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Beating

ANA

SAMPLER



How to Outsmart
Your Eating Disorder &

TAKE YOUR LIFE BACK

Shannon Cutts

Foreword by *Jessica Weiner*, Author of *A Very Hungry Girl*

Beating **ANA**

How to Outsmart
Your Eating Disorder &
TAKE YOUR LIFE BACK

Shannon Cutts



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“For Now Let Me Just Say (a poem for the fighter in all of us)”

Sometimes I feel like I have more to say to myself
But I can't find the words. And all that comes to mind is—

I am beautiful.
I am worthy of living
and loving.
I am exquisite—unique.
I am believable—as me.

Why did I waste all these years . . . !?

Never mind. Ignore her.
I'm back. I am grateful.
The eating disorder, the depression, the anxiety—
they were all just signposts.
They were my South, East, and West
pointing me North to NOW.

Now . . . when I know I am beautiful.
Now . . . when I know I am worthy of living
and loving.
Now . . . when I know I am exquisite—unique.
Now . . . when I know I am beautiful—as me.
Now . . . when I know that, YES, I am capable of achieving great things

But, more importantly, I know that I have already achieved great things because—

I survived.

I survived myself.

I survived others' pain.

I survived this media-saturated society we live in with body, mind, heart, and soul stubbornly intact.

In fact, I did more than survive.

I regrouped.

I restored.

I rebuilt.

I revived.

And even now I am regrouping.

I am restoring.

I am rebuilding.

I am reviving, discovering, accepting, and exploring the "me" in all this.

The me who got lost and left behind.

The me who was forgotten and misplaced her voice for a while because of it.

So amazing—she sings again.

I sing again.
And I speak.
I speak out against some
But mostly toward all of us
Who have splintered off our hearts and souls
from our minds and bodies . . .
who have forgotten that we are all whole by design
and that whole is the only way.

Whole is beautiful.
Whole is worth living
and loving.
Whole is exquisite—utterly unique.
Whole is believable—the only believable you and me.

And most of all, whole is the only thing worth dying,
living, and fighting for . . . do we ever really realize—

*You are the only you who ever was, is, or ever will be.
And I am the only me.*

Sometimes I feel like I have more to say to myself—to everyone—
But I just can't find the words.
So for now, let me just say—

TRUST. HOPE. FAITH. LOVE. LIVE. **TRIUMPH.** BELIEVE.

Part One

WELCOME TO OUR WORLD



Making the transition from being one of the many who suffers from an eating disorder (ED) to becoming one of the few who triumphs over your eating disorder is as rocky as any I can think of. Quite possibly, the only experience tougher on a human body, mind, heart, and spirit than falling ill is getting better.

It gets unnecessarily tougher, however, when we assume that we will have to heal the same way we got sick—alone. We don't. In fact, I couldn't. My loneliness and isolation were precisely the reasons why recovery felt so difficult—impossible, really. So here, in this first section,

I will introduce you to a whole new approach to eating disorders recovery—an approach that worked for me when I had literally lost all hope of surviving my eating disorder in any other way—an approach that has the very same power to renew your hope and transform your experience of recovery.

So what are we waiting for? Let's get started!



It is our Tuesday evening support group. On tiptoes, speaking in hushed whispers, they sidle forward, eyes groundward, chests barely rising and falling, curling up into the depths or balancing on the edges of their chosen seats. . . . They are afraid to breathe too loudly for fear someone will notice.

It is scary to be noticed when you don't like what you've become. It is scarier still to be noticed when you don't know who you are. And when the little you do know of yourself consists of the constant competition, comparison, and criticism of an eating disorder in your head, at first it can be very scary to be noticed keeping company with others like you . . . to realize that you, and your eating disorder, are *not alone*.

But eventually, if you want to heal, if you want to live, you adjust. You get used to two things—one, being noticed, and two, not being the only one with an eating disorder. You also get used to not being the only one with depression, anxiety, panic attacks, obsessive-compulsive

disorder, low self-esteem, self-harm, promiscuity or sexual anorexia, substance abuse, alcoholism, borderline personality disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, bottomless fear, uncontrollable anger, and endless aching loneliness . . . and you get used to sharing the burden of guilt generated by being willing, for quite some time now, to do just about anything and everything to ease the void within, even if what you are driven to do drags you down, and then drags everyone else down with you. In fact, oddly enough, this sense of collective ownership is eventually part of what gives you some small, and, in time, much greater relief.

This process—of harnessing the transformative, healing, relieving power of naming, owning, and then *sharing* both the pain and the promise of recovery with at least one other person who has been there, understands, and is willing and able to help—is called mentoring. Mentoring neatly circumvents the isolation in which an eating disorder flourishes by putting us in direct connection with each other—heart to heart, mind to mind, spirit to spirit. Mentoring has become a virtually lost art in this isolating age of eating disorders. Yet I have spent the past twenty years of my life putting into daily practice, and the last five years compiling, the material you hold in your hands now, because mentoring *saved my life*. I have seen it save the lives of many of my mentees, and I believe it has the same power to save your life as well.

