Karen, 50
Clinical nurse specialist & mother-of-three reveals her 32 year battle with anorexia nervosa, Sydney

Karen, 50, Clinical Paediatric Nurse Specialist and mother-of-three battles the voices of anorexia nervosa on a daily basis – a psychiatric illness with which she has lived for 32 years.

When not studying for her Masters in clinical nursing, Karen is caring for her “magnificent” chihuahua, three cats and three adult daughters.

Despite nowadays being a health weight, Karen acknowledges she has never recovered from the “evil and despairing illness” that has plagued her for most of her life. She has a family history of the illness.

This is her story.

“I was 18 when I was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa,” said Karen.

Karen’s parents went overseas for a year. Six months after their departure, she began developing symptoms of anorexia nervosa. Shortly after her parents returned home, she was diagnosed with the illness.

“My Aunty and cousin both lived with an eating disorder, both of whom are from my mother’s side of the family.

“They always struggled with body image and weight from a pathological level, and significantly restricted certain food groups,” Karen said.

Karen maintains her anorexia nervosa was triggered her fiance’s brother’s girlfriend, who was popular, wealthy, the centre of attention, but overweight. Karen couldn’t be wealthy or popular, but she could become skinny.

“My brother’s fiancé was quite wealthy and she was always the centre of attention.

“I felt the only way I could emulate her was to be thin, as being rich or popular was out of the question,” Karen said.

“I was not overweight but thought I was, and I think it just snowballed from there.

“I was controlled by my illness within three months,” said Karen.

At the age of 20, Karen realised the seriousness of her illness and that something needed to be done when she was having a picnic with her mother.

“I sat in a park under Sydney Harbour Bridge with my mother and a picnic. I got up and walked far away and sat on a stone wall for ages,” Karen said.

“It was very hot and I was really thirsty. But I didn’t have the energy to even go and get a glass of water.

“That’s when I realised something had to be done. I slowly accepted my dieticians’ advice and it took me three years from that point to become healthy again, but I still had a lot of issues with laxative abuse,” said Karen.
Karen describes anorexia as “a constant daily battle, centred on the voices in your mind. It is a despairing and horrible illness.

“I still live with the voices, now at the age of 50,” Karen said.

Anorexia nervosa has had a significant psycho-social and physical impact on Karen. She experienced premature menopause at the age of 41. She also developed osteopenia which progressed to osteoporosis around 45 years of age.

The illness also adversely affected her relationship with her family, often leading to arguments.

“My family were, and continue to be, cautious of me.

“My illness badly affected my relationship with my family, and there was always tension around meal times,” Karen said.

“I always limited my food intake. My dad would sit with me until midnight, arguing about food.

“I found it difficult to maintain a relationship with anyone because my mind was so distracted,” said Karen.

Karen continues to battle the demons of anorexia nervosa and anything to do with weight loss remains a highly sensitive topic. However her life as a single mother-of-three and a clinical nurse specialist studying for her Master’s degree has helped to largely pull her through the illness.

“I’ve pushed through anorexia nervosa under my own volition.

“My kids have also been a good distraction,” Karen said.

Karen hopes her contribution to the ANGI research study will help researchers identify preventative treatments and ultimately, a cure for anorexia nervosa, to ensure others don’t have to experience the devastating illness.

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