A black and white photograph of a woman with long, dark hair, sitting on a white towel. She is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. Her right arm is resting on her knee, and her left hand is on the towel. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

**“I was
destroying
myself,
but I kept
smiling
for the
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A Top Model's Battle with Bulimia

On the outside, Glamour cover girl Magali Amadei's life was perfect, but on the inside self-hatred was driving her in a relentless cycle of bingeing and purging. Here's how she learned to eliminate her inner thin pressure and finally find peace.

As told to Dina Roth Photographs by Michael O'Neil

I was so depressed that I wanted to die. It was July 1993, I was nearly 20 years old and flying from Santa Fe, New Mexico, to New York City for an advertising photo shoot. I had just scarfed down four pieces of pizza, two bags of Doritos and two liters of diet Coke in the airport. As soon as the plane was in the air, I went into the bathroom, stuck my fingers down my throat and threw up all of it. When I returned to my seat, I felt dizzy. My body was shaking and dripping with cold sweat. My eyes were bloodshot; my throat was burning. I could taste blood. My only thought was, "Maybe the plane will crash. How great that would be." It would have put me out of my misery.

That moment was near the end of my seven-year battle with bulimia nervosa. My life looked picture-perfect. I was at the height of my modeling career. But no amount of money or recognition could make me feel good about myself. *I had a secret obsession with bingeing and purging.*

Up until the time I started overeating and making myself throw up—just before I turned 15—my childhood had been a fairy tale. Born and raised in Nice in the south of France, I was very close to my family. Like many parents, mine taught me to try my hardest at everything. They didn't demand that I be the best, but, of course, when I was it made them extremely happy. Aside from being number one academically in my class and popular, I played the piano, acted, sketched, painted and took ballet and yoga lessons. I was petrified of disappointing anyone.

And I was a total perfectionist. When I saw the movie *Amadeus* at age 13, for example, I was impressed by a scene in which Mozart faces away from a piano and plays with his hands crossed over behind his head. I thought, "That looks difficult, but if Mozart could do it, I can, too." I practiced his trick relentlessly. Then when my family's friends came over, I would run quickly to the piano to show off my new talent. I thought I could achieve anything, and I lived for the approval of friends, family and teachers.

I never thought about my weight until I hit adolescence. At 14, I gained a few pounds, but it didn't bother me until

one of my parents (I don't remember which one), mentioned that I looked a little fat. They were probably just playfully acknowledging the fact that my body was going through puberty, but to me it felt like the end of the world. Even though I was as skinny as a pinky, all I heard was "fat." From then on, I felt like I was walking through a house of mirrors—and in all the mirrors I had flabby thighs, enormous hips and a bloated stomach.

I couldn't just let the comment go. In retrospect, I must have been overwhelmed by the thought that I had failed and lost control of how people perceived me. I had let people down, and I had to do something to get back on track.

I'm part Italian and part French, so I love food; I was not willing to give up my croissants and pastries—dieting to control my weight was out of the question. I had to find a way to eat what I wanted without gaining weight. I don't know where I got the idea to binge and throw up my food but that became my solution. I would fast during the day at school, and when I came home, I'd devour a box of apricot cookies, pasta, hunks of cheese and bread, jams and honey. Then I'd make myself vomit—and later at dinner, I'd eat as much as my father did. My family probably figured I had a growing adolescent's appetite; they never questioned me.

DANGEROUS GAME

Eating compulsively and throwing up became my new game, thrilling because of the risk of getting caught. I didn't know that I was playing a game that would ultimately endanger my health and happiness. At the time I was too caught up in it to feel much of anything, but it quickly spiraled into a frantic and shameful obsession.

I went to extreme lengths to hide my behavior. No one knew what I was doing; I didn't even want to admit it to myself. Although my throat was sore after vomiting, I never knew I could harm my body. I thought I could stop whenever I wanted. I kept it a secret from everyone, even Marc,* my high school sweetheart, whom I started dating at 16.

My bulimia was much worse by the time I came to the

*These names have been changed.

A Beautiful Life



1. Magali, at three, was born camera-ready. 2. At 13, performing ballet in Nice, France. 3, 4, 5. Magali found major modeling success in New York, including a '95 *Glamour* cover.

United States and began to model at age 18. (I had been planning to become a surgeon, but an agent who spotted me a couple of years earlier urged me to try modeling—I thought, why not? Why pass up a trip to New York?) Although I was still stuck in the torment of bingeing and purging, I was excited by this new experience. Within a few weeks, I was jet-setting around the world for photo shoots; appearing in magazines like *Glamour* and *Allure*; and working with major models like Naomi Campbell and Niki Taylor, as well as top fashion photographers. I decided to stay for at least another year and moved into a Greenwich Village apartment with Marc.

