Nikki, 32
Forensic specialist & anorexia nervosa survivor, Brisbane

Volunteering for the Anorexia Nervosa Genetics Initiative (ANGI) study, forensic specialist and keen sprinter, Nikki, 32, Brisbane, is keen to help people living with, or recovering from anorexia nervosa, learn more about the illness, including the role played by genetics.

Observing her sister battle anorexia nervosa during high school, Nikki never thought she would be at risk of developing the devastating illness.

However, in her late teenage years, Nikki found herself skipping meals, avoiding food and exercising to the extreme. She became exhausted, and found it difficult to acknowledge she had a problem to herself and those close to her.

Her sister, family and boyfriend at the time were all aware something was wrong, but Nikki was in denial.

For months, Nikki fought with herself, believing she could fix the problem, until eventually reaching breaking point, having lost control and in dire need of help.

When her GP diagnosed her with anorexia nervosa, Nikki sought professional help from a psychiatrist and counsellor.

This is her story.

“Anorexia nervosa is very controlling,” said Nikki.

“It’s like someone’s in your head and they take over your mind. You lose control of your own thoughts, and everything becomes extreme. You start to become over-sensitive to things that shouldn’t really affect you.”

Never one to over-think or concern herself with body image, and being witness to her sister’s battle with anorexia nervosa, Nikki couldn’t understand the illness and thought it would never affect her.

“I can’t pinpoint the trigger, or think of anything that really led me to develop anorexia nervosa,” Nikki said.

“I wasn’t one to try and make people look at me, or be attracted to me or anything like that. I hated people looking at me.

“Nothing really seemed to change. Even looking back now, I don’t know if anyone, or anything at university influenced me to start dieting. It just happened and began to snow ball,” said Nikki.

For 12 months, a war raged inside Nikki as she worked to avoid discussions around her weight or her extreme exercise behaviour.

In a constant state of exhaustion, on the occasions when Nikki did break down, she willed herself to believe she could fix the problem by herself.

After a year of constant exhaustion, food avoidance and over-exertion through exercise, Nikki finally gave in and went to see a doctor who diagnosed her with anorexia nervosa.

As a duty of care, the doctor recommended Nikki see a psychiatrist.

After visiting the psychiatrist who allegedly blamed Nikki as the cause of her illness, she returned to her GP to inform him she would not be returning to the psychiatrist.

Despite this negative experience, Nikki sought help from her sister, who organised for Nikki to visit a counsellor who had helped manage her sister’s anorexia nervosa.
For the next 18 months, Nikki worked with this counsellor, initially visiting her on a weekly basis, subsequently reduced to fortnightly, and later monthly visits, and eventually on a needs-only basis.

“It took about three years to see any improvement,” said Nikki.

“When I decided to seek help, I broke up with my boyfriend as, through no fault of his own, he couldn’t understand what I was going through, and I had very little time that I could actually spend with him.

“Physically I was skin and bones. My periods had stopped and I was always sick. I experienced many respiratory infections, and excess hair started growing on my body,” said Nikki.

“It took a long time for me to get back on track, to accept myself and look at the good, rather than nit-pick at myself.”

In her counselling sessions, Nikki was shown different self-acceptance techniques, including a technique known as ‘tapping,’ which helped her focus on other things and to relax her mind.

While seeing the counsellor, Nikki also saw a nutritionist to discuss which foods were okay, and how to eat again.

“It was such a sensitive time,” Nikki said.

“I had to be weaned back onto food, and to re-discover how I could actually eat food.

“It felt like I was being guided back into normalcy,” said Nikki.

“At the same time, my doctor, prescribed treatment to help ease my anxiety around food, which helped me to accept advice and stop my mind from spinning out of control.”

Although describing herself as having recovered from anorexia nervosa Nikki continues to fear the illness returning.

“When I was living with anorexia nervosa, I had forgotten what it was like to feel normal. I remember coming out of the illness and I never want to return.”

Nikki enrolled in the ANGI research study to learn more about the role genetics play in anorexia nervosa. She hopes that by contributing to the study, she may help others living with, or predisposed to the life-threatening illness.

After watching her sister experience anorexia nervosa, and living the illness herself, Nikki contends a combination of genetic factors, as well as the environment, play a role in the illness.

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