

# Reno Tahoe Tonight

September 2014



Anicia Beckwith's  
*Dreamscapes*



Special to Reno Tahoe Tonight

# Diabulimia:

## The hidden world of diabetics with eating disorders

Lucy was fifteen years old and beautiful. She was surrounded with friends, had a great boyfriend, and was getting lead roles in plays while acing classes. Lucy also had diabetes. Like many young women, Lucy was insecure, and weight loss was on the top of her mind. When Lucy discovered that omitting her insulin could lead to weight loss, she decided to give it a go.

Lucy *did* lose weight, but at a deadly cost. She felt the effects of reducing her insulin immediately. Lucy was thirsty all the time and drinking tons of fluids, but she was never able to quench her thirst. She was unable to satisfy her hunger no matter how much she ate. She was exhausted all the time, had severe headaches, was frequently nauseous, and vomited often.

She knew her constant thirst was a sign of Diabetic ketoacidosis, or DKA, the life threatening complication that results from poorly managed diabetes. DKA commonly results from an eating disorder known as diabulimia. Her obsession with weight loss outweighed the risks.

Women with diabetes are three times more likely to develop an eating disorder than non-diabetic women, simply because it is so easy to drastically

control weight loss at the touch of a pump button or injection. Diabulimia most closely matches the criteria for bulimia, which includes recurrent binges and compensatory behavior, or behaviors meant to “un-do” eating, such as purging, over-exercising, misuse of laxatives, or restricting insulin.

Diabulimia engrossed Lucy's life and within one month, she was admitted to the hospital with DKA. After nearly dying, she was able to pull through with her family surrounding her. Lucy's doctor stood over the bedside and said that if her insulin restriction continued, her life would come to a sudden halt. Once stabilized to the correct insulin levels, Lucy returned home. Within a week of leaving the hospital, she started restricting insulin again.

Lucy's doctors and loved ones didn't know what to do and didn't understand what was going on. Lucy's medical team and family weren't fully educated on diabetic eating disorders, leaving her in dire need for experienced help. She describes her time spent living with diabulimia as a haze of exhaustion and doctor visits. Being too weak to handle the illness alone, Lucy struggled along without diagnosis or accurate medical help.



As Lucy continued to restrict insulin, her hair started to fall out and she had one infection after another. Over the next year Lucy was hospitalized for DKA several more times. She felt trapped in her own body, knowing the problem without a path to a solution.

Visiting physician after physician, searching for answers, no one seemed to understand diabulimia and how a young woman with an eating disorder could have consistently high blood sugars. Lucy desperately wanted to get her life on track, but no matter how many times she told herself she was going to stop restricting insulin, she was unable to do so.

As things went on, Lucy started to lose sensation in her hands and feet. Her poor diabetes management was starting to affect her kidneys. Shortly after her vision started to fail. Cataracts developed rapidly to the point where she could no longer read or see clearly, a result of mismanaged diabetes over an extended period of time. Surgery was necessary to correct her vision.

Her time in the hospital was a catalyst to her recovery. She encountered an elderly woman who had lived a long, happy life. Lucy immediately realized what kind of life she wanted and snapped into clarity. She wanted to recover.

Lucy made major efforts to seek help and was put in touch with a Diabulimia Helpline. She decided not to let her life slip away. The helpline led her to a clinic filled with trained professionals who understood the condition fully, thus clearing the cloud of confusion surrounding Lucy's diabulimia. It took some coaxing, but Lucy went willingly to the clinic and has never looked back. A few years later with a lot of love and healing, she got her life back.

There are a few clinics in the U.S. that treat young men and women suffering from diabulimia. The Reno-Tahoe area is lucky enough to have one such clinic, Center for Hope of the Sierras, right here at the base of the Sierra Nevada.

Center for Hope of the Sierras takes a highly specialized approach to diabulimia treatment. The goal is to help patients like Lucy find the appropriate balance of insulin. When patients first arrive, their diabetes is managed for them by a 24-hour nursing staff. By educating diabulimic residents about how the diabetic body uses insulin, they can learn to regulate the amount of sugar and carbohydrates consumed without feeling compelled to restrict insulin.

As patients progress through treatment they work with therapists, an endocrinologist, a psychiatrist, a registered dietitian and a certified diabetes educator who all help teach proper diabetes management. The goal by the end of treatment is for patients to be free of their eating disorder, to be eating intuitively, to be accepting of their natural body weight, and to be able to independently and successfully manage their diabetes.

Diabetes and eating disorders have harmful and serious effects when viewed separately. Put those conditions together and the results are devastating. Lucy was able to realize that irritability, fatigue and endless dehydration don't have to be a part of normal life. Now, she's on a mission to share her story and inspire others suffering from diabulimia.

*For more personal stories like Lucy's, visit [diabulimiabelpline.org](http://diabulimiabelpline.org) and check out [centerforhopeofthesierras.com](http://centerforhopeofthesierras.com).*

