

Jamie1 audio

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Mei: Welcome back to Stay Tuned, supporting Transition Aged Youth. This podcast is brought to you by the Transitions to Adulthood Center for Research at UMass Chan Medical School Department of Psychiatry, and in partnership with our sponsor, the National Institute for Disability Independent Living and Rehabilitation Research.

I'm your host, Mei.

Gillian: and I'm your other host, Gillian. Today's episode is on the relationship between community participation and eating disorders.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, eating disorders are serious illnesses marked by severe disturbances in a person's eating behaviors. Although many people may be concerned about their health, weight, or appearance, on occasion, some become fixated or obsessed with weight loss, body weight, or shape in controlling their food intake.

These may be signs [00:01:00] of an eating disorder. So today we have Jamie with us. Hey Jamie.

Jamie: Hello.

Gillian: So can you tell us a little about yourself?

Jamie: Hello. I am Jamie. I am a graduate student in, uh, social sciences and I've spent much of my academic and personal life thinking about health, intimacy, identity, and the ways different systems shape, how we see ourselves and how we interact with each other, especially around um, mental health, body image, food intake, intimate relationships. Um, I'm really passionate about making space for honest conversations about, uh, mental health conditions and intimate topics, and in this case eating disorders as [00:02:00] well, especially for communities and, uh, groups of people that are often left out of the mainstream recovery or, um, wellness narrative like people of color or queer folks or individuals with body types that don't fit into the stereotypical image of, uh, what a body, what an individual with eating disorders should look like.

Gillian: I love that. It is so important and so needed.

So here at the center we talk a lot about community participation. So that has to do with things that people do in the community of their choice. What does community participation look like in your day-to-day life? Like what kind of things do you do?

Where do you spend your time?[00:03:00]

Jamie: I. Spend a lot of time with my friends from graduate school. They can be people that I, um, became friends through classes or through my program or I. Different hobby based, uh, clubs on campus. Like I'm part of this theater group and the friendships extend beyond just theater rehearsals and performances.

We go to the gym together. We have outings together. Um, I am also doing a lot of research with different teams, so I'm also intimately working with. A group of different groups of researchers at the same time. And because research is the type of career that doesn't give you a lot of work life balance. So you find yourself talking to the same group of people and hang out with them [00:04:00] a lot of the time.

Uh, and it doesn't have to do with work every day. Um, uh. I am also pretty active in different types of mental health support groups, um, for myself and also, I am a mental health advocate and I also have certificate in mental health first aid. So I, I would say that in general I have what I call like a wellness community with, um.

Physical therapists, therapists, counselors, and um, people in different, uh, medical, healthcare professions.

I think those are the things that come up, uh, to my mind immediately.

Gillian: That is a lot. You must stay really busy.

Jamie: I [00:05:00] do. I do.

Oh, can I add one thing I was thinking about, um, the environments I'm physically embedded in.

But I think there are other parasocial communities that I care a lot about. For example, I have been on Good Reads for many, many years, and there are authors that I really like and there are genres or subfields of literature that I am really interested in. I'm a very big nerd that way, like reading things about

say like an ethnography about this group of people and how they do their nightlife, uh, feels like leisure reading to me. And also, I'm a big K drama fan. I spent, god knows how many hours at this point, uh, and how many k dramas that I've watched. But it has been. [00:06:00] 10, 15 years now since I watch, started watching Kdramas almost like five, six days a week.

Um, and I care deeply about the characters and also the actors and actresses. I have this immense emotional investment in those shows and also that whole ecosystem. We, we are aware that there can be exploitation or toxic relationships or even gender-based violence that happening in entertainment industry.

Um, but I think I'm one of those anonymous, um, person that's always paying attention, trying to support people who are facing injustice and basically voting with my watching or opting out.

Gillian: That's great. I can relate to the reading one. When I moved back to the Boston area and I was just trying to [00:07:00] build more of a community, I joined a book club and I think I am now in about four, maybe five book clubs. It's a bit of an issue, but I enjoy it. I love it. Um, and now they've become friends and supports. Um, I didn't have a good reads before that and I do now, so we should connect on good reads. I like to geek out on it. Yeah. And interestingly, I was at an escape room with a friend this weekend and she was also talking about a kdrama that she was really into, and she's like, I always watch it.

You know this. And my partner and I were like, no, but we are obsessed with this game show. Yeah. And yeah, it was just a great conversation.

So we've been touching on it. Um, your Eating disorder and relationship to it. Um, can you tell us a [00:08:00] little more about the history of it, because I know it can look very different, the recovery too, from one person to the next.

Jamie: Yeah, so I think I probably had some disordered eating behaviors emerging ever since I was a very young kid.

