Juliana, 21
University student, competitive power-lifter & anorexia nervosa survivor, Adelaide

When university student, Juliana, 21, Adelaide, isn’t studying or training for power-lifting competitions, she is working to establish the first not-for-profit organisation – ‘Work of Hart’ – dedicated to helping individuals living with eating disorders involved in the health and fitness industry.

At 14 years of age, Juliana was diagnosed with the potentially life-threatening mental illness, anorexia nervosa. Throughout high school, Juliana continued to battle the illness. Nowadays, with support from her family and friends, she is working hard towards recovery.

This is her story.

“Growing up, I was always aware of my body shape. I was never happy with how I looked, and usually wore t-shirts and sweat pants to hide my larger size – but I never thought of needing to diet. I was not exposed to dieting as a child,” said Juliana.

“I can remember the exact date of when I decided to lose weight. It was after returning home from a school camp, where I had to wear a suit in front of my school peers. I had to take one of the largest sizes. I felt so embarrassed and insecure about myself wearing such a tight suit.

“The day I returned, I stepped on the scales and told myself ‘I need to lose weight’. That was the moment I believe ‘switched’ on my anorexia nervosa genes,” Juliana said.

Obsessed with her body image and weight, Juliana began fasting intermittently, which soon led to starvation and excessive exercise in a relentless quest to become thin. In 2008, Juliana was diagnosed with the potentially life-threatening mental illness, anorexia nervosa.

“Anorexia nervosa is about control. It’s a mental illness where you are both scared and proud of what is happening to you.

“When my anorexia nervosa was at its worst, I would cry over food and family meals and developed an inexplicable fear of sitting, as it meant I couldn’t burn calories. I even developed a fear of moisturising in case I absorbed the fatty oils from the cream,” said Juliana.

Juliana describes anorexia nervosa as a serious “mental illness” which is extremely psychodynamic and extends far beyond the concept of just being “skinny”.

“People think the illness is all about food and weight – it’s so much more than that,” Juliana said.

“My eating disorder has changed the way my brain works – the way I process thoughts and comments from others is different than before. It’s difficult to explain, but something that I know I am not alone in feeling.

“Initially, I just wanted to lose weight in order to become a fantasy version of myself. But once I started restricting my diet, it soon escalated into a numbers game,” said Juliana.

“To be honest, I was disheartened that my rapid weight loss didn’t spark too much interest among my friends. I think that fuelled the weight loss in some way, because I wanted to be noticed. They all just commented on how ‘healthy’ I ate and how ‘fit’ I was because of my new habits.

“I remember looking up symptoms of hair loss, feeling cold, yellow skin and finding posts on eating disorders frequenting my search engine. It was then I knew I had an eating disorder of some sort,” Juliana said.

“Before then, I’d never thought of myself as someone who would ever develop or be living with anorexia nervosa.

“I do believe my mum knew something was wrong. After reading online about eating disorders for a few weeks, I showed my mum an online post about eating disorders and took up the courage to ask her to take me to the doctors, who diagnosed me with restrictive type anorexia nervosa in front of her,” said Juliana.

“I was beyond restless. I would wake up at five in the morning and go to bed at seven o’clock at night. I could never sit down for more than 10 minutes at a time without having to be active or moving.

“My family was stultified by what was going on. On one occasion I remember my sister pulled me in for a hug on her lap, but it meant sitting down, so I shot back up. She told me to get a life, as I continued walking on the spot in front of her,” Juliana said.

After being diagnosed with anorexia nervosa at age 14, Juliana was given the option to become a hospital in-patient. However she chose not to accept this route.

“I convinced my mum I knew more about nutrition than the doctors – that I could recover by myself.

“Some nights I secretly wrote in my diary that I needed to go to see the doctor. Because of the fear of the physical changes of recovery, I found myself torn between wanting to recover while simultaneously being afraid of what would happen to me if I did,” said Juliana.
"I struggled throughout high school. I did gain weight, but I binged and restricted and still exercised. I just wasn’t aware of the actual physical damage caused by eating disorders that I am aware of now."

Juliana relapsed in 2012 while studying to become a personal trainer.

"I firmly believe in the saying that ‘learning you will teach’. It is not our beliefs that make us a better person, but our behaviors.

"After completing the personal training course, I knew if I wanted to promote good health to my future clients, I needed to take care of myself first. Because when it comes to self-determination and welfare, we ought to promote welfare," Juliana said.

In 2013, when Juliana began studying Exercise Science at university, she chose to restore her physical health. By following treatment guidelines for anorexia nervosa, she undertook this process alone. She began with increasing calories, eating foods she feared and working to reduce her exercise.

“The one thing I regret about going through the re-feeding process alone was that I had no medical supervision. In recovery, the body requires substantial energy to repair the physical damage of years of starvation, and this can cause many medical complications that need to be monitored.

“While I did not know that then, I do now. Heart palpitations, night sweats, extreme hunger and tiredness were some of the symptoms I faced alone. Not even my mum was aware of what I was actually going through in silence,” said Juliana.

The most important lesson Juliana learnt in her recovery process is that eating is not the enemy, restriction is.

"In fact, I understand now, that the ‘bingeing’ I experienced after being diagnosed was a protest from my body for nourishment. Now I see that breaking through this controlling dynamic was important for my recovery.”

Nowadays, despite nearing the end of her recovery process, Juliana recognises she still has some way to go.

“I don’t ever use the word ‘recovered’, because for me to make this claim, would be to say I am free from my eating disorder, which I know not to be true,” Juliana said.

“As confusing as it sounds, I believe one can recover from anorexia nervosa, and be ‘in recovery’. But ‘recovered’ sounds almost finite. Using the term recovered almost has a danger to it and insinuates that there is no need for after-care or treatment.”

“There are moments where I think I could relapse, but then I look at how far I’ve come and how much strength I have developed, and I work through the triggering thoughts.”

"I’m now juggling part-time work at a cafe, power-lifting four times-a-week, studying at the University of South Australia and am in the initial stages of establishing a non-for-profit support group, ‘Work of Hart’, that aims to provide awareness and education to people with eating disorders in the fitness industry,” said Juliana.

“People with eating disorders are an extremely vulnerable and often misunderstood population in the diet and fitness industry.

“Trainers and coaches are not qualified to recognise, or reverse the symptomology of eating disorders. Any nutritional or exercise advice not meant for someone with an eating disorder could be harmful to their recovery, even if they have restored their weight,” Juliana said.

“I want ‘Work of Hart’ to bring awareness and to help regulate the industry, to offer support and promote the development of healthy relationships with food, exercise and body image.”

Juliana is currently participating in the Anorexia Nervosa Genetics Initiative (ANGI) – the world’s largest and most rigorous genetic investigation of anorexia to date. The international study aims to detect genetic variations that may play a role in the potentially life-threatening disorder.

While Juliana maintains her anorexia nervosa was trigged by a combination of environments, she acknowledges the role genetics may play in the illness.

“I don’t think any members of my family have anorexia nervosa, however I have recognised that some members have slightly troubled relationships with food and body image, “said Juliana.

“If there is a specific gene that pre-disposes someone to an eating disorder, it would enable the family to prepare and implement lifestyle behaviors that avoid dieting and teach mindfulness and a healthy relationship with food and one’s body instead.

“I encourage every Australian woman and man living with, or recovered from anorexia nervosa, to participate in the ANGI study and help identify genes that play a role in the triggers of this potentially life-threatening illness,” Juliana said.

“As I continue to recover from anorexia nervosa, I am becoming stronger in myself – physically and mentally – and am incredibly determined to help others exposed to eating disorders in the fitness industry.”

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