

“You Have Kept Me Alive”

FROM EATING DISORDERS AND BINGE-DRINKING
TO VIBRANT HEALTH

by Victoria Hartmann

I wanted to share my story with you about my “aha” moment.

My name is Victoria. I am 29 years old, and I live in Austin, Texas. I am one and a half years sober and recovered from anorexia and harmful eating disorder behaviors. I have been WFPB, SOS-free during these past one and a half years, and I feel so incredible, happy, energetic, and FREE!

As I entered high school at age 14, I restricted calories heavily. I was consuming only about 1,000 calories a day. I would only eat packaged foods with labels so I could count calories. I called myself vegan at this time, too. I ate a lot of vegan junk-food protein bars, frozen prepared meals, packaged popcorn and chips, etc. And I was very OCD with this routine. I would come home after school and go on very long walks or runs until my muscles hurt. At dinnertime, I would tell my family I’d already eaten. I would skip social gatherings out of fear that food would be present.

I continued this dangerous behavior and started restricting calories further, down to 800 per day, then to 500 per day. Sometimes I wouldn’t eat anything all day. People saw how much weight I was losing and how sickly I looked and reached out to me with their fears and concern. I came up with excuse after excuse, and I did this for years.

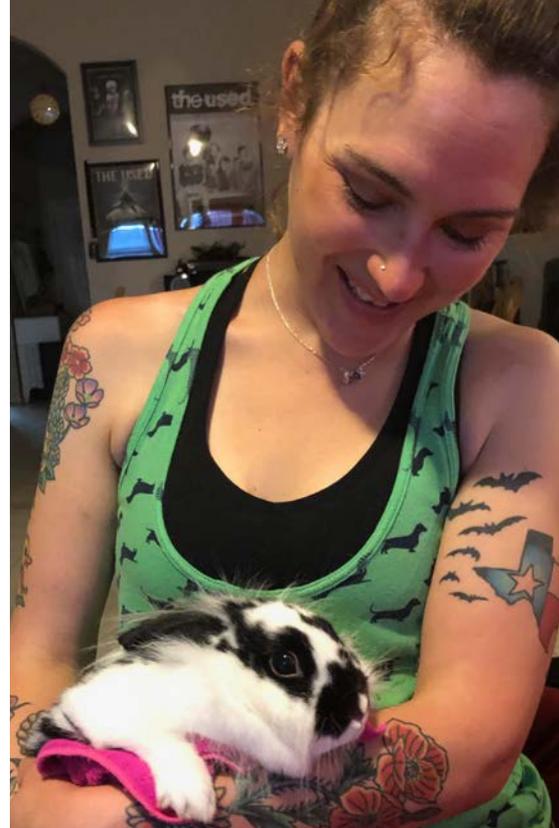
When I reached college, I would only eat on weekends. This was to reward myself with a meal out, to eat dinner with my family, etc. I felt terrible throughout the week without any nourishment, but I kept myself motivated knowing that I would eat on the weekends. The weekend-rewarding behavior resulted in binge-eating until I was sick to my stomach and bloated. Then the following Monday I would work out all day, telling myself I wouldn’t eat until the following weekend. It was a vicious cycle.

At age 25, I moved into my own place, and that was when the alcohol kicked in. I used alcohol as a way to make me hungry; I felt less anxious about food when I was under the influence. The binge-drinking was fun until the next day. This was my pattern: anxiety, motivation, reward, self-hatred.

I had my “aha” moment at 27 when my mom told me that I wasn’t fun to be around anymore, and that was the honest truth I needed to hear. My mom is my best friend, and hearing her say that broke my heart. I quit drinking that day and knew I had to work on my eating habits to get healthy.

I stumbled into the whole-food, plant-based movement while on lockdown during COVID. I have always been interested in science and data along with health and fitness. My mom had always enjoyed looking at cookbooks and recipe magazines, and I remembered looking through the vegetarian and vegan magazines even as a child. So, I started my research by seeking out recipes. I started buying fruits and veggies in abundance. I threw away everything in my freezer and fridge that had a label. I noticed that lots of vegan cooking blogs included “oil-free” headlines, so I started by cutting out oil. Then I cut out sugar, next salt. All of a sudden, with practice, I learned how easy it was to cook—which was great, especially since eating out wasn’t an option at the time. Along the way, I found Jane Esselstyn on YouTube, Dillon Holmes from Well Your World, Chuck Carroll from the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, and Rip Esselstyn’s PlantStrong podcast, and I became a huge fan of them all. I learned about calorie density, the importance of whole foods, and so much more.

I had wanted the obsessive calorie-counting to finally end, and I had wanted to truly nourish my body with fruits, vegetables, legumes, and healthy starches. And it



worked! I felt more and more amazing every day. I started building muscle, my skin was glowing, and my hair and nails were growing. When I had the eating disorder and was binge-drinking, I was very anxious, was irritable, and had very little patience, but with my new lifestyle, my mood changed to being always stable—and happy!

COVID really was a gift to me in the sense that it gave me the time to focus on my health and build back my relationship with my family. My family and friends are proud of me for healing myself, and I am continuing to educate myself every day on nutrition and fitness. I will continue this lifestyle for the rest of my life, and although I know it can be tricky, I plan to try to spread the word as much as possible. My next goals are to get a second degree in plant-based nutrition or lifestyle medicine. I would love to work with families and the elderly and to guide them so they can see the light.

I also found the National Health Association through the WFPB community. *Health Science* was a nice little reminder of those happy childhood memories of mom looking through the vegetarian and vegan magazines years ago. I was very excited to join the NHA’s membership in the spring of 2020. This truly is a special organization!

From the bottom of my heart, I thank the NHA and the entire WFPB community. You have kept me alive. 🌱