Ingrid, 53
Mother, counsellor & psychotherapist whose daughter, Victoria, 22, is in late stage recovery from anorexia nervosa, Sydney

Ingrid, 53, Sydney, works in private practice as a counsellor and psychotherapist with self-harming adolescents and young people.

Her passion in setting young people on the road to recovery stems from her personal experience of living with a daughter with anorexia nervosa.

At 17 years of age, Ingrid’s daughter, Victoria, now 22, was diagnosed with the life-threatening illness. For the ensuing five years, Ingrid spent much of her time caring for Victoria in a bid to help her beat anorexia nervosa.

Thanks to Ingrid’s relentless love and support, Victoria is now in the late stages of recovery from the illness.

Ingrid maintains it was only through sheer will, hard work and determination for Victoria to pursue a happy and healthy life, coupled with accessing the correct therapy, that Victoria has been able to develop strategies and a mindset to overcome the illness.

This is their story.

Ingrid’s realisation that Victoria was battling an eating disorder occurred after a few months of observing changes in her daughter’s eating habits, attitude towards food, appearance and concentration.

“Most people with anorexia nervosa are well beyond recognising their illness by the time they are diagnosed.

“For Victoria, I was in denial for quite a while as I told myself ‘this could not be possible’. My daughter is sensible and would not do this to herself,” Ingrid said.

“Even when other people mentioned her loss of weight, I was still telling myself ‘oh she’ll be okay’.

“Looking back, I think she was displaying symptoms of the illness for around six-to-twelve months before diagnosis,” said Ingrid.

“One of the things I recognised in Victoria was that she didn’t realise she was sick – she didn’t think she had anorexia nervosa.

“Even when she was in hospital, she didn’t see herself as ill, not like other people,” Ingrid said.

“Now only in reflection is Victoria able to recognise that she was extremely ill.”

Ingrid describes anorexia nervosa as a serious “mental illness,” citing “while part of it might have to do with image, the disease is about control.”

In Victoria’s experience, her illness was triggered by significant life changes. While completing her final year of high school and just prior to studying health and education at university, Victoria’s soaring levels of anxiety and fear of change triggered the onset of anorexia nervosa. She became highly stressed around food and withdrew into herself, failing to recognise what was happening around her.

“Victoria expected a lot of herself and was afraid of failing,” recalled Ingrid.

According to Ingrid, the insidious nature of the illness affected not only Victoria directly, but her entire family.

Meal times became a battle ground, as the whole family became extremely cautious of eating and around food.
In a bid to aid her daughter’s recovery, Ingrid battled constant feelings of frustration, anger and often utter despair due to her inability to help Victoria. She strove to be the hero in order to save Victoria’s life.

“When someone is living with anorexia nervosa, they become selfish in many ways, and without realising it, impact their entire family,” Ingrid said.

“Only in reflection do we truly recognise the impact of the illness on us all.

“One of the things I had to let go of was my enmeshment with Victoria. I cared for her, and we are close, but my life and hers were taken over by the illness,” said Ingrid.

“I wanted to stop it, but it was only when I recognised that I couldn’t fix it, and I couldn’t be the hero, and that it was up to Victoria, that we really started to make in-roads in her recovery.”

After four years of struggling with the disease, Ingrid identified a desire in her daughter to live, which marked the beginning of her recovery. Victoria wanted to be happy; she wanted to experience the world and finally became accountable for her illness.

Victoria worked with a counsellor, developing a strong therapeutic and trusting relationship, which allowed her to recognise the severity of her illness and need to recover.

Over time, Victoria, along with Ingrid and other family members, began to identify her triggers, and started working to address them.

As she started to recover, Ingrid recognised physical changes in her daughter, including a “sparkle” that returned to her eyes, glossy hair, a determination to finish what she started, and a heightened awareness of things around her.

“She returned as a part of the family,” Ingrid said.

“Victoria now has a really wholesome attitude towards food and eats a lot of organic and natural foods as part of her diet.

“We all benefit from her love of good whole foods and her interest and talent in cooking has returned, but in a healthy way in which we all love to participate,” said Ingrid.

On her journey of recovery, Ingrid experienced a lifting of tension between her and her daughter that had existed four years prior, and a feeling of “belonging” returned to her family.

“I had to get the monkey off of my back too,” said Ingrid.

“I had to let Victoria make her own decisions around eating, and I’m proud to say she is making the right choices and has a good understanding about what makes her body work.”

Through her professional research and work, Ingrid recognises a pre-disposition in families towards anorexia nervosa.

“I attended a conference not long ago, to hear a geneticist speak about finding genes for anorexia nervosa,” Ingrid said.

“I think it will take time for researchers to discover the genes associated with anorexia nervosa, but I do believe there is a pre-disposition through generations.

“It might not always present as anorexia nervosa, but as any form of addiction,” said Ingrid.

“Addiction in a family’s history might present as anorexia nervosa, but whether the illness presents solely because of a genetic pre-disposition or through learned behaviour, is something I don’t know.”

Discussing their involvement in ANGI, Ingrid posed the question, ”Why do we want to part of this study?

“As a team, Victoria and I plan to both share our stories and participate in studies and talks around Australia to help others, as we are survivors of this illness, and the love I feel for her is beyond words.”

ends#

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