

CASE STUDY

[Katrin's mother, Linda]

“From the family's point of view, we fell into it quite quickly”

Katrin was an excellent swimmer, training four times a week, so she's never been skinny, nor has she ever had to lose weight.

She was hitting 14 years old when it all happened. A boy she was really friendly with at school emigrated and it was a very stressful and upsetting time for her, plus she hadn't been placed with any of her friends in new GCSE groups.

At dinner we could see she was pushing her food around her plate, but we know she was upset so we put it down to that. Katrin would also get up earlier than me in the morning and it took a while to realise she wasn't eating – she was just putting crumbs in a bowl, which made it look like she had.

“She missed breakfast and threw her packed lunches away”

Katrin's school agreed she could come home for lunch and our GP put her on a mild antidepressant.

Christmas wasn't a nice place at all. During the school holidays, she lay on the sofa crying from morning to night, thinking we were putting calories in the water. I started reading books and doing research on anorexia, which was when I heard about the Maudsley. CAMHS were great because they recognised what was going on and were prepared for us speak to the Michael Rutter Centre directly, but Katrin had already got to the stage where she couldn't feed herself any longer.

She was five stone ten when we got to the Maudsley and her heart rate was so weak that they couldn't pick it up on ECG.

“With the Michael Rutter Centre by our side, we felt we had permission to insist on food”

The plan was for us to try and feed her at home while seeing them three times a week. Before leaving though, we had to try and get her to drink a high-nutrition milkshake, and that was like forcing her to take down poison because she'd already seen how many calories it contained.

We started family therapy, which was really helpful because, for one, it gave us permission to insist on food. I think when we fed Katrin she was alright about it because she felt we were to blame for making her fat. She'd just open her mouth like a baby, but if we gave her the fork she'd scream and drop it like it was a snake.

At that stage, the hospital rang us every day and we took her in two or three times a week. It went well, but Katrin was really upset because it wasn't what she wanted.

“Like Jekyll and Hyde, she was there and then not”

She did it, but it took all of January and into February for her to put on weight, and she was still crying and panicky.

The thing with anorexia: it's a brain illness, a chemical imbalance caused by malnutrition. You can be anorexic by choice, but you also become anorexic through not eating. Katrin often wasn't present and I realise now that it was because she was malnourished. Medication and therapy just won't work until you start to feed the brain, but once her body was getting nutrition again, every so often we'd see sparks of Katrin. As she got stronger though, she reached a point where she just didn't want to eat anymore. She also started self-harming... scratching herself.

“Leaving her at inpatients was the hardest thing I've ever done”

The hospital recommended a short stay of six weeks on the inpatients unit and, though we agreed, remembering our trip there still upsets me. I didn't want to leave her, but knew it was the best thing.

Katrin did everything they asked of her, but after a few weeks it was clear that being cut off from everyone was making her unhappy, so she came home after five weeks and went back to school part-time. She was very nervous – almost agoraphobic – and her concentration was shot, but she started catching up on work with tutors. Life had moved on quite a bit, but her two best friends were really supportive. Since then, she passed all her GCSEs, which we're really happy about.

“She has off-days, but these are fleeting”

Katrin is still on medication, but she was discharged from the Maudsley in August at nine and a half stone. That felt like a big step, as if we were being cast adrift – a bit like when your kids are being taught to swim and they take the armbands off for the first time – but she's eating freely now, her weight is great, she's not fixated on exercise anymore and she's so much happier.

We know it would only take a letter should the worst happen, and that's really comforting, but she doesn't need them now. She has a wide circle of friends and has realised that people like her for who she is.

I'm still vigilant, but realistically we're at a point where I should step back. In fact, I've no idea what she weighs now!

“I want Katrin to have everything she deserves”

We nearly lost her, which is the hardest thing to bear, so I'm thankful every day for our GP, CAMHS and the Maudsley, because the results speak for themselves.

I'm also grateful for resources I found when I needed them: books like Laura Collins' *Eating with your Anorexic*, and websites like www.feast-ed.org and www.aroundthedinnertable.org. When you're at the bottom of the well, it's so important to hear other families say you'll climb out. You never believe you'll feel happy again, but you do find happiness again.

