

My secret eating disorder



Lucy Birss is fit and healthy now, but suffered from anorexia and bulimia as a teenager. She thinks a lack of self-esteem contributed to her eating disorder.

Two Australian women talk for the first time to **Juliet Rieden** about the eating disorders that consumed their teenage years and haunt them still.

IT'S A CRUEL irony that while obesity hurtles towards a national epidemic, eating disorders are also skyrocketing, with two million people in Australia suffering in their lifetime, 20 per cent of whom never recover. This voracious, dangerously misunderstood psychiatric disorder has serious long-term health effects, from osteoporosis to cardiac arrest, kidney failure and more, and is responsible for the deaths of around 1828 Australians each year.

Most women have disordered eating at some time, be it a crazy diet or loss of appetite from grief or high stress, but anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorder aren't lifestyle choices or the result of diets gone haywire (although people who diet to change their body shape are 18 times more likely to develop an eating disorder within six months). They are mental illnesses.

Eating disorders are often shameful secrets to those suffering them and what we do know is that contributing factors are issues of core self-esteem and body dissatisfaction. There's no quick fix, with the illness affecting, on average, 15 years of a sufferer's life, with many never really free of it.

Lucy Birss and Zoë Watson both started suffering eating disorders in their teens and have never talked publicly before. For Zoë, the founder of Bliss Sanctuary For Women in Bali, this will be the first time her parents hear about the illness that dogged her teens and early 20s. And for Lucy, a personal trainer, it's the first time she's really allowed herself to look at what caused her to "fail" herself and admit to the remnants of a disorder that still haunts her. Both women were married, but are now single and work in the health and wellbeing business, which in its own way has offered each their road to recovery.

Lucy Birss, 39, PERSONAL TRAINER



By the age of 15, Lucy was seriously anorexic.

I've lived in Australia for 12 years, but grew up in England and had a happy, reasonably privileged childhood. When I was at junior school, I was top of the class, but when I went to grammar school, I was suddenly among a group who were of equal or higher intelligence and I got lost in the crowd.

It started when I was 14 and a bit overweight – a size 12 or 14. At my heaviest, when I was 13, I was 82.5kg. I'm now 39, about 1.7m tall and 62kg.

I remember overhearing my mum say that I took after my aunt, who was a large lady. My mum is tiny; she's about 1.57m and she's always been between a size 6 and 10. When my friends met my mum, they would say, "Oh, your mum's so tiny." And I'd think, "What am I, an elephant?" It was always weird to me that Mum was so small. I felt enormous by comparison. Mum was very body-conscious. She followed all the diet books – high-fibre, low-fat. But we still had a lot of biscuits, crisps, chocolate and ice-cream in the house.

When I was about 10, my brother, Jeremy, went off to a school as a day boarder, so he didn't get home until around 9pm. That was when I started gaining weight – I was lonely. I'd come home from school and get the biscuit tin out.

It was anorexia first. I can pinpoint exactly when. I had glandular fever when I was 15 and I was off school for three weeks. I didn't eat very much because I was not well and so I lost weight.

When I went back to school, people were saying, "Lucy, you look fantastic."

It was like the dots just joined up in my head. Don't eat, lose weight, look good, get attention. My bedroom walls were plastered with photographs from magazines of skinny models. Those were my role models, that was how I wanted to look.

I joke and say I wasn't a very good anorexic. I would make a packed lunch in the morning and drop it in a bin on the way to school. But then, after school, my friends and I would hang out in town and I'd buy a big bag of crisps. I had no breakfast and I'd make my own meal at night, often a bowl of soup, take it off into the TV room, which had a sliding door to the outside, and pour it down the drain.

The following year, I went on a holiday with Mum, Dad and my best friend, Karen, and by that time I had started making myself sick. Karen noticed what I was doing. Apparently, she phoned my mum, who said, "No, no, she's just taking care of herself, she's just eating well."

But then I remember the day that our form tutor called me in and said straight off the bat, "So, what's going on with your eating?" I was completely sidelined and I just burst into tears.

That was when I became seriously anorexic. It was like I was given a green light to do what I wanted because I didn't have to hide it anymore. I didn't have to even pretend to eat anything because everyone knew I had a problem.

I just didn't eat – there was a point where I ate five grapes in a day and each one I would peel the skin off with my teeth very slowly to make it last longer.

We had family therapy and I saw a psychiatric nurse until I was 19. But my parents were on eggshells around me and I couldn't eat in front of anyone. So, I would go down to the kitchen when everyone had gone to bed. Since then, my parents have said, "We would all just go up to bed as early as possible, so you would go and eat something."

I got down to just under 44kg. There's this weird feeling when you don't eat. >

You feel euphoric and that kind of gives you energy. There's a school photograph from that time and when I look at it now, I don't know myself.

