Anne-Margaret, 47
Practice nurse continuing her 33 year-long battle with anorexia nervosa, Townsville, QLD

Practice nurse, mother-of-one and Anorexia Nervosa Genetics Initiative (ANGI) research study participant, Anne-Margaret, 47, Townsville, Queensland, was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa at 14 years of age. Thirty-three years later, she is continuing her battle with this potentially life-threatening illness.

Attributing the onset of her anorexia nervosa to strange family dynamics and the brief absence of her mother, Anne-Margaret’s illness has compromised her health and relationships with her family.

She describes the treatment process during the first few years’ post-diagnosis as “extremely intense”. Today, Anne-Margaret self-manages the devastating illness, but acknowledges the thoughts associated with anorexia nervosa remain with her.

Now mother to an 18 year old with Autism Spectrum Disorder, Anne-Margaret has a very regimented and busy life which distracts her somewhat from the daily challenges of anorexia nervosa.

This is her story.

“I can’t really pinpoint the trigger for developing anorexia nervosa myself. According to my mother, the only thing that happened around that time was my grandfather passed away and she had to go back to England for three weeks for the funeral.

“It was the first time in my life I was without my mother which I found quite distressing back then,” said Anne-Margaret.

“I was raised by my mother and stepfather, but I always felt like there was something missing. I was convinced I was adopted”.

Anne-Margaret’s relationship with her brother suffered due to her illness, as her mother and stepfather spent most of their time focusing on her.

“Although we’ve always had a tenuous relationship, it got much worse when I became ill, as my brother was left out a lot,” Anne-Margaret said.

Anne-Margaret describes anorexia nervosa as “bizarre”, citing, “I would liken it to cancer, in my case. It has never really left me, it just goes into a kind of remission and then significant events will bring it to the forefront again.”

Anne-Margaret explains how the illness was all-consuming from the outset.

“I would exercise before the sun came up, when the sun went down and at every possible opportunity in between. I counted every single calorie. I was extremely mindful of what went in into my body.

“I am amazed when I hear about people who have recovered from anorexia nervosa, because I am still living with it after more than 30 years,” said Anne-Margaret.
“I can’t envisage ever overcoming this illness. This has never been a choice for me, it’s who I am.”

Diagnosed in the 1980s, when facilities for anorexia nervosa patients were not as advanced, Anne-Margaret was initially under the care of her GP, and then a Psychiatrist in a hospital facility, for approximately 12 months.

“People didn’t know much about anorexia nervosa back then. My GP tried hypnotherapy and counselling, but nothing worked.

“In hospital, new drugs were trialled but nothing seemed to work for the long-term,” Anne-Margaret said.

“Ever since my early twenties, I’ve been managing the illness myself and coping the best I can..

“I fell pregnant when I was in my late twenties with my son. I managed to maintain a healthy weight during my pregnancy for the most part,” said Anne-Margaret.

When Anne-Margaret turned 40, she made the shocking discovery that the man whom she had always considered her father, was not. This traumatic event triggered a relapse of her anorexia nervosa.

“For their own reasons, my mother and stepfather had not disclosed to me that the man I knew as my father, was not in fact, my biological father. This had huge repercussions for me, and sent me spiralling into a relapse.”

As well as compromising her relationships, anorexia nervosa has significantly affected Anne-Margaret’s health. However she admits she’s unsure which issues she can attribute to her illness.

“I live with gynaecological and bowel issues, irregular periods and minor cardiac anomalies.”

Also diagnosed with OCD, Anne-Margaret’s life is very regimented. Due to her son living with Autism Spectrum Disorder, she also leads a very busy life.

“I spend my waking hours keeping busy. That’s my way of managing the illness, I suppose. I’m rarely idle – my life is very regimented.

“When I’m not working, I spend my time watching cricket, gardening and playing with my son,” Anne-Margaret said.

When asked for her thoughts on the ANGI research study, Anne-Margaret considers genetics definitely do play a role in the development of the devastating illness, but environmental factors also trigger anorexia nervosa too.

“I don’t think genetics necessarily cause anorexia nervosa, but make someone predisposed to developing the illness.

“I always hope for a better understanding and a solution or better management. Research is never a bad thing,” said Anne-Margaret.

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