I think in my family and immediate family food was used as a reward for a lot of things. It was used as a, as a gift. Um, and there has, there was always a lot of other things tied to food and eating. It was not as much about you feel hungry and your body needs fuel. It was more about. Those social meanings or emotionals.

So basically I think I would go pick up a snack when I'm [00:09:00] happy and I would go pick up a snack when I'm sad and sometimes I find it hard to stop because of a big range of emotions. And then when I get to my, uh, adolescence, I think there is this very unhealthy environment where people comment on each other's bodies, young girls and young boys and kids of that age are so mean and atrocious to each other.

Um, that I started to feel real, really undesirable and,

and just like there's something wrong. Like, I felt really unpleasant and uncomfortable in my body, and that was when the restricting behaviors started. So I already had the binge behaviors before that and after the restricting kicked in. So I, I found myself [00:10:00] perpetually in this restricting and bingeing cycle to the point that.

I would find it difficult looking back to periods when I was actually having like calm and stable food intake for more than a day. Um, and I started experiencing other mental health conditions around the same time. Uh, depression, anxiety. And later I discovered that I had some complex PTSD, uh, that was embedded throughout those years and became a really big driver, uh, in my mental health.

And I started receiving counseling when I was 18 or 19, and it was an incredibly long and painful and winding journey. I've been through a lot of therapists, a lot of different counselors, like dieticians, psychiatrist, [00:11:00] and each person brought me something new, something different to the way I was viewing myself.

The way I was viewing my, uh, eating behaviors. Um. And it wasn't until I think, two years ago that I first had, uh, a dietician or a nutritionist whose so job in my life is to talk to me about eating. And that was a very unique experience. Actually, I, for the longest time I felt like dieticians were like, are this elite group of people who serve elite groups of people and. I did not see myself as someone who would need such help. And what if I had [00:12:00] really messed up eating behaviors and patterns? But then I was, uh, a friend in my community told me that with a lot of insurances, um you actually have zero copay to have a dietician. So I started reaching out and I had a conversation from there, and it was just, I remember how fascinating I felt that even though I was talking to my dietician about food, I essentially told that person a lot about the important aspects of my life, my academics, my dating life, my relationship with my parents, even earlier childhood memories and trauma.

And I think it was really in these last like two-ish years, ever since I started seeing a dietician that I started to connect all the different. Pieces and like piece them together to see how [00:13:00] my system is, a system is a universe on its own and all these pieces work together. Um, and there is a reason behind things I do and ways I feel.

Um, I would say that I'm still, um. I'm in, my late twenties, I will say that I'm still in recovery some days or months or weeks are worse than others. Um, when I would feel like stressed out and I need to stuff my stomach. But I have been having better awareness to pause and actually taste the food in my mouth and to ask myself, am I doing this because I restricted calories a couple days ago? Or because the workout I did was a very taxing [00:14:00] one on my system, or because I'm just stressed out. Uh, I'm able to have that kind of reflection a lot more now. Um, yeah. And sometimes things are a lot better for me where I feel like I can almost float through, uh, my meals and my social gatherings with a comfortable amount of food and it doesn't quite trigger that ed voice in me. That's about where I am now.

Gillian: Well, thank you for sharing and, you know, being so vulnerable about it. I find it so interesting how non-linear recovery is. Yeah. It can be frustrating because it is non-linear, um, but it sounds just great that you're still pushing through and you know, what you've been able to discover while [00:15:00] meeting with your dietician.

That's really great. Um, in my own experience, in my recovery, it was really helpful to have a well-balanced team and, you know, with a doctor and a psychiatrist and dietician and I couldn't just have one person on my team fulfilling all of those roles.

Jamie: Yep.

Gillian: Um, I think it's one thing about. Eating disorder treatment that makes it stand out from other types of treatment.

Jamie: Mm-hmm.

Yeah.

Sometimes I feel like my dietician. Is a dietician and a therapist and a good friend and some kind of surrogate parent that's reeducating my system and my eating behaviors. [00:16:00] And I feel the need to tell them absolutely everything, a lot more than what I thought I would share with a dietician

because it's all tied together and eating disorder is the, the kind of beast that, um, there is no way around it.

I think we talked about this last time, that with other issues, with different substances or behaviors, it's easier to avoid them altogether, but we cannot avoid food. We have this complex love and hate relationship with it.

Mei: Yeah. I think building off of that, um, you had mentioned how your. Everything feeds into your eating disorder.

Everything plays a part in including the people you surround yourself with, uh, your family, friends, it's [00:17:00] your communities that also impact your experience of your eating disorder. So like you just mentioned, you have to eat to live. There's no going around that, and someone who is struggling has to face that trigger on a day-to-day basis.

