

My story of struggling with Anorexia

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What is Anorexia?

Anorexia is a disorder of feelings. The person tries to cope with how they are feeling by not eating or restricting their food. It is a tricking, lying disease. It promises you great things at the beginning such as: I would be skinny which would make everyone love me and have lots of friends, happiness and success, and that I would look pretty. It is devious and cunning. So cunning in fact THAT sometimes you don't even realise that it's taking over you. It blocks out all your realistic thinking and your conscience.

I myself know that if you don't eat enough it can have negative effects on your health. But to me, anorexia is like a cloud or a thick fog. It comes and blocks out everything around me; my conscience and realistic thinking, my knowledge of right from wrong, and everything around me, so that it has complete control over me. It starts telling me what to do, what I'm allowed to eat, and when I'm allowed to eat (which is hardly anything for the whole day). It puts me down. It tells me that I'm not good enough, THAT my friends only like me because they feel sorry for me, that I am not smart enough for school so that there's no point even trying, and that my goals and dreams are unachievable. It twists people's words.

One day, I visited my Granddad who I hadn't seen for a few months, and over these past couple of months I had gained weight. He told me that I was starting to look good. Anorexia told me that I was getting fat, and that I needed to lose weight. It tries to isolate me from my family and friends; it knows that they are trying to get me better; it has less of a chance of me listening to its voice when they are around. By isolating me, it has full control over me. Anorexia has no real future for me; IN FACT, it's goal is to eventually kill me, but it does not tell me this,. Instead it promises me happiness and a better life. This is a big fat lie. All it does is make everything worse.

It affects the relationships with your family and friends; it causes a lot of tension, stress and unnecessary arguments in your family. It makes your relationships worse because everyone doesn't understand the extent of what you are going through. They think that all I need to do is put food in my mouth and I will be cured. THIS in turn produces a lot of frustration and anger. Anorexia tries to ruin these relationships because it knows that my friends and family are trying to help me get better, which it doesn't want to happen. It's so devious that WHEN IT is isolating you and ruining your relationships with people, you don't even realise that it's happening until it's too late.

By isolating me, it has full control over me. This is when it plans what you can eat, when it puts you down and rages at you if you've eaten something it considers as "bad" (e.g. a chocolate bar). It's very particular about what you're allowed to eat. It makes extremely harsh rules. It allows me to eat fruit and vegetables but it doesn't like milk, dairy foods, and meat; and it doesn't like me eating carbs, unless they are wholegrain.

Getting weighed is hard for me; this is when it's hardest for me to ignore Anorexia's voice. If I have put on weight, it gets angry at me, and I mean really angry, and it tells me I'm a failure and that I need to try harder. If I have lost weight, it congratulates me and tells me to keep it up. At this time, it has a stronger voice than the people around me who are giving me different messages. It tries to prevent me from achieving my own

goals. It is a very harsh disciplinarian. If I sit still, it yells at me : “You should be doing exercise to work off your last meal”. If I don’t exercise, it starts telling me how much I should reduce the amount I will be allowed to eat at the next meal. While I value kindness, caring, and my family and friends, Anorexia doesn’t care for any of these things, or my future or goals. It is selfishly and ruthlessly trying to destroy my life. That’s it’s only goal.

What the person themselves can do

Even though it may be hard with Anorexia’s voice telling you not to listen to what anyone else says, you must try to listen to what people are telling you, and realize and accept that you do have a problem.

At first, when people kept telling me I was Anorexic, I said: “Oh no, I’m just trying to lose weight, I’ m not Anorexic! Anorexic people don’t eat”. This was Anorexia tricking me into thinking that there was nothing wrong with me. It offered me promises of slimness and success. I found it hard when I first went into treatment, because I was adamant I didn’t have a problem. When in fact it was Anorexia tricking me into thinking I did not have a problem.

