

Case study

Hannah Loughnane

“When I started sixth form (aged 17), I wasn't really conscious of my weight or what I was eating. I was always active and participating in sports every single day. I practiced gymnastics for several years, and throughout this time, having to wear tight leotards didn't phase me at all (later on it made me feel sick). The transition from school to sixth form was an odd feeling, it was weird to have to choose what to wear every day and worry about what other people thought of your clothes, in addition to the added stress of the workload increasing. It was only around the middle of 2009 that I started to take control of what I was eating; I would look in the mirror and see myself gaining weight (or so I thought). I started to look in the mirror at every opportunity I could get, and was constantly comparing myself to my peers.



“I kept it all to myself because I thought it was just a phase, but it continued to progress. I made myself sick the first time in the summer holidays, just because I felt guilty for eating a packet of crisps. It continued on and off for a few weeks, and then I got gradually worse to a point where I would weigh myself literally after every single mouthful of food. If I hadn't gained anything I would go back and eat more. When I hit the point where the scales would go up by one pound, (which now sounds ridiculous) I would use that as justification to make myself sick. All I saw in the mirror was a fat girl (looking back on photos, I was definitely nowhere near fat). The food I was eating wasn't particularly unhealthy, but in my mind if it wasn't fruit or vegetables - it was bad.

“By this point I had to tell my parents. They already knew I had an issue but they really wanted me to admit I had a problem myself. Even though I knew I was suffering from an eating disorder, and the doctor had diagnosed me with atypical bulimia/anorexia, I still couldn't get perspective on things. It affected me mentally (continuing with the scales and mirror) with feelings of depression and worthlessness, and I actually started suffering from obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) to a degree where I would have to turn a light on and off a certain amount of times; it's all about control.

“Physically, I was doing more exercise than I had ever done before. I was going to the gym as well as practicing group sport every day, but because my calorie intake was so low, I was running on empty and my energy would decrease way too quickly. Even drinking water became an issue for me, and when I was playing rugby, I would refuse to drink it out of fear of putting weight on (water has zero calories!?). I had little motivation, skipping college frequently, to the point where my parents agreed I could leave (I didn't). The dangerous side of it all apart from the obvious weight loss was that my BMI had dropped down to 19, which was dangerously low for someone of my height (5ft 7). It also stopped my periods, which was another warning sign. My hair started snapping and became really dry. The GP at my doctor's surgery warned that if I didn't gain weight by my next appointment, I would be hospitalised.

“Regarding my education, I didn't want to drop out of sixth form, but I did drop a subject a few weeks before the exam to concentrate on my other two. I didn't do too great in my A levels because my concentration was all over the place. My parents were really supportive and still are. The one thing that really saved me and

helped me onto the road to recovery, was that my parents got rid of the scales and all the mirrors in our house, and they made sure they kept talking about it to me, asking how I felt and making me feel like they understood. No one other than family knew. Now I find that I'm a little more open about it, and a select few of my friends know.

I moved away to work when I left sixth form whilst still suffering with it all, but a change of routine helped. I started working at South Lakes Wild Animal Park as a Zoo Keeper. Turns out it wasn't the best move five years down the line, it made my ED come back because I was so stressed (hence why I have left). I have had help through my GP with tablets and also referrals to counsellors in recent years. I'm not over it yet but it's nowhere near as serious as before. The best advice I can give to anyone is to open up and tell someone straight away."