Carmel, 51
Mother-of-four & fitness professional who secretly battled anorexia nervosa in her teens, Sydney

Mother-of-four, personal trainer and healer, Carmel, 51, Sydney, spends most of her time with her children, teaching Pilates or helping people overcome challenging life experiences, such as eating disorders.

As a teenager living with anorexia nervosa, Carmel was plagued by insecurities from not being ‘thin enough’ to fit into her older sister’s clothes. So when her mother joined Weight Watchers, she asked if she could also follow the diet plan to lose a few kilos. Unaware of the potential consequences, her mother agreed.

Now fully recovered from anorexia nervosa, Carmel both practices and preaches a healthy lifestyle and in no way fears a relapse of the illness. However, at the age of 15, her Aunty expressed her encouragement of the diet, which regrettably, triggered the onset of anorexia nervosa. This is her story.

“We were at a family lunch when I overheard my mother telling my Aunty about the diet we had just begun.

“My Aunty’s reaction – that it would be nice for me to lose a few pounds – was a trigger point, most likely reinforcing my belief that I wasn’t skinny enough.

“This was the first time I’d heard someone say I needed to lose weight and actually thought I looked overweight,” Carmel said.

Carmel describes anorexia nervosa as being very controlling and programmed at a sub-conscious level.

“To me, anorexia nervosa meant being in control. It made me feel empowered, because when the weight loss became noticeable, people started commenting and almost encouraging the illness.

“People said they thought I looked better being slimmer,” Carmel said.

“When I reached the next stage, and started to look sick, the psychology of the illness began to take over.

“As the third of four siblings very close in age, I had subconscious feelings of missing out on affection and attention. I felt completely lost. The nurturing I had missed out on as an infant, I was craving on a sub-conscious level,” said Carmel.

“Hearing people tell me they thought I looked good, encouraged me so much more.”
Carmel lived with anorexia nervosa for a year-and-a-half. During this period, she recalls her mother being frightened and very frustrated from not knowing how to get her to eat.

There was little awareness of anorexia nervosa in 1978 and Carmel describes her experience with the illness as very lonely.

“I felt like I had a secret I couldn’t share with anyone. I was always lying, telling people I had not long finished a big lunch, or had just pigged out,” Carmel said.

“At the time, it felt like everyone was setting me up for failure when they encouraged me to eat more. So I had to be so careful and remain in control to ensure I wouldn’t fail.”

Carmel lived with the mindset of recovering as representative of failure, for a year-and-a-half.

“One afternoon, my mother asked if I needed any feminine products. I decided to tell her the truth. I told her I didn’t, and that I hadn’t needed these products for more than nine months.

“Half an hour later, I was at the local doctor’s surgery. He told me that if I didn’t start eating properly to get my body functioning again, I would never be able to have children,” said Carmel.

“This information rocked my world. Even at that age, I couldn’t imagine what purpose my life would serve if I couldn’t have children.”

This information was the sole trigger Carmel required to kick-start her recovery from anorexia nervosa.

“I don’t have any horrible memories of the recovery process. I literally went back to three-meals-a-day. I didn’t binge like most people do when they recover.

“A friend who was also diagnosed with anorexia nervosa a year after me, binged and gained excess weight throughout her recovery process,” Carmel said.

With a cousin and Aunty who have battled eating disorders, Carmel regards the Anorexia Nervosa Genetics Initiative (ANGI) as extremely valuable and has chosen to participate. She is excited at the thought of researchers identifying genes that may predispose a person to develop anorexia nervosa, but believes environment, subconscious programming and beliefs also play big roles in the illness.

“Genetics may very well play a part in the development of eating disorders. But I also believe self-worth, self-confidence, self-empowerment and fear of judgment can act as triggers for the onset of anorexia nervosa,” said Carmel.

For years, Carmel has in no way feared the recurrence of anorexia nervosa. The experience and wisdom she has collected over decades of working in the fitness industry allows her to maintain a healthy lifestyle.

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