or in the chat, cuz most things are virtual these days, but right. They'll, they'll say to me like, you know, thank you for sharing that. What were those books you recommended? Where can I find more information on intuitive eating or this, that, and the other, whatever else I mentioned and I'm always willing to share. So I figure if I can just help, you know, help one person, if one person in the audience that re that statement resonates with them, it makes them feel seen and heard I'm okay with being vulnerable too. So it's nice.

Speaker 2 00:11:39 Absolutely.

Speaker 1 00:11:40 So I'm wondering, like what has it been like since releasing your book? It's been probably kind of exciting. I would think so. Tell us about that.

Speaker 2 00:11:49 It's been overwhelmingly positive. Um, I have to say again, I was always such a private person, so I was really nervous the first time I even shared my cover, which was three months before my book actually was released. I was so nervous to share my cover even on social media, because it was disclosing that I suffered with Anna. And, um, so I literally went from being such a private person to being an open book and all of that entails. So, um, once I released the cover of my book, the response was overwhelmingly positive and it just made me feel like I can do this. So when my book came, came out in may, um, one, the first time you hold your book in your hand, people had said that is just an incredible feeling. And it was, and on some levels it's still surreal that I actually was able to put my life story into words.

Speaker 2 00:12:50 Um, it really did help me heal on the deepest level possible of not just saying that. And I am so grateful because since may, when my book came out, I've had so many opportunities to speak, to share my story, to connect with others. And it's so gratifying to feel that I'm making a difference in this field. And we're really giving people hope and sharing some of the ways that I worked on my own recovery what's necessary for recovery. And I had been a high school tennis coach for, for over a decade. And I absolutely loved that. Um, I'd been thinking about retirement from coaching and I actually retired at the end of the fall season so that I can focus all my time and energy on my book and the incredible opportunities that are unfolding as a result every day. I, I seem to get an email from someone who heard about my book or heard about my story, not just in the us, but in a few other countries as well. Wow. And I can connecting with readers. I, I, it's so empowering.

Speaker 1 00:14:00 That's awesome. And good for you. Congrats on being able to retire and share your message with a broader audience with, with some found freedom of time. <laugh>

Speaker 2 00:14:11 An empty nester. My kids are in college and it's just, the life is timing. And for me, the timing is right. So I'm grateful.

Speaker 1 00:14:20 Awesome. Would you mind describing the book cover cuz I thought it was so cute when I first saw it, I was like, oh my God. And we'll make sure that the book is linked in the episode notes, but I would love to hear you just describe it. What's on there cuz it's very cool.

Speaker 2 00:1 --

-- 4:33 Well, I, there's a little story behind my cover. I had no experience with anything like this. Um, writing a book, publishing a book, promoting a book, anything, well, my publisher had an in-house graphic design, uh, person and they were gonna create whatever cover I wanted them to. So I actually had no idea what I wanted to do. I went to our local bookstore and I wanted to just look at a shelf and see what colors jumped out at me. And most books were very neutral colors, but there were maybe one or two books that were this certain bright shade of blue, not Royal blue, not dark blue, not light blue, but just sort of a softer, bright blue. I'm like, that's it. That is gonna be the cover of my book. Originally. I wanted to have the cover be sort of an old fashioned diary because, um, I, I have so many of those that I read, um, the old little kind with the walk and oh,

Speaker 1 00:15:29 That's cool.

Speaker 2 00:15:31 I had one that had crossed tennis rackets on it. Tennis is a big part of my story. So originally I thought about having that and um, the graphic design person came back with a few ideas and they were fine. But someone said to me, you need something that grabs the reader. These are perfectly fine, but it doesn't grab the reader so that how the big tennis racket came to be. And then originally it was going to be a yellow tennis ball on the racket. Well then I also heard, um, from people who were giving me feedback, just a few select people, people think it's a sports book and if they have no interest in sports, they're gonna just put it aside. And cupcakes were significant, cuz that was a food I, I learned eat again in recovery. So I wanted a food on there that was, that could be made into the color of a tennis ball. So that there's a yellow cupcake, yellow frosted cupcake on the tennis racket where a tennis ball would be. And it's a, a nice white crisp tennis racket with the yellow cupcake and the bright blue. And as soon as I saw it, <affirmative> that, that was it. It's

