

My anorexia story



Recovery stories written by patients during 2023-2024 that have worked with the Eating Disorder Team, collated by Luisa Barclay

Cover drawing by Zuzanna, who's story is on page 7
All other photos for illustrative purposes only

With **all of us** in mind.

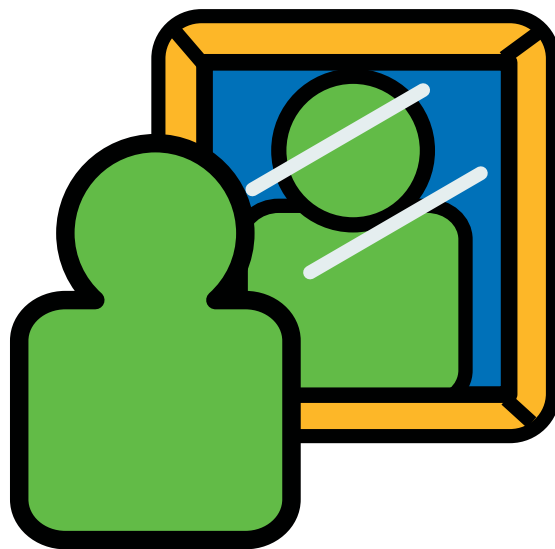
This booklet contains a collection of stories written by patients who have battled with anorexia and have successfully recovered.

As part of their reflections for their 'relapse prevention plan', they have shared insights on what helped them, what made the difference and the enlightening moments they experienced. These moments were sometimes brought about by therapy, discussions with family or a moment that they remembered that changed their perspective.

An extract from Tori's story illustrates a pivotal moment when cognitions and motivation for change shifted:

"Putting my swimming costume on was like a light bulb to me. I felt disgust and hated myself when I looked in the mirror. I hated the way I looked, I hated the way I sounded, I hated the way I felt. This time though it was different. I didn't think I was fat - I saw bones, ribs, hip bones, everything. It was like looking at an x-ray. I could see what everyone else could see. I felt embarrassed."

These remarkable young individuals have all shown incredible resilience in facing their challenges, and they are all motivated to contribute to others who are on a similar path. One account is from a mother, sharing a touching and heartfelt story that provides a mother's perspective and gives an insight about the relationship between eating disorders and autistic spectrum. These narratives aim to inspire others, showing that there is hope and that things can improve.



My anorexia experience

I can't remember the first time I realised that I had an issue with food and eating, but I always used to wonder how other people could eat anything that they want, like crisps and chocolate, without being afraid of gaining weight or getting 'fat'.

Even from when I was little, I always had a thought in the back of mind that I need to be cautious of what I eat. So, I guess it just got worse to the point that other people started to notice. My mum said that she first noticed signs of an eating disorder when I started to lose weight and when I started missing breakfast every day and having tiny portions. However, it wasn't just the eating signs that she noticed. It was the fact that I was starting to keep things to myself more, always in a bad mood, I often had headaches and my energy levels were very low.

My mum organised a number of doctor appointments and after a few visits, I was finally referred to the eating disorders team at CAMHS, where I was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa.

From there, I spent 4 months with my mum in family therapy where I was put on a diet plan and people tracked my weight. I had to eat so much more food than I normally would, and it literally felt like everyone was forcing food down me. I didn't realise that I was sick, and that they were only trying to get me better. I felt like the whole world was against me, forcing me to do things that I didn't want to do. But now I am so glad that they have because I wouldn't have been as well as I am today without all their help.

Because my weight was so low at that time, things that I enjoyed like exercise had to stop. There was so many lows at this point and I wondered if I would ever be better. For example, one day my mum said that I had to have a tiny yogurt for a snack, and I literally

had a mental breakdown over a yogurt. I only managed to eat a spoon full. I look back at that now and I think 'how did that even happen?' because it's only a yogurt. If I wanted a yogurt now, I would just have a yogurt. I think this is one of the most important things about recovering from anorexia, having food freedom.

After the 4 months in family therapy, I was sent to one-on-one therapy. At first, I found it really scary because I was afraid that my therapist would say that I have to do something that I found really hard, like when she said I have to eat ice cream every week (that was very scary for me). But I kept working really hard to try all the things that my therapist asked me to do, and after a while I started to get better with my food, and I felt more comfortable going there. We wouldn't just talk about food, it would be about anything that I thought could be improved, like my anxiety and stress. The appointments also helped other people who had to deal with living with someone with anorexia. For example, my dad started going to my appointments and now he has more knowledge about anorexia and how to deal with things when I am having a bad day. Now I am more comfortable talking with him about my eating because he understands.

Recovering from anorexia is the best thing that could possibly happen. It has made me enjoy things that I thought I could never enjoy again. I have much better energy levels. I can now do exercise when I want, not just because I have eaten something that I would have classed as unhealthy. I can go out with friends and family to restaurants spontaneously and without worries. And it just makes you feel so much happier and confident in yourself when you are recovered.

Written by Gracie

Tori's story

Reasons to recover

- To get my period back.
- So my hair stops falling out.
- So I'm not always cold.
- So I stop feeling dizzy.
- So I stop exercising (forcing myself to work out and walk 40,00 steps a day even when I'm ill and tired).
- Stop me from stressing all the time.
- To be able to clear my head (I'm always thinking about food, when I'm going to eat, what I'm going to eat).
- To be able to eat what I want and enjoy it.
- To get my personality back.
- Exercise for enjoyment (not to burn calories/change my body).
- Stop thinking about calories.
- Get back hunger signals.
- Stop bingeing/restricting.
- More energy - I was always lethargic and weak.
- Enjoy holidays and Xmas.
- Stop wasting my life worrying about my weight.
- So I can live without the scales.
- So I can sit comfortably in the bath (because I lost weight it's uncomfortable to sit/lay back in the bath cause I can feel my bones).
- There would never have been 'sick enough'. I would have kept losing weight until I died.

Makes me feel:

- Trapped.
- Suffocated.
- Alone.
- Constantly wanting validation.
- Weak.
- Like a failure if I gained weight.
- Not sick enough.
- Bingeing on food (lost control).
- Compulsive exercise (pacing around all day, not allowed to sit down so that it means I'm on my feet all day from 6 in the morning to 11 at night).
- Feet hurt from standing up.
- Forcing myself to wake early so I could get in the steps.
- Legs feeling weak so it hurt when I walked.
- Getting annoyed at everything and everyone.
- Smelling food - sniffing it. Hating the smell.

After recovering:

- I hardly body check (if I do, I don't really care about how I look).
- I have more energy.
- I feel better about myself.
- I don't feel like I have to exercise all the time.
- I can eat my favourite meals without caring.
- I don't watch food videos.
- I'm myself again.
- I no longer need validation.

I lost motivation to do anything, I was really emotional, had no energy, could feel my bones. No matter how much weight I lost it was utterly never enough. There was never skinny enough.

