The core of recovery comes from hard work and dedication. Support from all angles and from numerous people are undoubtedly critical ingredients of this incredible journey. But what about the support YOU give yourself? This issue of Connections will feature articles from Renfrew clinical staff on the most essential elements you need for your recovery – self-compassion, self-acceptance, self-care, and courage.

self-compassion

By: Hannah Beaver, LCSW

It’s hard to imagine what the recovery process would look or feel like without the fundamental element of self-compassion. For those who have been through the difficult journey and for those still fighting their way through, it’s important to take time to get in touch with where your self-compassion exists and how to make its presence even stronger. Perhaps it takes its form in practicing non-judgmental awareness or allowing yourself to choose a special time for self-care or pursuing a special interest. I often hear that self-compassion, although crucial to healing, is one of the most challenging practices to take on. It can feel uncomfortable to be kind to ourselves when, caught in the trenches of the disorder, our norm is to do the opposite. To self-appreciate, a key part of the process of compassion, can feel strange and unsettling when our mind is used to focusing on all of our negative self-traits instead. Despite these challenges, it is undeniable that through the practice of self-compassion and breaking out of harmful patterns, you will feel better; not only about yourself, but also in how you view the world.

Learning to be kind to ourselves first makes it easier to accept the kindness from those around us.

As we enter into the warmer and brighter months ahead, it feels like just the right time to get in touch, or back in touch, with this practice of self-compassion.
At this time, thirty-three years ago, I was putting the finishing touches on Renfrew’s first site in Philadelphia, founded with the concept of helping adolescent girls and women heal through community and empowerment.

Since that time we have expanded our services throughout the country and continue to offer the highest quality of care — our newest site in West Palm Beach, FL is now open. It is our 19th location nationally and our third in the state, the others being a residential site in Coconut Creek and an outpatient site in Orlando.

Programming at The Renfrew Center of West Palm Beach consists of a comprehensive range of services, including day treatment, intensive outpatient and group therapy.

With the addition of this site, patients are able to easily transition between all levels of care and receive consistent treatment between all sites, while staying within the state and close to home.

I want to thank you for your support of the This Is ME! campaign during National Eating Disorders Awareness Week. In case you missed it, the campaign was geared towards identifying the where, why and how often we put our true selves aside to gain acceptance from others. We are happy to report it was a great success in starting a dialogue about using your voice and being real.

In closing, this summer we are hosting our annual Alumni Reunion at our Philadelphia, PA and Coconut Creek, FL locations. Join us Saturday, June 2nd from 9 AM – 2:30 PM, for a day of workshops and reconnecting with fellow alumni and staff. We look forward to seeing you there!

SAMUEL E. MENAGED, JD, is the Founder and President of The Renfrew Centers and The Renfrew Center Foundation. Mr. Menaged founded The Renfrew Center 33 years ago as the country’s first residential treatment facility specializing in eating disorders. He is the past-president of the Board of the Eating Disorders Coalition for Research, Policy and Action, an advocacy group based in Washington, DC and a board member of the Residential Eating Disorders Consortium. Mr. Menaged is a former healthcare attorney.

HANNAH BEAVER, LCSW, is the Alumni Coordinator for The Renfrew Centers. She received her Bachelor’s degree in Psychology from University of Pittsburgh and her Master’s degree in Clinical Social Work from Bryn Mawr College. Ms. Beaver is committed to keeping Renfrew’s alumni network strong and connected by facilitating workshops for former patients and their families. She often provides information to schools on eating disorders and healthy body image.

C.E.O. of Renfrew Center for Recovery, Inc.

Come for a free day of recovery workshops to reconnect with staff and fellow alumni!

Light breakfast and lunch will be provided.

For more information, please visit www.renfrewcenter.com
Self-acceptance

By: Elizabeth Black, MA, LCPC
Team Leader and Alumni Representative at The Renfrew Center of Chicago

Self-acceptance is to acknowledge things as they are, even if we prefer they were different. Two commonly held beliefs that interfere with self-acceptance include 1. That we cannot accept things we do not love or like and 2. that self-criticism (an adversary of self-acceptance) is what keeps us ‘in line’ and without it we would ‘let ourselves go’.