So how, how have you dealt with that and um, how has community, uh, impacted your experience with your recovery?

Jamie: I think that's a very big question. I would have to trace back to the different communities in my life to reflect on. Each of their influence on my eating.

Mei: We can break it down a bit. How have your close friends impacted your recovery?

Jamie: I think because of my [00:18:00] recovery. I have moved through a couple batches of close friends, to be honest. Um, I am a female bodied individual and I would say 65% of my closest friends over the years have been female bodied individuals. And I think sometimes, I don't think it's any individual's fault, but.

Society, socializes female body individuals into this very unique group who are very mean to themselves and to each other. I think sometimes I wonder if it's just internalized misogyny like we are fundamentally.

Incapacitated [00:19:00] in terms of how, how we see our own bodies, how we see each other's bodies. I was having a conversation with my therapist, a physical therapist earlier today, and she said that I bet when it's a man and a woman walking together on the street and there is another woman coming, uh at them, the woman will notice and make judgements about the other woman's

physical appearance way before the man notices the those details, I think, I think there is some truth in that observation.

I have definitely found myself to feel bad when a female friend looked amazing. Especially if they look amazing in ways that I find myself lacking. And I have also been really triggered around [00:20:00] close friends who have a more relaxed attitude towards eating. I can also be triggered if they have a very rigid attitude towards eating.

Um. And also the comments that people can make about them, their own bodies or about my body. All those things can bring up a lot of complex emotions that just make my everyday experience taxing to the point that I won't be able to enjoy the interactions with a previously close friend anymore. And over the years, I found myself moving towards communities and friends who are.

More body positive, who are more, um, wellness conscious and who approach body sizes, health weight with this [00:21:00] holistic perspective in instead of like talking about the weight as a number, and we get in our head about this with this like perfectionist, um tendency, like it has to be above a certain, uh, number or below a certain number for us to feel good.

Um, yeah, I think that's about the close friend side of things.

Gillian: What about family, if you don't mind sharing.

Yeah. Well, that's. A different universe on its own. I think I grew up in an environment where

Jamie: Food is everywhere and food is a lot more than the fuel for your body. I think my, um, [00:22:00] for some. Years during my parents' childhood and definitely for their parents, for my grandparents' generation, they have experienced some level of food insecurity. And I think that historical context, um, made them like shaped.

A particular view about food in them, like they would say it's a terrible idea to have leftovers in your bowl. You're supposed to finish up, or, or your place, you're supposed to finish up everything. Otherwise it's immoral, it's evil to, uh, waste food. Um, and also going with that scarcity mindset is also that they use food as a gesture of kindness, of love and care. So you would always like the way they tell you they love you is constantly [00:23:00] asking whether you need more food, whether you are hungry, whether you want to get a bite of this or a taste of that, and it becomes this different language of communicating

emotions. Like when my mom wanted to apologize to me after having a, a verbal argument with me, she would try to offer something as extend an olive, um, to me and say like, do you want to try this?

I just made this soup. Um, or. After like a couple months of being away from home and I went back to visit, they would try to have like a big table of, different plates of different food to try to show that they put their heart into preparing the food. Thinking about your nutrition and your homecoming, um.

So that's my overall environment. [00:24:00] And then specifically, I think my mom has some kind of undiagnosed disordered eating. She growing up, I have heard a lot of comments from her, like. I've already had something that's very fatty from like my last meal. So this meal, even though this thing looks delicious, but I don't think I should have it, or she would comment on, um, oh, I need to walk a couple more rounds, uh, in this neighborhood because I just had a big meal.

Um, and she would comment on. The weight change in me, and it's not just her, my other family members, extended family members sometimes would do that too. Like they would pinch my cheek and said that I have this chubby cheeks, and they say, oh, it looks so cute on you. You must have gained some weight. As an adult, looking back, I can tell that they might just be [00:25:00] appreciating my cuteness, but.

Because there was this another, this other narrative about policing, especially female bodies, appearance. I internalized that as calling out something I did wrong or something problematic about me, like they would pinch my arm or like pet on my shoulder or pinch my face. All those gestures of affection, um.

Somehow were were interpreted by me as calling out my fatness, even though I wasn't necessarily a very big kid to begin with. Um.

Like even these days, me at this age going back home and spend time with my family, I can still have some tension around that. Sometimes I will get frustrated and say like, I'm, I want to skip [00:26:00] lunch today because I had a late uh, breakfast, or I am good on food and I don't want to be snacking right now.

But there is. A lot of misaligned priorities about food and uses of food, even between me and my family, I would say.