People might think that becoming a model would have given me confidence and a sense of achievement, but it didn't. Because I was bulimic, it was the worst thing that ever happened to me—I was now being judged exclusively on my appearance. In America, I discovered Ben & Jerry's, Oreo cookies, muffins, nachos—the junk food we didn't have in Europe. Although I was a vegetarian, I'd eat almost anything—but especially foods that were easier to throw up. I was bingeing and purging up to four times a day and I began taking laxatives, which made my stomach feel empty. The more visible the project or prestigious the photographer, the more laxatives I would take. My weight fluctuated, as it often does with bulimia, but I was never overweight. Still, I had a Mediterranean figure, much curvier than many other models'. When people in the business began calling me the “new Sophia Loren,” I was honored because she's my idol. But it also worried me—Sophia Loren was an icon of the 1950s and 1960s, when the ideal woman had hips, breasts and a fuller body. That meant I didn't have the ideal 1990s body—a skinny, boyish figure.

CRITICAL CAMERA

Some photographers, fashion editors and stylists made cruel comments that fed my insecurity. During a fitting for clothing by an Italian designer in 1992, the stylists, who didn't know I spoke their language, said something like, “My God, she's a cow.” Instead of crying or getting angry, I pretended that what they said didn't hurt me. I was afraid they'd see how vulnerable I was. So I just went back to my hotel room to eat and vomit. And every time I felt pressured, insecure, out of control or rejected, that's what I did.

In the fall of 1992, my phone rang: It was my agent. “The client was outraged by how fat you looked in the pictures for their fashion ad campaign,” he told me. “They have to redo the whole shoot with another model.” I panicked. I wanted to defend myself and say, “That's unfair. No one said anything to me during the shoot.” But I didn't. I said to myself, “You're nothing. You're huge and don't deserve the life you have.” I immediately bought two cheese sandwiches, a whole quiche and two apple pies, then ate and vomited all of it within 10 minutes. Although I was shivering and weak, in a perverse way I felt a sense of relief. I was overwhelmed by such harsh criticism

“My God, she's a cow, a stylist on a shoot said—right in front of me.”

because I internalized it. I felt replaceable. I was so ashamed of being rejected that I thought I deserved to be tortured.

I was deeply depressed and emotionally exhausted from pretending that I was “together, happy and carefree Magali,” when actually the exact opposite was true. After we'd been together for three years, Marc moved back to France. I still couldn't be honest with him about my insecurities, let alone my bingeing and purging. I spent a lot of time and energy hiding my eating disorder from him and from my boyfriends after him. The only relationship I committed to was

the one I had with food. I felt fat, but I also felt guilty for all the success and recognition I thought I didn't deserve, so I punished myself. All I thought about was, When am I going to eat? What am I going to eat? Where is the closest bathroom? If I waited too long to purge after eating, I believed I could feel the fat cells growing in my thighs.

So even though I was living the kind of life most people can only dream about—traveling to exotic countries, mingling with celebrities at movie premieres and cocktail parties—I couldn't stop myself from bingeing. Afterward I would throw up champagne and caviar in the bathrooms of some of the most famous hotels in the world. The Ritz in Paris. The Four Seasons in London. I even made the toilet overflow at Chateau Marmont in Hollywood, California.

BATTLING BACK

In the early 1990s, Francesco Scavullo, a top fashion photographer, hosted a lavish affair at a Manhattan apartment overlooking Central Park. He invited the “Who's Who” of New York, an A-list crowd of models, painters, actors and socialites who were all dressed to kill. I, too, was decked out, sipping champagne and mingling with other guests, but I felt totally self-conscious among such hip, classy people. Whenever I sat down, I would try to hide my “enormous” stomach with a napkin or pillow so no one would see. People were telling their stories of fame, fashion and glory, but I felt I had nothing interesting to share. I couldn't stay. I wasn't worthy. I sneaked out of the party early, went home and fed my compulsion.

I was always careful not to get caught. Initially I would only throw up in my own bathroom and hotel rooms, but as my bulimia got worse, I became more reckless. In 1992, French *Vogue* was doing a