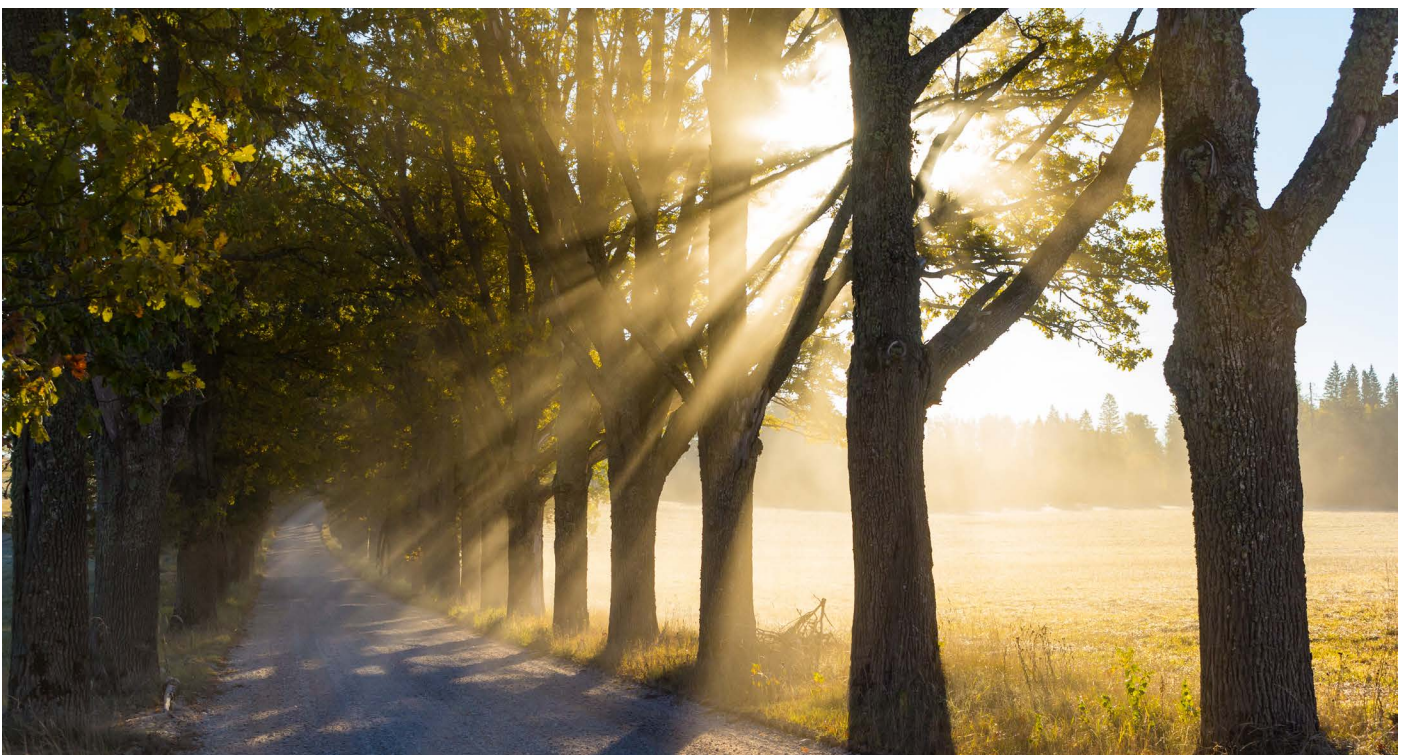
I realised I could never be happy with my body because I was killing it.

My body gave me signs that it was dying, and I turned a blind eye and ignored it. It didn't matter how many people told me that I lost weight and looked unwell, I didn't believe them, anorexia convinced me that they were just saying I looked thin to make me better (gain weight and be fat so they can be pretty and slim).

I remember going to the gym (my happy place) and having the worst session of my life. I was so weak. I couldn't even complete a set. I contemplated my life and I wanted to give up. I beat myself up for not working out.

Putting my swimming costume on was like a light bulb to me. I felt disgust and hated myself when I looked in the mirror. I hated the way I looked, hated the way I sounded and hated the way I felt. This time though it was different. I didn't think I was fat - I saw bones, ribs, hip bones, everything. It was like looking at an x-ray. I could see what everyone else could see. I felt embarrassed.

Written by Tori



Hello, I'm Theo!

In February of 2022 I was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa. But earlier than that, in November 2021, I started to feel fat when eating and I started to restrict what I eat.

My mum took me to the doctor, and I went to CAMHS. I can't really remember much after that apart from losing weight every session. Soon after in May I was going to Dubai. My counsellor at the time said that if I wanted to go to Dubai I had to start eating and put weight on. I really didn't want to do that, but I had been waiting for Dubai for so long that I had to.

Soon enough Dubai came and went but then I remember getting back and I had put on weight when I thought I had lost. I was terrified. This is where everything started to go downhill.

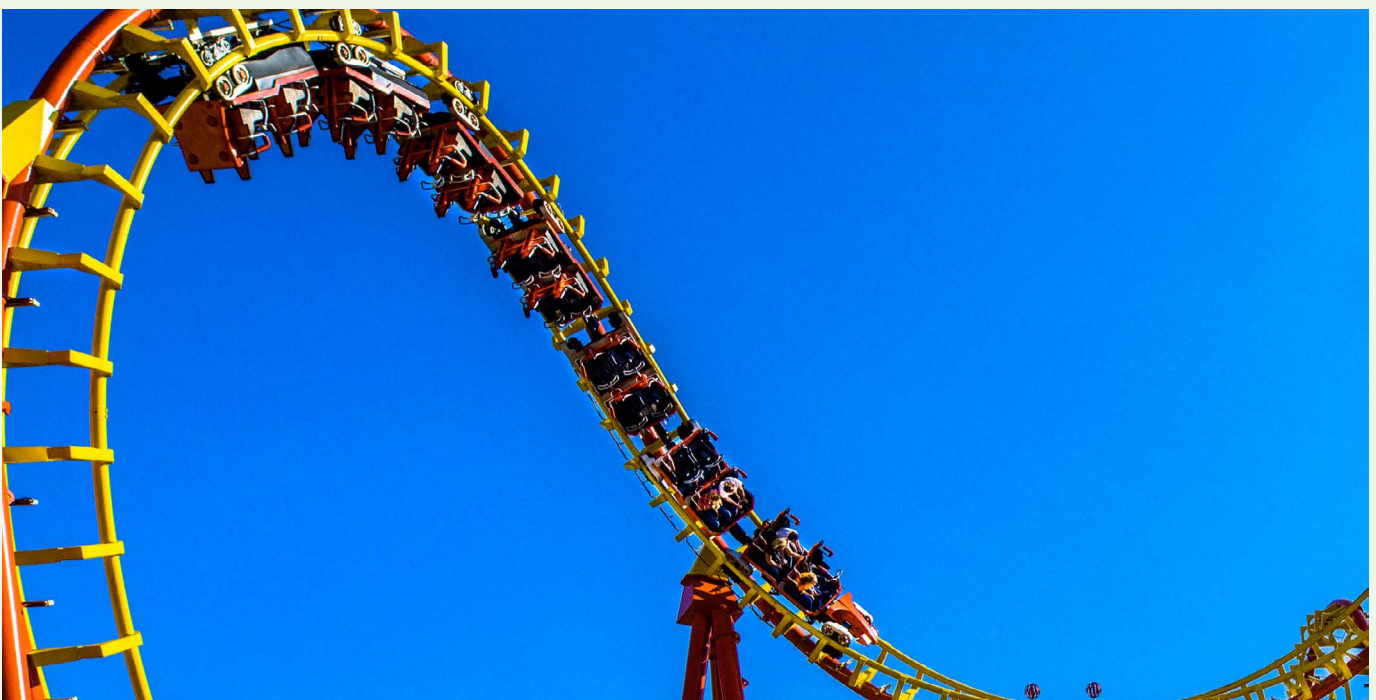
I remember when June came around, I went to Thorpe Park for my birthday. I looked really unwell. Not long after that I was put on early bed rest because I was dropping so much weight. It started to become big jumps of weight loss and I was put on bed rest again in December. The next session I went to I was put on full bed rest as I was at 85% weight for height - the lowest I had been.

Each week I was going down 1% until it was Christmas, and I was at 83%. My counsellor said that if there was another loss the following week I would be sent into hospital. I didn't know

what to do. I was scared. I didn't want to eat but at the same time I didn't want to go into hospital. It wasn't just me who was scared, so was my family. I can't imagine how it feels to see their son, brother, grandson slowly dying in front of them. That year, Christmas and New Years was ruined all because of a silly eating disorder. After all of that I started to realise the effect this was having on me and my family. I was feeling sick all the time, dizzy, back pains and all sorts of horrible feelings.

Around February time I started to get things back on track. My new counsellor really helped me get through my fears and I couldn't have done it without her. She put my meal plan in place, and I was scared because there was so much food on there. I started to gain weight and was allowed to do things that I would never have been allowed to do before. One of my aims was getting back to doing what I love: theme parks and YouTube. It felt amazing to get back inside of a theme park and doing my YouTube videos. I continued to put on weight, and I ended up where I am now. I can see my friends, go out, go to theme parks, go swimming, and go to the gym – all of which I was never able to do before.

Written by Theo



Zuzanna's story

At the beginning of my healing/recovery journey I felt hopeless, lonely, worthless and so much more.

At seven years old I had to transform myself into a responsible and careful child. My childhood had been finished forever.