When I left school, my friends were going off to uni. I fell into another crowd, who were more interested in having fun, and I suddenly felt like I belonged and gradually, over time, I started eating more.

My bulimia started a few years later. With bulimia, something emotional triggers you and you stuff your face to take your mind off it, and then you panic and bring all the food back up again.

The worst phase I went through was when I lived in New York with my ex-husband. He was working very long hours and I was extremely lonely. I would buy ice-cream and then the next thing I knew I'd eaten the whole tub. So I'd bring it back up. There were times I was making myself sick three times a day. It got to the point where I said to my husband, "I'm in a really bad way, I need help." But I didn't get it and that probably led to the collapse of our relationship.

Bulimia has been in my life ever since to varying degrees. It has massively affected my relationships because it's always this big lie floating around in the background. I've had group therapy, seen psychologists, psychiatrists, hypnotherapists, life coaches, had neurolinguistic programming, I've read all the books, I've done it all. I've accepted now that it's something that haunts me. I recently broke up from a long-term relationship and did have a bit of a wobble and a couple of bulimic episodes.

I'm happy with myself now. I'm fit and healthy. I eat well, but I also know the signs and how to manage things. For me, exercise has become a kind of meditation and a way of coping with stress.

When I look back, it makes me want to cry. I had no self-esteem and I wish I could go back and give that anorexic girl confidence. No one encouraged me to be anything because all they wanted me to do was to eat. All they wanted me to do was survive. I never felt that I had anything to offer and I really feel that failed me in life. Nobody failed me. I failed myself.

Zoë Watson, 38, OWNER, BLISS SANCTUARY FOR WOMEN



Zoë's bulimia was the result of academic stress.

I was raised in Adelaide by born-again Christian parents. I had a carefree childhood with lots of people around and a younger brother, Daniel. We went to church every Sunday. I went to the local Christian school, which was very much about the way you live, rather than your actual education.

I started suffering from bulimia when I was 16, in Year 12. I had decided at the age of 11 that I wanted to be a lawyer because I wanted a different life – my dad was a bricklayer and my mum was a stay-at-home mum.

But the school I went to wasn't that fantastic. I'd gone up a year already and I was very bright and always wanting to get on to the next thing. But I think that was challenging for some of the teachers. I was really frustrated and put myself under a lot of pressure studying.

The bulimia wasn't connected to how I looked. I was quite a tall, thin, nice-looking teenager. It was very much stress-related. I would be up late studying and then I would binge-eat when everyone else was in bed. Food was very controlled in my home. We weren't allowed to just go to the fridge and get something. And so I think since I was a child I've associated control with food.

I was quite rebellious and it felt naughty opening up the cupboard and getting something when people didn't know. I would binge eat one to two big bowls of cereal and then, straightaway, I'd just throw it up. I think it was all the angst and seeking comfort, and then feeling so guilty about what I had just done and not wanting it in my body. I had to get rid of it.

I'd have a shower at night and I'd often purge in the shower, which is gross, I know. But it was so people couldn't

hear me vomiting. No one ever knew, but I could never understand why Mum didn't pick up on how much cereal we were going through.

I think it was about shame and control. I felt like I was out of control of my own destiny and that's why I ate. Then, by purging, I was gaining control again. It was a very weird thing.

It probably went on for about a year and a half, and then I stopped for a while. Since then, there have been certain times in my life when I was in a high-stress situation and it would happen again. But no one knew about it.

I was 24 when I got married and that ended up being quite an unhappy relationship. I wasn't married long and I'm pretty sure there was a period of time in there when I started the binge-eating again. My husband didn't know.

That was the last time I did it. I didn't speak to my friends about it. I tend to internalise and try to sort things out by myself. I think there was something in me that needed to learn that you can't control things in life and you need to go with the flow.

Definitely, the bulimia has had lasting physical effects. I've got irritable bowel syndrome and bad sinuses. My body just doesn't regenerate quickly and I suffer from crippling migraines. At a period where my body was growing, I treated it really badly and now my digestion is terrible and I'm sure that's got to be from the eating and purging.

I don't think I would become bulimic again. I've really put a lot of time and energy into understanding the background behind it. Today, it feels like I'm talking about someone else, not me.

I think my parents will be very surprised when they read this, but I have to be honest. That's what my life is about now and if my story can help anyone in any way, then I'm all for it. ■

FOR HELP The Butterfly Foundation operates a national helpline and a range of facilities and recovery groups for all people affected by eating disorders – sufferers, their families and friends. Phone 1800 334 673 or email support@thebutterflyfoundation.org.au

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Zoë Watson has put a lot of time and energy into understanding why she became bulimic.