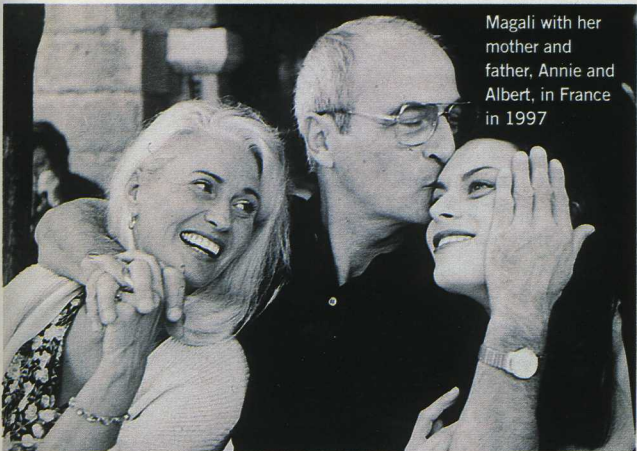
fashion shoot on the island of Mustique in the Caribbean, along with a story on Mick Jagger and Jerry Hall, who had a house there. One night, they invited the entire crew and all the models to their home for a four-star dinner, complete with superb food, vintage wine and impeccable service. By the time coffee was served, we had been there for hours. When I realized this, I thought, "If I don't throw up now I'll start to digest dinner and will look like a whale in my bathing suit tomorrow." So I went to the bathroom and vomited. Even on such an extraordinary evening, I couldn't escape my shameful secret.

Being bulimic, of course, was seriously hurting my body. I didn't want to admit it but as the years went on, it began to show. The glands in my neck were always swollen and my throat was constantly sore. I'd faint during work from exhaustion and blame it on hypoglycemia. Because I was malnourished and throwing up all my fluids, I was dehydrated and cold. I had dry skin, brittle hair and nails, heart palpitations and an irregular period. I couldn't sleep—my mind raced all night with guilt and depression—so I had dark circles under my eyes and puffy lids. Stomach acid gradually ruined my teeth; now, 11 of them are capped, and I've had seven root canals. Still, no one knew what I was doing—my dentists never commented to me.

I was destroying myself, but I kept smiling for the camera and pretending that I was fine. For magazine shoots and fashion ads, computerized retouching covered up the physical evidence of my bulimia. But when I did the biannual fashion shows in Milan, Paris or New York, it was harder to hide what I was doing to myself. I was strung out. Although no one ever said anything to me, I recently heard that the industry buzz was that I had a cocaine problem. But drugs were not my addiction and bulimia was not a fashionable subject.

In the modeling industry, a lean body is everything. Although some models are naturally very skinny, others would tell me about the rigorous diets and intense exercise programs they followed to maintain their figures. Looking back, I know some girls had very strange eating habits and were definitely way below their natural body weights. But at the time other people's behavior and problems just didn't register with me. I was too involved in my own struggle.

In October 1994, I began to realize how out of control I had become. I took 40 laxatives—the most I had ever taken—the night before a cover shoot I was doing in Paris for *Madame Figaro*, a French fashion magazine. At the shoot, even though I had already gone to the bathroom four times, I felt like I had knives in my stomach. While everyone was waiting for me, I was on the bathroom floor sweating, struggling not to faint and thinking that I might not live. Still in pain, I got up and smiled my way through the shoot. Later on I found out from a doctor that I could have *(continued on page 272)*



Magali with her mother and father, Annie and Albert, in France in 1997

Do you have a friend battling bulimia?

Here's what **you** can do.

Bulimia can be dangerously difficult to detect, because a bulimic typically maintains a normal body weight. But there are danger signs that can indicate a possible problem, says Claire Mysko, administrative director of the American Anorexia Bulimia Association, including: excessive laxative use; a glaring preoccupation with food and exercise; trips to the bathroom after every meal; bloodshot eyes and broken blood vessels in the face and neck (both caused by minor hemorrhaging from the pressure of forced vomiting); major dental problems; scratches on fingers from scraping them against teeth; swollen glands in the face ("chipmunk cheeks") and cracked lips. If you fear that someone you know may be suffering from bulimia, here's how to help:

● **Educate yourself about bulimia before confronting her.** "Most people misinterpret the problem as simply a food and weight issue when it's really a complex psychological and emotional disorder," explains Mysko. For more information on eating disorders or referrals to treatment providers and support groups, contact one of these organizations: American Anorexia Bulimia Association (AABA), 212-575-6200, or www.aabainc.org; Eating Disorders Awareness and Prevention (EDAP), 800-931-2237; National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (ANAD), 847-831-3438, or www.anad.org.

● **Call her on it, but don't be judgmental.** Pick a time when you can talk one-on-one with your friend, somewhere she'll feel comfortable and safe. Do not confront her right after you think she has purged, as she'll be more likely to be defensive. Cite particular reasons why you are worried. For example, you might say, "I've noticed you always go to the bathroom right after meals and come out with bloodshot eyes. You may be embarrassed or unwilling to admit that you need help but I think you might have a problem. I'm not judging you, but I am here as a source of support." Says Mysko, "Being direct and matter-of-fact can counteract some of her feelings of guilt and shame."

