Hello everyone. My name is Dr. Cheri Levinson and I am an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences at the University of Louisville, the Director of the Eating Anxiety Treatment Laboratory, and a Licensed Psychologist and Supervisor at the Behavioral Wellness Clinic where I treat eating disorders and supervise therapists training in evidence-based treatments for eating disorders.

When I asked what to focus on in this speech, I was told to speak about something inspirational. I actually had a really hard time coming up with what to focus on, until I took some time to reflect on what inspires me to do the work that I do.

Frankly, the work that I do is hard. But everyone here knows that. You wouldn’t be here today if you weren’t aware of the destruction that EDs cause and the hard work it takes to stop them. EDs steal lives, end relationships, stop careers and schooling, and break up families. So what inspires me to keep fighting against EDs?

I came up with what I see as two, inseparable answers: science and people. Let me start with science. In my work I am lucky enough to have multiple roles that keep me involved in research, advocacy, and clinical work, all related to EDs. Over the past ten years, I have seen the impact that science has had in each of these areas. Every day I am involved with and learn about cutting edge research that has real impact on eating disorders. For example, (a) wide-scale genetic research has found that anorexia nervosa is not only a psychiatric disorder, but also a metabolic disorder, changing the way we think about AND (b) we are discovering how people’s brains with EDs respond differently to food and body cues, and (c) we are learning that EDs share many of the same causes as do OCD, schizophrenia, and anxiety disorders. This research is important because it helps us understand that EDs are biologically-based illnesses, just like cancer or diabetes.

Science also improves our ability to advocate for change in our community. The Body Project is a prevention program for EDs, that cuts down on the development of EDs by about 30% (that’s huge!). This prevention program has over 30 years of scientific research behind its development and dissemination. As many of you may know, the Body Project is being rolled out in our community, both at a high school and soon across UofL’s campus. This means that we will have fewer EDs in Louisville. Science also helps us advocate for better treatment. Research that shows that weight is not a good standard to define recovery, which is pushing insurance companies to no provide care regardless of weight and to stop cutting off treatment because of weight. Right now my colleagues across the world are developing standards for treatment centers based in research that will help more individuals access treatment for lower costs and encourage treatment centers to publish outcome data so the public can see how effective the treatments are that being provided.

All of this is progress is fantastic, but the entire point behind the science of eating disorders is to improve treatment. This brings to me to how science is helping the people we care about. Right now, as we speak, researchers are working on developing and disseminating new treatments that are based in science. Here is just a selection of these treatments: there are new couple-based treatments for AN, BN, and BED, there is a new family-based treatment for avoidant restrictive food intake disorders, there are new technology based and online treatments that can reach people who can’t normally afford or access treatment. In our laboratory, right here in Louisville, we are figuring out the individual symptoms that maintain eating disorders. This means that we can personalize treatment for each individual, using data, to disrupt eating disorders so people can reach full recovery and not relapse.

But here’s the bad news. We also know from science that too many people are not receiving scientifically based treatments. We need greater access to empirically-valid treatments in Louisville. We also know that in many cases even these treatments don’t work. Current treatments for EDs are not good enough. Too many people continue to suffer, too many people relapse, and too many people never fully recover. We need the science I’ve talked about to push us forward. In the same way treatment for cancer advances because of science, we need to demand the same for ED treatment. We need to raise our standards so that the people we care about receive effective, scientifically grounded treatments because the people who suffer from EDs and their families deserve this.

Now, this brings me to my second point of inspiration. People. Science and people are inseparable. Science would be nothing without the people behind it. And what inspires me as much as science, are my clients, my research participants, my colleagues, my students, and every single one of you here. There is so much work to be done and we can’t do it without people. But the good news is, that every day I have conversations with people, many of you who are here, many who are across the world, but all who care about changing society and the treatment of EDs for the better. This inspires me.

Because each and every one of you here cares and are already doing huge things to move us forward just by being here. The first step to change, after all, is awarenss. And the even better news is, that you don’t have to be trained as a scientist to do huge things. You just need to care and you just need to ask questions. So my challenge for you is to go out in our Louisville community and ask questions like a scientist. Questions such as “How can I educate our society about EDs?”, “What can I do to help our legislators understand the impact EDs have on our community?”, and “What does science say about this treatment I am receiving?”

This may seem like an overwhelming task- but I see it happening across the globe every day and I know that with the number of people here who care about our community we are capable, willing, and able to rise to this challenge.