While I was in denial, treatment didn’t work; I did not make any progress in getting better. It takes a while, but you have to do a bit of self-realization. When I looked in the mirror I thought I looked normal. I couldn’t see that I was too skinny. Lots of different people, people I hadn’t seen for a long time told me not to lose any more weight because I was looking way too skinny. This is one of Anorexia’s biggest tricks. It altered my perception of what I looked like, making me think that I looked normal, so this would encourage me to lose more weight. Even at my lowest weight, when I weighed x kgs., I still could not see for myself how skinny and emaciated I looked. Anorexia made me want to lose more weight. But thankfully one day I thought to myself - “Why are all these people telling me that I am too skinny when I feel fine? There must be something wrong here”.

I then started comparing what I was eating to other people, and realized it was a hell of a lot less compared to everyone else. I then suspected that I did have anorexia, and when I went to the doctor, that confirmed it. Having to hear from somebody else that you are anorexic was the most frightening and scariest moment of my life.

I didn’t know much about it, but the little I did know was that anorexic people don’t eat and they die young. I didn’t want to die, but the possibility that I could die scared the hell out of me. Mum and Dad did some research, and pointed out that I pretty much had all the symptoms: loss of periods, reduced body temperature (I was so cold all the time), increased hair loss, changes in colour and texture of my hair, nails and skin, and excessive hair growth on the body. Paradoxically anorexics are often obsessed with food, and feel a need to cook, or study recipes or menus. I would make sure I went with mum every time we went grocery shopping. I would read all the food sections in magazines, cut out all the recipes, and stick them in a folder. I would try and persuade mum to let me cook dinner most nights, and on the weekend I would do lots of baking.

When they pointed out that I had most, if not all of the symptoms, this was a moment of realization. I felt ashamed of myself and scared.

You've got to really want to try to get yourself better; otherwise you won't make any progress, and will fall deeper into the grips of anorexia. You realize that you can't do this by yourself. Anorexia told me I could get better by myself. I tried but I couldn't. I needed help. You need to work out some sort of treatment. My doctor recommended a psychotherapist, but this didn't work for me. Anorexia didn't want me to get better and made me not co-operate or try whenever I went to my sessions. Looking back, it wasn't that bad, but anorexia made me see it another way.

Letter to Anorexia

Dear Anorexia,

First of all, I'm going to start with how I wish you never came into my life. You were so cruel, preying on me as a young vulnerable teenage girl who was insecure about the way she looked. You lied to me; you promised me many things that I could only dream of. And the sick thing about you is that you made me believe you. You turned me from a lovely girl into a zombie. You made me starve myself. Do you know how that made me feel? Having to sit there and watch everyone else eat, while my tummy continuously rumbled. You made me turn down people whenever they offered me food. You made me exercise excessively, and put me down when I put on weight. You made me shove food into my mouth until I was full, and then you made me throw it back up. That is sick. How could you do this to me? You told me you were my friend. No friend of mine would make me do that to myself. I hate you so f..... much. If you were an object, I would have disposed of you so violently that there would be no remains left. Not even any ashes. You caused me to miss out on so many opportunities in my life over the past couple of years. I could have passed NCEA with excellence if you didn't have me under your grips. I would've still been playing lots of sports. I could've finished my modeling course. There are so many things that I could've done better if you did not exist. You f..... ..hole! What gave you the right to take all this away from me? Nothing. ABSOLUTELY F..... NOTHING. You are so sick that you had to trick me all the time, just so that I could listen to you. You're pathetic. You're the lowest of the low. You almost took my life last year. You nearly tore my family apart. You took all my friends away from me. But you chose the wrong person to mess with. Did you really think that you could take away the three most important things in my life? I feel sorry for you because you thought you could. My life has so many good things worth living for, and I won't let you take that away from me. My family are the best family in the world and I love them to bits. Neither I, nor any of them, are going to let you take them away from me. You took my friends away from me. You nearly won. But I've sprung back you motherf....., and I have a group of friends that will beat you're a.. to a f..... pulp . And I've got the friends back that you took away from me, so you wasted your time. In fact, I have more friends now than I did before, so shame in your face you f..... c...! You nearly got me again this year. You tried to make me lose weight again. You started to make me do badly at school. But you know what? I've got news for you. YOU'RE NOT GOING TO WIN! You have no chance. I know all your tricks now; you can't fool me. You think you're the s..., but you're actually not. You've lost already. How does it feel? Good? Well I feel F..... FANTASTIC. I'm winning this already, and do you know what?? I am ALWAYS going to win from now on. You can't fool me with your sh.... little tricks. I know every single one of them now, and I'm not going to put up with them. SO you know what? How about you JUST F... OFF AND NEVER COME BACK. No matter how hard you fight back, I'm going to fight back a million times harder. That's how much I want you out of my life. I'm going to do well in my externals. I'm going to get into nursing at university. And nothing, not even you, is going to stop me from achieving this. I'm going to have the most amazing time with all my friends. My family and I are going to have so many happy times together from now on. I'm going to live a long happy, healthy life. I'm going to be the best nurse I can be. I'm going to be a good wife and mother. And do you know what the greatest thing is? None of these things include you. Yeah that's right; I have no room for you in my life anymore you f..... devious little shit. The sooner you go, the better. You're going down. AND I MEAN BIG TIME. I F..... HATE YOU SO MUCH, WORDS CANNOT DESCRIBE. It's NOT been nice knowing you. Have a bad f..... life, you piece of shit, and I never want you back again.

