Nicholas, 30
High-powered solicitor offers insights into the isolation of a man living with anorexia nervosa, Melbourne

Solicitor and Anorexia Nervosa Genetics Initiative (ANGI) participant, Nicholas, 30, Melbourne, received a formal diagnosis of anorexia nervosa in his final year of university, then aged 21, although symptoms began a year prior.

With an original intent to be healthy, Nicholas’s eating habits changed drastically, exacerbated by uncertainty in his life at the time and too much time spent alone.

Now a decade later, Nicholas admits it’s difficult to completely eradicate the thoughts that elicit behaviours associated with anorexia nervosa. He is, however, in a much better place now and is looking to a bright future with his girlfriend.

This is his story.

“To me, anorexia nervosa is something that really takes over your whole life and changes who you are. It’s extraordinary. It became the centre of my life,” Nicholas said.

A self-described ‘outsider’ at university, Nicholas attributes the development of his illness largely to isolation from his peers, coupled with anxiety around his final year exams and uncertainty of his future as a solicitor.

“The initial reason for deciding to change my eating habits was to get healthy. But before long, food was everything.

“I lost all of my interests. My time was spent reading cook books, watching cooking shows and figuring out what next to eat. Anorexia nervosa took over my life,” said Nicholas.

“I lost weight drastically and it started to negatively affect my life.”

After completing his Law degree, Nicholas started job hunting. However his interviews were often cut short when prospective employers noticed how thin he was.

Apart from his professional life, anorexia nervosa also took its toll on Nicholas’s health and relationships.

“I couldn’t really work, even if my interviews were successful. I was so lethargic all of the time, especially toward the end of the day.

“I would get up in the middle of the night as I couldn’t sleep and was hyper-emotional, crying all the time. I also lost all sexual interest,” Nicholas said.

“My illness really put a lot of stress on my family. My Mum kept forcing me to go to the doctors and my Grandmother was always telling me to eat.

“I found it incredibly isolating to be a male with anorexia nervosa as so much of the coverage, and treatment [of the illness] related to females,” said Nicholas.

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At the age of 23, Nicholas was admitted to a specialised eating disorder clinic in Melbourne, but chose to walk out after 22 hours because of the sole focus to gain weight rather than target the underlying causes of anorexia nervosa. This episode marked the beginning of a year-long transition from anorexia nervosa to bulimia nervosa.

“Doctors at the eating disorder clinic told me if I didn’t put on weight, I could die.

“I felt a bit out of place as the only male there, and the pressure to gain weight rather than addressing the issues behind anorexia nervosa was overwhelming.

“I started eating more, but within a year my anorexia nervosa developed into bulimia nervosa,” Nicholas said.

“I became involved in Orygen Youth Health Clinical Program, which really helped me, but closed down a year later. Although I was referred to other services, I would have had to have started them from scratch, and that put me off.

“A real turning point for me was around 18 months ago, when my girlfriend was due to move in with me. This was a big incentive to recover,” said Nicholas.

When discussing anorexia nervosa nowadays, Nicholas describes himself as fully recovered, although he remains highly cautious of the potentially life-threatening illness returning.

“I’m reasonably confident I can now hold off my thoughts relating to anorexia nervosa.

“The level of control the illness took was so exhausting; I don’t think I could do it again,” Nicholas said.

Nicholas has registered for the ANGI study, citing it as “very important” research.

“It’s vital to have some understanding of why anorexia nervosa occurs, because it is something so devastating to life that it would be comforting to know the dangers and potential early interventions.

“I implore anyone in the same situation as me to participate in ANGI and make a real difference,” said Nicholas.

“I’d also be interested to learn if anorexia nervosa has a genetic overlap with other mental health illnesses, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder.”

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