CASE STUDY

Katrin

“I wanted to grab onto something to save myself”

I don't know what triggered the anorexia exactly, but it started around the time my best friend moved to Australia. It was really hard to be separated from him and hard to cope... because he wasn't just a friend, he was more like family. I was also having fights with other friends at school and had to start with new people in new classes.

Things felt out of control and I didn't know what to grab onto to save myself. I remember my dad cooking dinner one night and me saying I didn't want to eat because I was upset. I didn't eat normally for a week; then I cut down to smaller portions, started not eating breakfast and throwing my packed lunch away.

“Exercising and not eating was something of mine to control”

I've had aspects of body dysmorphia for as long as I remember. It wasn't there every day, but some days I hated the way I looked.

My big problem area has always been my legs. I was a swimmer so my legs have always had muscles, but to me they looked fat. I'd think of ways to exercise in class without people noticing. Instead of focusing on the teachers, I'd be looking at myself or at other girls, trying to work out how I could look more like them.

I'm not a selfish person, but anorexia changed that. I couldn't think of anything apart from my weight, exercising and comparing myself to others. When my weight was down, I thought I was prettier and more popular, but I kept getting sick: blackouts and even chilblains on my feet.

“At 12 o'clock on New Year's Eve, I was doing sit-ups”

I seemed to deteriorate quite quickly over the Christmas holidays. Because I didn't have to go to school or do school work, I had time to focus on myself – on exercising and not eating. My memory of that time is really hazy because I was really out of touch with things, but I remember on New Year's Eve, when the clock struck twelve and my whole family were downstairs cheering, I was in my bedroom doing sit-ups.

We had a meeting at the hospital sometime in early January, I think, and then we began family therapy sessions. We'd have a session every few days and I'd cry all the time – I thought I was going to die if I put on weight, not the other way around. Like I say, my memory is really hazy, but I remember the first time we were at the eating disorders hospital, being told to eat lunch in front of them. I screamed and refused, and I think that's when it was decided I needed something extra.

“I felt people wanted to take away the one thing that was mine”

I begged my mum not to make me go to the hospital. For a start, I really didn't think I'd fit in because I was too fat. To me, someone on an eating disorder unit should be really, really skinny, and I didn't think I was.

After a couple of weeks of being there though, one girl came onto the unit who really opened my eyes. She was really out of it and her feet would be running even when she was sat down. She was so painfully skinny – very, very ill – and in her I could see myself just a few weeks before. That was when I realised how ill I must have been. There was still a big part of me that wanted to hold on to the anorexia, but a small part had been scared into getting better.

“I knew I had to stop because I was hurting myself and others around me”

As my anorexia got better, my mood got worse. I didn't like being away from my family and friends and I locked myself away a bit, so I came home and carried on with family therapy there.

I started back at school, catching up with tutors in the library, but I was kind of scared because I didn't know what people would think. That first day the tutor asked if I wanted to go into the playground to see my friends. I went out and 50 people came up to say hello. It was really nice to know that people had missed me, but the pressure caused a panic attack. Because I'd put on weight and was looking healthy, I also thought no one would notice anything wrong... in a way, I wanted people to see there was something wrong... I wanted to be skinny and feel ill.

“The anorexia had made me feel special. I felt it made me stand out at school.”

I was known as the skinny girl. Actually, I was 'the girl with the nice figure', then 'the girl who was painfully thin', then 'the girl with anorexia', and I was afraid not to have that anymore. I did go through a bit of a bad stage after hospital, but since then I've been fine and it's been so nice to have the freedom.

My therapist really helped me. I hated him at first – it took me a long time to accept his help and I didn't want him to take the skinniness away from me – but he was bringing me back and making my family happier. I finished therapy with him a couple of months ago and it was sad. I knew I'd miss him and I still do.

“It's taken me time to realise I am who I am”

Through the therapy and medication I've become so much more confident. I still suffer from fatigue, and some depression and panic attacks, but that's apparently normal for now.

It might be difficult to accept sometimes, but I know I can't change who I am. I have bad days when I don't like the way I look or I can't fit into my favourite pair of jeans, but I come through it with my friends and family. Ha, my best friend usually just shoves a cream cake in my mouth and tells me to shut up!