In all anger, frustration, honesty and hatred of you anorexia.

From Ashleigh.

Anorexia-By an Anorexic's Mother

It took me quite a few months to realize my daughter was anorexic .I realized that she had lost a lot of weight, but when people started talking to me about her weight, and that

she was looking gaunt, I started to see some alarming signs. Yes she was looking gaunt and had a lot of trouble keeping warm, but the final straw was when we caught her vomiting up her meals. We had various talks about Bulimia and she promised never to do it again. Well, we believed her- but as we soon learnt Anorexia made her lie constantly to us, and sure enough she was caught vomiting yet again.

That was the first time we took her to our doctor. He confirmed she had Anorexia. It felt like someone had hit me over the head. My first feelings were that of guilt. How could I, as her mother, not be aware she was starving herself or when she did eat (and she binged) she vomited it up secretly? She became very good at disguising the vomit smell, and cleaning up after it.

People blamed me - that I wasn't a good mother, to allow my beloved daughter to succumb to the grips of Anorexia. We took her to a psychotherapist. She did not cooperate in these sessions. We took her to a psychiatrist. She was again uncooperative, and the psychiatrist told us she had become Anorexic, to rebel against the control we had over her life. We did not feel we were over controlling- in fact she had a lot less control than her older brother and sister had experienced.

We were very much in despair. Our beautiful, happy go-lucky, intelligent daughter had completely changed her personality. She would not eat, she would not co-operate, and she looked at me with black eyes with complete hatred in them. She told me she didn't care about us, or herself, and she wanted to die. I had to physically help her out of her room, but she would hit me and dissolve into tears and lie in the fetal position.

The family had had enough. They wanted her to go to either hospital or a home. But I would not give up. She nearly broke up the family. But still I would not give up on my beautiful daughter. The only time she really came through for me was either when I broke down in tears, or she hit me so badly she would wind me.

I began to do research. I thought there would be a quick fix. You cannot fix Anorexia quickly-that was a very hard lesson I had to learn. I obtained modules from an eating disorders clinic, and started to work through these with her. She was still uncooperative, but still I persisted. We then got into a book called "*Mom, Please Help*". We started exercises that were set out in this book. (The book was written by an Anorexic's mother). As a result of this book, I learnt that sending her to hospital/home for Anorexics would not help her. Neuroplasticity would. We drew up a dream board. We saved money and planned what she would wear to the Yr13 ball. We started to draw up and re- identify who she was as Anorexia had taken away her identity.

