

**Subject:** Fwd: Why I quit nutrition coaching, and something nice to say  
**From:** Thomas Lilley <[thomas@zerow.com.au](mailto:thomas@zerow.com.au)>  
**Date:** 6/6/24, 11:29  
**To:** Michael Kingston <[michael.kenneth.kingston@gmail.com](mailto:michael.kenneth.kingston@gmail.com)>

----- Forwarded message -----

From: **Thomas Lilley** <[thomas@zerow.com.au](mailto:thomas@zerow.com.au)>  
Date: Wed, 24 Apr 2024 at 14:03  
Subject: Re: Why I quit nutrition coaching, and something nice to say  
To: Verene Sarter <[verene.sarter98@gmail.com](mailto:verene.sarter98@gmail.com)>

Hey Verene,

I'm glad you felt safe enough to open this dialogue and that you were able to express how you felt and gain insight into the bigger picture. Seems like we're all on the same page now, which is what communication is all about!

Remember – with myself, and any of the ZeroW staff for that matter, the proverbial office door is always open!

I understand your distrust of psychologists. It's certainly a uniquely sensitive and personal science, that can easily be interfered by clashing personalities or morals or world-views, etc. It also requires an enormous amount of trust to open up, and that trust is hard to earn. And, in a somewhat circular fashion, that opening up is key to creating an environment for progress. Somewhat serendipitous! And you're certainly not alone in your distrust of them!

I'm sorry to hear that you broke your own heart, but I'm also glad you have a professional that you trust and I hope that with ongoing help and work you can shatter the barrier created by the trauma you've experienced in your life. You come across as somebody who is strong and self-assured, and have clearly not waived despite whatever tempestuous season of life you've found yourself in – made evident by the fact that you are here right now! Just make sure you never neglect the healing and work that needs to be done to eject that past trauma from your being, which can be easy to do when you've developed the ability to shield things beneath an armour of outward strength.

Now that you've clarified the mystery person as a male, I can confidently say that he brought this to our attention early in the piece, and, with his permission, a trusted team of us worked together to find him the help he required, and he is doing much better now. You needn't worry about him, and know that he is in good hands. Hands of people who listened to him, heard him, and care about him enough to make helping him a major priority.

Everyone is going through something or has been through something in some way shape or form, relative to their baseline experience of the world. We can't discount or rank people's experiences. My genuine belief is that we all have a duty to look out for one another when and where we can. We can't help everyone. But, if we all try to help someone, no-one misses out.

It isn't entirely silly for you to think we have blind-spots. We all have blind-spots. And, there isn't anything wrong with that if we're willing to be self-aware and identify them, so we can work towards fixing them.

Haha I appreciate you assuming the role of mind-reader, but, as we've unpacked, the complexities of eating disorders are not within my scope to educate on. So. it's not something

we'll consider. We do have a short section in our nutrition coaching course, however, that touches on eating disorders and the fact that they should be referred out to the appropriate professionals.

You're welcome, Verene. And thank you for being up-front and honest.

Look forward to seeing you when I get back!

Thanks  
Thomas

On Mon, 22 Apr 2024 at 20:30, Verene Sarter <[verene.sarter98@gmail.com](mailto:verene.sarter98@gmail.com)> wrote:

There's no easy way to start this, so I'll just say... I cannot express how grateful I am for your reply.

I'm glad I'm wrong. And I don't know if you'll ever be able to grasp how much I appreciate you understanding my approach, and not taking offense. I sincerely meant none, and you believed me.

You're definitely aware of eating disorders, and painfully so.

Regarding myself; I hadn't thought until recently to see a psychologist. I've been repeatedly let down by psychologists and similar professionals (guidance counsellors mostly) from the age of 7. I didn't realise I have a blindspot with seeking psychological help for my eating disorder. It's not the reason I started seeing one. I've brought it up with him, so we'll go over it eventually. I still distrust therapists wholeheartedly. I click with this one, and I'm an adult now, navigating the system. This is definitely not what you want to hear, but if I didn't already have my psychologist, I would never take you up on your offer of suggesting psychologists to me, because I just don't trust them. I trust my psychologist, but I do not trust psychologists. This is the first time I've ever articulated that so succinctly. I just broke my own heart lol. I've been through some things. Things people generally think only happen to women, because of a lack of physical strength. We're easily overpowered. And I processed it entirely on my own. This go it alone attitude is something I might share with Ali.

