

Ash, 28

Advertising art director who battled anorexia nervosa for four years, SYDNEY

Advertising art director, Ash, 28, Sydney, initially began to show signs of an eating disorder at 19 years of age.

It took more than a year of exhibiting worrying food-related behaviours before Ash finally recognised she needed professional help. She was subsequently diagnosed with the potentially devastating eating disorder, anorexia nervosa.

Although her journey to recovery was littered with relapses, Ash staunchly persevered and managed to reach recovery four years ago.

Nowadays Ash is using her first-hand experience of anorexia nervosa to advocate for changes to the way eating disorders are viewed, diagnosed, and treated in Australia.

This is Ash's story.

In 2011, at 19 years of age, Ash commenced a 'health kick'. However, this behaviour soon spiralled out of control.

"I started counting calories, and before long, the health kick took over my life. I developed an unhealthy and destructive relationship with food and body image," said Ash.

Over the ensuing year and a half, Ash battled her eating disorder behind closed doors. Fortunately, she eventually came to the realisation that professional help was necessary to address her deeply-rooted issues.

"I realised what was going on wasn't normal, and my gross fear of food and the overwhelming control I needed had to be addressed, as well as my depression. It was then that I decided that I wanted to beat this, so I went to my GP.

"Even just having my disorder validated, to understand what was going on, and also get the right diagnosis was immensely helpful," Ash said.

After being diagnosed with anorexia nervosa, Ash began to invest significant time in mounting a recovery from the illness.

"I had to reach a more physically stable level before beginning work on the underlying causes of my disorder. I was subsequently admitted to a hospital in-patient clinic for 13 weeks.

"Luckily, I had a lot of support from my family. Even friends with whom I'd lost contact returned to rally around me. Everyone was trying to get me to a better place," said Ash.

Over the next three and a half years, Ash battled multiple relapses, which were subsequently followed by hospital re-admissions.



"There were ups and downs. My recovery process certainly wasn't linear. Each time I relapsed, I'd learn something new about myself. Once I'd worked my way through each relapse, things started to become a bit clearer," Ash said.

Ash says her physical health declined substantially during her up-hill battle with anorexia nervosa, as well as her mental health, interpersonal relationships and career.

"Anorexia nervosa basically put my life on hold. I had no life for about four years. My illness affected everyone because I was physically unwell and couldn't hold down a job."

"I had such a strict routine with my food, I couldn't even think properly. I was overwhelmed by feelings of low self-worth," said Ash.

"I had no relationships because my only relationship was, essentially, with my eating disorder. My friendships suffered. A lot of people connect over food, and I couldn't do that. My relationship with my family also suffered because they were basically watching me self-destruct and had no idea how to help."

Eventually, Ash reached a critical point in her battle with anorexia nervosa.

"I reached my lowest point in terms of my physical and mental health in August 2014. I knew my health wouldn't survive another relapse, so I put my foot down and said to myself, 'this is it. I'm going to beat this.'"

Now, four years later, Ash is in full recovery, and 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.

"The more focus and resources we allocate to eating disorders, the better. I'm really excited to be participating in this new initiative."

"We definitely need more funding and research to fully understand the complexity of eating disorders and break the stigma surrounding them. Anything we can do to ensure people have access to better treatment and information, early diagnosis and prevention, is key," Ash said.

"I know I'm one of the lucky ones, given I had the right treatment and support. There are some people who are unable to access the right treatment, diagnosis and support, which means they end up living with the wrath of their eating disorders for longer, which is unacceptable."

"Everyone deserves to live a life free from illness," said Ash.

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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