Maddy, 20
Working professional who battled anorexia nervosa in her early teens, Hobart

Working professional, Maddy, 20, Hobart, spends most of her free time hanging out with her friends, exercising and studying.

As a teenager living with the potentially life-threatening anorexia nervosa, Maddy was plagued by insecurities, and allowed peer pressure and perfectionism to get the best of her.

Now fully recovered, Maddy works for a not-for-profit organization specialising in aged-care.

This is her story.

Maddy describes anorexia nervosa as very isolating and controlling.

“Anorexia nervosa is harrowing, to say the least.

“In my experience, anorexia nervosa is debilitating, not only physically, but also mentally and socially,” Maddy said.

“It held me back from doing a lot. I missed out on being a teenager due to lack of energy or being in treatment.”

Maddy first developed anorexia nervosa at the age of 13. She had just started high school and felt significant peer pressure to look a certain way, which was further compounded by the substantial pressure she placed on herself.

“As a self-confessed perfectionist, I've always wanted to set a good example for my sister and please my mum and dad.

“It was caused by the pressure I put on myself; it was not caused by pressure from my parents,” said Maddy.

“As the eldest child, you want to guide and lead your siblings, to help them avoid making the same mistakes that you made. Being the first-born strengthened my resolve for perfection.”

Maddy lived with anorexia nervosa for a year. During this period, Maddy’s friends found her illness confronting and hard to understand, leaving her quite isolated. She also experienced isolation during her recovery from missing out on various social activities due to her treatment.

“All I wanted was to be normal,” Maddy said.

Although Maddy received little support from her friends, her family, particularly her mother and grandmother, were always there for her.

“They were consistently there and supportive throughout my recovery process. Unfortunately, Nan passed away mid-way through my recovery and the resulting grief made the process longer and harder,” said Maddy.

After living with anorexia nervosa for a year, Maddy began her recovery process as an in-patient at The Royal Hobart hospital, and continued as an out-patient for years after.

“Going through the public system limited my treatment options,” Maddy said.

For Maddy, the recovery process was a long road. While she improved physically after only 18 months, her mental recovery took five years after initially commencing treatment.

“When you’re an in-patient, medical professionals ensure you gain physical stability as soon as possible.
“As resources are so stretched, once you reach a physically stable place, they discharge you, regardless of whether your illness is continuing to fester internally.

“Because anorexia nervosa is a mental illness with physical complications, many people mistakenly assume once you are physically ‘healthy’, everything is back to normal,” said Maddy.

“Although I was physically healthy, the battle of the voices in my head continued for years, because it was what I’d known for so long.

“The fear of the unknown and being ‘normal’ again was a scary prospect,” Maddy said.

Maddy also recounts the extreme challenge of “losing control of the illness” when she was an in-patient, citing “Everything I had control of was taken from me, including my calorie intake.

“While I’m now recovered, the voices, thoughts and irrational statements still creep up every now and again, and it’s really important that I recognise these patterns and stop them before they become habitual. Even stressful situations can spark irrational thinking,” said Maddy.

Although having recovered, Maddy continues to fear a relapse.

“For me, anorexia nervosa is a dangerous habit. It wouldn’t take much for me to start thinking negative thoughts again, or doing the wrong thing.

“Learning to accept myself for who I am and developing self-worth was extremely hard work. But I knew I had to work on this if I wanted to start living again. I didn’t feel worthy of this for some years,” Maddy said.

“An eating disorder isn’t something you can fight on your own. You need support, assistance and guidance, which, unfortunately, so many of us refuse.”

With two distant relatives who have battled anorexia nervosa, Maddy has chosen to participate in the Anorexia Nervosa Genetics Initiative (ANGI) research study to help further international understanding of the illness and its causes.

“It was so frustrating to not have an understanding of the illness when I was diagnosed. There were no studies or statistics and the lack of information and knowledge made it really hard to accept,” said Maddy.

Maddy contends both a genetic disposition and the environment contribute to the development of anorexia nervosa.

“If you have the personality traits and genetics and are put in the wrong environment, it can blow up.”

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