She said the way she recovered from her eating disorder was by doing a complete 180 on the restriction. She said she used to eat ice cream for breakfast, until eventually those foods no longer had power over her, they lost their appeal, and she settled somewhere in the middle between bingeing and restriction. And she stopped purging.

After reading your reply, I asked her about the woman who reached out to her. Turns out it's actually a guy. The language she used made me think it was a woman. I asked her if they ever got professional help, and she said she only helped them as a friend. She asked me why I was asking about him, and I told her it had been playing on my mind for months, because I'm just sensitive (which is true, it's the main reason I don't watch movies, shows etc.). Her response confuses me, but now I can see she doesn't see the value in psychological help with eating disorders either (I'm starting but it will take time). She seemed to interpret herself as the professional who would help. It doesn't sound like anything else happened. I don't know what to make of this. It doesn't change my opinion; I still believe you and by extension your nutrition staff are doing everything that you can do, right. I understand where nutritionists and APDs now fit in the 'treatment plan', if you want to call it that. Rachelle is doing her job perfectly. She helped me as much as her scope of practice dictates.

It breaks my heart reading about your eating disorder and Megumi's. It's devastating to think about how many other people I know who have gone through the same things as us. Ali. Dana. I believe Bridget is another. I'm sure there are others in the gym we don't know about. I guess we find something in strength training that acts as a guiding light.

I can see your continual drive for improvement. It was silly of me to think you, or anyone who works for you, has any blindspots. And I suspect you've already thought about creating a course on eating disorders in strength athletes (before and/or after reviewing the course Megumi has completed), as you are a teacher at your core, which would explain your aptitude for developing systems. Which is a factor in your business' success. I believe that's pedagogy in some way; distilling and dispensing ideas. I promise not to blab about the course idea; I may have just read your mind.

Thank you Thomas for understanding my perspective and approach, and taking the time to provide complete clarity.

Don't worry, you don't have to respond to this.

Warm Regards,  
Verene

On Sat, Apr 20, 2024 at 8:11 AM Thomas Lilley <[thomas@zerow.com.au](mailto:thomas@zerow.com.au)> wrote:  
Hi Verene,

First off, let me say thank you for taking the time to articulate your thoughts and feelings around your experience. You can rest assured that you always have an open line of communication with us and that you will be heard. I know that broaching sensitive topics can be difficult, so I appreciate you being willing to be open and honest.

I want to begin by saying that I take any feedback on my brand, my staff and our services extremely seriously. And I want to follow that with the subject you've raised, and the language you're using is of an extremely serious and sensitive nature. And, as such, must be approached with the appropriate care, attention and, to a degree, caution. As you read through what follows, please understand I come to you with an open mind and heart filled with empathy, and that my end-goal with this communication is to provide you with the clarity you need, so that we can all move forward in a safe and respectful manner. Having said that, due to the serious comments you raised, the language I use at times is stern. Please do not take that sternness as threatening or defensive, but, rather, as a sign of respect that I hear the genuine voice in your language, and recognise the serious nature of the topic.

You may not know this about me, but I have a 4-year degree in health-science, majoring in nutrition, and worked for several years for the QLD Government as a community nutritionist, during which time I had contributed to published journal articles. Of course, through studying, the topic of eating disorders was covered. I also sat on the curriculum advisory panel for QUT for several years, and guest lectured, during which I developed relationships with practicing Dietitians, some of whom I know have gone on to specialise in eating disorders. And, to break from the character of my role at ZeroW and speak to you on a personal level, I experienced a diagnosed eating disorder through my mid-late teens, of which I am still very well aware of the impact on a day-to-day basis – so, not only do I hear you, I also feel you. (Okay, back in character). I say these things to let you know that what

follows in this email is not an opinion based on my feelings, but on the knowledge and experience gained through my life, studies and career/s.