Speaker 1 00:16:34 Perfect. It's really cute. How

Speaker 2 00:16:36 It, however it came to be,

Speaker 1 00:16:38 You nailed it or whoever and the people that helped you. It's really cute. And it definitely drives home the message. But you also, when you see you think, well this person probably has tennis probably plays a part in their life also. So that's really, um, awesome. And you mentioned cupcakes being significant. That was that one of the foods that you banned,

Speaker 2 00:16:55 The eating disorder wouldn't allow me to eat any kind of sweets for a while. And it was actually in my dietician's office where I learned to eat sweets. Again, she would have me bring food to the office during my appointments. And one of the first things I brought was a cupcake for us to share, to learn how to eat them again. Mm.

Speaker 1 00:17:12 Yeah, for me, pizza was one of the big ones that just was off limits for a very long time. And uh, its one of my favorite things. So it was, it was welcomed back. I was when I was able to welcome that back into my life that

Speaker 2 00:17:26 Eating disorder voice can be so cruel. Mm. So cruel

Speaker 1 00:17:30 For sure. You noted. I was looking at, um, you know, some of the information about the book and I don't remember if this was in the synopsis or where I saw this, but it was a, a rather staggering statistic that over 15% of women at midlife and beyond suffer from eating disorders surpassing the number affected by breast cancer. And why do you think it is? I'm just curious your thoughts on that, that people don't recognize this for the, you know, major health concern that it is.

Speaker 2 00:17:57 I honestly believe it's cuz of the stigma attached to any mental health issue and eating disorders are a very serious psychiatric illness caused by a variety of biological, psychological, physiological environmental factors and like any mental health issue or illness. I think there's so much shame and secrecy. I think, um, the numbers probably even higher because so many disorders go undiagnosed. Um, I think it's not really talked about in the same way because it is, um, a mental illness. And um, one of my, one of my goals is just diminishing that stigma attached to any mental illness. I think eating disorders have the second highest mortality rate of all mental illness behind opiate abuse.

Speaker 1 00:18:49 --

-- Goodness.

Speaker 2 00:18:49 So those statistics are certainly alarming, but I think it doesn't even do a justice. I think there are, I think it's once every 52 minutes that someone dies as a direct result of their eating disorder. Eating disorders are such a serious illness and they're just not given the focus or attention cuz yes, many people do recover or from them. Um, but unfortunately they take the lives of way too many. So that is a high number of people, high percentage of women in midlife that struggle. Um, but so many people don't even admit it or get help or recognize that it is a clinically diagnosable illness that deserves treatment and recovery. It's it's all about the shame secrecy and stigma associated with mental illness.

Speaker 1 00:19:38 Yeah, for sure. Thank you for sharing that. And I even think back to kind of at the height of my DISE, shall we say, or eating disorder, you know, those closest to me, my closest loved ones didn't even know the depths. Um, shall we say of some of the behavior? Um, because I was able to kind of, or it was written off as I would write it off as like, this is normal. Like this is what I have to do. Like I want to change my body in a certain way. So like, and you know, that's celebrated in society when you do that. And especially when you don't fit the typical mold, like, like I never looked like someone who was suffering with that. So it kind of got a pass and I was celebrated in certain circles for being, having such willpower and all these things too.