It is also worth mentioning that many different names exist for what I call mentoring. For instance, we will discuss a bit later how the success of the worldwide fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous is structured around the art and discipline of sponsorship. Similarly, many outreach organizations offer the chance to seek out a “Big Brother” or “Big Sister” to share life’s challenges and victories. It is often possible to form similar bonds within the context of an ongoing therapeutic relationship as well. Here, I introduce my own highly successful experiences of first being mentored, and now mentoring others, through what I call “The Mentor Model.” This model, which we will explore in much greater depth shortly, will serve as our guide as we unfold the full potential and promise that a mentoring relationship holds for you in your journey to meet—and even exceed!—your recovery goals.

Why have I dedicated countless hours of my personal time to serve as a mentor and five years of my life to write this book? For one simple reason—because mentoring takes us back to the heart of what it means to be human, which is that we need each other or we will not, cannot, survive. My own battle to survive my eating disorder took an undeniable, almost unbelievable turn for the better with the appearance of one single, willing, able human being—my own mentor. She was all I had—the only source of help and support I had access to when I was ill and trying to get better—and mysteriously, miraculously, it was enough.

Before we proceed further, I want to make it clear that, regardless of my particular circumstances during my recovery journey, I am not now, nor will I ever be, an advocate of *choosing* to “go it alone”—even with your mentor by your side. Rather, our consistent focus here will be an exploration of the many reasons why it is of value to consider *adding* a mentor to any existing professional support network you have in place. However, over the years I continue to meet many people who, for one reason or another, are confronting the challenge of overcoming their eating disorder without having access to professional medical care, just as I experienced when I was sick. If you are one of these people, holding this book in your hands right now, and you are considering throwing in the towel, then know this—regardless of the circumstances in which you find yourself, regardless of the level of care you currently have access to, regardless of what you think your options are or your prognosis is or can be, you must simply set your mind and heart and spirit to do *whatever it takes* to get better and *never ever give up*.

Hopefully, even as you are reading this now, you have a full treatment team encircling you with all of the care, support, expertise, love, compassion, and guidance you could ever need to heal. But whether you do or do not, there is absolutely no reason to allow yourself to think that you cannot, somehow, some way, no matter what obstacles appear to stand between you and your recovery

goals, get better—my own story is living proof of this! Against all odds, with the help of just one caring person who was willing to serve as my mentor when I needed her, I *survived* a devastating fifteen-year battle with anorexia and bulimia . . . and have been in sustained recovery for over a decade now!

Let me say this one more time, that in my own direct, personal experience, there is never, ever, *ever* any reason to give up *hope*. You can do better than that. You *must* do better than that. This world needs you. You are here for a reason. You *matter*. You were always meant to, designed to, and able to survive whatever life hands you and come out ahead, flying the flag of victory! No matter what your situation is, there is always something more you can do to save your own life. There is always more help available to you than first meets the eye. If I could do it—if I could find a way to heal, and *stay* healed, when absolutely no way seemed to exist in my life as I knew it in those days, then *you can too*.

Here is the secret to your success, the secret I learned during the years I spent working toward my own successful recovery, and the powerful secret I now pass along to you. Through the years when I was doing the bulk of my recovery work, and in the years since then, it has been and continues to be my experience today that even with all that we now know about eating disorders that we did not know then, and even with all of the resources we have

now that I did not have when I first became ill, our most powerful resource for healing, survival, and revival of life continues to be *each other*. Today, even as the work I do at times takes me into some complicated territory, the credo I live by remains simple, direct, profound.

Relationships replace eating disorders. Period. The end.

This is my life's work. This is who I am. This is how I live—and stay alive.

And what a wonderful, worthwhile life it is! Today, post-recovery, I am privileged to spend my days working one-on-one with those in recovery from eating disorders and those who love them, speaking and singing across the country through my outreach organization *Key to Life: unlocking the door to hope*, writing this book and monthly columns for several recovery organizations, and recording music inspired by all of the courageous fighters I meet along the way. All of these endeavors are structured with mentoring in mind, and in such a way as to purposefully demystify what author Peggy Claude-Pierre terms “the secret language of eating disorders,” so that those who have no voice can borrow mine until they reclaim their own, and those in a position to help can clearly hear and understand the unspoken and unspeakable need, and move quickly to lend their aid.

That is the purpose for this book—to give to you what I was given from my mentor—*hope*—and through this gift to awaken within you your own ability to *fight* for your life.

