Nourishing The Soul: Using Flower Essences For Eating Disorders
A Case Study by Debra Ann Barnes

Editor’s Note: Flower essences are used with great success in treating the emotional components of many eating disorders. Commonly affecting young women, the following case profiles flower essence therapy with a 16 year old in the formative stages of her eating disorder. Early intervention with flower essence therapy can have a remarkable and relatively speedy impact in such cases.

The following study was originally presented by Debra Anne Barnes as part of her FES certification program. Several sessions of counseling and flower essence therapy were discussed in much greater detail in the original version of her case presentation, and are summarized here.

Debra Ann Barnes, CSW, has worked in mental health counseling for 22 years, treating children, adolescents, and adults. She has a private psychotherapy practice in Altamont, NY, near Albany, and provides flower essence and homeopathic consultation in this context, as well as solution oriented and process oriented psychotherapies. Debra also teaches classes in self-esteem, goal setting, and dealing with stress to women’s career programs in local colleges. Having been involved in flower essences, herbalism, and homeopathy for 14 years, she has provided training in flower essences to the Capital District Homeopathic Study Group. Inspiration has led her to research and make new flower essences from her indigenous area. Debra may be contacted at debiam@juno.com.

Client Background

At the time this case was presented “RJ” (not her real name) was a 16-year-old girl starting her junior year of high school. She is a slender, graceful young woman of about 5’ 5”, who often dresses in bell-bottomed jeans, form fitting shirts in soft colors, and small silver earrings and necklaces.

RJ comes from a middle class family, in which both parents work, and lives in a suburban neighborhood. She is the older sister of another daughter, age 12. RJ is in her junior year of high school, and is an honors student. She is very active and is on student council, Key Club, and plays flute in the high school band. She attends church and is active in Messiah’s Messengers, a clown mime group. RJ is highly committed to ballet, taking lessons three days a week, and also practicing several hours on Fridays and Saturdays with the ballet school’s dance company. She maintains a close friendship network, and spends time on the phone, computer e-mail, and in various social activities with her friends. RJ strives to maintain high grades as well as stay involved in many extra-curricular activities.

Case Presentation

A very conscientious individual, RJ is careful to do things right and as well as possible. Very well mannered in public, I once saw her clap her hand to her mouth when I entered the room while she was saying something she thought was bossy to her mother. Her mother complained that RJ has been irritable with the family. She felt that this irritability was partly due to her stringent diet, and to her heavy schedule. RJ has been particularly critical of her younger sister, sometimes reducing her sister to tears. Mom is concerned that RJ has been cutting back her food intake in the last few months. She refuses to eat any fats, including mayonnaise, butter, or meat, and eats only small amounts at a time. She always has been slender, but has been particularly thin lately. Her parents set a weight limit: RJ needed to gain and maintain between 3-4 pounds, in order to continue on the ballet company. RJ has complied with that, but is very careful not to exceed that weight.

While RJ’s mother shares her worries that RJ works too hard maintaining so many activities, she also shows a gleam of pride about RJ’s accomplishments. Mom almost brags that RJ often stays up to
1:30 AM on school nights to complete homework after ballet and talking on the phone. The parents have disagreed about setting limits on RJ’s bedtime and phone time, and have ended up not setting any limits. They seem proud she does so much. Both parents have a keen interest in dance and are proud of her being in the ballet company. They all complain, however, that the ballet company is too rigid and strict. The company requires its girls to lose weight in order to be cast in a part, although RJ herself has never been asked to lose weight.

A year and a half ago, RJ was hospitalized for three weeks with acute appendicitis, which went undiagnosed for many months. After her illness, she had a home tutor for a few weeks before returning to school, meanwhile maintaining grades in the high 90’s. In order to give her time to recover, the ballet company would not allow her to dance for some months after her surgery. RJ and her parents protested this. When she was allowed to dance again, to their dismay, she was given a spot in the back line. Her mother commented that RJ looked pale and fragile in the recital.