Mei: I am like nodding along and, and laughing at some things that you say, even though it's not really actually funny, but it's just because I relate to so

many things that you have mentioned. Um, yeah, it's, I have always found that for me culturally and with.

With my mom's side of the family specifically, it's always been conflicting messages when it comes [00:27:00] to food. Like food is how we show love. You should eat, don't waste food. Let's have a family gathering that centers food. But you're gaining weight. This will make you fat. Yeah, don't eat that.

Do you see what, what that person looks like? You should look more like that. Like it drives you mad. Like the, the, the messages that you receive don't make sense with each other.

Gillian: That must be really hard, like managing around your family. Is there anything that helps you navigate the that relationship?

Jamie: I think growing up, moving away, establishing a more stable sense of self helped a lot. Also acquire acquiring the skills of maybe just nonviolent communication. Being [00:28:00] able to tell them how I feel about food and share my recognition of about how their ways of treating food has impacted me fundamentally, there are people who love me, it's just their lenses are different than mine.

Um. Yeah. And a very non-linear process of communicating with them.

Mei: Going back to friends, are there ways that your social circles have supported you through recovery and been sources of strength and positivity throughout your journey?

Jamie: I am not completely out as someone, uh, in recovery from eating disorder to everyone in my life. So. [00:29:00] I think at this point, other than my healthcare providers, maybe only a couple friends and my partner, um, know about it and it took me a lot of. Courage and a lot of years of therapy targeting the shame and self blame related to those issues to be able to open up about that side of myself.

Um, but I'm specifically thinking about two instances, like when I told my partner that, oh, recently I've been feeling more stressed and I noticed this- this new batch of unwanted behaviors related to eating. And they would tell me, um, that they think[00:30:00]

it's reasonable that they would love me regardless, that they offer to support in ways that. I will need, they're not as educated about ED as I am, but I think the

sense of acceptance and support, um, mattered a lot to me. And I have a; I have two other very close female friends who also have eating disorders and in our regular check-ins with each other. Sometimes we would say like, how are you? Um, how's your relationship with your body these days? How's your relationship with, uh, food these days? And we will give each other little reminders. Like when, um, after a long hike, I would just want to grab takeout and eat in a car.

My friend who's next to me would remind me too take a pause and say like, [00:31:00] are you really hungry? How are you treating your body right now? We want to make sure that your body feels, um, the love it deserves, basically. Um, I think these are the, the two relationships in my life that really supported my dis um, my recovery.

Mei: Yeah. I think, um, what, what you said brings to mind this idea that a lot of anxiety disorders, I know for a fact, but, and eating disorders thrive off of the internalization of your thoughts and, and keeping everything inwards and never, never saying what you're thinking out loud. Mm-hmm. And of course, it can swing in the opposite direction of people with eating disorders coming together and hyping each other up and, and bouncing off unhealthy ideologies off of each other. Yeah. But for the most part, I think it is important to [00:32:00] seek support outwardly. Say your thoughts out loud. Get them on paper, whatever it is.

Yeah. At least that's what my psychologist tells me. Mm-hmm. These disorders, they, they thrive off of you not sharing.

Jamie: Yeah. Off your shame. Uh, yes.

Mei: Thinking that you

Jamie: did not tell other people

Gillian: Yeah.

Jamie: About this. You know, when you were saying the discourses online, I was thinking about. All those fads and like K-pop diets, like you're, you, what do you eat every day?

And they have this like 28 days, sometimes 14 days that how to help you lose how many pounds in, uh, in how many days. And, and they eat such an atrociously little amount of food, which. Like I still have an emotional reaction

every time I see those [00:33:00] things pop up on my social media feeds and I am not proud to say that I have followed them when I was younger many times.

And now that I understand how. Uh, my body works and how eating and cortisol level and your dopamine and how all of that system, uh, works together. I am aware that those things fundamentally doesn't work and they're going to harm my, my body sometimes in irreversible ways. Um, and it's. I can also tell that there is a small part of my brain that's so excited at that promise that like, if I can just get that to work, I would feel like I've accomplished something so big.

I would be so proud of myself. That little [00:34:00] girl in me who was once very hurt, who was bullied for whatever reason, uh, related to body image would, would be very happy. But then I would have to. Tell myself or talk to a therapist or a friend and have new, new messages in overwhelming amounts to combat that ed voice in me saying like you are more than a number on the scale. You are your whole self and how you feel in your body, how you function as this whole being matters a lot. And also it is fundamentally wrong to think that there is this equation of. Thinness or you, your body looks a certain way, means that you are successful, you're desirable, you're amazing.