That is the purpose of my life—to offer you living, breathing proof that recovery lies within your reach also, and to light the way so that you too can experience for yourself the incredible triumph of *Beating ANA* once and for all!

There is, quite simply, no better use of a life—at least not that I can think of. There is no other life that I would choose than this one—every single heart-wrenching, heart-warming day of it. I will admit I often wasn't sure at the time I was struggling to heal, but today I know that it was all worth it—the years of struggling, of not knowing, of feeling so scared, and then to see the sun begin to come up over the horizon and to realize that *I am doing it . . .* that thing I thought *I could not do . . .* and then realizing that if *I* could do it, then *so can you . . .* WOW.

Talk about a life worth living—a life worth saving, a life worth surviving for. Today, for me, that life that is so worth living, saving, and surviving for is mine—*and your own*.

My Story

When I first got sick with anorexia, at the age of eleven, no one talked about eating disorders—to me or anyone else. I had been molested by a neighborhood man at the age of six, which created an innate distrust of my surroundings, not to mention a sensitivity to the senseless nature of personal physical and emotional violation that would stay with me from that point forward.

By age thirteen, peer cruelty and family turmoil had left their additional marks, and yet I spent the first seven years of my battle with anorexia harboring absolutely no suspicions that my problems were caused by anything other than “just me, being me.” My family appeared to feel similarly. We simply didn’t know any better, and neither did anyone around us. I continued to decline, year after year, and everyone close to me fell away, as mystified as I was by my slow descent, and unable and uninvited to venture into the intimate, secret places where only the eating disorder and I could go.

When I turned eighteen, I left my family and moved to another state to attend university. I was already a nationally recognized up-and-coming young jazz and bluegrass musician, and I had been accepted to a prestigious music program. Unfortunately, my “best friend,” the eating disorder, had no useful advice for me to help me cope with the stresses and strains of a whole new life, let alone the demands that my college’s music department directors placed on me. Before too long my physical and mental health caved in. Not even three months into my freshman year, my parents arrived to pack up my things.

I dropped out of school and flew home. Not knowing where else to turn, I found myself crawling even deeper inside my eating disorder for comfort. I couldn’t face my family, my few remaining friends, or the cold, hard facts of such an abrupt end to such a promising music career, let alone the heavy weight of guilt I felt for somehow letting it happen. Like an athlete, over time my patterns of overpracticing and persistent, consistent weight loss had steadily weakened my body, including the ligaments and tendons I had relied on to maintain my ten-hour-per-day practice regimen. The doctors told my parents they had never seen such a severe performance injury in one so young—that my injuries resembled those of a thirty-year-career musician. They told me I had better proceed to Plan B, but I had no Plan B. I had no sense of “me” without music. All I had left of the person I had previously referred to as “me” were hard casts on both hands and forearms . . . indefinitely. I couldn’t even lift a milk carton or turn a doorknob, let alone engage in the sole form of expression that had offered me a

safe way to “speak” the words and emotions that now remained bottled up inside, hour after hour, day after day. I was in constant, ever-deepening pain, both inside and out. Worst of all, I remained in ignorance of the name of my tormentor. I still labored under the assumption that the total collapse of my life was “just me, being me.” I wrote myself off, and miserably, unbearably, inconceivably settled down to die.

Meanwhile, my mother searched around and found a physical therapist for me to try and at least salvage my musical dreams. Mom drove me to her office once a week, sometimes twice if things got really bad. My new therapist’s name was Annie. I liked her well enough, although I never said much during our initial sessions together, other than politely asking for the occasional clarification of her instructions for the physical therapy exercises she assigned. Privately I thought that she seemed like a strong, happy, confident woman—someone I felt quite sure I could never find anything in common with.

One day, a few months after we started working together, I arrived at her office not just quiet and reserved, but mute and silent. She sat me down, very gently, and said, “Today we will not do physical therapy. Today, we will just talk.” She explained that she knew I needed someone to talk to, that she could see I was hurting. Furthermore, she told me she believed that if I didn’t talk to someone soon, I might actually explode from the strain of holding it all in, whatever it was, that was pushing so desperately against my seams to get out. I opened my mouth, intending to quickly thank her for her concern, and to assure her that all was

well and there was no need to worry. I opened my mouth . . . and it all came flooding out.

The depth of relief I felt was incalculable, mind-blowing, and instantaneous. After seven long years of battling my disease in lonely silence, after I had long since given up hope of help ever arriving, Annie *noticed* my pain. Even more miraculous, she seemed to understand what that unnameable pain inside me felt like from personal experience. She also appeared to possess the ability to do what I could not—separate the particular issue that was causing such a struggle from the human being underneath who was struggling. She saw *me* . . . trapped inside, held down by the weight of my disease, but still alive and willing to fight and wanting to survive. She heard *me* . . . my nearly inaudible actual voice, crying out for recognition beneath the eating disorder voice's vicious lies. She cared about *me* . . . in a way I had never even considered caring about myself.