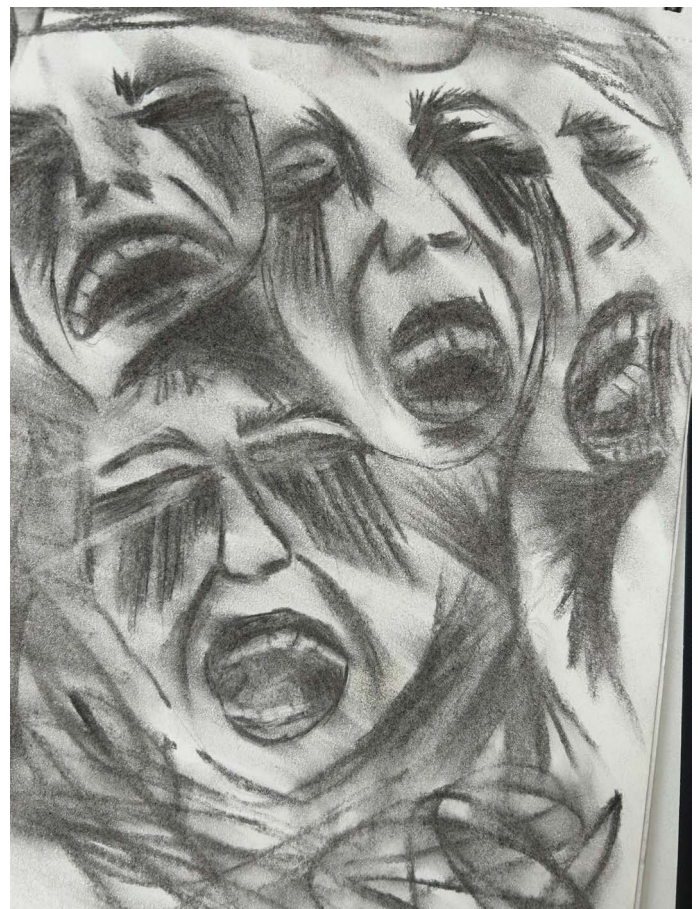
At school I felt like the odd one out, I felt like I had something wrong with me. In high school I became dark and felt suicidal. I stopped giving myself insulin even though insulin made me stay alive. My body began to get weak and dehydrated. I was losing control of my own body that I used to love and appreciate. As time went on, I despised it.

I didn't care and couldn't focus on anything. However, my doctors decided that I needed help from CAMHS urgently as my body was so weak. This is when I started talking to Luisa, we talked about my problems and my fears which

were too much to handle. Unfortunately, I lied about my diabetes as I was in fear of letting my control of my diabetes go. As a result, I lost everything and had to stay off school for so many months. I was unable to do stuff with my friends and family. I felt like staying at home wouldn't give me positive results, however in fact it has. I did feel lost and depressed for many months. But my family and I came out from the end of the tunnel happy, and most importantly healthy!

I am now back at school, and I am the happiest and healthiest that I have ever been. I am going to be forever thankful to Luisa, Miss Burke, the diabetes team and my parents for helping me and believing in me.

Written by Zuzanna



Zuzanna created both illustrations. She began drawing as a way to convey her emotions during her time away from school and while undergoing treatment. Her artistic skills have flourished, and it is probable that she will pursue a career in this field. Zuzanna has unearthed a remarkable talent, and her artwork is truly exceptional.

My anorexia experience

We didn't realise until I was in year 5 in junior school that I was autistic. My mum always said that I was a handful and that I was a mini version of my dad, we even look the same!

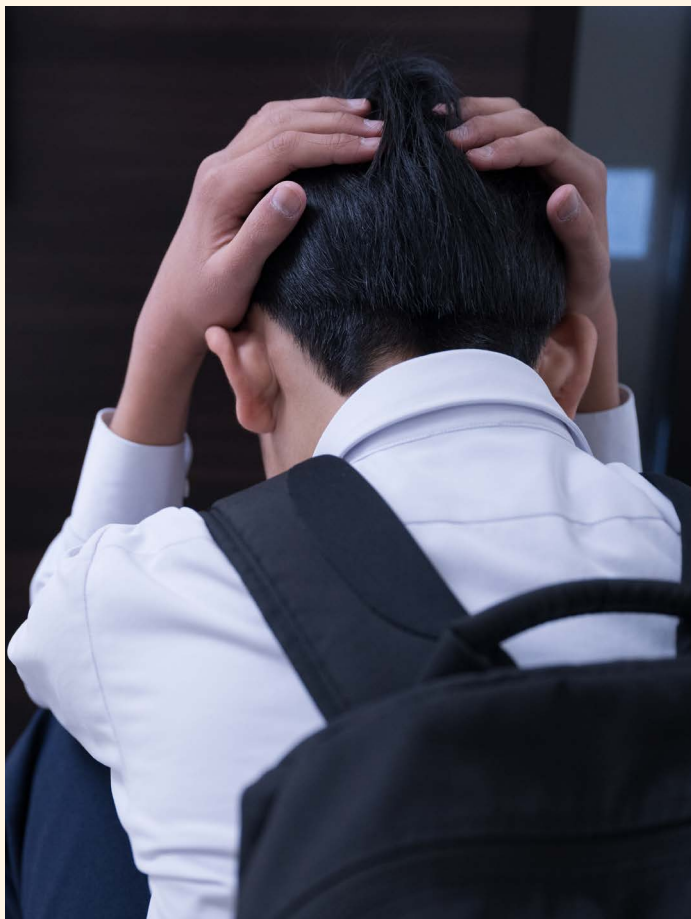
I didn't find it difficult to make friends when I was younger, or to join in things and I loved sport of any kind. I did find some things difficult like enjoying reading, they were just words on a page which didn't really make much sense to me. I preferred mental maths, winning a competition every single week – the prize was always a pizza, which I enjoyed!

In year 5 I began to find school more difficult, sometimes feeling like I needed to escape but couldn't because we all had to just sit there and do whatever was expected of us, sometimes without knowing what that was going to be as the routine changed each day. I didn't feel like my teachers understood and sometimes I just wanted to go home where I felt safe. Often when I got home, I found myself getting angry, shouting, and hitting out because all day I had to do what I was told, and I did not feel safe. Once I was home, I felt safe and I felt able to be myself, even if sometimes this was lashing out at my family in some way. I knew they loved me whatever I was experiencing and that they would always love and support me, and I just couldn't help it.

When the Covid pandemic came and we had to work from home, I really struggled. I couldn't join in the Zoom lessons because there were too many voices at once and too much background noise – I just couldn't learn. I'd roll about on the floor, disrupt everyone, and just hope that the end came soon. I wasn't able to play sports either, I was used to playing rugby every week and training three times a week, but instead I stayed home and on my PlayStation until gaming took over completely. I gained a little weight and felt unfit which I found difficult, and it made me really unhappy. Once we could play sports again, I tried to improve my fitness as that's what helps me to be my best self. I need to move a lot, to burn energy and exercise makes me feel better. I felt like the Covid pandemic took away all of the things that I was used to doing, that I enjoyed, and my routine

suddenly changed. I couldn't do anything, and it all felt really out of control. I did not cope with it well.

When I started secondary school, I found it so very hard. The school felt huge, sensory things were overwhelming – smells, noise, busy corridors, and classrooms themselves. I could hear things like people breathing, chairs scraping and pencils scratching on paper. I found the rules overwhelming too; I couldn't do what was expected of me and I found this really distressing. Sometimes I felt like I didn't understand the instructions well but if I asked the teacher to repeat them, I would sometimes be shouted at, and other kids laughed at me. When this happened, I acted silly because I didn't know what else to do and I felt panicked but couldn't escape, and of course I got into trouble all of the time. I didn't want to get into trouble, but they didn't understand that I found being there so scary and difficult. I used to watch the clock, willing the end of the lesson to come soon so that I could escape. I would sometimes use my toilet pass just to get out of the room and walk around school.



I was constantly in trouble, punished for things that I couldn't help like answering questions when there was a no hands up rule (I was just excited to know the answer and shouted it out without thinking), not being able to wear my shirt tucked in because it made me so itchy that it hurt me. I didn't know how to cope with this. It felt like I had no control over anything so I began to look for the things that I could control, which I now know was harmful to me.

