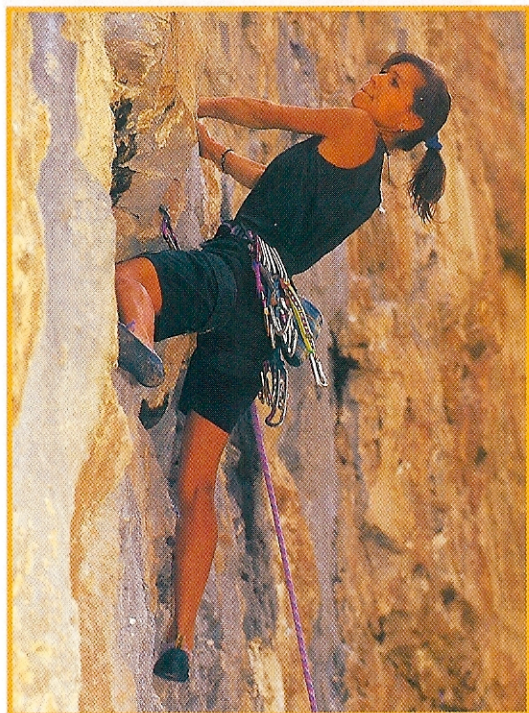


# perspective

## Between chaos

## and clarity

What it's **really** like to live with an eating disorder



The author on the rocks.

BY STEPHANIE FORTE

**O**pening day at Snowmass. Blue Colorado sky, 18 inches of fresh. I get off the lift, strap into my bindings, and feel my stomach tighten from nerves. Looking down the fall line at the untracked powder, I say a small prayer for recollection: it's been seven months off snow.

Point the nose downhill, then it happens, without thought. Knees sink into my board, shoulders lead, the turns link through the powder. Anxiety is just a vague memory, replaced by euphoria.

Muscle memory never fails to amaze me. Each spring as the snow melts, I am sure I will be

climbing 5.2, but the muscles remember the technique I spent the previous season working on. The mind can be trained in the same manner. By simply reinforcing a certain thought pattern over a long period of time, you can be sure your mind will revert to that thought process when it receives the signals. At 12 years old I began to experiment with mental discipline. Without uttering a word, I repeated affirmations I believed would give me peace of mind and control of my life. But rather than leading me down the road to enlightenment, the process became a starting point for a lifelong battle with an eating disorder.

In our small subculture of climbing we have published articles hinting at the fact that eating disorders may be a problem in our sport. They are. Having been

anorexic and bulimic for 17 years, I feel I can call myself an expert on the subject. More than half my life and most of my energy have been devoted to this disease. We are so entwined in one another that sometimes I don't know where I end and it begins. It has been my security blanket, a source of power, and my worst enemy, and just might take me to an early grave.

I have seen the behavior and signs in all types of climbers, in many places. This disease holds no prejudice to style of climbing, age, or gender. It affects people from the Yosemite climber who indulged in bulimic behavior before it had a name, to the young Hueco boulderer who travels with crash pad and scale. The sunken cheeks of many sport climbers are unnatural. This problem may not be epidemic, but if we lose one climber to this disease, that is one too many.

Two years ago the world of gymnastics mourned the death of the elite gymnast Christy Henrich, who died from complications of anorexia. Climbing, like gymnastics, requires a mindset that can make one susceptible. It is in climbers' natures to thrive on personal victory, the thrill of going beyond our limits. *Stay calm while you run it out on some dicey placement. Maintain your focus top-ping out on a high boulder problem.* We require discipline to perform hard moves. This sense of control, mind over body, is similar to what an anorexic/bulimic experiences.

And it is addictive. While I am sure that some people have flirted with this behavior and simply walked away, for others it is not so simple. You can gain back the weight, you can stop the bingeing — but the emotional aftermath lingers on. Someone you know may seem to have it all together, but be dying inside. Strange as it may seem, the thoughts I will put before you may be lurking in the mind of your friend, spouse, child, or climbing partner. It is important that these emotions

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and thoughts are understood. Anorexics and bulimics are masters of masquerade. For years, and still to this day, many of my friends and family have had no idea of my problem. Those who suspected never realized the magnitude.

