Kirsty, 22
Young woman battling the “all-consuming” illness, anorexia nervosa, Perth

Keen dancer and Anorexia Nervosa Genetics Initiative (ANGI) research study participant, Kirsty, 22, Perth, has been battling anorexia nervosa for the past four years.

Describing the illness as “all-consuming” and “pure hell”, Kirsty explains how anorexia nervosa has robbed her passion for dance and forced her to abandon other simple hobbies, including reading and horseback riding.

While Kirsty experiences some “successful” days in working towards recovery, many other days she fears she may never overcome the devastating illness.

This is her story.

“I describe anorexia nervosa as being like a person,” Kirsty said.

“’She’ started as a friend, who helped me cope when I felt out of control, but then got her claws into me, to the point where I couldn’t escape.”

Since she can recall, Kirsty has always experienced disordered eating habits and issues around food.

“With anorexia nervosa, it’s got nothing to do with the way you look. It’s more to do with thoughts and behaviours around eating and food.

“A healthy person might cut down on portion sizes to lose weight, or skip a meal because they aren’t hungry, but with anorexia nervosa there are so many issues around eating and food avoidance, which leads to the weight loss,” said Kirsty.

In 2011, at the age of 19 and prior to anorexia nervosa diagnosis, Kirsty was physically assaulted when on leave from hospital.

Following the assault, which Kirsty now identifies as a trigger for the development of her illness, the hospital staff noticed she was restricting her food intake by skipping meals.

After a fortnight of avoiding food at the hospital, Kirsty was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa.

“When I was diagnosed, I didn’t believe them,” Kirsty said.

“It took around six months of them [doctors] telling me that I had anorexia nervosa before I believed them.”

Before the assault, Kirsty was battling self-esteem issues, believing she wasn’t good enough.

“I think the trauma of the assault brought a lot of self-esteem issues to the surface.

“After the trauma, I thought to myself ‘if I can’t control anything else, at least I can control what goes into my body and my weight’, said Kirsty.

“I began to believe if I can control my body, I can control my entire life.”

Kirsty continues to combat the illness today. At her lowest points, she has attempted to take her own life.

“There were times when I attempted suicide, as I didn’t feel like I would ever get better.
“Even today, I continue to experience some days that feel really difficult and I wonder whether I will ever get better. Whereas other days, I can look back and see how far I have come and feel really positive about the improvements, which help me to keep moving forward,” Kirsty said.

“Right now, I am in a period of recovery and I’m going pretty well. I see a psychiatrist, a psychologist, a mental health nurse, a GP who specialises in eating disorders, and sometimes I even see a dietician.

“I am currently learning a lot about anorexia nervosa and its causes, which can be really confronting, but it’s really informative and helpful,” said Kirsty.

Although in recovery, Kirsty lives in constant fear of certain triggers, causing her to relapse.

“Anorexia nervosa has changed my entire life.

“It has ruined a lot of my relationships, as I can’t go out socially nearly as much,” Kirsty said.

“It also hurts the people who love me to watch the illness destroy me.

“Anorexia nervosa has prevented me from working, which has placed in massive financial strain,” said Kirsty.

“I haven’t yet learned to drive and the illness stops me from doing a lot of things I love, like dancing, reading and horse-riding.”

Due to the insidious and destructive nature of the illness, daily activities, like showering and study, also prove challenging for Kirsty.

“It’s really hard for me to take a shower, as I hate having to look at my body.

“I want to be a normal 22-year-old,” Kirsty said.

“I want to do normal things, and not be constantly worried about food and eating all the time.

“I don’t need a huge, amazing life – I just want to be normal,” said Kirsty.

In the past six months, Kirsty has noticed a marked improvement in herself and her outlook.

Working with new treatment centres, and attending a new hospital, Kirsty is setting goals for herself as a recovery technique, including studying sign-language part-time, learning to drive, being sufficiently healthy to start dancing again, and reading a list of books.

“I’m trying to incentivise myself by setting goals, and just being able to do day-to-day activities.

“The way I see it is, I have three options; living like this for the rest of my life, which I really don’t want; dying, which I really don’t want; or recovering, which is something I’m working towards and really starting to believe can happen for me,” Kirsty said.

Kirsty is participating in the ANGI research study to keep up to date with the latest research into the illness.

“I think the study is great. It’s a way that I can actually help people overcome anorexia nervosa, which is so bad.

“I see the genes as the gun and the environment as the trigger to developing anorexia nervosa,” said Kirsty.

“I am certain there is a genetic component to the illness, but I don’t think having a genetic disposition to anorexia nervosa necessarily means you will develop the illness. Although I do think genes play a huge part.”

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