Eventually I struggled to even be in school, most days managing two hours at best but unable to even be in class. During year 8 I was given a diagnosis of autism, and this really helped me to understand who I was, but also why I had struggled so much. It was hard to go through the assessment, but I needed the diagnosis, and it changed my life.

I was scared of being given a diagnosis of autism because I thought I would be bullied for it. My parents told me that the teachers needed to know about my autism but that the diagnosis was my diagnosis to own, and it was entirely up to me who I told. If I didn't want to tell anyone, I didn't have to and that gave me a feeling of being in control, which I needed because of my autism.

A few months before my diagnosis of autism we were on holiday. My parents realised that I was exercising excessively and when we were eating out each evening, I was looking at calories on the menu, making choices that I wouldn't normally and cutting down on what I ate. I even suggested that I had a Caesar salad instead of a burger when I had never dreamed of eating lettuce in my life! Alarm bells began to ring and when we arrived home my parents realised that I had lost a lot of weight quickly and that I was exercising to burn large amounts of calories but eating very little.

My mum called CAMHS, and I was seen by the eating disorder team. We had an appointment at the clinic every week for 8 months. At first this was incredibly difficult, I don't like meeting new people and my autism makes it more difficult for me to communicate, to work out what might happen or what may be expected of me. I find it very difficult to interpret facial expressions, especially with people I don't know, and this makes me feel very vulnerable and scared. My parents came with me, and

it was soon clear that I had lost a great deal of weight in just a few weeks through the excessive exercising and limiting what I ate. Autism means that I have to plan everything in advance, my daily routines need to be set and not change because I find change very difficult to deal with. My thoughts are very rigid and that means that if something changes unexpectedly, I feel that I have lost control of everything, and I quickly look for the things that I can control.

During the early weeks of my eating issues I set myself daily targets, how many calories I could eat, how many calories I needed to burn each day, how far I had to run in a certain time and by a certain time of day. If I didn't meet this, I had failed, and this resulted in meltdowns. I couldn't regulate my emotions because of my autism, but it also meant that my thoughts couldn't be changed because of how rigid my thoughts are, and once I have planned something I can't change it. Sometimes I would be so exhausted from this and the lack of eating that I would collapse by the treadmill and have a meltdown, but still be trying to get back up to run a few more miles. I knew this wasn't good for me, but it was like an addiction. I would have very physical meltdowns because I was so overwhelmed, and I couldn't regulate my emotions because I am autistic. It was devastating for my parents and my sister who didn't know how to help me. I lost so much weight that I had to stop exercising and was confined to rest which was the most difficult of all for me and I hated everyone for making me do this. It felt like I was being punished for something that I couldn't help and the exercise that makes me feel good was taken away. It was a very scary time.

The eating disorder team were able to listen and see how difficult I was finding things. During my weekly appointments I would be weighed and measured, and if I had gained weight, I would really struggle to cope with this, sometimes having meltdowns during the appointment. Quite early on in my weekly appointments Luisa, my practitioner, determined that my eating issues were related to autism rather than typical anorexia. It became clear that when I felt things were out of control in my life, when I had no control over what I did in school, that I controlled the one thing I could: my eating and my weight. We were still waiting

for my autism assessment at this point, and I felt like I didn't understand things very well.

Over time I learned to trust my practitioner and felt that she really understood me. She encouraged me to gradually gain weight, but I still found this difficult. I was given control over what I chose to eat within a daily plan. Planning in advance helped me to manage this and I tried hard to eat well but it was really challenging. Luisa supported my parents as well as me and taught them how to help me. I still found it very difficult to gain weight as my thoughts were fixed on a certain weight and I couldn't risk breaking that, even when I knew it was taking away the things I loved and making me ill. When I had meltdowns in the clinic room, at times they were very physically aggressive meltdowns and I also had these at home regularly. I would be devastated afterwards but I just couldn't control my emotions because the eating disorder was controlling me, and I needed to be the one in control because of my autism.

School didn't have a very good understanding of autism and it felt like they didn't want to understand. They wanted me to fit in with the rules even when I couldn't, to do things in a way that they expected me to but without accepting that my brain worked in a different way to theirs and that I see and hear things in a different way to those who are not autistic. This eventually led to issues with my attendance, and I was diagnosed with Emotional Based School Avoidance (EBSA). The more I tried to go to school where adjustments hadn't been made

for me, the more difficult it became to even step through the door. I found that my autism needs were escalating and eventually I was unable to go to school at all. These were very difficult times, I had no purpose and only my thoughts to think about, eventually experiencing burnout. This was a terrible time for me, sometimes I didn't want to carry on because I couldn't imagine how things could get any better. I felt so exhausted and low, sometimes spending all day laying in bed, sleeping for hours and not feeling any better. I can now see that I was burnt out and that it was because I couldn't cope with anything else, so my body almost shut down for a while.

I knew that my parents were battling with school and that was frightening, especially when there was talk of having to go to court. The CAMHS eating disorder team really supported my parents with trying to make things better with school but sadly this didn't change things very much, and I couldn't deal with hearing about the things that were happening.

However, during this time something life changing happened. I received my autism diagnosis, and it was amazing for me. I felt that it told me who I was, why I couldn't do what was expected of me sometimes, and most of all that I wasn't naughty, which is what I had been labelled by school. I knew I wasn't naughty and not being believed repeatedly was traumatic for me. I saw that the difficulties I'd experienced were the failings of school, not me, and that was a huge step forward for me.



One day I decided that I didn't want this to be my life anymore, that my eating disorder behaviours had defined who I was, and it was the focus of everything. I also realised that it had happened because my needs related to my autism had not been met, and this had led me to control the only thing I could – my weight and eating. I felt exhausted and unhappy all the time, and I wanted to be me again, the sporty, funny, and happy boy that I was before.

I decided to take control back. I started to allow myself to eat more, soon realising that I felt better for eating and realising just how much I had missed the foods that I love. Chocolate, pizza, my mum's brownies. I gradually allowed myself to enjoy those things again even if it was in small quantities to begin with, but it wasn't without guilt and still to this day I have times when I feel guilty for eating. I now recognise that this is when I feel out of control (school holidays and lack of routine are the most difficult) and I immediately control my eating. I can see this now and my parents have learned to manage this well so that it is soon turned around.

Once I decided to gain weight I did so quite quickly (I ate lots of chocolate) and as much as I found this difficult, I knew that I had to do it to be healthy again. It was my biggest challenge and at times I wasn't sure I was strong enough, but I wanted my life back and it was there waiting for me. I didn't realise at the time that not only was my life waiting for me, but I could shape it into something much bigger and better than it had been. I could be whoever I wanted, and I liked that.

I've now changed schools to a specialist education setting after being assessed for an education health and care plan. As much as it was a huge and frightening step, it has been an amazing journey so far. I love my new school and despite having almost a year out of secondary school I have 100% attendance at my new school. I even miss it during the school holidays and I'm looking forward to a residential trip in the next few weeks. I still limit what I eat even now and still fear weight gain, although now I am close to being a healthy weight and would be if I wasn't growing so fast in height. Only recently did I start to allow myself to eat a meal at lunchtime and now I eat a ham and cheese baguette each day and really look

forward to the Friday sausage sandwiches at school each week. I love my snacks and chocolate and enjoy these daily. I realised that not eating lunch made me tired which I hated and it sometimes led to meltdowns because I was what we now call "hangry". Now I eat a meal at lunchtime I feel so much better, I have more energy, feel better, can concentrate more and it has really helped my learning. I also feel part of a group more as I eat with my school friends, which is helping me to develop more social skills and friendship building skills.

I may still struggle in accepting that I need to gain weight sometimes as I grow but I am working on it and doing well. Each time I gain weight I cope a little better, I don't get weighed very often now as I don't feel I need to. I go to a gym, and I love this as it helps me to regulate my emotions, but my parents have to limit how often I go so that it safely allows me to maintain my fitness. It really helps my mental health. We have a rule that I must eat well to be able to go and be a safe weight. I also play football for a local team and feel stronger each passing week. My aim is to gain strength and muscle now I'm 13 and physically able. I can eat what I choose and enjoy my food, even learning to cook a little at school (even though I don't like it) and realising that I am actually quite good at it.

