Jess, 30
Café manager’s 17 year battle with anorexia nervosa, Gold Coast

Manager of a popular café in Surfer’s Paradise, Jess, 30, Gold Coast, has been battling anorexia nervosa for more than 17 years.

At the age of 12, Jess chose to stop eating meat, which soon developed into complete food avoidance.

Jess mistakenly thought this behaviour would have no serious implications. Until one day, her mother announced a surprise doctor’s appointment, at which she subsequently diagnosed with anorexia nervosa and immediately referred to a residential eating disorders facility. She was 13 years old.

This is her story.

“When I arrived at the eating disorders facility, I was exposed to all sorts of different people of all ages, who had been sick for a while,” said Jess.

Rather than providing help, the clinic became a place of competition for Jess and the other residents battling anorexia nervosa.

“It was a really competitive environment in the clinic, with everyone striving to be the thinnest,” Jess said.

“While I stayed there, I learned every bad trick in the book.”

After leaving the residential facility, Jess shed more weight, and spent the next 17 years failing to regain a healthy body weight.

“To me, anorexia nervosa is really hard to treat. It’s different for every person.

“I think the hardest thing about treating people with anorexia nervosa, is that it’s not a ‘one size fits all’ kind of illness,” said Jess.

Reflecting on the onset of her illness, Jess explains that although unaware at the time, she was living with symptoms of anorexia nervosa for around six months prior to her diagnosis.

“For me, there was no trigger.

“It started out as an experiment; a way for me to express my feelings. And it spiralled out of control from there,” Jess said.

“For me, there was no specific cause. I just started to lose weight at the beginning and then it developed into an addiction.

“These days, I see the illness as part of who I am. Over the past 17 years, it’s shaped my life in some ways for the worse, while in others, for the better,” said Jess.

Describing how the illness has impacted on her life, Jess explained, “I’ve lost half of my life so far to anorexia nervosa.

“I’ve nearly died due to anorexia nervosa on so many occasions. Physically, I’m unable to have children and I live with osteoporosis and a weakened liver.

“This illness has impacted every one of my relationships,” Jess said.

“My poor mother has been through it all, and she’s always been there for me.
“There have been times, she’s come to me and said, ‘I can’t do this anymore,’ but she always comes back,” said Jess.

“I’ve always kept my distance from other people, as I find it hard to open up.”

Hospital stays, psychiatric appointments and the repercussions of living with anorexia nervosa have at times, made it difficult for Jess to support herself financially.

“I’ve spent stretches of up to eight months in hospital, which meant I was unable to work.

“I lost income and I lost houses because I just couldn’t afford to pay for them,” Jess said.

“Being in hospital without support for long periods of time is something that’s really hard to bounce back from.”

Jess has been able to remain out of hospital for nearly four years now due to help from a case worker and a psychiatrist.

“Four years ago, when I was last in hospital, I was registered under the Mental Health Act and assigned a case worker and a psychiatrist.

“Nowadays, even though I’m no longer registered under this Act, I still see both of these people, because I need their continuing support,” said Jess.

“Neither of these people try to change me, but rather, see me for who I am – someone living with anorexia nervosa.”

Jess enrolled in the Anorexia Nervosa Genetics Initiative (ANGI) study to personally learn more about the illness and to assist researchers to discover better treatment methods to help others living with anorexia nervosa.

“I enrolled in the ANGI study because I want to better understand why anorexia nervosa occurs, and to help the researchers identify a way to better treat the illness.

“I absolutely believe genetics are involved in my illness,” Jess said.

“I experienced no trauma, and anorexia nervosa was never impressed on me, so I think it must be something in my genes.”

ends# 

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