When I discovered rock climbing, I temporarily stopped worrying about weight or food. I was in love. Climbing gave me a sense of confidence I had never experienced. Soon enough, though, at the crags and gym I began to feel embarrassed and humiliated at the way I looked. In my mind, those who climbed harder than I were all also leaner. Hitting the depths of the whole illness, I starved and exercised until I lost 20 pounds, convinced this was the way to finally climb 5.12. My normal standard was about 5.11a. I finally did flash one .12a — only to spend months unable to climb, with injured rotator cuffs, fingers, and a bad hip. Without food, I couldn't heal. My body gave me an ultimatum: starve and be the thinnest woman in climbing who can only belay, or eat and climb hard.

Here is the state of mind that sends you to a place like this. *You are fat ... don't eat. You are ugly ... don't eat. Food is the enemy, starvation is good. Keep running, you are not hungry.* The reflection in the mirror is not your own. I have no recollection of ever being thin, even though the scale has read 75 pounds and I could feel most of my bones. Everyone in the world is thinner than you, and at the same time they are all fat because they eat.

Your very being becomes defined by the numbers on the scale. I have spent days in bed missing school and work, devastated about gaining one pound. Your self-esteem vanishes, making it almost impossible to have success in other areas of life, such as career, academics, and relationships. Your reward for losing a pound is the same as your punishment for gaining: no food. Life becomes ruled by rituals of when and what to eat. Social events that include food are taboo. There have been months when I would not go out socially because I was so shamed by my appearance. The whole center of your being is your goal weight, only you are no longer sure why. You run hours in the rain, snow, heat, in the middle of the night. Ten miles on a rest day, eight on a climbing day.

Tired and worn from starving, you are eventually consumed with thoughts of all the food you have deprived yourself of. You eat, and then the guilt attached to food is so overbearing that laxatives, puking, and more excessive exercise seem your only alternatives.

Binges first only happen when you're alone, every detail carefully planned. Then they esca-

late, get out of control, start to happen daily, several times a day. Because you are eating, you will gain some weight. People may comment on how healthy you look. But you know better, healthy means fat... so you purge more. You know what you are doing is wrong, but you can't stop. The food no longer gives you the comfort it used to. Your teeth begin to rot, your hair is brittle, your skin looks gray, and eyes bloodshot. Lying in the darkness, you clutch your aching stomach and wonder why you haven't had a heart attack yet, and if there will ever be an end to this. You hate being so shallow as to have a problem with food when people are dying from AIDS and breast cancer.

Everything you do becomes compulsive: studying, cleaning, training, even cooking. These distractions occupy your time and busy your mind. Life must be routine, because in your mind it is routine that keeps you in control and thin. For years I spent hours organizing my clothes by color and alphabetizing my shoes by manufacturer. Everything in life needed to be in perfect order.

You may be thinking, this girl needs a strong dose of Prozac and a few hundred hours in therapy. But these thoughts are not only mine, but those of many others, some of whom are climbers. Contrary to popular belief, this problem is not about vanity, but self-worth. Learning to respect yourself takes more strength than climbing 5.14 ever will.

If you have a problem, it may not just go away after your next redpoint, comp, or tomorrow. Seek help. As a teenager I used to imagine my future, and never did I think I would still have this problem.

Since I hit that low point, I've been struggling to retrain my mind to deny the lies I told it for years. There are still days at Rifle when I look at everyone else, and feel repulsed by my body. The alarm sometimes still goes off when I read of a female climber my height who weighs less than I, even if she's 15 years my junior. I remind myself that I now climb a grade and a half harder than when I was starving, and am not ridden with injury. I have tried to take possession of my life again, no longer letting it be dictated by meaningless rituals.

I think about what it will be like to finally be able to stop fighting. It will be like riding in the untouched powder on a serene winter day. Absolutely free.

I'm getting there. In the closet, in a huge pile, is a crazy clump of shoes.

*Stephanie Forte, 29, lives in Carbondale, Colorado, where she works as a photographer's assistant.*