I can now think a little about my future as I now have good prospects. I'd like to work in a specialist educational setting to help others who have also struggled as I have, and my teachers feel that I will now achieve well. They want me to consider working towards a teaching career, ideally a PE teacher given my passion for sport. I never imagined even going to school again and now I have choices to make about my future career options. My parents and school support team say this is down to me accepting my diagnosis, being proud of being autistic and working so hard to achieve on so many levels. I'm really proud of myself and want to show others that there is a way through this, even when things seem so dark and exhausting. There is a way.

Written by L

A mum's perspective

We suspected that **L** was autistic from around the age of 8 or 9. This became more evident during the Covid pandemic when he was challenged with coping with restrictions and different ways of working. We had very good friends whose son was autistic, and we thought we had an idea of what autism was. How very wrong we were.

On reflection, there were early signs that we didn't recognise, the things such as a baby who cried constantly and never settled, a toddler who lined toys up rather than participated in role play, a young lad who seemed to be a handful and didn't exactly have a sense of humour although made us laugh unintentionally. Maybe the main sign was a boy who was never beaten at memory games despite many adults trying their best to beat him, the boy who hands down won maths competitions every single week at school because he memorised the questions and answers and had an immense competitive nature.

L had been referred for an autism assessment and sadly but not unexpectedly this was a three year process. During this time, we had seen some difficulties in primary school mainly related to needing to move around, feeling trapped and struggling with lack of routine as the activities in class could change daily. School tried to support but it was evident that **L** had learned to mask very quickly and very effectively. He copied the actions of other children but didn't always use them in the correct situation, often resulting in a telling off but overall, at least trying to understand.

Once **L** transitioned to secondary school with a 'my support plan' in place (although vague and not used effectively) things really started to become very difficult. The school was huge and placed a huge emphasis on academic achievement. With that came very rigid rules and expectations. Sadly, this meant that some children, such as those with special educational needs (SEN), would struggle in that environment and often in different ways due to their very different needs. We soon began to realise that **L's** needs were being treated as behaviours and he was being punished quite

significantly because of his needs, the needs that were not being met by school.

I've been trying to recall the events that led to **L** developing Emotional Based School Avoidance (EBSA) and I find it difficult to remember. Not because my memory is so poor (to be fair it is terrible lately) but because it was so traumatic for the whole family, I seem to have blocked them out. I do recall meltdowns, very physical and distressing for both of us, happening because he was being made to go to a place that he felt so unsafe, where his needs weren't being met and where he was being punished for being autistic. After a partial timetable didn't help and the summer holidays were upon us, we expected to have a nice break, some family time and a complete reset before we thought about the pending academic year. Again, how wrong we were. During a week away we realised that there was an issue with **L's** eating and weight and what unfolded from there was the most heartbreaking and stressful experience that only someone living the experience could even begin to comprehend.



In the early days we felt guilt, failure, shock but most of all fear. It was such a lonely time; we didn't know anyone who had been through such an experience and didn't know where to turn. I used to lay in bed at night imagining our twelve-year old son being taken away from us and admitted to an eating disorder unit, dying because he'd starved himself, never recovering and living his life as it was and a whole variety of other fears. I now know that this was because we didn't understand either autism or eating disorders very well. We soon learned, spending every evening researching and reading up on both until the early hours whilst trying to parent a child in crisis and a child two years older, working full time (from home after having to change career due to the demands of home life) and dad/partner working twelve-hour shifts. When people say we live on adrenaline we must have used up ten lifetimes' worth of adrenaline in a few months.

The CAMHS eating disorder team were our lifeline. Quite early in the care period, Luisa recognised the traits of autism and how they were impacting on the eating and weight issues. Often during the weekly sessions there would be a clear focus on control, an emerging picture of a child struggling with school, who felt out of control and immediately turning to the one thing he could control. At times I think it's fair to say that at times there were thoughts that this was a presentation of typical anorexia where body dysmorphia was a real focus, however, the focus would always return to that of a control mechanism and correlated with the events that were going on in his life in relation to school. Monthly care planning meetings were held with the team, us as parents and school. These meetings were so important to us as parents and helped guide us to identify what adjustments L needed at school and why he had developed EBSA and an eating disorder. I think it's fair to say that despite acknowledging the struggles, school had a very poor understanding and a huge reluctance to make the appropriate adjustments that L required and was legally entitled to. As parents we felt that because our child couldn't fit into the school's mould, he was an inconvenience to school, and they still expected that L fit in with the school rules regardless of whether he was able to or not.

At this point we realised that things weren't going to improve and since we had received an autism diagnosis by this point, we applied for an education health and care plan and withdrew L from school on the grounds of ill health. This was a real changing point in our lives. We had opted for a low demand parenting approach, still reading everything possible, learning as much as we possibly could and trying different approaches to supporting our child and his older sibling. Life is very traumatic for siblings of a child in crisis and it was important to meet the needs of both children.

Life was one crisis after another, not a day of what you could call happiness, just worry, fear and exhaustion. We questioned everything from our abilities as parents, to whether we were neurodiverse ourselves, soon realising that one parent probably is yet had never recognised their own struggles as being autism related. This was a whole new issue to deal with on top of everything else and almost constantly we felt like we were drowning in stress. It felt like we couldn't catch our breath because we lived in absolute chaos.

I'm not sure at which point the fears started to reduce a little, maybe when we received a diagnosis of autism, and everything made sense. In the run up to the call L was shaking with fear, terrified that he may not be diagnosed and questioning everything that had happened to him. That very moment we were told L was autistic, L said: "Oh mum, I really needed that, I now know I'm not just naughty". My heart broke a little more at that moment and there is nothing fiercer than a mother trying to protect her child, especially when that child has suffered trauma that no child should ever have to suffer.

I was determined that I would not stop until my child was well, safe and happy and I made him a promise that same day that I would not rest until he was happy again. All he ever asked for was to feel happy again and that is what he would get.

With the amazing support from the eating disorder team L reached a safe weight. His diagnosis had been a huge turning point and despite challenges on the route to the final hurdle he made it. The key had been making him feel in control, that he did have choices, that he wasn't naughty and gradually things

improved, and he began to enjoy food again. Always with a conscious effort to control the weight gain, and a newfound love of boxing to help regulate his emotions, he made it to discharge. What was most heartwarming was the development of a trusted relationship with his practitioner, something that we knew was extremely difficult for L and something that we will remember for the rest of our lives. When you're down and out, don't know where to turn and can't make things better yourself, you must trust those who come into your life to help you. We truly believe that people came into our lives for a reason at that time.

Once L was discharged from the CAMHS eating disorder service we felt vulnerable and scared. It was like our safety net had been removed initially but we soon learned that we had been given the tools that we needed to manage this in the long term. Gradually we have become more confident in using these tools and don't worry so much when L appears to regress a little. It's now a year since discharge and we still have issues with L's eating but he's not far from being a safe weight and he eats relatively well. When something doesn't go his way, he immediately restricts his eating, and this may be for an hour or a few days, but we know that making him feel like he has control will help and it usually does.

When the education health and care plan process approved a specialist educational setting, it was a massive relief. It wasn't without challenges, finding a school who could provide the educational opportunities that L needed wasn't easy, however, we were lucky to find an amazing school and transport was provided. L is thriving in all ways including academically. He has a future, friends, those all important trusted relationships are developing but most importantly of all he is happy. We gave what we promised but not without leaving us burnt out and exhausted. Life with an autistic teenager is very challenging still but in a different way and I could write a book about that alone but doubt anyone would believe it!

We've been on an incredibly difficult journey, one we never imagined but we are older, wiser and greyer. Would we do it again to get to this point, absolutely in a heartbeat. There is a way through, it takes everything you have along with things that you never knew you had, and I doubt we are the same people that we were prior to this, but we're here and always looking for ways to make things easier. There is a way, I promise!

Written by L's mum



I was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa when I was 14...

I think it started early in my childhood, when my family would make 'harmless' comments on my weight and shape and how much I ate as a young child. Up until this age I had always been slightly insecure of my body and have vivid memories of gymnastics classes where I wore a leotard, and would compare my seven-year-old body to other girls in my class. However, I was very active at the time, and also enjoyed food. I was always aware of my body and over the years grew more insecure about it.

