Lisa, 56
Retired public servant & volunteer living with anorexia nervosa, Canberra

Art lover, wine connoisseur, social butterfly and community volunteer, Lisa, 56, Canberra, is enjoying her newfound freedom, after retiring from the public service last year.

Lisa has spent the past 39 years battling the serious and potentially life-threatening illness, anorexia nervosa.

The self-described “classically overweight child” began dieting in her early teens to shed some weight. What began rather innocently, attracting compliments and support from those around her, quickly turned sour, as genuine concern for her welfare began to swell.

After graduating from highschool at 17 years of age, Lisa elected to work for a year before heading to university. As part of her job application, she was required to undertake a medical examination, during which she was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa.

Weighing only 32 kilograms, she was admitted to a female ward of her local hospital, where she spent the next two months confined to bed rest and force-fed until reaching a goal weight of 50 kilograms.

This is her story.

“Anorexia nervosa means having control over your body. Everything else around you might be out of control, but the one thing you can control is your body image,” Lisa said.

“When I experience a severe bout of anorexia nervosa, I describe it as my ‘diet brain’ taking over. It’s as though I’m a different person.

“As a rational person, you know how important it is to eat in order to sustain your body. But when your ‘diet brain’ switches on, your rational thought process stops,” said Lisa.

“I was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa in the 1970s, when little was known about the illness, compared to now.

“The first time I was hospitalised, I reached my goal weight of 50 kilograms. But I had no psychological support. So when I was released from hospital, I reverted to my old eating habits, and was back in hospital within a year,” Lisa said.

Following her second hospitalisation from anorexia nervosa, Lisa continued to battle the illness for years, but fortunately managed to gain some control during her 20s and 30s, by recognising her triggers.

“My triggers include stress, being in uncomfortable situations, any difficult issues or looming decisions, and travelling.

“Travelling for work to an unfamiliar setting, or eating around people I didn’t know, would increase my stress levels and lead me to control my eating,” said Lisa.
With the passing of time, Lisa continued to battle her demons. By the late 1990s, hedging 40 years of age, Lisa recognised she was in dire need of help and admitted herself to the eating disorders unit of Sydney’s renowned mental health treatment centre, Northside Clinic.

“When I was at Northside, they really tried to help me, and wanted me to reach 40 kilograms. But anytime I came close, I had some sort of block and couldn’t make it.

“Unfortunately the clinic’s treatment regime was geared towards treating teenagers, and as a middle-aged woman, I felt many aspects of this regime were totally inappropriate.

“I ended up leaving Northside Clinic, and chose to see a psychologist for support,” Lisa said.

Together with her psychologist, Lisa worked hard to beat her illness, once and for all, and in the year 2000, admitted herself to the Canberra-based, private mental health facility, Hyson Green.

“At Hyson Green, again the treatment was not tailored to the meet the needs of an older woman,” said Lisa.

“And I was a woman in my 40s, so it was never going to work.”

Nowadays, although she consumes only a small amount of food, Lisa describes her health as much improved. When people ask how she is able to stay so thin, she either explains she is living with an eating disorder, or she has a very small appetite.

Lisa volunteered for the Anorexia Nervosa Genetics Initiative (ANGI) to help researchers identify the specific gene(s) that play a role in the onset of the illness, and to raise awareness of anorexia nervosa in older women.

“I signed up to the ANGI study because I want to contribute to this ground-breaking research and to work towards a greater understanding of, and cure for, the illness.

“I also want to inform the community that older women also live with anorexia nervosa,” Lisa said.

“I think there are definitely genetic factors that contribute to anorexia nervosa.

“My anorexia nervosa was triggered by many things, including always striving to be perfect and my perceived sibling rivalry between my sister and I,” said Lisa.

“However I do think the illness also stems from a combination of psychological and physical factors.

“There’s still much to discover about anorexia nervosa, and any research that seeks to identify a new angle or treatment for the illness, is definitely worthwhile,” Lisa said.

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