We can (and often do) accept things we do not ‘like’ in our lives and can do the same with self-acceptance. We can begin practicing self-acceptance in this moment even if we do not love every part of ourselves. Self-acceptance does not mean that we feel only positive emotions. Instead, self-acceptance involves bringing awareness to emotions and responding in ways that allow us to get our needs met in an adaptive, value driven manner (instead of relying on unhealthy emotion driven behaviors).

To practice self-acceptance in recovery is to recognize who we are in this moment - flaws and all. When we practice self-acceptance, we acknowledge what is and choose to respond without judging or criticizing ourselves for it. Our practice of self-acceptance does not mean total approval but flexibility in our thinking.

Ideas to start practicing self-acceptance today:
• Notice harsh thoughts and let them go without latching on to them
• Practice generating objective or neutral statements when you observe yourself using subjective judgmental language
• Consider what a compassionate (instead of critical) response would include and identify small concrete steps you can take to try something new
• Instead of focusing on what should be, express gratitude for what is

And remember, self-acceptance is an ongoing practice in recovery.

The Renfrew Center of West Palm Beach
NOW OPEN!

Located at: 1515 North Flagler Drive, Suite #800, West Palm Beach, FL 33401

We’re excited to have opened our 19th location nationally in West Palm Beach, FL. This site is Renfrew’s third facility in Florida.

Programming consists of a comprehensive range of services including:
• Day Treatment
• Intensive Outpatient
• Group Therapy

For more information or to schedule an assessment, please call 1-800-RENFREW.
Every so often I find myself slowing down; reading a book, taking a nap or calling a friend. When I engage in these activities, I notice that I’m present in the moment and free from the fast pace of my usual day.

On the occasion that I run a topic group I usually discuss self-care. I ask our community members to fill out a survey that covers all aspects of self-care such as physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual, workplace/professional/school, and balance.

We rate the examples of self-care listed in each section between a 1 (never occurred to think about) and a 5 (engaging in frequently). What I find most often is that our community members rate a majority of each section with 1 or 2’s, and only a handful of 4 or 5’s are rated throughout the entire evaluation.

Unfortunately the results indicate a severe lack of self-care in many aspects of life.

One of the benefits of working with an amazing team of clinicians is they are always willing to lend a helping hand. I asked members of my team how they define self-care. Their responses were beautifully thought out, logical, and most of all congruent with Renfrew’s treatment model focused on present-centered, non-judgmental awareness.

- Communicating and listening to one’s body.
- Making present based decisions.
- Creating purposeful attention to oneself.
- Finding a balance in life that is applicable to physical and mental health.
- Engaging in a personal exploration.
- Taking on small or large activities to create positivity, present based awareness, and productivity in one’s life.
- Continuation of the assessment of one’s needs throughout the day.

I challenge everyone to use these themes of self-care as a way to initiate present-centered, non-judgmental awareness into your daily life. You can start by having a meaningful conversation with a family member or friend, watch a movie, listen to music, journal, read a book, sign up for an art class, or just take a seat and notice your surroundings. As long as the intention is there to listen to your needs and make purposeful decisions, you can be on your way to living a self-care filled life.

Don’t forget to check out RenfrewSupport.org!

Our redesigned website allows alumni, support persons and those needing extra help in their recovery to connect to Renfrew’s clinical expertise and vast alumni services.

Some features include:

- A recovery blog
- Recovery testimonials
- Recipes from Renfrew’s Cook Book
- Tips on helping a loved one readjust after treatment
- Upcoming Renfrew news and events
From the Librarian

Submitted by: Eileen Binckley, Librarian

As indicated by the title, this book is a memoir of Mira Tierney’s life from growing up in the 1980s in America’s Heartland through her struggles with an eating disorder in her teen years and her eventual reconciliation with her emotions, her body, and her family. It details a journey of need for control and of search for recognition of worth as a person.

