

in the eye of a hurricane

How does a bright, happy and chubby 13-year-old turn into a 14-year-old anorexic? This is a deeply personal account written by a 15-year-old school girl from Johannesburg.

They say anorexia is a disease, simple as that. But it is so much more than that. For the past two years I have been battling a demon inside of me, which has controlled my mind and many of my actions. This demon controls many females and males of all ages all over the world. No two cases are exactly the same and all anorexics are completely different. However if my story can give any insight into this disease, this demon, this battle, well then here goes:

before it started

I grew up as a bubbly child in a loving family. My parents are happily married and I have one older sister whom I absolutely adore. Growing up, I had no intense problems or issues. I have always coped extremely well in school and have always had friends. Like most children, though, I ate a lot of fast foods, sweets and chips. This combined with my lack of exercise made me overweight. My sister and I were both incredibly 'chubby'.

It was for this reason that, when I was 10 years old, my mother took my sister (who was 13 at the time) and me to a dietician. My sister, who was about to enter her teens, was extremely keen on the idea of going to a specialist to help her control her weight. I did not like the idea of having someone tell me to stop eating the foods I loved because eating food made me happy. My sister began losing weight immediately and ate all the 'right foods', while I remained overweight. We would go for check-ups on a regular basis and I would sit and watch my sister be congratulated while I sat back and got the patronising 'well tried' treatment.

As my teenage years approached I began to envy my sister. She was absolutely beautiful in every way, she was smart and she constantly had both girls and boys around her (going to an all-girl school meant that having boys as friends was a really big deal).

the decision to change

I am an incredibly tall girl (almost 1.71m) so my large mass was not seen as particularly strange to anyone. By the time I was 13, though, I weighed almost 73kg and I was steadily growing bigger. All my friends were small and dainty so I felt quite lonely as the 'large' one in the group. There were many factors that changed my mindset and no real

'defining moment' when I decided to lose weight, but somewhere around December 2006 my mind was made up. I was *going* to lose weight and I was *going* to be thin, gorgeous and pretty like my sister and my friends.

enter the demon

Like most teenagers, I did not have a very easy transition into high school. I lost my best friends along with all my confidence. I was the 'nerd' of the class and did not fit in. I would go home every night and cry myself to sleep. In order to get back control of my life, I started working myself to the max. I took control of my schoolwork and my rowing (a sport I had started a year earlier), but most of all I took control of my eating.

I started my 'dieting' slowly: simply eating one less sweet a day or eating only one sandwich instead of two. This was healthy weight loss and I was congratulated by friends and family for my great 'new look'. I began to crave these compliments as they boosted my confidence. I began to eat even less and exercise even more! I started eating only fruit during the day and rowing many laps around the lake. I ate a little less each day and rewarded myself for every kilogram I lost. By May 2007 (at the end of rowing season) I had already lost over 10kg! The more weight I lost the more confidence I gained. This meant I was attracting more friends and boys. However, I seemed to think this was due to my loss of weight and consequently tried even harder to lose. I stopped eating during the day and drank tea and water and ate bubblegum in order to stop myself feeling hungry. I ate small breakfasts and even smaller dinners.

the diagnosis

After a trip to Europe in August during which I ate almost nothing, my parents took action! I was taken back to the dietician and diagnosed with anorexia. I had lost over 20kg in five months and my weight was still steadily dropping. I now weighed just 53kg!

I was sent to a psychologist and my mother booked weekly appointments with the dietician. Goal weights were set and meal plans were developed. However, none of this actually stopped me as I continued to lose even more weight. I never once followed the eating plan. I found ways to trick my mother and even tricked my dietician by drinking loads of water to fake my weight.

rock bottom

Very soon my body began to suffer. Without nutrients I became tired and weak. Rowing became very painful. I could not do simple things like climbing stairs without experiencing major pain. I was constantly grumpy and began sleeping during school break. I looked skeletal. My ribs stuck out on the front of my body and my limbs were tiny. I was now clearly anorexic by any measure and gossip began to spread. After a weigh-in of 49kg my mother went into absolute hysterics. I saw her cry for the first time in history. My father intervened and I was pulled out of rowing. It was after this that I decided I wanted to recover. But I never anticipated how hard that would actually be.

the recovery

One day at a time, I struggled against my mind, and often I was not successful. I struggled to bring myself to eat and often my friends and family would have to intervene. It took ages to put on simple kilograms! It is the small steps that count the most like simply eating a sandwich by myself or being able to say "I gained a kilogram" without feeling awful about it. Truly recovering is not the gain in weight or even a restoration of your own sanity. Real recovery comes through small victories. It was with the help of my family and all my friends that I began, very slowly, to recover.

did you know?

- 52% of girls start dieting before the age of 14.
- One out of three South African women suffer from an eating disorder.
- The most common onset period for anorexia is between the ages of 14 and 25.
- Although anorexia is most commonly associated with females, one in 10 anorexics is male.
- The death rate for eating disorders ranges between 18 and 20%.

Eating disorders are unfortunately becoming more and more common in our society. Increasing numbers of teenagers and adolescents are unnecessarily worrying about their weight.

The media may seem to be trying to combat the problem as many teenage magazines are seen to be 'educating' teenagers about the effects of these diseases. Yet these same magazines still use underweight and airbrushed models! How is this meant to send positive messages to the youth of our country?

resources

<http://www.recoveryspace.org/>

books

The Best Little Girl in the World by Steven Levenkron (Mass Market Paperback, 1989)

In and Out of Anorexia: The Story of the Client, the Therapist and the Process of Recovery by Tammie Ronen Ayelet (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2001)

The Golden Cage: The Enigma of Anorexia Nervosa by Hilde Bruch (Vintage Books, 1978)

The Thin Disguise: Understanding and Overcoming Anorexia and Bulimia by Pam Vredevelt, Deborah Newman, Harry Beverly and Frank Minirth (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1992)

Hunger Pains: The Modern Woman's Tragic Quest for Thinness by Mary Pipher (Ballantine Books, 1995)

Bulimia Nervosa and Binge Eating: A Guide to Recovery by Peter Cooper (New York University Press, 1995)

Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia by Marya Hornbacher (Harper Flamingo, 1998)

Making Peace With Food: Freeing Yourself from the Diet/Weight Obsession by Susan Kano (Harper & Row, 1989)

The Eating Disorder Sourcebook: A Comprehensive Guide to the Causes, Treatments, and Prevention of Eating Disorders by Carolyn Costin (Lowell House, 1997)

Anorexia Nervosa: A Guide to Recovery by Lindsey Hall and Monika Ostroff (Gurze Books, 1999)

Helping Your Child Overcome an Eating Disorder: What You Can Do at Home by Bethany Teachman, Marlene Schwartz, Bonnie Gordic and Brenda Coyle (New Harbinger, 2003)

The Parent's Guide to Childhood Eating Disorders: A Nutritional Approach to Solving Eating Disorders by Marcia Herrin and Nancy Matsumoto (Henry Holt & Company, 2002)

Help Your Teenager Beat an Eating Disorder by James Lock and Daniel le Grange (The Guildford Press, 2004)

Biting the Hand that Starves You: Inspiring Resistance to Anorexia/Bulimia by James Maisel (W. W. Norton & Company, 2004)

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