



Tough to Swallow

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Context Essay

Tough to Swallow is a playable, tabletop board game designed to replicate the experience of having an eating disorder (ED). The game uses glimpses of my experiences, both small and serious, to demonstrate the frustrating and non-linear journey of developing, having, and recovering from an eating disorder.

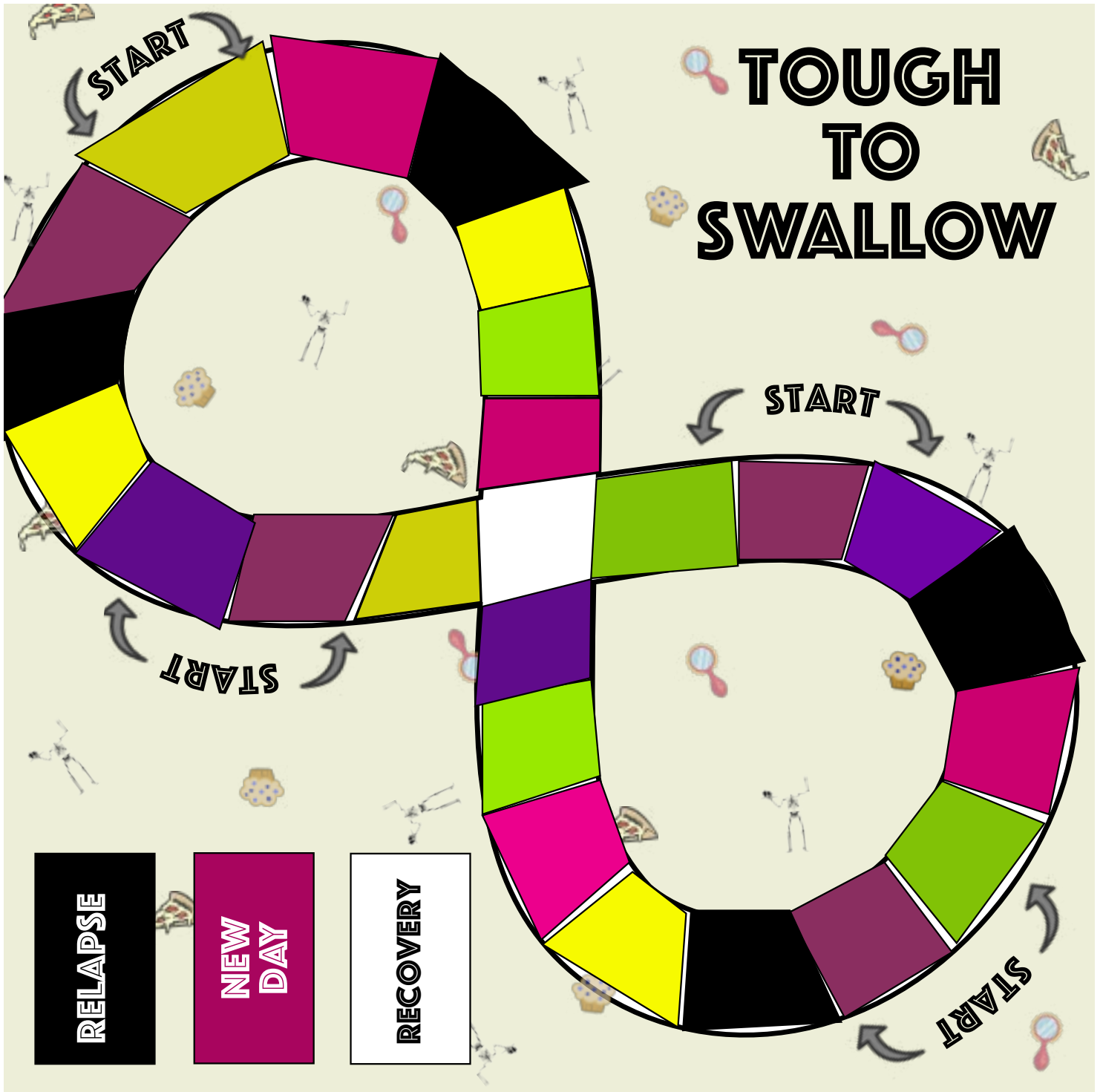
The game comes with playing cards, instructions, and a game board. To play the game, the player will use three card types: New Day (anecdotes from small, random moments from my experience), Relapse (anecdotes from moments I felt I had relapsed into unhealthy behavior), and Recovery anecdotes from moments I felt I had made genuine progress). The player will begin on any colored square, and follow the commands of the cards as they play. Each card will have a command, but the commands are confusing and contradictory (for example: “move 1 step forward, 3 steps back”). This is meant to simulate the disorienting and frustrating nature of EDs, and since the tiles on the board are shaped in an infinity sign, the player will feel trapped and unsure of how to win.