Finally, at Christmas time, she changed to a new group of friends. She started to become happier mentally, but sank to x kg- well over a x kg weight loss. Over the last 8 months her friends have helped her to ignore Anorexia's voice, when she is with them, and her friends encourage her to eat lunch. This is a great help and has really assisted her.

With the help of a nutritionist, Averill, the counsellor at her high school, who is kind, patient and understands what Anorexia has done to her. In the therapy sessions I do

with her from the book "*Biting the Hand That Starves You*", Ashleigh has turned the corner. She has finally obtained the mental strength to write Anorexia a letter, expressing her moral outrage at what Anorexia has taken away from her, and is determined to rid herself of this crippling eating disorder. She is re-identifying herself, her views, beliefs, dreams and goals. She is eating good regular meals, and is almost at x kg. We are teaching her the skills to fight anorexia, by disengaging from and critiquing Anorexia's voice.

We are not out of the woods yet-but we've come a very long way from the depths of August 2009 when she wanted to kill herself. She is now working hard on studying for exams as she desperately wants to become a nurse. I hope with all my heart that she becomes a nurse as she would be an outstanding nurse. She has the patience and caring nature that a good nurse needs, and after going through this journey, she can perhaps add extra perspective to younger patients, especially ones with eating disorders.

She still has to be careful and conscientiously eat her 3 meals a day and morning and afternoon tea, and alcohol does not mix well with an eating disorder. She is learning to restrict this to an occasional drink when she goes out, as this can take away her sense of responsibility. But we have come a very long way in the right direction. I am pleased to say she is present for 90% of the time now, and Anorexia's voice is becoming smaller. I can recognize when Anorexia's voice comes out of her mouth, and I promptly tell it that I don't want to speak to it; that I only wish to speak to her. To all parents of Anorexics, I learnt from my research that is not the parents' fault, and you should not feel guilty.

Research Matter that greatly helped us:

"Biting The Hand That Starves You" by Richard Maisel, David Epston and Ali Borden.

Inspiring resistance to anorexia/bulimia.

"Mom Please Help"- By Karen Phillips and DR Irina Webster MD.

www.womenhealthsite.com

Modules on Overcoming disordered eating.

Centre for Clinical Interventions

www.cci.health.wa.govt.au

Therapy

When I was diagnosed with Anorexia, I was referred to a psychotherapist by my GP. I didn't find it helpful, but that was because Anorexia wouldn't let me co-operate. I was still in denial so I think it was too soon for me to go. She got me to answer questions and draw pictures. I couldn't see the point of drawing the pictures for homework. I would have to do modules for homework from a site of the internet each week. I found these useful as I found out a lot about Anorexia. I think it would have been helpful if I had been more co-operative. I guess it kind of helped me to accept that Anorexia was a part of my life. I went to my psychotherapist for about 2 months, but there wasn't any progress. Mum took me back to the doctor who sent me to a psychiatrist. I didn't find her helpful one bit. All she did was ask me questions about my childhood. I got nothing from it. I don't think she was the right person for me. She never explained how she was helping me. She just asked me questions I couldn't see the point of. After this, I went to EDEN. The lady explained what it was, and what they do. Anorexia didn't like it there, and it made me not want to go back. Mum got a book from the internet called "*Mom Please Help*". I found the section on creating an identity useful, as Anorexia has robbed me of my identity. My doctor sent me to a nutritionist. She tried getting me to eat breakfast, morning tea, Lunch, afternoon tea and dinner. I found this task very challenging to try to cope with this, as Anorexia didn't like it one bit. She gave me different alternatives of food I hadn't thought of before. It made me realize how important it was for me to eat a healthy balanced diet, so that my body is being supplied with all the essential vitamins and minerals that it needs to function. The first couple of sessions with my nutritionist were not good, because she told me if I lost anymore weight she would admit me to hospital. This gave me motivation to try because I didn't want to go to hospital. We made weekly plans of what I would eat and this made me want to try, as I got to choose everything I ate. This meal plan of eating little and often made it easier for me, as it wasn't too hard on my shrunken stomach. But now I haven't seen my nutritionist in a couple of months and this has made it more of a struggle for me. Each time I had a session with her she would point out to my parents that eating lots of fruit and vegetables, nuts and seeds, low-fat milk (as it has more calcium), beans (e.g chickpeas and kidney beans) and having at least one vegetarian meal a week is good for me. She would also point out that any food, no matter what type of food it is, will put on weight if you consume more energy than you burn off. Not having regular visits to her has made it mentally and emotionally harder for me. This is because my parents and family forget what the nutritionist said, so whenever I have a healthy meal (e.g sushi or fruit), they tell me that I'm not trying, and that what I have eaten was nothing. I find this very upsetting as they have no idea how hard I am trying to even eat a meal or a snack. When they say things like this to me, it feels like they are putting me down. Also, when the nutritionist has told me my goal weight that I need to get to, I have recently been maintaining 0.5 kg over this goal weight, but my parents are still not satisfied, and keep