Speaker 1 00:20:24 But really the other side, the dark side of that was really the destructive behavior. And um, you know, I feel very, very fortunate that I was able to, you know, get the help that I needed. I found a dietician to work with and trusted her and listened to her enough that I was, and I was ready to let go of all of that. Like I had realized I'd gotten to a place that this was no longer sustainable and my body was actually fighting me back. I was like, oh, I was ready. And I trusted her and listened to her. It was not easy <laugh> and that healing journey certainly was, um, uh, challenging, shall we say? And you know, seeing my body ch as I was recovering and now, um, you know, they always say you gain the weight back and then some, and that was my experience and certainly, and rather rapidly. So it felt like in a way I was losing control and things were failing me when really my body was just trying to keep me alive and protect me. But it's

Speaker 2 00:21:26 Why you a really important point. And that is that you can't tell by looking at someone that they have eating disorder, eating disorders do not discriminate all shape, sizes, ages, genders, you name it. You cannot tell by looking at someone. And I too, when I was first diagnosed, I had the same preconceived notions of someone with anorexia. I was like, how can I have Anex I'm in my forties. I'm not emaciated. Um, I like everyone else thought it was, you know, young, white females. Um, so I had a lot to learn about eating disorders and, um, nobody chooses to have an eating disorder. Recovery is a choice, right? No one chooses to suffer from this illness. Yeah.

Speaker 1 00:22:08 Yeah, absolutely. So I'm wondering, we do talk about self care as the primary focus of, of my podcast episodes. So I do want to ask you how you like to practice self care and what that means to you.

Speaker 2 00:22:22 Well, I, first of all, I had to learn that self-care is not only not selfish, but it's essential. It's necessary. Yes. <laugh> um, both of us who are caregivers for me, it was my children, others. It could be aging parents. We sometimes lose ourselves in that. And so I felt guilty if I did something for myself, but I learned in recovery that it's it's essential. So for me, um, tennis is one type of self care, but I had to learn in recovery because it was intertwined with my eating disorder to keep it in the right balance in my life. So right now I may play twice a week. So that is self care. That is me time. My something that I'm still pretty good at and enjoy with friends. Um, it's a break from the work that I'm doing, but for me, I, I found so much peace by the water.

Speaker 2 00:23:17 There's a small beach in my town and my favorite form of self care is going for a walk on the beach and collecting sea glass. There is no place. I feel more at peace and more we relaxed and I can think I can fe --

-- el I can just be. And without being impaired by an eating disorder, I can be present and notice the reflection of the sun on the water and all those things I couldn't do when I spent each and every day consumed by thoughts about food and, and exercise. Self care is also allowing myself to just relax. If I just wanna sit on the couch under a blanket and watch television, I don't have to be productive. Every second self care is such an important part of a healthy well balanced life. And, um, it's something I had to learn and accept and actually do.

Speaker 1 00:24:10 Yeah, you said several really important things there about it. You know, not making you feel guilty. And I think that that's, you know, that society again in its kind of twisted way, making us feel that if we prioritize our over those of others, then we must be selfish or, you know, that that practicing self-care is some luxurious thing that must cost tons of money. And, um, you know, it's just, it's reserved for other people. We don't need that. Other people need that. And like all these myths around self-care that I try to work very hard to dispel and in my work, um, you put it so beautiful. Also your recognition of tennis being something you love, but was also, um, intertwined into some, um, your reading disorder. For me, that was dance. I used exercise and movement as a restricting method, um, or purging method really. And, um, overdoing it. Yeah. Yeah. And so I really, I still love to move my body. And so having to learn again, that it was, you know, okay, to move my body. Now my body might look there for it still moves. It does that it's supposed to do. And it still feels good to do that and put on my favorite song and just dance it out. And

Speaker 2 00:25:24 It's for the right reasons. Yeah. Not as compensatory behaviors, but just something that means joy.

Speaker 1 00:25:30 Right. It just feels good. And that learning that movement should be joyful, was like earth shattering to me. And <laugh> in recovery being like, oh boy, it should be <laugh>. What do you mean? It's not punishment for, you know, for something I ate? What do you mean? Um, so that was, that was definitely an, an eye opening, um, peace for sure. But I, and I love the idea of just being present and, you know, going to the beach and what a beautiful, simple thing that brings so much joy and just mindfulness and healing. So I love that.

Speaker 2 00:26:01 Thank you.