Tough to Swallow is more than just an artistic exploration of my relationship with my ED; its main purpose is to function as a real, playable game. The rules are coherent, the cards are comprehensive enough to perpetuate around 20 minutes of solo play, and the board itself is built to a regulation size. I imagine the board game sitting in the waiting room of a therapist's office, a health clinic, or on a high school's guidance counselor's desk. I can see it functioning as a tool that could help someone with an undiagnosed ED recognize their destructive behavior, as well as a way to build empathy between those who have an ED and their community who may not understand them. The ways in which Tough to Swallow violates typical board game convention does not affect its ability to be played in real time. If anything, these breaks from convention (single-player, circular commands, a lack of an ending) emphasize aspects of EDs that may be counterintuitive to those who are trying to understand it, whether it is they who are struggling with an ED, or someone they know.

While my first goal for this game was to build empathy between players by encouraging personal interaction, I also see Tough to Swallow as delivering an important and necessary message about EDs. I believe that the way the media often characterizes EDs does a disservice to those who actually struggle from them. An ED does not have to be late-stage bulimia or anorexia to be dangerous, and we as a culture should not wait until it becomes late-stage before intervening. Tough To Swallow's secondary function is to educate all of its players on the nuances of an ED, and show the range of dangerous behaviors as well as how they can escalate. I've had people tell me that because I was never hospitalized for my ED, that means it wasn't "real" or "serious." This kind of thinking perpetuates EDs, because it is exactly what I would tell myself when I was in my darkest place with the disorder. I hope this game can enlighten and change that line of thinking, and help those suffering receive the help they need from people who are willing to recognize that they need help at all.

I envision Tough to Swallow fulfilling both of the purposes I've mentioned above. I imagine some will read the instructions, my cards and look at the game and consider it from an artistic angle, forcing them to rethink how they define EDs and board games. From my experience with peers interacting with the game, I also believe that some readers may pick up a die and play a round or two, just to get a feel for my message. Both of these functions align with the purpose of the *RhetTech* journal—to use technology to communicate my message in the most convincing, effective medium possible.

TOUGH TO SWALLOW



NEW DAY



You run into your cross country coach from high school. She says “You were never heavy but wow have you slimmed down.” You feel amazing. You take selfies all day and skip dinner. Lose a turn.

NEW DAY



Your roommates come to you, concerned. One of them brings it up while the other is in the shower. You're surprised and embarrassed. You tell her you don't know what she's talking about. She says she loves you. You brush it off. But you can't stop thinking about that conversation. You choose to eat in the morning. Move forward 1 space.

NEW DAY



You've mastered splitting your time with different groups of people and telling them you ate with the other. No one suspects a thing. Skip to the next relapse square and then roll again.

NEW DAY



You haven't eaten all day. You drank coffee to purposely curb your appetite. You feel exhausted, but you're proud of your self-control. Move back 1 space but roll again.



NEW DAY

You come home from Spring Break and your mother rejoices about how skinny you are. She says “She didn’t gain the freshman 15, she lost the freshman 20!” to anyone who will listen. Skip to the next relapse square.

NEW DAY



You open up to your older brother about your eating disorder. You tell him you’re in therapy. You haven’t told your parents. He cries. He says its his fault. He says he’s sorry. You forgive him for what he has done and absolve him for what he has not. Move forward 3 spaces.