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This year, several of RJ’s peers and friends in the ballet company dropped out because of the pressure of the company and lack of time to follow any other interests. RJ chose to stay in the company, but with some ambivalence. She had worked hard and wanted the chance to dance good roles in the ballet company. At the same time, she did not like the strictness and limits the company demanded.

RJ’s younger sister has a more complacent attitude toward life. She gets good, but not as high grades as RJ. She has declined to be in the ballet company, and chooses to do fewer extracurricular activities. RJ complains that her sister doesn’t know how to dress or do her hair. RJ says she can’t help but tell her sister what she’s doing wrong, and how to do it better.

RJ strives hard to accomplish her goals and wants to be viewed favorably by others. She makes food choices by examining labels of calories and fat grams rather than being in touch with her true physical appetite. She extends her critical attitude toward her sister in an attempt to mold her to make the same choices, the same “right” choices that RJ does. RJ appears to be somewhat fragile and low in stamina since the appendicitis. It is likely that she is also weakened by her dietary restrictions.

**Summary of the therapeutic work and flower essences used**

**Beech** was the archetypal remedy in my work with RJ, around which all of the other flower essences constellated. In the beginning session RJ expressed that she “did not want to be so controlling of her environment.” She had high standards for herself and perceived many imperfections in her sister, her parents, and in the food that she ate. With the use of this essence RJ became more relaxed about what she was eating and less hyper-attentive to picky activities like reading food labels. Her strong aversion to eating foods with fat content has softened during the therapy. RJ also began to see how critical and bossy she was toward her younger sister. At first it was a matter of “catching herself in mid-stream,” when critical comments were offered. Later this changed to positive activity, becoming much more friendly and supportive of her younger sister.

The Beech archetype that was strongly demonstrated in RJ has not only to do with her own internal soul dynamics, but also her family and her involvement in a ballet company. Her parents expected her to get high grades, to be active in many extra-curricular activities and to perform well in ballet. As well, the ballet company has rigid, high standards for attendance and performance and creates a highly competitive atmosphere.

**Manzanita** was an important essence at the beginning of therapy to help RJ come into a more physical relationship to food and to her body. RJ approached food from a mental outlook, measuring her portions carefully and scrutinizing labels and food contents. She shifted to eating more naturally, based upon her actual physical appetite.

**Self-Heal** flower essence was a significant catalyst in helping RJ recover from her bout with appendicitis. She initially appeared pale and weak, but developed more strength, vitality and muscle tone. Working in combination with Manzanita, Self-heal brought more physical presence and embodiment to RJ, with
noticeable increases in her energy level as well as appearance.

In the latter stages of her therapy, Walnut became an important stimulus for RJ. As she began to change her strong, self-imposed demands on herself, RJ questioned her commitment to the ballet company. She also wanted to be free of many of her parent’s expectations for high performance. Although she honored a commitment to stay with the company through the remainder of the year, she was able to eventually resign in a clear and firm manner. Her high school grades also dropped a few percentage points though they were still very high. RJ became more able to establish her own internal standards rather than striving in an unbalanced manner for those imposed upon her.

Wild Oat and Scleranthus were also used to assist the action of Walnut. RJ became firmer in her decisions, with a clearer sense of purpose. She quit a part-time job in favor of more relaxed social time with friends and even joined a new social group for Christian youth. She also actively explored future colleges which were of interest to her.

**Concluding Comments:** RJ has done much sorting and sifting of other people’s values: her own, her family’s, her ballet company, her job and her school. She is finding a level of responsibility that does not compromise her ability to enjoy life and to find meaningful social interactions with others. She is more self-accepting and comfortable with herself. This change is registered right down to her physical appearance. RJ glows now — she looks attractive and softly rounded rather than wan and angular. She transmits a physical presence of energy which is clear and focused. It has been a pleasure to see her flower!

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**Inner self-portraits tell a story of transformation**

Here we see that at the beginning of her therapy RJ sees herself as 90–95% pre-occupied with her diet, with a scant 5% of her thoughts for friends and family.

At the conclusion of her therapy, RJ now spends only about 10% of her time concerned with diet, and the rest of her time is divided among typical adolescent activities.