Following your email and the points outlined within, I have gone through the entire line of communication between yourself and Rachelle, from your initial questionnaire to the weekly check-in form.

The first thing to touch on here is that the diagnosis, management and treatment of eating disorders is out of the scope of nutritionists and not only is it not the role of a nutritionist to attempt to diagnose or treat eating disorders, it would be irresponsible to do so. Accredited practicing dietitians can diagnose eating disorders, but should only really enter the picture of management and treatment of them after the psychological aspect as been addressed with a clinical psychologist. Nutritionists and dietitians, however, are more than qualified to work with people 1-on-1 in the pursuit of creating healthy and sustainable eating habits.

In your onboarding questionnaire, you raised concerns around your history with potential disordered eating patterns. You then made it clear that your primary goals were to change your relationship with food as part of recovering from your historical, disordered eating, and to lose weight. Rachelle immediately flagged this with me. I expressed to her that your goal through nutrition coaching was to look for a sense of true control (rather than the feigned control that those with eating disorders often have) and that education provides a healthy pathway to understanding what control looks like in the context of health and nutrition, which is a vital aspect of recovering from an eating disorder. That is, after all, our roles as nutritionists. We don't feed our clients by hand, we don't cook their meals, we don't do their groceries. No. Rather, we guide and nurture them to develop an understanding of how they can manage their *choices* for life. In all aspects of that sentiment, I believe Rachelle did a stellar job, and I'm sure if you review her communication with you, you'll agree.

See, it's common for individuals in your position to engage with nutrition professionals like us as part of seeking to manage self-diagnosed or undiagnosed eating disorders. One of two things generally happen; the client is successful and gets on top of the issue, or; the client comes to realise through the process that the issue is not to do with food and exercise, but, rather, psychological in nature. I believe from what you've expressed that you fit into this second category. There is no shame in this. You can find solace in the fact that you put your best foot forward, with an extremely well-educated and competent professional, and were unable to find what you were looking for. That will allow you to tick that box, and move on to a more suitable approach to managing your lifelong experience of disordered eating by knowing that it isn't because you are uneducated or unmotivated. I mean, you're one of the most consistent individuals in the gym. With the nutrition coaching process, you engaged fully in the process and genuinely tried. There is nothing wrong with YOU and your ability. There is something deeper that you or I or Rachelle or the best dietitian around cannot tap into, because we're untrained in doing so. That is the role of a psychologist.

You also may not be aware of this, but Meg suffered bulimia for over 10 years, and was in the throws of some of the worst of it when we first met. She has worked hard with the aid of psychotherapists, and has since completed courses in the area, which she has help further educate us in. I know the pain of dealing with it firsthand, as well as the long-term damage it can create. I've seen this more than once, and, if you'd find it helpful, I am happy to pass on some details of professionals who specialise in the field of eating disorders if you're open to it. There is a way out.

Whether you realise it or not, several of the points you've raised in your email (and I mean

this with the utmost respect) are gross misrepresentations of what happened in the coaching process. And, again, I encourage you to go back through the feedback spreadsheet with as unbiased view as possible. I refer to the following examples:

- To your point about telling you not to eat whatever you want being “irresponsible” – in fact, I believe this was the complete opposite, with Rachelle providing responsible advice. Logically, I’m sure you can understand that the concept of ‘eat whatever you want’ needs to be reined in, especially because it’s so open-ended.
- To your point about walking – Rachelle very clearly understood your compulsive tendencies around cardio, and provided a very clear time constraint of 15 minutes, which is extremely low impact, as well as helping you reframe it away from the concept of ‘cardio’, instead focusing on how it could benefit your training.

There are more examples, but that isn’t the point of this email. I’m not trying to argue with you, rather, I come with empathy and understanding, wanting to help you find the solution you’re looking for. One thing we all have to acknowledge and accept, despite whatever psychological label or condition we carry, despite our lived experiences, despite our trauma, despite our environmental conditions, despite everything – is that we are all responsible for our own choices. Had Rachelle told you to do any of the things you’ve listed along words such as irresponsible, I’d agree with you and disciplinary action would be taken. However, she acted in accordance with your direct requests, and within the boundaries of her understanding your psychology around nutrition. We all get to make our own choices.