The book slowly and methodically, in personal journal style, chronicles Mira’s life from childhood through young adulthood. As a child, growing up in a strictly religious Southern Baptist family, she learned to deny her own needs. Likewise, as a sister to an older brother with a learning disability, she again denied her own needs in striving to be the perfect child. She suffered from a trauma and struggled with the normal trials of growing up, gaining and losing close friendships, and ultimately battling teenage depression. The trigger that sent her into an eating disorder was the reading of The Best Little Girl in the World by Steven Levenkron and everything after that was a downward spiral.

Mira’s journey at times reads ploddingly as if the younger years will never end. Her actual treatment and relationships with other patients is only depicted in the last few chapters of the book. Setting the broad stage for what eventually resulted in her own self-destruction should be considered though. Any reader who has ever struggled and lost her true self will recognize some of her own issues and hopefully find the courage to embrace yourself.
By: Kristine McMillan

By the time I arrived at The Renfrew Center, I didn’t believe recovery existed. I had been stuck in my eating disorder for 21 years. I had chosen my path and although it had taken so many things from me, it was familiar and known.

Within my first weeks at Renfrew, I was reminded by my amazing treatment team that there was another path, one called recovery. I didn’t believe I had the strength to walk that road but my team was with me every step of the way, catching me when I faltered and helping me learn the skills I needed to navigate it.

My eating disorder began very innocently, there was no defined moment where I realized I was making choices that aligned with an eating disorder, it was my way of taking care of myself.

With a history of trauma and a hard family life, I was left taking care of others instead of being the child I needed to be. I was tired of the pain caused by other people and the constant fear of trusting others. I soon realized my eating disorder would be the one friend that would never leave me, so I decided that I could become completely self-reliant, shutting myself off from the rest of the world to protect myself.

Over the years, my eating disorder was a loyal friend, but also an abusive one. I lost opportunities at work, missed out on life and lost many friends. I also have a number of medical problems – I lost a child and cannot have children. Yet, I still thought I was invincible, until I wasn’t. All of it caught up with me and I realized that I was not living my life, but merely existing.

Entering Renfrew was a life-saving decision. With a lot of hard work, I found recovery. I’ve become an advocate, using my story to help others who are still struggling and I returned to graduate school and hope to work with women with eating disorders. None of this would have been possible without my treatment team from Renfrew who patiently taught me what strength, vulnerability and authenticity truly mean. I am deeply grateful!

Kristine McMillan is an alumna of The Renfrew Centers Boston and Philadelphia. She currently lives in Boston with her husband and teenage daughter, who they adopted. She works as a nurse. She is also pursuing a graduate degree and runs a non-profit in Haiti. Kristine has become an advocate for eating disorders at both the state and federal level.

By: Christina Aquilina

Some of my earliest memories are being 14-years-old and refusing to change in front of friends, or standing in any mirror I saw and squeezing parts of my body that I hated until they hurt – hoping that would make them disappear. In high school – I strived to be extremely active. I was obsessed with finding the latest and greatest diet I could be on.

When I went away to college I struggled immensely the first few months with binging because of the difficulty I was having adapting and the unnecessary anxiety about things that should not matter. I used symptoms to cope with a number of other issues I had suppressed for so long and had no idea existed.

Things continued to get worse and were really a spiral effect – I was depressed, suicidal, and very sick. I restricted until I would pass out and was barely living. I started an outpatient program that fall and was meeting with a therapist and dietitian weekly. I saw nothing wrong with my actions and would come to no acceptance with any kind of diagnosis. I truly believed there was nothing wrong with me and that I had just some bad habits.

Almost 3 months later, I was able to walk out of Renfrew feeling like a completely different person.

