

# A Doctor, A Director, and A Friend of ED

BY KIMBERLY DENNIS, MD



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Welcome to my first “Food Fight” column for *It’s All in the Journey*. In future columns I’ll discuss in detail various topics that explore eating disorders, from diagnosis and treatment

to lifelong recovery. This column will serve as a forum for me to share with you my experience, strength and hope both as a medical professional and a member of the recovery community. Additionally, it will provide a space for me to answer questions you may have regarding your own journey in recovery.

For my first column, I wanted to give you, the reader, an opportunity to get to know me. I am a board certified psychiatrist, trained at the University of Chicago, who specializes in treating addictions and eating disorders. I currently serve as the medical director at Timberline Knolls, a residential treatment center where I am blessed to work with adolescent girls and women suffering from eating disorders, substance abuse and co-occurring disorders. I also maintain a private practice in downtown Chicago.

My experience and knowledge of eating disorders and substance abuse isn’t limited just to my academic and clinical experience – I have a personal, experience and knowledge of the recovery process as a woman in recovery from an eating disorder and alcoholism. Growing up I was an overachiever, as are most girls and young women with eating disorders. I excelled in sports and in the classroom, an all-state, 3-sport MVP athlete earning valedictorian of my high school class. Although I had some typical adolescent concerns with body changes in high school, it wasn’t until my first year of college that I began my fight with food. I stumbled across purging in my first year of college, unintentionally, and crossed over the “line” into addiction and eating for oblivion shortly thereafter. It was also in my first year that I re-discovered alcohol (alcohol colored my childhood as my father suffered and died from alcoholism at the age of 46).

At the height of my food illness, I was bingeing and purging as many as 15 times per day and spending more than \$1,500 a month on food. When I recognized earlier on that I needed help, it wasn’t readily accessible and I didn’t know where to find it. I remember going to the university clinic, revealing my violent relationship with food and desperately hoping to receive some sort of treatment. I was told that my illness wasn’t too serious and was sent on my way. It wasn’t until my 3rd year of

medical school that I finally began to receive the treatment needed to begin my recovery. It was then that I also started understanding that my eating disorder, like alcoholism, is a disease, not a choice and not my fault. Recovery, on the other hand, became a choice for me with the medical, spiritual and emotional support I was receiving by the grace of God.

I slowly began to learn that I didn’t so much have a problem with food, I had a problem with living. The disease had little to do with food (although it was the most prominent symptom) and lasting recovery would be the result of identifying and healing from the underlying causes and conditions – emotional and spiritual wounds such as unhealed trauma, distorted beliefs in my relationship with a higher power, myself and others. All aspects of my being – spiritual, physical and emotional – had to be treated. Just treating the symptoms and not the disease would be a short-lived solution.

I often use the analogy of treating pneumonia with antibiotics with the treatment of eating disorders. When a doctor prescribes antibiotics, she stresses the importance of taking the entire course of the medication, even if you are feeling better after a day or two. Eating disorders are no different. It’s critical to treat the disease and the entire person, not just her symptoms with food or weight. And that’s what I stress to the residents at Timberline Knolls – that they are not uni-dimensional – they are multi-faceted women who deserve to live in health, abundance, and happiness. By addressing all of aspects of the disease, we can more effectively treat eating disorders and facilitate life-long recovery.

As medical director at Timberline Knolls, I am able to combine my own personal experience with my medical training to help adolescent girls and women become emotionally strong, responsible problem-solvers, who are inspired to create fulfilling lives for themselves. Working with the residents is a tremendous gift to me on a daily basis in my professional growth and especially in my recovery journey. My recovery, just like everyone’s, is a daily reprieve from a deadly, killing disease(s). It’s no longer about fighting food but about living life fully, joyously and freely – a life-long process. I look forward to sharing my journey as a recovering member of the medical community with you through this column and hope to hear about yours as well. As the title of this magazine states – *It’s All In the Journey*.

**KIMBERLY DENNIS, MD**, is the medical director at Timberline Knolls ([www.timberlineknolls.com](http://www.timberlineknolls.com)). Located in Lemont, Ill., this innovative residential treatment center is designed exclusively for women and adolescent girls with emotional disorders, including eating disorders, addiction and self-injury behavior. Dr. Dennis is a member of the Academy of Eating Disorders, the American Academy of Addiction Psychiatry, and the American Society of Addiction Medicine.