Speaker 1 00:26:02 Yeah. And there's so much that goes into self care that people don't even realize. I mean, it's how feed your body and hydrate and how you soothe and how you rest and how you interact with other people and how you practice. Self-compassion how you maintain your environments, how you set goals and see the bigger picture for yourself. Like it really, it's a pretty big deal and it is essential. You are correct. <laugh> not ops.

Speaker 2 00:26:29 Correct.

Speaker 1 00:26:30 That's awesome. So I'm wondering, you know, if, if folks are listening to this and maybe a lot of what we're saying is resonating with them, maybe they're struggling with their own relationships with food or learning to love their body. Do you have any piece of advice or something you would want to, um, to share or give them?

Speaker 2 00:26:50 I, I would say the first thing is it's okay. It's okay if you're struggling, but it's essential to reach out for professional treatment. Um, my treatment was all outpatient with a therapist who specialized in eating disorders and a dietician who specialized in eating disorders. I was told early on, nobody can do this alone. And if the support is professional treatment, I, I really think it's essential. And I also, um, again, it, that self care and compassion comes. It's an illness that nobody chooses to have. So if you're struggling, you deserve that extra care and compassion that this illness is a, a result of so many different factors and you deserve help. You deserve treatment, you deserve recovery, and it's not something to be ashamed of. And to keep a secret. I personally kept it a secret from almost everyone in my life. Um, that was another big change. <laugh> when my book came out and my cover, um, but really getting help getting treatment and realizing you can't do this alone. And, um, recovery is possible and it's worth it.

Speaker 1 00:28:02 Yeah. Thank you. And you do so many wonderful things. I've noticed --

-- you're presenting at different conferences and hosting groups and participating in, you know, weekly sessions. So where can folks find you? Where can they connect with you if they'd want to learn more?

Speaker 2 00:28:19 Well, first place, I'll say my website is [www.betsybrenner.com](http://www.betsybrenner.com). And there's more about me and about my book and some of the things I've been doing. And, um, also if you're on Instagram, you can follow me at Betsy Brenner author. I also have a page on Facebook, the longest match. And, um, my book also has my email address in it. Um, I love hearing from readers and, uh, my book is available on Amazon and it's in paperback or, uh, ebook format. I believe it's also on Barnes and noble and apple books in the ebook format. And, uh, I live in Rhode Island. It's on the shelf at several bookstores here in Rhode Island, but, um, most people find it on, on Amazon. So I love hearing from readers, I welcome any and all feedback. And, uh, I'm putting myself out there. I'm not used to this self-promotion but I guess it's part of the package.

Speaker 1 00:29:19 Yeah, I guess so. Well, it's so cool. And I think that your message certainly resonates. And I think it's a very important one for people to hear. And I think we need to do as much as we can to help break down, you know, the barriers and end the stigma that's around this and really, and help to dismantle the societal oppression that exists around, um, you know, living in our bodies in fat phobia and all of diet, culture, and diet mentality, and all of that. We'll, we'll, we'll work on that, but in the, we

Speaker 2 00:29:47 All need to do our part absolutely Part.

Speaker 1 00:29:50 We keep chiseling away at it, but in the meantime, um, your work is very valuable. So thank you for sharing. And I hope that folks do reach out and, and connect with you.

Speaker 2 00:29:58 That would be wonderful. And I just wanna leave you with my last message and that is, it's never too late to be a work in progress and recovery. Doesn't have to be perfect to be wonderful,

Speaker 1 00:30:15 Such beautiful advice and powerful information shared by Betsy on this episode, it was so FA be able to chat with her and learn more about her journey and about her. And of course share some more pieces of my healing journey as well. What a powerful experience, if you do not have a desire to write and publish your story, just writing for fun can be a really healing and powerful practice. This is why journaling is often re be sure to check out a recent article on the episode notes, where I was featured for sharing more about journaling. And if you're struggling with your body and relationship with food, I strongly recommend that you seek help recovery and healing is possible. And trust me, it is very freeing and of course, self-care is aunt selfish. This is not a luxury. It is critical to your survival. You are worth it, and your health and wellbeing are worth it.

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