Mel, 26
Occupational therapist & ANGI-participant now recovered from five year anorexia nervosa battle, Sunshine Coast, QLD

Occupational therapist and Anorexia Nervosa Genetics Initiative (ANGI) volunteer, Mel, 26, Sunshine Coast, was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa at 17 years of age. However her symptoms associated with the devastating illness began a year prior.

Describing anorexia nervosa as a ‘debilitating illness’, Mel believes the disorder was triggered by a combination of societal pressure, family dynamics and low self-esteem.

Although recovered from anorexia nervosa, Mel continues to live with an eating disorder not otherwise specified (EDNOS), characterised by mixed features of anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa.

This is her story.

“My symptoms started when I was 16 years old, but I was officially diagnosed with anorexia nervosa a year later.

“I had very low self-esteem and was very much a perfectionist. I think my illness was also triggered by societal pressures and family dynamics at home,” Mel said.

“Anorexia nervosa made my life hell and my family’s life hell. The illness is all-consuming and extremely debilitating.”

The potentially life-threatening illness seriously impacted Mel’s life at a time when she should have been growing into a woman, enjoying her friends and experiencing new and exciting things.

“A year after my diagnosis, I was hospitalised for six months due to my dangerously low weight,” said Mel.

“I was so ill and frail that my Mum had to come and check on me at night to see if I was still breathing.

“Both my family and I found the illness incredibly isolating and damaging. I was supposed to be out having fun with friends, but I had no friends; I missed out on all these enjoyable things,” Mel said.

Despite hospitalisation, Mel continued to live with anorexia nervosa after being discharged and began seeing a psychiatrist as an outpatient one year later, which she described as “really hard going”.

“Shortly after being hospitalised, I started seeing a psychiatrist. Because I found my time in hospital so traumatic, I was managed as an outpatient,” said Mel.

“When I was 22 years old, my anorexia nervosa developed into bulimia nervosa.

“In the past year, I have been hospitalised twice, as I’m now living with an eating disorder not otherwise specified (EDNOS). I’m also seeing a dietician and a psychologist,” Mel said.
Although Mel isn’t fully recovered from her battle with eating disorders, she has made huge progress with anorexia nervosa, from which she considers herself to be fully recovered. She attributes her success to the relentless family support.

“My family are very supportive. I don’t have a lot of friends due to the all-consuming nature of eating disorders, but my family are always there, which is comforting.

“Although I’m not worried anorexia nervosa will return, the thoughts associated with the illness will never completely disappear,” said Mel.

In the face of anorexia nervosa, Mel managed to qualify as an occupational therapist, despite enduring periods of struggle throughout the course, including her being pulled out of clinical placements at times due to a physical inability.

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

She is excited about the potential ANGI has to make a difference to individuals affected by anorexia nervosa or those who may be predisposed to developing the devastating illness.

“I think it’s so important that we find a way to help people living with anorexia nervosa or those who might be predisposed to developing the illness, because it’s so devastating.

“We need to educate the community. Many people have misconceptions about anorexia nervosa, which I have experienced first-hand,” Mel said.

“I think there is a specific genetic link, as with many illnesses and diseases. However in many cases, environmental factors may trigger the genes to become active.”

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