By the time I started high school, I had grown so insecure of myself, that I ended up stopping gymnastics classes in fear of what others thought of my body. I would skip school on the days where I had a PE lesson, because I knew I had to get changed into my PE kit in front of everyone else, and a few people had started commenting on my body in the changing rooms. I found this humiliating and started to cover my body up constantly, I never took my school blazer off, and always had my legs, arms and stomach covered. However, during my upset, my coping mechanisms became quite depressive. I trapped myself in my room and barely looked after myself throughout the pandemic, I barely showered or opened my curtains, and I began eating lots of food to 'numb my pain'. I also turned to forms of self-harm, which I am proud to say I am now completely clean of. Because of all of this, I gained a lot of weight, and grew even more insecure of myself. I felt trapped and it started the depressive cycle again.

At some point however, my mindset completely changed. I grew bored of being in my room and started going on daily walks to 'get my steps in'. During this time, I noticed that I had lost some of the weight I'd gained through my depression episode. Other people noticed too, and now they made comments praising my weight loss. This gave me motivation and I felt so confident. I also felt like I was doing the right thing. However, I became completely obsessed with walking, sometimes going two or even three times per day. I began eating much smaller portion sizes, 'healthier' or diet culture foods, and I kept losing weight. The comments

praising my weight loss kept coming too. This gave me more motivation and I still assumed I was doing the right thing, and so I carried on.

It's important to note that people were only praising me because all they see is a girl who has struggled with her weight and shape for years and is now beginning to lose some of it and become more active. However, what they don't see is a girl who is slowly becoming completely consumed by diet culture and fully obsessed with exercise. Whilst their comments gave me that feeling of confidence and motivated me to carry on with my unhealthy behaviours, I still wasn't happy, and was chasing the satisfaction that was never there.

Throughout the next year, I became very regimented in my eating habits and patterns, and my obsession with exercise. If something got in the way of my plans, I had a tendency to lash out and get annoyed with whoever had interfered. People still praised my weight loss; however, I think my dad began to notice that maybe I was getting a little bit too engrossed in my habits. I created rules for meal times, step counts, number of walks per day, etc. and it began to take over my life. My personality changed too. It got in the way of family meals and going out to restaurants. I turned down friends because I 'had to' go for a walk. Slowly over this year my restrictions on myself grew tighter and I subtly, over time became completely regimented in my ways and focused on my body. I still wasn't satisfied or happy with myself.

That summer, I went to Greece and whilst it should have been the best holiday of my life, I wasted the majority of it exercising in the hotel room and walking for hours by myself in scorching heat. Not only is this dangerous but resulted in me passing out by myself with no one knowing where I was. I didn't manage to enjoy any of the amazing foods they serve in Greece either. All of this was because I was absolutely terrified of gaining weight on holiday. Wasting this holiday is one of my biggest regrets.

After we got home, I carried on with my regimented ways and safe to say 'my rules' had gotten significantly stricter whilst I was away. I began arguing with my dad more as he began begging me to eat a little more, and tried to explain that there was no way I would gain weight if I didn't exercise for one day. My other family members got involved too, now their comments had turned into telling me not to lose any more weight, and they inquired about my true eating habits and exercise that I had kept to myself for all this time. Still, despite all of this, I made the choice to carry on the way I was because of the sheer terror and panic caused by my belief that I would gain back all the weight I'd lost, and 'lose my progress'.

Out of concern, my school got me an appointment with the school nurse who, after a chat about how I was feeling and taking some physical observations, referred me to CAMHS.

I remember how quickly CAMHS wanted to get me in to see them for the first appointment. It had been a few days since the referral from the school nurse when we were urgently contacted to get an appointment as soon as possible.

I was fully honest in my first appointment, because secretly I was tired and wanted to

be free of my poor habits. I was aware I was seeing the eating disorder team, but until this point, I had never considered that my eating behaviours were in any way unhealthy or disordered.

I remember the shock that ran through my body when they diagnosed me with anorexia nervosa in that first session. To be fully honest I was expecting that they would tell me I wasn't 'sick enough' for them to help me. I didn't see much wrong with the way that I was eating and something inside of me was burning with anger and rage. I later found out that this was anorexia, which was screaming because it knew these people wanted rid of it. However, anorexia doesn't give up easily, it is very resilient, and can control such sweet people into becoming violent and inconsiderate at times. The truth is anorexia doesn't care about your relationship with your family, it doesn't care how you feel, it just wants to control you.

Following the first CAMHS session, I was put on a strict meal plan, and not following it wasn't an option. I had already been struggling with bad anxiety at school, but now I could not even face walking into a classroom. I felt drained and defeated. My dad was always there for support, but after a small while we relied on



each other to keep going because anorexia takes a huge toll on your family too. It destroyed our relationship, and for a long while I did feel like I was by myself, because nobody seemed to understand that I wanted to get better, I was sick and exhausted, but anorexia was doing everything in its power to stop me. This came across as though I didn't want to recover.

I made little to no progress at first. My weight dropped every week because I simply wasn't complying with the meal plan and was still secretly exercising in my bedroom. CAMHS involved a dietitian in our sessions, and she helped explain about nutrition and the importance of balanced hormones and having enough energy levels when developing as a teenager. She also helped put a more structured meal plan in place that would increase on a regular basis based on my weekly weigh-ins. I also went for my blood tests and blood pressure checks every week, both of which I was absolutely terrified of. I think it shows my progress that now I can hold a normal conversation and even laugh when getting blood pulled. I was also paired with a meal support worker, who came round a few times a week to eat lunch with me.

After months and months of still restricted eating, and sneakily throwing food away, not to mention a wasted Christmas, I was caught out. My dad found some food that I had been throwing away from my lunch each day to take to school. This was my turning point.

To this day, and probably for the rest of my life, this is the worst argument I have ever had with my dad, and the most upset I think either of us have ever felt. My dad was instructed to ignore me and show no affection. He threatened to drop me off at CAMHS and leave me there because he could not physically or mentally deal with my anorexia anymore. For the first time I snapped out of my selfishness and had a long think about how my dad must be feeling, not to mention the rest of my family. I thought of my mum, who I lost at a young age, and about how if she was here, she would be making sure our relationship didn't fall apart. She would also be there to empathise with my dad. I thought about how difficult solo parenting must be for my dad, he'd brought me up all by himself and I realised how much of an achievement that is.

It broke me to hear that he felt 'anger' towards my mum for 'leaving him to deal with me by himself'. He didn't really mean that, he was just so exhausted and fed up with the situation, and anorexia destroying our strong relationship. I cannot begin to explain how distraught I was.

I slipped temporarily back into that depressive state, which I've now learnt often occurs when something unexpected or upsetting happens in my life. I stayed in bed and cried and cried nonstop for hours before drifting off into the worst sleep I've ever had. I barely got any. The next day was exactly the same. I didn't eat the night before, and I didn't eat the next day until I'd made up with my dad. I now recognise that this also is something that occurs when I have a particularly bad period in my life. However, I'm much stronger now and have learnt how to prevent myself falling into a deep rut, where I can get trapped in those awful thinking habits again. I also see now that not eating that particular day definitely made my emotions much harder to deal with.

By mid-afternoon I remember my dad coming into my room with a supplement drink. He begged me to drink it. Anorexia's first response was no, but my dad wasn't letting it win this time. He got past the anorexia and through to me that weekend, by angering anorexia in every way possible. I agreed to drink half of the supplement, but ended up deciding myself, with a little encouragement from my dad, to drink two full bottles.

We had such a long chat that day. For hours we discussed how I'd made him feel, how I felt, and how anorexia wasn't worth my time and energy. We came to a compromise for things I was struggling with on my meal plan, primarily lunch, which had provoked the huge argument in the first place. For the first time I felt like I was healing in so many ways. My relationship with my dad was being patched up, I was eating my full meal plan without sneakily doing anything, and I looked at myself with more confidence. Yes, anorexia was there a lot of the time, especially when something was changing, however the difference this time was building the strength to say no and not giving in to it. I did this by keeping a diary and logging things I felt compelled to do but didn't. Reading these back makes me laugh because some of these

things are so silly and in a different frame of mind, sound like the most ridiculous and made up things. I brought these to my counselling sessions, and we'd go through my thoughts whilst eating different foods and overcoming little rules and challenges.

