

Georgia, 22

Community mental health worker who harnessed her personal experience of anorexia nervosa for good, *ADELAIDE*

Community mental health worker, Georgia, 22, Adelaide has a passion for writing. She also loves listening to music, socialising with her friends and spending time in nature.

At 15 years of age, Georgia was failing to adapt to certain changes in her life, which was further compounded by her low self-esteem and perfectionism. Georgia responded by beginning to restrict her food. Over the ensuing six months, alert to their daughter's unhealthy habits and dramatic weight loss, Georgia's parents sought professional advice. Soon after, Georgia was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa.

Throughout the remainder of her high school years, Georgia's anorexia nervosa brought loneliness and isolation to her life. Her all-consuming illness made it hard for her to maintain a healthy relationship with her family and school friends. Georgia's loss of focus and energy compromised both her schooling and her health.

At 16 years of age, and after frequent hospitalisations, Georgia began visiting a psychologist to help manage her illness. Initially, while struggling with her journey towards recovery, Georgia chose to express her distress through isolation and bargaining with her parents and doctors to curb any further intervention.

Georgia managed to complete her final year of high school over two years, while participating in an outpatient day program.

Today, despite having mounted a recovery from her illness, Georgia recognises that management of her mental wellbeing is an ongoing process. Having turned her first-hand experience of anorexia nervosa into a career, she is now working as a community mental health worker.

She is participating in the Eating Disorders Genetics Initiative (EDGI) to support researchers in their quest to identify the specific genes that influence a person's risk of developing an eating disorder, and to ultimately improve treatment options for those most in need.

This is Georgia's story.

At the age of 15, after losing weight and fainting during a blood test, Georgia says her parents grew particularly concerned about her wellbeing. Referred to hospital to have her health monitored, Georgia was unfortunately discharged without a formal diagnosis.

Over the ensuing six months, Georgia continued to severely restrict her food consumption in a bid to reclaim control over her life. Experiencing many turbulent changes at the time, Georgia struggled to talk openly about her distress.

"My illness made me very hazy and prevented me from deeply thinking about what I was actually doing to myself," said Georgia.

Following Georgia's second trip to hospital to treat the effects of her eating disorder, her parents decided to engage the help of regional mental health services for their daughter, given they were living in a country town. Her parents pursued the services to secure a diagnosis.



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It was during a Skype call with one of the treating psychiatrists that Georgia was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa at 15 years of age.

Initially extremely opposed to any form of treatment, Georgia had one sole purpose – to obey the commands of her eating disorder. She therefore attempted, through several means, to evade help.

“My illness was all-consuming. I had a very different goal to that of my parents and doctors. I was not open to any further change in my life. In fact, I was convinced I was fine,” Georgia said.

Georgia's anorexia nervosa, however, managed to pervade every aspect of her life. Her illness completely drained her of all energy to the point at which she had difficulty walking up a flight of stairs. She chose to isolate herself from her friends, given any social setting proved too stressful for her to manage, particularly in the presence of food.

Her illness fuelled significant anxiety among her family members too. Although they still loved her, Georgia says they were unable to share any semblance of a meaningful relationship with her, given she wasn't herself and was deliberately keeping her distance.

After frequent hospitalisations and liaison with eating disorder services, Georgia fell under the care of a treatment team comprising various doctors and a psychologist. For the remainder of her schooling, Georgia spent time in and out of hospital. She participated in a day program to treat her anorexia nervosa and completed her final year of high school over two consecutive years.

Following high school, Georgia continued to undergo treatment for her anorexia nervosa and, through a slow learning process, acquired the necessary skills to manage her illness.

Today, at the age of 22, she has mounted a recovery from her anorexia nervosa, but recognises the importance of continuously prioritising her mental well-being.

“I know it will be a continuing process of self-compassion and managing my mental health in order to keep myself healthy,” acknowledged Georgia.

Georgia now works as a community support worker in the field of mental health, having learnt the life-changing impact of mental healthcare on people's lives.

She is excited to be contributing to the Eating Disorders Genetics Initiative (EDGI) – the world's largest genetic investigation of eating disorders ever performed. The study is aiming to identify the hundreds of genes that influence a person's risk of developing anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge-eating disorder to improve treatment, and ultimately, save lives.

She believes that pinpointing the genes that predispose a person to the development of an eating disorder, will vastly improve treatments, and ultimately, the lives of millions of Australians.

“Anorexia nervosa is misunderstood. It's a mental illness, and just like other mental illnesses, I believe part of the solution lies in understanding its contributing genetics.

“I urge anyone with experience of an eating disorder to volunteer for this study, so that together, we can promote change for the future,” Georgia said.

Should you suspect that you, or a loved one, may be living with an eating disorder, speak to your local healthcare professional without delay, or head to www.insideoutinstitute.org.au to complete their screener and assessment, and to access more information and professional support.

Australian professional patient support services offering 24/7 helpline services include:

- **Beyond Blue: 1300 22 4636**
- **Lifeline: 13 11 14**
- **Men's Line Australia: 1300 78 99 78**
- **Kids Help Line: 1800 55 1800.**

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