

**RECOVERY SESSION:**

# RECOGNIZING THE EATING DISORDER VOICE

---



## DISCLAIMER

This resource is a living document and is open to change. It was created by students from within the Body Brave community and may not be fully representative of the full spectrum of disordered eating experiences. If you have any suggestions to improve this resource or lived experiences that you don't see represented here, please email us at [info@bodybrave.ca](mailto:info@bodybrave.ca).

## *The 'Eating Disorder' Voice*

In eating disorder treatment and recovery, people sometimes refer to the eating disorder's 'voice'. The ED 'voice' is something that professionals talk about and folks struggling sometimes recognize in their own experience. The idea of an 'eating disorder voice' can be scary or confusing for some people, especially at first if folks are worried that they are "hearing voices" or experiencing psychosis. But the ED voice is not the same as audio hallucinations (though they can co-exist!). When we refer to the ED voice, we are actually referring to the set of thoughts and beliefs that support the eating disorder – it is the rationale or arguments that support disordered thoughts or behaviour despite knowing the harmful realities of such thoughts and behaviours, it can be consistent dialogue or self-talk that someone with an eating disorder might experience.

## WHAT DOES THE ED VOICE SOUND LIKE?

In research the ED voice has been described as having a powerful, negative and almost almighty nature. Folks who have talked about experiencing the ED voice have talked about feelings of entrapment and defeat are commonly experienced in response to it and feeling ambivalent towards it, like there is nothing they can do to help quiet that voice.

## KINDS OF 'ED VOICES'

Multiple research studies have found folks with eating disorders often describe an internal 'voice' of their disorder (Broussard, 2005; Tierney & Fox, 2010). For others, disordered eating is represented not so much by a voice, but rather a discrete component of personality: a kind of 'sub-self' which is composed of 'needs, feelings, perceptions, and behavior that has been dissociated from the patient's total self-experience' (Sands, 1991, p.37). There are more ways this 'voice' can be conceptualized with some describing it as a metaphorical experience (Graham et al., 2019) and others suggesting that it reflects the multi-voiced nature of human personality (Pugh & Waller, 2018). Basically, the ED voice or ED self can be experienced a bit differently by everyone.

A recent and popular way of understanding this voice is as a hostile internal dialogue (i.e. second- or third-person commentary) related to eating, shape, weight, and the person's implications for self-worth (Pugh, 2016).

## WHY DO I HEAR IT?

For a lot of folks, the ED voice may be a result of the learned negative thoughts and coping mechanisms that contribute to their disordered eating. You repeatedly say negative things about yourself, or reason that something bad has happened to you because of your weight or shape, or attribute values to your body or eating disorder habits, and suddenly, there's an entire separate part of you that's automatically thinking these thoughts. In contrast, your 'non ED self' or your 'real self' does not think eating disordered thoughts – in fact, your real self knows your eating disordered thoughts are irrational, false, and potentially very dangerous. But your eating disorder self will insist distorted thoughts are true until you are compelled to act on them.

Your eating disorder self/voice will take any situation and turn it into an opportunity to tell you eating disordered statements and push you to use disordered behaviours. It is self-destructive, self-critical, and – at times – so powerful that you do react and use behaviours, even though your real self knows that behaviours aren't helpful.

---

Broussard, B.B. (2005). Women's experiences of bulimia nervosa. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 49, 43–50.

Graham, M., Tierney, S., Chisholm, A. & Fox, J. (2019). Perceptions of the 'anorexic voice': A qualitative study of healthcare professionals. *Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cpp.2393>.

Pugh, M. (2016). The internal 'anorexic voice': A feature or fallacy of eating disorders? *Advances in Eating Disorders: Theory, Research and Practice*, 4, 75–83.

Pugh, M. & Waller, G. (2017). Understanding the 'anorexic voice' in anorexia nervosa. *Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy*, 24, 670–676.

Sands, S. (1991). Bulimia, dissociation, and empathy: A self-psychological view. In C.L. Johnson (Ed.) *Psychodynamic treatment of anorexia nervosa and bulimia* (pp.34–50). New York: Guilford Press.

Tierney, S. & Fox, J.R. (2010). Living with the anorexic voice: A thematic analysis. *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, 83, 243–254.

## STAGES OF THE ED VOICE

### STAGE

### DESCRIPTION

#### 1) DIRECTION

The ED voice initially fulfills positive functions. The voice may be reassuring, offering companionship, and regulating distress, particularly during the early stages of illness. Positive voice appraisals become established, though compliance with the voice is required and so the person struggling's motivation to change the relationship is often low. Disordered symptoms emerge.

#### 2) DOMINATION

The ED voice is experienced as increasingly hostile and controlling. Relating to the voice is characterized by dominance and coercion. Internal dialogues are increasingly imbalanced and hierarchical. Realizations about the negative intent and relative power of voice emerge. ED symptoms escalate, although motivation to change may remain limited.

#### 3) DISEMPOWERMENT

The voice is experienced as punitive and overwhelming, generating submissive and defeated responses. The voice dominates internal dialogues and undermines self-esteem and self-efficacy. Individuals are motivated to change their relationship with the voice but may doubt their ability to do so. ED symptoms may continue to escalate.

#### 4) DEFIANCE

Individuals begin to oppose the eating disorder voice. Power differentials begin to shift, generating intense ED voice 'counter-attacks'. Internal dialogues are conflictual and polarized. ED symptoms may begin to improve, although setbacks and periods of disempowerment still occur (see stage three).

#### 5) DELIVERANCE

Power differentials now favour the individual rather than the eating disorder voice. Individuals are better able to 'step back' and decentre from the ED self/voice. Internal dialogues are less conflicted and more harmonious. More adaptive internal voices begin to emerge. ED symptoms continue to improve.