The other thing that helped me was being completely transparent and honest with my dad about things I thought. Getting my worries out to him meant he could watch out for anything he knew I felt compelled to do, and I was much less likely to give into the anorexia, instead believing the encouragement my dad gave me. For a long time, I always assumed that people said things to me just to please me and make me listen to them. I now know I only ever thought this because I am a people pleaser, and they were telling the whole truth the entire time, and only said things to help me.

For a very long time my diet every single day was exactly the same, and whilst my diet was much better than previously, and I was moving more towards a healthy weight, I still heavily lacked sugar and carbs in my diet. I was utterly terrified of them and avoided them. Unfortunately, this led to my blood sugars being consistently low for months and months. I had to get my bloods done weekly after my breakfast, and every week they were something along the lines of 1.2-1.9. This is an extremely dangerous level, and CAMHS were convinced I was doing something, either exercise or food related, to get my sugar levels down. It took me a long time to realise that they were low because of the lack of carbohydrate and sugar in my diet. I kept quiet about it and when I was questioned about it, I would grow very agitated and annoyed.

This of course got me nowhere, they were going to find out at some point anyway. When they finally did, they put me on an extremely high sugar diet. I ate nearly half a pack of jelly sweets, and pretty much a full jar of jam a day, on top of loads of white carbohydrates and three supplements per day. I felt very sick during this time, but nonetheless, I pushed through the first week of the diet change, and to everyone's surprise, my blood sugar levels were 1.6, which is extremely and dangerously low still. As CAMHS were still convinced I was manipulating the diet in some way, which this

time I really wasn't, I ended up in hospital for a bit.

I felt so incredibly defeated, not only because I'd been trying so hard and had been gaining weight and eating much better, but also because I felt that CAMHS didn't trust me when this time I really was going for it. I realised that my trust would have to be built up over a very long period of time, and it gave me the motivation to prove to them that I was going to do this and get myself out of hospital. It was incredibly hard having a cannula in my arm, getting my finger pricked every three hours, and feeling incredibly vulnerable, especially without my dad there. I barely slept the first night, mainly because I missed my dad so incredibly much. I cried into the early hours of the morning and kept being woken up to my finger being pricked, and blood being drawn from my arm.

The previous winter, my dad had managed to get tickets for my favourite band in the entire world, Arctic Monkeys. It seemed typical that something I'd been working towards being able to get to would be on the very week I was sent into the ward. I knew that I was going to that concert, because it had been a significant part of my motivation to get better. I ended up getting let out of hospital with improved bloods a few days before the concert, and me and my dad went to London for it. This was my first 'trip' since starting recovery, and it was extremely challenging because every meal was in a restaurant. However, I really pushed myself and ate so well, and challenged myself more than I ever had before. It felt amazing.



I still speak about that concert to this day. It was the best night of my entire life, ever. It made it even more special that I'd tried so hard to make it there, and it made me feel so good to hear my dad talking about my smile that he'd missed so much. After the concert, I was pretty much weight restored and enjoying my life so much. I ate a well-balanced diet, and did not skip any meals or snacks or cut out any important food groups. I grew more confident and started branching out in fashion as well. I wore things I never thought I'd see myself wearing, and I felt a whole new level of confidence. Because I was weight restored, I was able to start walking and doing yoga, which I found a huge passion for.

That summer, I really pushed myself, and went on holiday without my dad. I went to Greece for five nights with my auntie and two cousins. It was the most amazing girls' trip ever. I enjoyed so many different types of food, and instead of spending my time walking and exercising by myself, I enjoyed family time lounging around the pool and swimming. I feel like I really made up for the holiday I feel I wasted the year before. I completely shocked myself, I ate different pastries, ice cream, and traditional Greek dishes I'd always wanted to try. Being in a bikini for the first time in a long while was very difficult, but I actually found that I felt really confident, and I didn't compare myself to others or worry about gaining weight. I just enjoyed my food and time with my family. I made so many amazing memories.

Starting my last year of high school in September was very difficult. Considering I hadn't been in school, let alone a classroom for over a year, my anxiety was through the roof. I went in on the first day with my best friend, which made it much easier, and went to every single lesson, staying all the way through. I felt so empowered and proud that I'd managed to get myself back in there. Obviously, I had missed a lot of core learning, but all my teachers were aware and helped me get back on track. I worked harder than I ever had before. Maybe a little too hard because I did neglect my eating and let it slip a little bit, which resulted in my weight dropping slightly, but I made a few adjustments and was back on track. I have just finished my first set of mock exams. I worked so hard for them and I'm so proud of myself for sitting in an exam hall and

completing every single one. It feels like such a huge achievement. Christmas has just been and gone and I can confidently say that I feel I redeemed myself from last Christmas, I not only enjoyed an amazing Christmas dinner with family, but spent the whole next day with them celebrating, drinking and enjoying a buffet. I thoroughly enjoyed it and am so proud of myself.

Over the past few months, my confidence has grown so much in so many areas. I also feel so much more comfortable in my own body and I learnt so many tricks to help me deal with anorexia that I feel are really important for me to share. One of them was taught to me by my CAMHS worker. It's called the 'full body appraisal', and it's really effective. It means focusing on every aspect of your body, and praising it, not just looking at the area you know you feel insecure about. Looking at your stomach for 'fatness' will only result in you feeling crappy about yourself, because whatever you set out to look for, you'll probably find. Therefore, if you look in the mirror for pretty eyes, a beautiful figure and a contagious smile, you'll find it.

If you think it sounds silly, there was a point where I did too. But if you think about it, if one Monday morning you think your hair looks greasy and horrible, you might go to school and think that 'everyone' has amazing hair today and compared to your greasy hair, theirs looks amazing. But this Monday doesn't differ from any other Monday, and your brain is only noticing other people's 'gorgeous hair', because you feel insecure about yours. Naturally, you put emphasis on things you dislike about yourself, and try to look for it in other people.

The next one links back to the full body appraisal, and is a sort of psychology trick. Naturally, when you have a bad day and you look at yourself in the mirror to 'make yourself feel better', you're setting yourself up for failure. If you're in a negative frame of mind, you will only criticise yourself, and it will probably lead to a bad body image day, which we know could influence your food choices. Most people who are struggling might check their body after a meal to make sure the meal 'didn't make them fat'. This follows the same principle. If you look for 'fat', you'll find it. Instead, I encourage you to bodycheck in a different way. When you notice

yourself feeling happy – maybe you made a big achievement at school, or had a fun evening with your family or friends – look at yourself in the mirror, and the likelihood is that you will love what you see. Your mood reflects your perception of yourself. It's also really helped me to remember that what you think you see on a negative day, versus on a positive day is the same person, and your body hasn't changed overnight, it's literally just your perception. This is why you will never feel satisfied deep into your eating disorder, because when were you ever in a good frame of mind?

I have learnt lots about myself during this experience. One of them is autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Something that helped me turn around my mindset from wanting to go as far as I could with my eating disorder, and letting anorexia take over me, to accepting and wanting recovery and enjoying my life free of anorexia. In my first CAMHS session, I was told I might have autism, and since then I have done lots of work on how to manage the effects it sometimes has. I've also learnt to appreciate it – instead of thinking it's a 'disorder', I actually used it to help me, and have learnt how much it actually does for me. It's like a superpower; I have amazing memory, heightened senses and the ability to put my mind to something and do it. I had never noticed it before, but now it all seems to make sense. However, I believe that everyone can do this, if you really feel determined to. That is why, when I managed to change my mindset from wanting to get worse to wanting to get better, I recovered. You have to truly want to recover and find that life without your eating disorder is so much more worth your time and effort.

Something that helped me during the early stages of recovery that I still look at now is my diary. Writing about how you feel during certain times, whilst completing food challenges and overcoming difficult periods, can really help get the overwhelming feelings out of your head and onto paper. It also really helped me to share these with other people so that I felt reassured and encouraged that recovery is always possible. Looking back on these notes now is really empowering, because it shows so much progress. In my first diary entry, one of the things I wrote was 'what if it makes me fat, I can't do it', before my tea which I described as a 'mountain of pasta with loads of mayo'. In my most recent entry, I spoke about

me and my best friend going to the cinema and eating popcorn, and then going out for a meal. A year ago, that wouldn't have been possible. Recovery is possible and I'm living my best life because of it.

