

NELFT Talks.... Living with Anorexia

According to Beat, approximately 1.25 million people in the UK have an eating disorder, with Anorexia one of the most common disorders (10%) ([Source: Beat](#))

What is Anorexia?

Anorexia (or anorexia nervosa) is a serious mental illness where people are of low weight due to limiting their energy intake. It can affect anyone of any age, gender, or background. As well as restricting the amount of food eaten, they may do lots of exercise to get rid of food eaten. Some people with anorexia may experience cycles of bingeing (eating large amounts of food at once) and then purging. **Anorexia is an eating disorder and a serious mental health condition.** People who have anorexia try to keep their weight as low as possible by not eating enough food or exercising too much, or both. This can make them very ill because they start to starve. They often have a distorted image of their bodies, thinking they are fat even when they are underweight ([Source: Beat](#))

As part of Eating Disorders Awareness Week, one of our patients has bravely shared her story on living with Anorexia and how, through support from the Kent and Medway Eating Disorders Service, she has been able to find support and helpful tools to help with everyday life.

1. Tell us a little about you and your experience with eating disorders.

I'm 21 years old and struggled with anorexia nervosa during my final year at university. What began with innocent dieting and weekly exercising, quickly spiralled into a serious eating disorder that robbed me of my friendships, relationships, and my own happiness whilst seriously affecting my physical and mental health. I am now 8 months into my journey towards recovery from anorexia and whilst I'm not quite free from it yet, I am finally at a stage where I have recovered my own peace of mind around food and exercise and I am slowly reconnecting with myself and with the people that I love.

Whilst the past 8 months have truly been the hardest battle of my life, I'm so grateful to be at the place where I am at today and I could not have gotten here without the support of my friends and family and without help from the NELFT services.

2. What made you decide to seek help with our eating disorder service, was there a turning point?

My eating disorder spiralled during my last year at university but it was the final weeks leading up to my dissertation deadline that pushed me to seek help. My brain was so malnourished that I could no longer string together enough coherent sentences to make up the word count for my dissertation. As my weight plummeted, so did my confidence and I had become so insecure that I'd isolated myself from my friends. My world had gotten smaller and smaller till all it revolved around was the gym and my plate of food. I was known to be a typically positive person but I just felt drained and every conversation was an effort, every smile felt forced and I just felt so suffocated by my own negativity and by the constant thoughts around food and

calories and exercise. Though those weeks were a turning point for me to go and seek help, my decision to actively start recovery happened after a few months of relapsing. One night my Mum looked at me and said: "You have no idea what it's like as a mother to watch your daughter starve herself to death." It was heartbreaking to hear her in pain and it was from that point on that I fully committed to my recovery treatment plan.

3. How long have you been with our service? What did your appointments with the dietitians involve?

I booked an appointment with my GP in June, who then referred me to the NELFT services in Kent and Medway and I have been in treatment with them, as an outpatient, for the past 8 months. My first appointment was with a Nurse who assessed my physical and mental condition. She informed me that I would be put on a waiting list until a team of doctors, dieticians and therapists were available to implement my treatment plan. I was on the waiting list for about a month before I was offered treatment and my first point of contact was with a NELFT doctor whose primary concern was my physical health. I was then assigned to my amazing dietician, who I would come to visit on a bi-weekly basis and who would monitor my weight. We worked on a meal plan together, one that would be sufficient enough for her to approve of but that also wouldn't be impossible for me to follow. Every week we would slowly and gradually increase this meal plan as my weight and metabolism got stronger. Once I had restored a little weight, I was then assigned to my therapist, who I would see on a weekly basis to work on the underlying causes of my eating disorder and to tackle my anorexia-led behaviours.

4. What are some of the main things you have learned from this?

For my recovery I truly needed a medically certified person, who was not a parent or a friend, to a) assure me that I was physically very underweight and b) tell me exactly what amount to eat. My dietician was indispensable in those first few months and I am grateful I was able to be seen by her so quickly. When I was restricting and severely underweight all I could think about was food. Whilst I was rarely physically hungry, my brain would fixate upon the things that I was denying myself the most and no matter what I ate that given day, my body would only ever be superficially full. I became so terrified of overeating that eating nothing seemed to be the easier option. I relied heavily on the detailed meal plan provided by my dietician and found relief in putting my trust in a professional team.

5. Why is it important that people experiencing issues with eating disorders get in touch with services like ours/ If there was one piece of advice you could give someone who is living with Anorexia Nervosa or another eating disorder, but unsure how to seek help, what would it be?

I truly believe that one of the biggest eating disorder traps that may prevent someone from seeking help, is this twisted belief that "you're not ill enough." This belief is your eating disorder ultimate trump card and it is what kept me trapped alone with my anorexia for such a long period of time.

I believe the diagnosis for an eating disorder is not inherently linked to an individual's low weight on a BMI chart. Whilst this may be the case for many patients if they do not receive treatment early enough, it's not universal. Your internal struggle and disordered thoughts may not reflect your weight on a BMI chart, but if you are struggling day to day and feel trapped by food or exercise or your own body image, do speak to someone whether it be a friend or a family member or an organization (BEAT). There is no such thing as being "sick enough", or "skinny enough" to receive treatment, so if you are struggling please seek the help you desperately need and deserve. There are so many services out there and NELFT is just one of the amazing organisations made up of incredible staff that are here to help you throughout your recovery.

If you would like to talk to our team about any of the issues raised in this interview, please visit <https://www.nelft.nhs.uk/services-kent-medway-eating-disorders> or call us on 0300 300 1980.