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Dr Nicola Davies, co-author of the Eating Disorder Recovery Handbook, provides advice on how to recover from eating disorders the natural way.

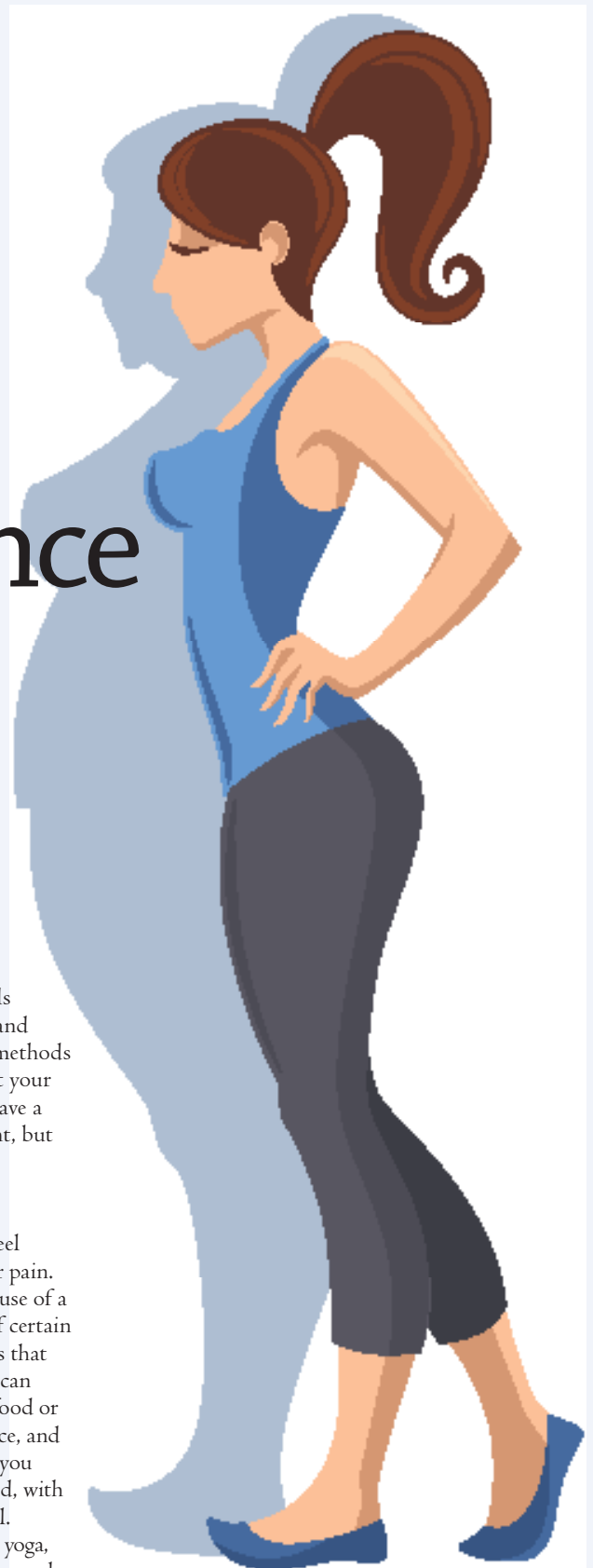
Natural balance

EATING disorders are complex conditions that develop from deeply ingrained emotional and psychological issues. At times, people who suffer from anorexia, bulimia, binge eating, or other forms of disordered eating take years before admitting they need help. Then, treatment can be a long and intimidating process, with some sufferers going back and forth between doctors, psychiatrists, physical therapists, dietitians, and counsellors. Although health professionals are necessary for prescribing medication and psychotherapy services, natural recovery methods can be embarked on independently and at your own pace; they can also help those who have a difficult relationship with food and weight, but not a full-blown eating disorder.

