



When our lives were turned upside down by our daughter's eating disorder, we were lost. Like many parents, we initially turned to our pediatrician for guidance, believing that if we asked the right questions, we would get the answers we needed, and she would be on the mend in no time. But as the days passed, the questions piled up in my journal, unanswered:

*\*Where can we go to help her start eating again? Why isn't she following her doctor's advice? How do we get her weight back up? What do we do now that she's still losing weight?\**

We couldn't find any counselors specializing in eating disorders who were accepting new patients. Dietitians experienced with pediatric eating disorders were scarce. Our daughter lost 40 pounds, and we had no idea where to turn.

*\*What do you mean there isn't anywhere in Tucson specializing in pediatric eating disorders? Why isn't there anyone who can help us?\**

Our daughter's doctor shared a sobering reality—her staff had recently attended the funeral of a 17-year-old who had died from an eating disorder. Yet, despite this, we couldn't find any place in town that would accept our daughter.

*\*Why is there no inpatient help for kids with eating disorders in Tucson? Why aren't there any support groups for parents or peer groups for kids to share their experiences? Why is the medical care for children under 18 with eating disorders so lacking?\**

**We were terrified our child was going to die.**

Eventually, we learned that the only way for our daughter to receive adequate care was to admit her to a hospital in Denver, Colorado. We discovered that Tucson hospitals would only refeed pediatric patients before sending them to psychiatric hospitals to handle "those issues." Children were being sent to Palo Verde Psychiatric Hospital to recover from eating disorders—a place that's not equipped for this kind of healing. This is not okay. This is not where a child should be sent.

I flew to Denver every weekend for three months to visit our daughter during the brief visiting hours—three hours on Saturday and three hours on Sunday. We did this to ensure she received proper medical care and to show her that we loved her and supported her recovery.



After being discharged from the hospital in Denver, we were accepted into UCSD's Eating Disorder Program, one of the best Partial Hospitalization Programs (PHP) in the country. Though we had been told not to bother applying because acceptance was unlikely, we were astonished when she was admitted. We quickly found a place to live for another 2.5 months. The costs were mounting, but we knew our daughter needed to go through this recovery process to heal.

At UCSD, we finally found a community of parents who understood what we were going through. There were process groups where we could ask questions, learn how one parent got a 504 plan for their child, or discuss what medications were working for anxiety and depression in children with eating disorders. We exchanged tips about restaurants that listed calorie counts or had helpful online menus.

Nick and I attended 15 hours of classes weekly, learning about eating disorders and how diet culture had shaped our children's perceptions of beauty, weight, and food. We were given binders full of information on how to live in a way that would best support our daughter's recovery.

### **Living was our only choice.**

That experience led us to create Bella Vita Tucson, named after our daughter Bella. "Bella Vita" means "beautiful life" in Italian, and we are hopeful that she will live a beautiful life even with an eating disorder. We know firsthand how crucial peer support has been for Bella, Nick, and me, and we want to offer that same support to other families in the Tucson community.

Our mission is to provide adolescents with a safe, nurturing space to express their feelings alongside their peers, fostering healing and growth. For parents, we offer a supportive community to help navigate the challenges of understanding and supporting their child's journey with this condition.

One day, I hope to build an inpatient eating disorder wing at a hospital or even a free-standing facility in Tucson. Until then, I want to help parents and their children navigate the rough waters of eating disorders.



Eating disorders are among the deadliest mental illnesses, second only to opioid overdose. Each year, 10,200 deaths are directly caused by eating disorders—one death every 52 minutes. About 26% of people with eating disorders attempt suicide. My child, who was once the happiest kid in the world, had suicidal thoughts. Others do too, and without a safe space for these kids and their parents, we, as a community, are failing them.

Bella Vita Tucson offers no-cost support groups for parents, guardians, and siblings of adolescents with eating disorders. Separately, we meet with adolescents (ages 12-23) in a safe space where they can process their feelings with a Behavioral Health Technician (BHT) present to ensure they aren't discussing self-harm. This gives them the freedom to talk openly without their parents present.

If you or someone you know has an adolescent struggling with an eating disorder, please reach out to us at [info@bvtucson.org](mailto:info@bvtucson.org). We would love to speak with you directly to see if we can help on your journey. After our conversation, we'll provide the location of our meetings.

For more information on how you can support our mission to help kids with eating disorders receive the care they deserve, please visit our website at [bvtucson.org](http://bvtucson.org) or find us on social media at [@bellavitatucson](https://www.instagram.com/bellavitatucson) on all platforms. Thank you for your support.