You're all those positive descriptors that is [00:35:00] artificial, that is constructed and arbitrary to begin with. And I am still very new on this journey, but I have been making efforts to. Like counteract that voice. Like people would say that if your face or your legs or any part of your body looks good when it's like this and mine doesn't, I will say like, I am proud that my cheeks like are like this.

And sometimes it works, sometimes not as much. But that's something that I have I that I want to do more.

Gillian: Yeah, I used to do that too, and still, still do, but I think at this point it's, I just do it automatically. And I also make sure to stay [00:36:00] away now from those spaces online because I know. That, or I'm scared that I could be triggered so easily and I don't want to go back to that life.

Jamie: Yeah.

Gillian: And just the difference in my happiness and able to get through the day, it's just, it's so different and so much better now that I, I have no desire to go to those spaces and. I think you've, you've come so far. It's so great. In what

ways has your community participation helped you shift your focus from appearance or weight to other parts of your identity or life goals?

Jamie: I think this might be a very philosophical point. It's basically being in those communities and [00:37:00] having interactions with people makes me aware that there's so much. Outside of my head, outside of my shell, and there's so much color and brilliance and abundance out there. And when I am immersing myself in those experiences and in those communities, I am less fixated on.

I'll give you an example. Like if I'm actually doing some kind of warmup, uh, game with my theater group in that moment, I will not care about whether my arms look fat and I will just be enjoying that my teammates arms are against mine and we're trying to like hold hands or do something silly together.

And I think fundamentally [00:38:00] that kind of sensation, stimulation, pleasure, sense of connectedness with people brings me out of my little, um, corner in my head, I think. In me. That's how the mechanism works.

Gillian: I love that. I know. Yeah. So that said, what advice would you give someone trying to find or build a supportive community? During their recovery from an eating disorder?

Jamie: I would say write it out. Having physical reminders is better than only have them in your mind because the ed voice can be really strong and stubborn and it has been there for a long time. [00:39:00] Um.

And then it's exactly like other types of community building. You have to know yourself, what you're looking for, what you like and don't like, and then try to build connections with people who support those values.

And I, I also just want to acknowledge that eating disorder is one of those conditions where there are a million myths surrounding it. Um, my dietician recommended me to read a book called Sick Enough. That's like this guidebook for, uh, ed patients and their loved ones. [00:40:00] I, I really like the name of that book because I think as a society we have a lot of rigid associations of what people with eating disorders should look like.

And, um, we trivialize a lot of disordered eating behaviors because we think those are not as important or, um, or because the beauty and gender and all those norms are just so pervasive that it's almost normalized that. I've once been

on a date and somebody commented saying that I've never seen a woman eating the way you do.

And to this day, I don't fully know what they mean by this. But I think there's a lot of information hidden in that one comment. Recovery and, and community building [00:41:00] just requires a lot of patience and time to filter out the noises, the unhelpful, uh, sounds and , and information , and fundamentally to reclaim a, a love for yourself. I think at the core, that's what it is. It's like you have to care about yourself and how you feel more than that imagined audience and how they see you.

It got really heavy, I think.

Mei: I'm speechless. No, because like most things you say I am. I am speechless as well. Yeah, exactly. Yeah. You're saying straight up bars,

Jamie: I, I think I have, I, and I know a lot of people, uh, have had this experience too, like with being [00:42:00] so hurt by those norms and expectations and critiques first externally and then internally for so many years.

And I at some point started to, uh, educate myself. You know, there was even a point that I felt like, do I even really want to correct this? Does this make me this unique cool person? And then I realized this is probably one of the most common undiagnosed condition there ever is. Um. And also as I, I think as I age and get older and I have more responsibilities in me, and I recognize that I have passions that are more deserving of my time and energy, I just intuitively don't want to, to [00:43:00] fight this never ending and never winning battle with my own body. I want to embrace all those flavors and potential out there.

Gillian: Yeah, exactly. Like I wanna live my life. Yep. Not just be alive.

Mei: I, I hope you know I have. I have gotten a lot out of this conversation today and I really appreciate your vulnerability.

Your thought-provoking conversation and, uh, just thank you so much for being an incredible guest today.

Jamie: Of course. Thank you for having me.

Gillian: I second that. It's been amazing. It's been such a great conversation.

If you or someone you know is struggling with signs of an eating disorder, please call the National [00:44:00] Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders Hotline at 888-375-7767 or check out the resources on www.nationaleatingdisorders.org.

If you would like to contact us, you can email us at stay_tuned@umassmed.edu and check out the Transitions ACR website at UMassmed.edu/transitionsacr, thanks for being here, and be sure to stay tuned for next time.