Relaxation training

This refers to any activity that helps you feel calmer and reduces stress, anxiety, anger or pain. People often develop eating disorders because of a desire to have control over the outcomes of certain situations, and the overwhelming emotions that come with this desire for control. Anxiety can occur frequently, especially when around food or discussions that relate to weight, appearance, and body image. Relaxation exercises can help you feel more at peace with yourself and, indeed, with situations currently outside of your control.

Examples are meditation, deep breathing, yoga, tai chi, mindfulness techniques, body massage, and



biofeedback (bringing your awareness and gaining control over automatic bodily functions with the aid of monitoring instruments). Relaxation training can also be as simple as doing a few minutes of muscle movements that alternate between tension and relaxation, forming mental visualisations of a peaceful image, or repeating positive phrases to yourself.

Animal-assisted therapy

Spending time with a pet or therapy animal can calm people with eating disorders. Animals do not judge people; instead, they give undivided attention, affection, and trust. Being around animals can make us feel more grounded and relaxed, which are integral components to eating disorder recovery.

There are different kinds of therapy animals and those in recovery can choose one that suits their comfort and lifestyle. If you like to stay at home, choose a cat or a dog. Therapy dogs are trained to read human body language and provide the care needed by their owner. A study has shown that, within the first few minutes of interacting with a dog, people reportedly experience reduced stress, blood pressure, and feelings of isolation. A cat's purring (with a frequency between 25 Hz and 150 Hz) has also been associated with muscle and bone healing, which is fundamental for patients with bone density loss and muscle atrophy (partial or complete wasting away of muscles). If you like to be outdoors, you can work with horses or dolphins. In equine therapy, you learn how to groom, feed and lead horses while walking. Horses are said to mirror our behaviour, which can help you acknowledge your own emotional and mental state. Research also shows that spending time with dolphins can reduce feelings of depression, obsessive tendencies, and somatisation (when our psychological issues become physical).

Mirror therapy

Looking in the mirror excessively and being dissatisfied with the reflection can exacerbate eating disorders and hinder recovery. However, mirrors can also be used to confront the condition head on. Through mirror exposure, people with eating disorders can learn to stop the automatic negative thoughts that enter their mind when they view themselves, and practise observing their reflection using objective, non-judgemental terms. By exposing yourself to your reflection, you

also become exposed to your anxiety, which you can learn to manage, rather than avoid. If anxiety related to body image is avoided, the key problem remains unresolved, hindering long-term recovery.

Mirror therapy does not work for everyone, however, and in some cases, can actually threaten recovery, so only use this option under the guidance of a trained counsellor.

Writing therapy

Putting complex thoughts and feelings to paper can be cathartic, and a positive outlet to express yourself. You can write about your emotions, thoughts, experiences, and notable reactions for the day. You can also journal about your positive dietary and physical activity changes, and any difficulties with these changes. It can be useful to monitor recovery goals in writing to make it more 'real.' For some people, writing tasks such as composing a love letter addressed to themselves or putting together a list of self-affirming statements is effective. These tasks give you a better perspective of your current situation and the direction you want your life to take. Some people prefer to write poems or songs. Whichever format you prefer your writing to take, what is important is to dedicate time for introspection and expressing your thoughts and feelings on paper.

Yoga practice

At the beginning of recovery, the focus is to stabilise the nutrition and physical wellbeing of a person affected by an eating disorder, and so you may need to temporarily refrain from doing any form of exercise. Eventually, physical activity needs to be reintegrated as part of achieving holistic health and wellbeing. It can be helpful for recovery to choose exercises that promote self-awareness and relaxation for the mind and body, such as yoga. Yoga is non-competitive and encourages you to take movements slowly, listen to and be patient with your body, and focus on and enjoy the moment. Research shows that practising yoga can reduce eating disorder symptoms and food preoccupation. It also improves muscle strength, core strength, and balance. During a yoga session, there are no machines that count calories, which can often create pressure on people struggling with an eating disorder. ✨

Research shows that animals can bring out a sense of calm, cooperation, self-awareness, and self-control in people with eating disorders.