#### 6) DISQUIET

The eating disorder voice fades over time or is considerably less powerful. Recovery from disordered eating/ED may be accompanied by feelings of anxiety or loss: individuals are vigilant to the voice returning or miss its positive aspects. Intermittent 'skirmishes' with the ED self/voice are not uncommon.

## **TIPS FOR ADDRESS THE ED VOICE**

### ***Building Awareness***

In order to confront the fears, deceptions, and insecurities the eating disorder voice wants you to believe, first you need to recognize what this voice sounds like as it creeps into your mind. Whenever you feel a portion of your brain start to mentally detach itself and contradict the rational thoughts you know to be true, chances are, the eating disorder voice has intercepted and taken over.

Spend some time just working to develop an awareness of the voice when you hear it. What is the tone of voice? Positive or negative? When do these eating disorder thoughts happen? For example, does this inner voice start talking before mealtimes, after a negative experience, or when you see yourself in the mirror. Start with spending time just working on recognizing the ED voice when you can.

### ***Building Separation***

If it feels like a potentially useful tool, working to build separation between the ED voice/self and your true voice/self can be helpful for working towards silencing the ED voice. You can start by thinking/talking about the ED voice as a separate entity: "The ED voice is telling me to \_\_\_\_\_".

When we do this we bring what the ED voice is "saying" into greater awareness, allowing us to challenge the "truth" of its claims, and examine these claims in light of the person's beliefs, values, hopes, and dreams. It also lessens the self-blame people may feel because it puts the blame on the problem rather than on the person. In contrast, if the voice is seen as part of the person, then fighting the eating disorder voice is like fighting oneself.

**"ALL THESE YEARS I WAS UNDER THE IMPRESSION THAT MY INTRUSIVE THOUGHTS WERE JUST FACTS, IT NEVER OCCURRED TO ME TO EVEN QUESTION THEM."**

**- ANNIE SEGARRA**

@bodybravecanada

## RECOVERY SESSION: RECOGNIZING THE EATING DISORDER VOICE



### *Building Identity*

As you fall deeper into your eating disorder, your eating disorder voice gets much louder, while your own authentic voice gets smaller. You start focusing on the things your eating disorder wants you to, and what you really care about starts to fall away. At some point, you've probably felt like all you are is your eating disorder. But distinguishing between your eating disorder voice and your true voice will help you realize that you have your own identity. You care about more than what your eating disorder says you do. You are your own person, and when you are ready to recover, you won't be an "empty shell." Rather, you can return to yourself, your true self.

This can be hard, but working to develop a sense of self outside of your disordered eating is incredibly important. Explore books, movies, hobbies, ideas that make true you happy!

### *Building A Voice of Reason*

There are many ways to talk back to your eating disorder voice. You can gently reason with it, or become furious with it. Either way, talking back to your eating disorder voice helps you poke holes in your eating disorder's logic, and strengthen your healthy self voice. Try a few different ways of 'talking back' to feel what works best for you: empathy, anger, gentleness, rage, etc!

That voice in your head? The one that tells you to restrict calories, track your food, and hyper-analyze your body in the mirror each day?

That voice is *not* yours. It's the internalization of a harmful, thin-obsessed culture that aims to keep us small (mentally and physically).

Your voice is in there, too. It's much stronger.  
You just have to find it again.

Natalie Colantuono | @softeningnutrition

**JUST  
BECAUSE  
YOU KNOW  
A STORY  
BY HEART  
DOESN'T  
MEAN IT'S  
TRUE.**

**-RUTHIE LINDSEY, "THERE I AM"**

@BODYBRAVECANADA

## RECOVERY SESSION: RECOGNIZING THE EATING DISORDER VOICE



★ *Take some time to reflect:*

***Do you ever experience an eating disorder voice? What does it sound like? What does it say? When do you hear it most or least?***

[illegible]

## **AFFIRMATIONS**

"The voice of my eating disorder does not represent how I feel about myself."

"I love myself enough to heal from my eating disorder. I am worth it."

"The real me loves and accepts myself; those bullies in my head are just my anxieties- they are not me."

"I release all destructive thoughts and patterns which do not serve me anymore."

"My thoughts are thoughts, that does not mean that they are facts."

"Just because thoughts are automatic for me does not make them true."

**IF YOU CAN'T SAY  
SOMETHING NICE  
ABOUT YOURSELF,  
PRACTICE.**

@bodybravecanada

## **FURTHER LEARNING**

### **Podcasts**

[Belle: The Eating Disorder Voice Inside - Other People's Problems](#)

[The Eating Disorder Voice with Esther Rubinstein](#)

[What it Can Really Be like Living with an Eating Disorder Voice](#)

[Healing, Recovery Tools, and Finding Your Real Voice](#)

### **Reading**

[The Eating Disorder Voice - ED Resource Catalogue](#)

[Whose Voice Are You Listening To? - Walden](#)

[Eating Disorder Self vs. Healthy Self: Find Your True Inner Voice Again](#)

[My Abusive Eating Disorder](#)

[How To Tell If It's Your Eating Disorder Talking To You](#)

[Challenging Eating Disorder Thoughts \(PDF\)](#)

[Speaking Back to the Anorexic Voice](#)

[Overcoming Negative Thoughts From Eating Disorders](#)

SO THE QUESTION IS, WHICH BOULDER  
ARE YOU GOING TO CHOOSE TO ROLL?  
THE 'MUST LOSE WEIGHT' BOULDER OR  
THE 'FUCK YOU I WILL BOLDLY,  
DEFIANTLY ACCEPT THE BODY I'VE GOT  
AND LIVE IN IT' BOULDER?"

- KATE HARDING