Amy, 32
Counsellor & personal assistant recovered from anorexia nervosa, Perth

Counsellor and personal assistant to her church pastor, Amy, 32, Perth, works to help others battling their personal demons.

As a teenager, Amy became fascinated with the world of modelling and dreamed of one day carving a name for herself in the fashion industry.

Her father’s throw-away comment about not being pretty enough to work as a model, coupled with a trait of hyper-perfectionism, spurred Amy to believe she could control her body and shed weight, in order to create the perfect life for herself.

At 14 years of age, Amy began dieting. However her diet soon spiralled out of control as she plunged into anorexia nervosa. Nine years later, after reaching out to a friend for help, she was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa.

This is her story.

“I wasn’t formally diagnosed with anorexia nervosa until I was 23, but I began struggling with the illness around 14 years of age.

“When I was younger, I was a perfectionist and thought if I was thinner, my life would be perfect,” Amy said.

“I started dieting on-and-off, and for a while I was able to control it.

“When I reached my early 20s, this really changed and I couldn’t stand the sight of food any more. Even if I ate, I couldn’t keep anything down,” said Amy.

Recognising something was wrong, Amy found herself in two minds – part of her wanted to reach out and ask for help, while the other part didn’t.

Eventually, Amy made the hardest decision of her life – to seek help. She contacted a friend from church who was also the pastor, to discuss her issue with eating.

During this conversation, she quickly learned the pastor was aware of her situation and wanted to help.

“When I reached out for help, I was at the stage where I needed treatment urgently,” Amy said.

“I really didn’t want to be hospitalised, so I spoke with the people around me and we looked for an out-patient treatment program.

“Eventually, I found a residential treatment facility, usually reserved for people with drug and alcohol addictions, that was willing to take me on as an eating disorders patient,” said Amy.

Amy spent the next 15 months of her life in recovery at this treatment facility.

“It was the hardest 15 months of my life,” Amy recalled.

“Even after the first two or three months in treatment, I still found it difficult to accept I was living with anorexia nervosa.”

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It wasn’t until Amy was able to admit to herself that she was living with anorexia nervosa and take ownership of her illness, that she was able to commit to moving forward.

“When I finally accepted I was living with anorexia nervosa, I chose to fight it,” Amy said.

“I’m lucky I was surrounded by people who supported me in my recovery.”

At the residential treatment facility, Amy was asked to eat two meals a day of her own choosing and to identify why she was living with anorexia nervosa.

Amy believes she is fully recovered from anorexia nervosa, citing she has control over her illness, rather than the other way around.

“Nobody wakes up and decides to develop anorexia nervosa. It was through a series of small choices that I found myself there.

“Now, I know what those small choices were, and realise that if I start making them again, I will end up in the same position I was in a few years ago,” said Amy.

“When I left the residential treatment facility, I was very scared. It was like I had to step out into a whole new world. But I have a great support network around me now and I choose to capture the negative thoughts around anorexia nervosa captive and replace them with positive ones.”

Amy still continues to experience some health and self-esteem-related issues resulting from her anorexia nervosa.

“Emotionally, anorexia nervosa still has an effect on me. I continue to struggle with self-esteem and self-worth issues, although I’ve worked hard to address this.

“I have endometriosis, regular headaches and have experienced autoimmune challenges due to my illness, and I’m still learning to overcome these things. It’s not easy by any means,” said Amy.

Amy has discussed her father’s destructive comment from years ago with him, and they both moved beyond it, and salvaged their relationship.

Amy has chosen to participate in the Anorexia Nervosa Genetics Initiative (ANGI) research study to help others living with, or predisposed to the life-threatening illness.

“I think there are certain people who are more prone to anorexia nervosa, although I do think it’s a combination of genetics and environment.

“If someone with a genetic predisposition to anorexia nervosa is raised in an environment of high standards or perfectionism, or if they experience abuse or trauma in their lives, I think this will make them more susceptible to the illness,” Amy said.

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For more information, or to coordinate an interview with Amy, please contact Kirsten Bruce, Mark Henderson or Claire Wright from VIVA! Communications on 0401 717 566 / 0431 465 004 / 0467 415 617.