It's so important to fill your time with something you enjoy, find a hobby, reconnect with friends and family, and look after yourself, otherwise you'll end up spending your time, like I did, dwelling on the changes happening in your life and you will be much more focused on thoughts of food and your body. I found so many hobbies during my time recovering. At first, I started doing mindful things like colouring and rediscovered my passion for reading. After I was at a much healthier stage, I was allowed on short walks with my dad once in a while and found a real passion for yoga and meditation. Now I go for a walk when I feel like it and keep up with frequent yoga as I've seen huge improvements in my strength and flexibility. It's also important to look after yourself. Maybe if you're experiencing a particularly bad day, you could take a long bath, do some skincare and maybe curl your hair. This always helps me pass an hour or two to save me from dwelling on negative thoughts. I appreciate family time and outings with friends so much more now. I went round to my friend's house last weekend and we sat and coloured in pictures for hours and talked about everything on our minds. Me and my dad often take walks, look around furniture shops, and go to a coffee shop just to get out of the house for a bit. It really breaks up the day and improves your mood.

Most people who have experienced an eating disorder will develop fear foods, meaning you feel uncomfortable or anxious about eating certain foods because you fear it would make you gain weight, or you'd lose control around it. Even after recovering from anorexia, I'm still very aware that there are foods I avoid for specific reasons. However, compared to last year when I was diagnosed, my diet has improved so much in variation, and I've challenged myself to try new foods. I did this by identifying foods I avoid a little, a lot and completely. I wrote them all out and cut them up, and filled three jars with them, one for each category. Starting with foods I avoided a little, I picked one out of the jar with the aim that during that week, I would challenge that food. I asked myself a series of questions before and

after. 'What was I afraid would happen if I ate this food?' I then planned how I would test this prediction, and recorded my level of distress before, during and after trying the food. I then asked myself 'what actually happened?', and every single time, the answer was nothing, I just enjoyed it. It was also important to keep challenging this food on a regular basis if I enjoyed it, so that it wouldn't develop into a fear food again. I then moved on to my other jars and challenged other things I found even more scary. If I found something particularly daunting, I would ask my dad or my best friend to try it with me, this helped as I found it eased my anxiety around the food.

I learnt a lot about nutrition from my dietitian. I learnt about the real importance of a balanced diet, and a lot about diet culture. The truth about diet culture is that every diet is completely different from the next. A keto diet would rather you eat a full tub of butter than even a crumb of bread, but another diet would tell you to cut out oil and fat completely. Something I always used to believe was that sugar, carbs, fats and dairy were bad for you, and made you 'fat', but in reality, they are so incredibly important to our growth and development. Sugar is the number one fuel for the brain, we need sugar in our diet to survive. Carbohydrates are what our body uses for energy and without it our muscles, body systems and organs simply would not work. Fats and oils are crucial so that our body can absorb vital vitamins such as vitamin D, which is needed to keep our bones and muscles healthy; vitamin A, which is needed so our body can reproduce, keep a strong immune system, normal vision, and we can grow and develop; and vitamin E, which is needed so our body can destroy harmful things that can damage our cells. Dairy is needed so that we can keep our bones strong and healthy, as it contains lots of calcium, and it is also a good source of protein. Mentions of calories used to be very triggering to me, but now I understand that enough calories are needed so that our body has energy to function. Without calories we could not live, we need them to breathe, sleep, for our heart to work, etc. I also used to believe that I had to burn off all of my calories through exercise and 'earn my food'. This simply is not true because you burn calories each day just sitting doing nothing. You need fuel all the time, to do absolutely anything you can think of. I

now have a completely healed relationship with exercise and understand that my body deserves rest frequently. I no longer use exercise to earn anything, just as enjoyment and to feel good. I've even thought about joining a gym and starting to lift weights to grow my muscles even more.

Thinking back to when I was constantly freezing cold, became bitter and closed off from everyone, my hair was falling out, my circulation didn't work properly, I was constantly feeling faint and passing out, I was always exhausted, missed family and friend gatherings, didn't enjoy most meals I forced myself to eat, was always hungry and was never happy, I wonder why I did it. I know I was aiming for an unachievable body, and that I just wanted to be 'skinny', but looking back I now recognise outside of that distorted vision of myself that I was already too 'skinny'. The 'ideal body type' changes so frequently, and the truth is that no matter what you can never always match it, and most of the time it is completely unachievable. Ask yourself if the 'problem' is really your body, or if it's actually your mindset and attitude towards yourself? I advise you to block those models on Instagram with your idea of 'the perfect body', stop watching those 'what I eat in a day' videos, because you know you only watch them to compare yourself to them, and get rid of any negativity from your life all together. I now love my body and appreciate what it does for me, I look forward to meals out with my family and friends, I cannot wait for Christmas dinner, I have confidence to dress exactly how I want to, I enjoy every meal I eat, I don't sit daydreaming about food, me and my dad always go on coffee shop 'dates', I don't centre my worth on my body and weight, and I've healed relationships with friends and family. I'm finally at peace with myself.

Recovering from an eating disorder is so empowering, and so worth it. It will always be better than the living hell of your eating disorder. You only live once, don't waste 90% of your life trying to weigh 10% less, live life to the fullest and with no regrets.

Written by a 14 year old young person

Choose recovery

You deserve a happy life where you can see more positives than just weight loss, where you have the energy to spend time with the people you love, where you have the power to live and not just survive. Right now, it may never seem like things will get better, but they will, good things take time, patience, and perseverance. It will be difficult, and it will be scary at times, but it will also be the most rewarding thing to experience.

In 60/70 years' time, when your grandchildren are asking what you did when you were younger, what will you say? "Oh, I wasted my teenage years trying to lose weight." It's not interesting and it simply won't matter. You want to be able to share the memories you made and the moments you want to remember. Things that will make you smile when you look back on them. You don't want to look back on memories where your life was being controlled by the cruel cycle of restriction. Right now, this may seem impossible but I promise you it isn't. Your thoughts are only temporary but have the power to change your life completely if you listen to them. You might not feel ready to recover but you never will if you don't start now. The more you listen to the voices in your head the more control your thoughts will take from you. If you want them to leave you alone, you have to accept that they're there and do the opposite of what they say. It's like a person – if you keep ignoring them or going against them, eventually they will leave you alone even if it takes time and even if they come back again. If you can ignore them and send them away once you can most definitely do it again!

Recovery is not linear; you'll be doing great then you'll hit rock bottom again. It is normal and it's okay to struggle or fall back again but you have to pick yourself back up. Sometimes all you can do is your best and that's alright too, you will get there even if there are obstacles in the way. Think of it as a car journey – there may be traffic or crashes that make you feel like you'll never get there but you will. It might

take longer than you expected but imagine the relief you will feel at the end. You will never feel sick enough or realise how sick you were until you're in recovery. Your eating disorder doesn't want you thin, it wants you dead and it won't stop pushing until you are. The best thing to do is to learn how to accept these thoughts. Acceptance: the thoughts may take years to go, maybe weeks or months. It's different for everyone but if you listen to them, they never will. They won't go straight away, all you can do is accept they are there and move on. There is nothing you can do about it but there is also nobody forcing you to act upon them.

Things scream when they are dying. If your disordered thoughts are screaming at you, you're doing the right thing and killing them by going against them. Another thing that may help is weighing out the pros and cons. Is it really your dream body if it's a complete nightmare to live in and maintain? Probably not. Recovery is scary but so is living with an eating disorder. There are so many risks with restricting your eating but in the moment, you don't care, you have no energy to even think straight, you can't think about what you want only what you're eating disorder does so nothing feels enjoyable at all. You will only see light in things when you push back against your disordered thoughts. That is when you will see there are so many things that you missed, and you don't want to miss more, and that life isn't as dull as it feels when you're trapped in the cycle of restriction. You'll have the energy to move, to laugh, smile and find more positives in life than weight loss. There is no skinny enough and there never will be, so don't waste your life trying to weigh less. It will ruin everything. You don't need to look like other girls to be pretty, if that's not how you're meant to look, you never will. Flowers are beautiful but so are sunsets and they look nothing alike.

Written by Rosie

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