NEW DAY

You’re having a normal day and haven’t thought about your body much at all. You walk past a dark glass window, but you intentionally don’t look. Your heart races anyway. Move forward 2 spaces and back 1.

NEW DAY



You’re seventeen. You’re writing a story with an anorexic character. Your mother compliments how chilling and realistic sounding it is. You accept the compliment. You don’t realize yet that you’re writing about yourself. Roll again.



You're sixteen. You're googling "fat people" to see if you look like the images that show up. You pull on your stomach and your arms. You consider not eating for a couple of days. But then your dad calls you down for dinner. You eat, and you don't think about what you googled until you're in bed that night. You decide against not eating. Roll again.



You've just run six miles. The only things you've eaten today are unsalted baby carrots and a Chewy granola bar. You eat a banana. You feel light headed but mostly just light. Move forward 1 space but then lose your next turn.



You're having a normal day and haven't thought about your body much at all. You walk past a dark glass window, and catch a glimpse of yourself. You think you look skinny. You smile, and walk a little taller for the rest of the day. Move forward 3 spaces and back 4.



You're having a normal day and haven't thought about your body much at all. You walk past a dark glass window, and catch a glimpse of yourself. Your face turns red and you look away. You feel humiliated. Your skin weighs heavy on you all day and you wish there was less of it. Move forward 1 space and back 2.



You ate a sliver of birthday cake even though you promised yourself you wouldn't. You think about it for a week. Move back 1 space.

RECOVERY

You admit to yourself that you have an eating disorder. It's the hardest, scariest thing you've ever done. You admit that you want to change, even though part of you is so scared to let it go. You choose to write about it for a creative writing class. You choose to share it with your professor. Move forward 3 spaces.

RECOVERY

A work colleague mentions the free counseling sessions available at the counseling center on campus. You ask her how you make an appointment, and if you're allowed to talk about stuff that doesn't involve school. She shows you the website and gives you the phone number. Move forward 2 spaces.

RECOVERY

Its maybe your 10th time talking to your counselor. She asks about your most recent dysmorphic episode. You tell her. She asks what you know about your body. You think for minutes. You begin to cry. You realize for the very first time that you don't have an image of yourself that's grounded in reality. Move back 2 spaces but then take 3 more turns.

RECOVERY

You're planning on going clubbing tonight. You try on an outfit and step in front of the mirror. You're confused--you can't recognize what you see. You feel sick. You want to crawl somewhere dark and never be looked at again. You sit in your room and you grip your arms tight. You breathe. You change. You feel better. You choose to go out. You have fun. Move forward 5 spaces.

RECOVERY

You go home for summer break. At the family barbecue, you eat an entire burger. You only feel a little guilty. Move forward 1 space.

RECOVERY

You raise your hand to share your idea for this project with your capstone writing class. You say the words "eating disorder" out loud. Your heart pounds the whole time. You feel okay after. Move forward 1 space.

RELAPSE

You're getting dressed to go tailgating with your friends. You've been planning this all week and you're excited. Your roommate's in the other room when you make the crucial mistake of looking at yourself too closely in front of the mirror. You don't go out. You don't tell your roommate why. You cry and you cry and you cry until you feel as empty as you wish you looked. Move back 6 spaces.

RELAPSE

You haven't eaten all day. You realize this and you feel good. Move back 4 spaces.

RELAPSE

You're at work at a retail store. A woman approaches you and asks when you're due. You tell her you're not pregnant. You go to the back room. You sit on the floor. You sob. You don't eat for three days. Move backward 10 spaces.

RELAPSE

You buy a blueberry muffin for lunch. You can only eat half of it before you feel bloated and nauseous. You realize your stomach has shrunk so drastically that you can't even eat an entire muffin one sitting. You smile. You feel small and girly and pretty. Move back 8 spaces.

RELAPSE

You're stressed out. The world around you is unforgivably fast. You don't have time to eat, you rationalize, so you don't. You know that time isn't the reason. You don't eat anyway. Move back 2 spaces.

RELAPSE

You step in front of the mirror and tug on the zipper of your favorite skirt. It fits a little different. You feel your entire body go warm. Then cold. You don't remember collapsing, you don't remember slicing up your arms with tiny half crescent cuts. You lie on the tile floor of your bathroom. You try to make yourself throw up, but you can't. You hope your mom doesn't hear. Start over.