My recovery since I walked out of those doors was definitely not one from a story book. It was hard, very hard. But I used my tools I had learned, and the support system I had created. And I did okay. I was beyond grateful to have so many people in my life show support for me when I got out of treatment. When you are healthy you create this entirely new appreciation for life and all its gifts. Something I wouldn’t change for the world.

Christina Aquilina was born and raised in Boca Raton, FL and is an alumna of The Renfrew Center of Florida. She is currently a senior studying marketing at the University of Central Florida. She is a co-founder of Freshmen15, a food blog on Instagram targeted primarily to college students. The tagline, “We Gain Weight for a Reason,” summarizes their mission of encouraging students to embrace the myth of a 15-pound weight gain in the first year of college and to make strides to end the tumultuous relationship with food experienced by people of all ages.
At 16-years-old, I made a list of girls I wanted to look like. I then set a seemingly innocent goal to lose weight. I was complimented on my food choices and admired for my willpower. When my body began to change, I loved the positive attention I received.

There is a dangerous misconception that only certain foods are good for us. Thus, my eating disorder went undetected during the crucial years of development. No one caught onto the internal fear of food and poor self-esteem. Not even me.

When I started college, I was completely overwhelmed. My only source of comfort came at night: when I binged and purged. This led my parents to finally realize there was a problem.

At 18-years-old, I was diagnosed with severe anxiety and bulimia. The diagnosis was difficult to believe. I never felt sick, frail, nor was I ostracized for being “too thin.” The new-found addictive binge/purge cycles made me feel disgusting and monstruous. I blamed those actions for my diagnosis. I desperately wanted to go back to the ignorant days of restricting. Now, instead of comparing myself to others, I compared myself to her (my past self). I was never good enough where I was.

I spent five years trying to recover on my own, while simultaneously trying to achieve the “perfect body.” I was always mentally, physically and emotionally drained. I made the decision to enter day treatment at The Renfrew Center of Southern New Jersey.

Renfrew wasn’t what I expected. It was filled with girls that looked and thought very similar to me. How could these vibrant and beautiful women not see what I saw in them? Which in turn taught me to change the way I perceived myself.

My eating disorder gave me a sense of control in an otherwise “out of control, anxiety-provoking” external world. I learned how to change the misconceptions I had about the world and about my own self-worth. I learned to love myself where I was. No more comparing, competing or trying to be someone else.

I spent four months in Renfrew. Almost a year later, I relapsed and spent an additional two months at The Renfrew Center of Northern New Jersey.

Along with finding safety through crisis in psychiatric hospital stays, I worked through brutal treatment resistance, anger, confusion and pain. I learned how to live in a world that was not what I expected. I learned how to change the misconceptions I had about the world and about my own self-worth. I learned to love myself where I was. No more comparing, competing or trying to be someone else.

Finally, late bloomer though I am, the miracle I was given of a “second chance” at life has allowed me the healing, patience and compassion to coax out of the dark corners and cobwebs the quirky girl, rebel, Woman, tomboy, Gender Non-conformist, Dharma punk—S/he—that I am.

As I let go of the self-harm that numbed and disfigured my body with the twisted razors of my eating disorder, I liberate myself one breath at a time to live and be free now as a queer, Transfeminist artist. I will no longer let stigma punish me for being different or for moving to the beat of my own drum. In the face of our profound human experience of life, loss and love, today I am passionate and hopeful to see our many recovery communities strengthen, embrace diverse “Health at Every Size” and share the joyful teachings and creative practices of self-care, peace and compassion on Earth. May all beings be free!
Support The Renfrew Center Foundation

The Renfrew Center Foundation is a nonprofit organization that helps to advance education, research, advocacy and treatment of eating disorders. Please help us to continue these efforts by making a tax-deductible donation to the Foundation.

Donations can be sent to:
The Renfrew Center Foundation, 475 Spring Lane, Philadelphia, PA 19128

Your donation, or that of a family member, may help someone receive the crucial care she requires. In addition, we can continue to educate the public about eating disorders and provide necessary training for professionals in the field.

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