She wasn't at all intimidated by my pain or my disease or my shame, or even my inability to put any of it into comprehensible words at first, because in her own way she had walked through those same places in her life and had emerged whole and healthy and strong. She also—amazingly, unbelievably—seemed to believe in me, even when it felt impossible to believe in myself, and even while I faltered and fell so many times that her continued presence and support seemed less like compassion and more like insanity.

It was only later that I learned that the reason she was able to do this for me was because someone else had first believed in her and stood by her when she needed that person most.

Annie was my first mentor. She was my first anything—the first person I had ever met who proved to me that an ordinary person like me could be a hero in her own life. She taught me this by showing me, through her own example, that everybody has “something”—something that we each struggle with, something that life hands us, individually, which forces us to wake up and choose life every day, in every way, in every thought, word, and action, because choosing anything less than life means we will not survive, and what a waste of a perfectly wonderful, irreplaceable, unrepeatable life that would be!

Annie also taught me that this “something”—*my* something—meant not that I was weak, but that I was *human*. It meant that I was not to be forcibly, willingly even, separated from the herd of humanity all around me by the perceived unusual weakness within me, but rather that this very challenge I was facing was what *included* me and made me very much *like* the surrounding herd. Annie shared with me something I would never have realized on my own—that, in struggling through my particular “something,” I was simply participating with each person around me in the normal and necessary rites of passage life offers us. In other words, I was having my own individual experience of the collective “human condition.” Most importantly, I learned from Annie that it was only when we all come together to share in both the burdens and blessings that life offers to us that we each activate our inner power to fully live.

This insight did more to bolster my courage for the journey ahead than any other single “aha” moment during my recovery

journey, because in the first instant I understood the true meaning of Annie's words, I received permission and the right to *rejoin* the rest of humanity—to once again occupy my rightful, reserved space to share the pain and the poignancy, the power and the personal responsibility we each bear for uplifting us all, one life at a time.

As we will discuss in more detail in parts three and four, John Nash may have explained this process best when, in the movie about his life, *A Beautiful Mind*, he outlines his Nobel Prize-winning discovery, the Nash Equilibrium. Previously, in economic circles, it had long been assumed that the good of the individual was achieved by each individual looking out for his or her own needs, with no thought or care for how their choices or opportunities might affect the group. Nash discovered that, in fact, the exact opposite was true. The good of the individual can only be achieved when the individual seeks both his or her own good *and the good of the group*.

This is mentoring in a nutshell, and these are words to live by.

Words *I* live by.

Words *you* can live by, survive by, thrive by too.

This is why I have come to meet you here—so that I can say to you with pride, humility, and the unshakeable conviction that if I could heal from my eating disorder, *anyone* who wants to heal badly enough *and is willing to do the hard work of recovery* can do so too.

And maybe, just maybe, through these pages, your eyes will be opened to someone in your life who is willing and able to mentor you, as Annie mentored me. This is my wish for you—to have

courage, to let support in wherever it may be found, and to use it to *overcome*.

I was mentored. I became a mentor myself. Now, I pass it on to you.

Welcome to our world—the world of overcomers, survivors, and thrivers. We are so glad you are here!

IMAGINE A WORLD in which it is easy to find someone to turn to who understands your struggles, identifies with your wounds, and knows how lonely and scary it feels to live inside your skin.

In this fantastic brave new world, you would face your eating disorder head on, standing tall and firm with supportive friends by your side as you get better—and stay that way! In *Beating Ana*, Shannon Cutts opens the door to this world as she introduces you to a whole new way of thinking about and recovering from your eating disorder.

Shannon understands firsthand the total isolation, dead-end thinking, and exhausting mind tricks that eating disorders confine you to and has found a way to break free from her own 15-year battle with eating-disordered thinking and living—for good—through the powerful process of mentoring and connecting together.

From the very first page of *Beating Ana*, you will experience the empowering joy of sharing your recovery process with others as Shannon guides you with the same techniques she developed to achieve her own lasting recovery and has since passed along to her own mentees. You will walk with Shannon through the recovery process as you read private correspondence from five of her long-time mentees and participate right along with them in self-quizzes, short exercises, motivational affirmations, and journaling that is specifically designed to give you the courage, support, and tangible skills to say “no” to your eating disorder and “yes” to your life!



Shannon Cutts is the founder of *MentorCONNECT*, a community where mentors and mentees can connect to experience the power of mentoring, and *Key to Life: unlocking the door to hope*, an organization that offers events, workshops, concerts, and products and services to facilitate recovery from eating and related disorders. Contact the author about both organizations at www.key-to-life.com.

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