TOUGH TO SWALLOW

Do you intentionally go days without eating? Have you become obsessed with exercise and controlled by food? Will you fight to stay alive? Are you willing to recognize the need to fight at all?

Tough to Swallow™ is a tabletop single-player board game. Experience the terrifying thrill ride through the mind of an individual who has endured/does endure an eating disorder (ED), disordered eating (DE) and body dysmorphia. Feel the frustration of those who struggle to eat, not eat and over-eat every day. Each game lasts between 10-20 years, although some games may never end at all. Around 50% of the people who play report winning entirely, the vast majority of them purchasers of the Tough to Swallow™ expansion pack.***

Nearly 8 million Americans, (7 million women, 1 million men) have an eating disorder. These disorders develop overwhelmingly before age 20, and Anorexia Nervosa is 12 times more likely to kill a girl 15-24 than all other causes of death combined. But Anorexia Nervosa is only one side of the spectrum for EDs. Eating disorders are defined as irregular eating patterns accompanied by obsessive distress or concern with the body and body image. Almost all people who have had or do have EDs have also engaged in disordered eating. Disordered eating is characterized by many of the eating behaviors recognized in eating disorders, but with less frequency and severity.

While those with ED/DE are not always inflicted with body dysmorphia, and vice versa, the two are often linked. Body dysmorphia, or Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD), is a psychiatric condition in which victims are plagued with persistent and intrusive perceptions of imagined or slight flaws in one's appearance. These intrusive thoughts can become so frequent and severe that they can seriously diminish the quality of life for affected individuals. It is estimated to affect between 5-8 million Americans.

Follow the footsteps of a victim and survivor, and see if you can persevere through the confusing and tumultuous journey of being absolutely and totally controlled by food and your reflection. Recovery is possible, but it's not linear; it's messy and confusing and contradictory. When you play Tough to Swallow™ you're a winner with every roll and a loser only when you call it quits.

****The expansion pack is not included with this game, but may be purchased through talk therapy, enrollment in support groups and other forms of treatment. It includes: a larger board with 4 more "Recovery" spaces, 10 more "New Day" spaces and an exciting path that leads off the board--allowing the player the chance to truly win the game. Additional "Recovery" cards are not available for purchase, but may be earned through hard work, perseverance and getting the help you need. For more information, please call the National Eating Disorder Association helpline: (800) 931-2237 or visit their website at <https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org>.*

Sources: the Anxiety and Depression Association of America: <https://adaa.org/understanding-anxiety/related-illnesses/other-related-conditions/body-dysmorphic-disorder-bdd>, Eating Disorders Victoria: <https://www.eatingdisorders.org.au/eating-disorders/other-eating-disorders>, Mirasol Eating Disorder Recovery Center: <https://www.mirasol.net/learning-center/eating-disorder-statistics.php>

TOUGH TO SWALLOW

OBJECTIVE

To be thin, to be in control, to stay alive, to keep playing.

CONTENTS

- 1 Tough to Swallow™ board
- 1 Deck of “New Day” cards
- 1 Deck of “Relapse” cards
- 1 Deck of “Recovery” cards
- 1 Die
- 1 Personal Item to Serve as Token--the more precious, the better

PROCEDURES FOR BEGINNERS

Set out the Tough to Swallow™ board.

Shuffle all three sets of cards, “New Day,” “Relapse,” and “Recovery,” and place them in their designated spots on the board.

Using a personal token of your choice--a ring, a watch, a hair scrunchie, a collectable coin, a small toy, a pin, a bookmark, or other cherished knick-knack--begin on any colored square.

Roll a single die.

If you land on a colored square, select a card from the “New Day” pile and perform the action required.

If you land on a black square, select a card from the “Relapse” pile and perform the action required.

If you land on the white square, select a card from the “Recovery” pile and perform the action required.

Place all discarded cards at the bottom of their respective decks.

Reshuffle the cards as necessary.

The game ends when you are too exhausted to continue playing.