Verene, again, with the utmost respect and courtesy, I need you to understand the gravity of your language and the impact it can have. To write this statement; “*she triggers us to regress to or develop potentially life threatening habits*” is not only inaccurate, but dangerous. I wholeheartedly and respectfully reject that statement, which is seemingly based on the preceding hearsay around this mystery client combined with the emotion invoked by your own experience of the process. What you’ve divulged there is extremely serious, and, if it’s true, gossiping about it is not the solution. The person needs help and quickly, and we need to be encouraging them and supporting them in getting that help as soon as possible. One thing I am absolutely certain of, is that IF it is true, it is not the direct result of the nutrition coaching process, but, rather the individual requiring psychological attention. Again, if you need the names of qualified psychologists who specialise in this area that you can then pass back down to this person, please let me know so I can help where I can.

I want to make myself clear in a non-threatening and gentle way – but to insinuate that Rachelle’s coaching is creating eating disorders is an extremely serious accusation, and even more serious when based on unverified whispers. If there is real evidence of this, I need to know. But, from my investigation, I don’t believe this to be true. Tarnishing anybody’s reputation in the gym with hearsay or untrue information, staff or not, is not something I’m able to tolerate, because it makes the gym unsafe for everybody.

Again, please don’t take my language as threatening. I’m not meaning it in that way. Rather, I’m expressing to you how seriously I take these matters, because providing a safe, enjoyable environment under my brand is my number one priority. Please understand that this is my genuine response to your heartfelt email, and a sensitive topic such as this is going to invoke serious conversation.

Now, while I do reject many of the sentiments and claims you’ve made against Rachelle, I am genuinely invested in any feedback. And, as such, your email has prompted immediate

discussion with her and my other nutrition staff and we will be going through a new course focused on eating disorders that Meg completed recently and found extremely valuable. We are committed to continuing to learn and grow so we can provide our customers with the best experience possible.

Eating disorders are extremely complicated and not even completely understood by the experts. The psychology behind them is complex and multifaceted. I believe you understand this, based on you saying that eating disorders are “mental illnesses with physical repercussions”. You came to us wanting to address the physical repercussions. And you agree that you developed better habits as a result of it. We are committed to helping you get the best outcome possible, so, once more, I am happy to pass you some names of professionals who may be able to help with the psychological aspect.

I truly and genuinely want to see you get the absolute most out of training and, as a conduit, life, and will help in the small ways that I can!

Thanks again, Verene. And thank you for the kind words about Phoebe – she did great!

Regards,  
Thomas

On Wed, 17 Apr 2024 at 22:11, Verene Sarter <[verene.sarter98@gmail.com](mailto:verene.sarter98@gmail.com)> wrote:  
Hi Thomas,

This won't exactly be a nice email to read, but hopefully it will be a helpful one. I thought it might be beneficial to you, the nutrition coaching, Rachelle, and the nutrition coaching course if I explained why I stopped the nutrition coaching with Rachelle.

I have an eating disorder history; never diagnosed, but purging anorexia fits well. I felt Rachelle didn't know how to address it. My goal when working with her, for the longest time, was to lose weight. Filling in her questionnaire, I told her about my relationship with food. This goal of mine, in itself, should've been a red flag. I'd told her I'd already lost 17kg; forcing myself into the 63s wasn't healthy and I feel she should've focused on improving my relationship with food instead, which was my second goal. We did agree to bulk eventually, but when I expressed my belief that I could eat whatever I wanted thinking I was free(r), Rachelle said that was not the approach to take because I would easily gain fat after losing so much weight. This put fear in me about gaining fat. As someone whose motivation behind her ED habits was the fear of gaining fat, this was a little irresponsible.

Before we agreed to bulk, when I wasn't able to shift weight by limiting intake, Rachelle suggested I add in some walks. People with eating disorders often have skewed relationships with exercise too. At the peak of my eating disorder in my teens, during the school holidays I would walk 25km every second day. The other day was a break. I would only walk 15km on those days. In these two-week periods I would lose 5kg. I only did this twice.