expecting me to put on more weight . In order to help me get better, I need support, a huge amount of it, and I rely mainly on my family for this. Yet when things like this happen, it feels like each of them don't appreciate or care how far I have come as they keep pushing me, which shows that anything I have done is not good enough. This makes me feel terribly alone and results in Anorexia having more control over me. In order to fully recover, I need my family and friends working with me 100%. I need them to support me, not mentioning my weight or eating unless it is necessary, not having them put me down whenever I've eaten something healthy, and to eat the same or similar meals with me some of the time, to help me not feel left out, and for them to show me that they are really proud of my efforts that I am putting in. After recently joining a gym and going to gym classes with some of my friends, I have found that I have progressed quite a bit. By going to the gym it has made me feel stronger and more confident in myself, and gives me the opportunity to work up an appetite, which I have found has got me enjoying eating my food.

What friends can do to help.

Watching your friend continually isolate and starve themselves must be very hard on the friends of the person with Anorexia. If they realize something is wrong and their friend isn't eating, they must try to understand that it is not easy for the person in the group with Anorexia. They are not themselves, and they are going through a very stressful time. It is anorexia that is doing these things. Anorexia takes over the person's mind and tells them what to do. It controls you, and the person doesn't realize that it is happening. It is a ruthless disease and sets up very strict and demanding regimes of starvation and exercise. Anorexia tells them to isolate themselves and to not join in conversations. I remember I used to take a book to school, and sit there at lunchtime and read rather than talking to my friends. If friends try to get you to eat, Anorexia gets angry, and makes up excuses (usually the excuses aren't true... Anorexia lies). Anorexia doesn't just try to trick friends, it also tricks the person it has in its grips. For example, it might say at lunchtime: "If you don't have lunch, you can eat dinner", then at dinner time it tells you to eat as little as possible- It doesn't keep to its promises. Going out as a group and doing fun things helps. Anorexia doesn't like fun, so this gives the person a rest from Anorexia. Try to be understanding and supportive, and make sure you know everyone in the group is there for them if they need it. Give them compliments to help the person feel better about themselves- things like " You have such a good personality", "You are so caring", "you are really such a beautiful person on the inside and out". Compliments should not be around how thin the person is. Do little things so the person knows they are valued as a friend, e.g send texts with nice messages, write them a little note so the person doesn't feel alone and knows they are loved. When the person makes an effort to eat, let them know you are proud of them. Texting is a good way to do this. Make sure the person feels included all the time. Anorexia loves it when the person feels left out, as it gets a tighter grip. Challenge ideas about perfectionism. Help them to realize no one is perfect. Don't have conversations that focus on the way you or others look. Anorexia is different for every person. It plays different tricks on each victim. Try to help expose the tricks for what they are. Although Anorexia operates differently for different people it has the same goal To starve the person to death.