● **Don't argue if your friend denies her bulimia.** Instead, say something like, "I can see you're not ready to talk about this, but know that I take this seriously and will continue to try to help you." Then, wait for an appropriate time to bring up the issue again. Persistence is the key. "Maybe by the eleventh time you mention something, the person will be ready to reach out to you for support," Mysko notes.

● **Give her the facts.** When your friend does admit that she has a problem, find out what kinds of helpful resources are available in her area. Offer to make a doctor's appointment for her or drive her to her therapist's office.

● **Know your limitations.** "There is nothing a friend or family member can do to force another adult to get help if she isn't willing," says Mysko. The most important thing you can do is let her know that you care.

—D.R.

seriously damaged my intestines or permanently ruined my bowel system.

I felt terrified, but I didn't know where to turn. Many nights when I cried myself to sleep, my new boyfriend Philippe,* a photographer I had met through friends, would hold me and say, "Why won't you talk to me? Why won't you tell me what's wrong?" We'd been living together for a few months and though I knew he was sensitive and a good listener, I couldn't say anything.

I reached my absolute lowest point in the spring of 1995. I was so depressed I couldn't face the world. I had been bingeing and purging up to seven times a day. I figured things couldn't get worse, so I decided to tell Philippe about my bulimia. When he came home one day, I handed him a letter I'd written to him about how much I had been suffering and cried, because I thought I was going to die when he knew my secret. But when he finished reading, he gave me a hug and I realized suddenly that *keeping* the secret would have killed me. That moment was the first true relief I'd had in years. It was the beginning of my recovery.

Speaking to a specialized therapist—someone who has medical and psychological knowledge about eating disorders (see sidebar)—is absolutely the best way to get through bulimia. If I had to go back to the beginning of my recovery process, that's what I would do. But I didn't know at the time that specialists existed to help me, so I had to find my own way out, starting with facing the seriousness of my problem. It was a struggle, but I decided I would try anything to stop hurting myself.

For example, I threw away my scale, and I made an effort to surround myself with other people at mealtimes. When thoughts of bingeing and throwing up or taking laxatives snapped into my head, which they still constantly did, I would anchor myself to a chair and acknowledge the urge. Once I said to myself, "You are about to eat and purge," I then put every ounce of my will into trying *not* to do it. Instead, I'd occupy my mind with something else—like doing some laundry, or making a call to a friend.

I still slipped a few times, but in the second month, I was purging less frequently. I was also better able to communicate my feelings because I wasn't numbing them with food. By talking things through with Philippe,* I realized that I'd throw up mainly when I was afraid of making people angry with me or disappointing them by expressing my emotions. In order to recover, I had to learn to express anger, depression and stress instead of denying them. That expression came through writing, painting and sometimes crying ses-

sions when I would beat on a pillow. I also started telling people when they hurt me or made me angry. Afterward, I was always much calmer, and though I still felt angry or anxious or depressed, I never purged. Communication was what finally shattered my house of mirrors.

To relieve the pressure of other people's expectations, I cut back on modeling. I needed time to get back in touch with who I was. And I only worked with photographers and designers who didn't criticize me, people I felt comfortable with. Within three months I stopped purging altogether; that was four-and-a-half years ago. My psychological battle with my emotions and compulsions, however, continued on for a while longer, as did my paranoia about my weight.

Because I wasn't lying about who I was anymore, I started to feel free. I felt better about myself and appreciated how lucky I was. I was growing and changing so much that Philippe and I drifted apart. But slowly, my depression lifted and I began to rediscover all the things I used to enjoy, like yoga, dancing, painting and acting. Last year I even starred in two off-Broadway plays. Now, at 26, I finally have self-esteem. I have a good body image—my womanly body makes me feel sensual, which I have never felt before. I also understand that the way I look does not make me who I am.

Nowadays, I am in love with a fellow model that I met two years ago during a photo shoot. Because I'm completely open with Jack,* it's the healthiest relationship I've ever had. I still look at food as one of life's greatest pleasures, as I did when I was a child, but I don't designate certain foods as off-limits because they are too fattening. I never have compulsions to purge now, but bulimia will always be a part of who I am.

In many ways, I see all those years of suffering as a tragic waste. After recently speaking to a therapist, I now believe my bulimia was caused by my adolescent insecurity and extreme drive for perfectionism and approval. In my case, beauty *didn't* equal happiness. I appeared on the covers and pages of virtually every major fashion magazine in the world, and I do accept responsibility for the message sent to women through these images. Although I have been part of the problem, I am also trying to be part of the solution. I am now able to transform seven years of silence into a positive educational outreach program. In alliance with the American Anorexia Bulimia Association, I will do a 20-day national tour of high schools this month, speaking to students about my battle with and victory over bulimia. I only hope my story will help save someone else from living through—or dying from—such a nightmare. ©