

**Evening News leader
column for Sat Feb 16**

How Rebecca beat her eating disorder

As part of Eating Disorders Awareness Week, **MICHAEL ALLEN** speaks to a former anorexia sufferer about how she overcame her condition.

Nineteen-year-old Rebecca Ferris from Thorpe St Andrew was a star pupil at school and is now studying medicine at Cambridge University.

But five years ago she was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa.

Now she is keen to break down the stigma attached to the condition which led her to spend 19 weeks in a special eating disorders' clinic.

"My parents said they noticed changes when I was 13," she said. Her mum being a dietician and her dad a doctor, they both knew what the signs of the condition were.

"I was making my own lunch and wanting to eat alone," she said.

"I remember starting off deciding I was going to stop eating puddings and chocolates, then it just got worse from there. It just gradually spiralled till the amount of things I allowed myself was very restricted.

"If my family went to the cinema I wouldn't go in case I had to eat something. Your whole life is based on that. It made me isolate myself quite a lot."

Her father found it difficult to deal with because of the perceived irrational nature of the condition.

"I knew how completely irrational it was," she said, "but no matter how much other people tell you that it doesn't make a difference."

During the ages of 14 and 15, she was an outpatient with the NHS Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services



Weighty problem: It is estimated that as many as 20,000 people in Norfolk may suffer from an eating disorder.

Where to find help

Local eating disorder charity

Beat: For the adult helpline, call 0845 634 1414. This helpline is available to anyone over the age of 18 and is open Monday to Friday from 10.30pm to 8.30pm and Saturdays from 1pm to 4.30pm. You can also email help@b-eat.co.uk. For the Beat Youthline call 0845 634 7650. This is

available to anyone aged 25 or under and is open from Monday to Friday, 4.30pm to 8.30pm and Saturdays, 1pm to 4.30pm. You can also text the Youthline on 07786 20 18 20 and someone will get back to you within 24 hours, or email fyp@b-eat.co.uk

NHS Norfolk Community Eating

Disorder Service (for people aged 18 and over):

Patient helpline (for people living in the NHS Norfolk area) – 0300 300 0115; Norfolk Community Eating Disorders Team – 0300 300 0142

Eating Matters helpline:

01603 767062 or email eatingmatterseast@gmail.com

(CAMHS) in Norwich. Later, she became an inpatient at Rhodes Farm, a North London eating disorder clinic. The staff focused on helping her to reach a healthy weight.

"It's difficult to change how you think when you're still at a very low weight," she said. The clinic set her diet for her and tested her weight twice a week. She also underwent individual group therapy and family therapy with her parents.

Despite her 19-week stay and having to take her biology and chemistry GCSE exams in the clinic, Ms Ferris managed to achieve 11 A*s at GCSE, including 100pc on the two papers she sat in the clinic. She later went on to achieve 4 A*s at A-level and secured a place at Cambridge.

When she returned to school, people did not talk about where she had been, but she thinks that is the wrong approach.

"There's a stigma attached to it and the less we talk about it the more it becomes something we can't talk about," she said.

Since her recovery, having a fresh start at university and her commitment to becoming a doctor has helped keep her focused on staying healthy.

Ms Ferris advises those who are suffering with an eating disorder to talk to other people who are going through the same thing, whether in person or on online moderated messaging boards. "Talking to other people who feel the same makes you realise you're not on your own," she said.

What is an eating disorder?

An eating disorder is a complex illness which can be caused by a complicated set of biological, psychological and social factors, as well as significant life events and stress, says Dr Jaco Serfontein, consulting psychiatrist at the Norfolk Community Eating Disorders Service (Norfolk CEDS). People who suffer from one might have other conditions such as anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) or depression.

"People need to work incredibly hard to get better," he said. "It's a difficult process and people often think that they should just eat more." He said eating disorder sufferers have often been influenced by social factors. "There is evidence that the media does affect people's attitudes to their body shapes," he said. Dr Serfontein notes that the emergence of pro-anorexia websites, bolstered by social media, is "causing

quite a lot of problems and seems to be proliferating". "They promote anorexia as an ideal, almost as something to be proud of," he said. "They support people in being unwell." He speculates that they are probably set up by people who suffer with at least a degree of eating disorders themselves. "I think awareness needs to be raised about that and I actually think that some action will be taken," he said. "It

needs to be regulated." Norfolk CEDS offers talking therapies which are specialised and adapted to eating disorders. Dr Serfontein said that the amount of time a person stays in treatment is down to the individual. "It's true for some people that it's a long-term illness and can become chronic," he said, "but some people who have had the illness for a very long time can make a good recovery."

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