I told Rachelle I didn't know how to do cardio in moderation and that I was worried about going too hard at it. She didn't understand. I attempted to incorporate walks. I overdid it. I hurt myself on the treadmill three different times. I only tried three times.

I'm still physically recovering from what I did to myself when I was 14/15. I've had these habits to some intensity/degree since I was 12. I'm still struggling. I started physically recovering when I was 19.

My hair is only now starting to grow properly, I still have low blood pressure (presumably a

weak heart), I get chest pains, lightheaded easily, I still struggle to make myself eat sometimes, the thought of purging still crosses my mind.

I'm fortunate that I no longer have most of the behaviours I once had. But the mindset is still there. Ali knows a little of what I've been through (our motivations for our behaviours were different), and she has also dealt with her own eating disorder (bulimia fits for her, anorexia for me). Ali is open about her history. She knows what it's like. Which is why one of Rachelle's clients reached out to her, knowing her history, instead of Rachelle. She is keeping this from Rachelle.

What I'm about to tell you is information I'm not supposed to know. Please keep this between us.

Rachelle has a client who struggles to stay in her weightclass year round. Ali won't tell me who it is. I said I didn't expect her to tell me who it is. But I have my theory. Rachelle's client keeps struggling to get into her weightclass and stay there. In her weekly checkin with Rachelle, she tells her she failed. Rachelle's response to this, week after week, has been to restrict her calories further, and say "you'll get there next week". I remember this. It felt akin to toxic positivity and glossing over the facts. Rachelle couldn't meet me where I was. Luckily I'm stable enough I only ever thought about purging; I never actually went through with it, in response to Rachelle's feedback. This woman on the otherhand is now terrified of gaining weight. She has started to purge after eating; she is making herself vomit after meals. And she told Ali this, not Rachelle. She is developing an eating disorder under Rachelle's care.

Rachelle is an amazing sports nutritionist for people who have a healthy relationship with food and exercise. But for those who have distorted relationships with these aspects of our training and lives, she triggers us to regress to or develop potentially life threatening habits. Eating disorders are out of her scope of practice. She can't identify risk factors or read between the lines of her client's behaviour to suspect something is up. She doesn't realise her impact. Even when she knows about your eating disorder, like in my case, she still thinks it's purely physical; it isn't, it's a mental illness. The one with the highest mortality rate, especially in females 15-24 I believe.

Rachelle needs further education in eating disorders. There are short courses designed for allied health professionals to take. They're geared towards nutritionists, psychologists, social workers etc. I wrote everything above this, just to make that point. I hope you understand I felt the need to provide examples, and that you can eventually appreciate this feedback. I hope Thomas, that you have not taken offense. Rachelle is great at what she does, she just has a blindspot. And I mean that sincerely.

Enough of that. Please let Phoebe know I saw her confidence grow as the day went on at Queensland States. I guess this only works if she can put a face to a name. She might know who I am if you describe me to her. She was really shining in her role as head ref. She was very comfortable calling the commands a few hours in. She's turning into a very capable ref under your guidance. I held off on saying this so I would have something nice to say in this email. I mean it. I'm not pulling it out of thin air. I thought it might mean something if the observation/compliment came from someone unexpected. I want Phoebe to know she was nailing it as head ref and that she will become an increasingly competent major figure in the APL who can be entrusted with it and your legacy.

I'm sorry for the length of this email, and that I was so to the point about it when you just got back. And you're about to leave again. And I forgot to ask about Megumi. Say hi to her for me. I didn't get to ask you questions like "did you manage to train while you were travelling?" Because I'm sure that's fun to figure out. Should be easier this time regardless



of your most recent trip, as you're heading to the UK, meaning Wales. You have a gym there. No difficulties. You hope.

Thank you Thomas for getting through this slog of an email, enjoy your trip, hit the jet lag as hard as it hits you and please don't take offense to what I said about Rachelle. I hope this turned out well. I've been thinking about telling you this since Ali told me, which was possibly two months ago. A bit before I cancelled the nutrition coaching anyway.

Warm Regards,  
Verene

**Thomas Lilley** | Owner

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