



Alex at 15 before the anorexia took hold



Emaciated

At 22, a painfully thin Alex still loved buying and cooking food

I thought they were just over-reacting, so I refused to open up. At dinner I'd pretend I was eating normally, and then I'd hide food under the baggy jumpers I always wore. I was good at making sure that, somewhere between the kitchen and the dining table or my plate and my mouth, my food secretly got lost.

Sometimes I'd survive on just a couple of bran flakes in the morning. Or I'd hold out all day and eat a plate of cabbage in the evening.

I drank water to stave off the hunger, but I hated the bloated feeling of being full. I tried to satisfy my food cravings by shopping or cooking for my parents instead. Bizarrely, I was replacing actually eating food with preparing it.

As my obsession grew, I was barely existing. At 19 I was admitted to hospital. I'd done so much damage to my body that doctors warned I was in danger of a heart attack. Even that wasn't enough to get me to face my situation.

I thought everyone was exaggerating, that it was a huge conspiracy. I got angry when people told me I wasn't thinking straight, but I wasn't feeding my brain - no wonder I was deluded.

Over the next few years, I was in and out of hospital and clinics, always fighting the treatment, always making excuses and blaming the therapists. My behaviour made one nurse cry.

Surrounded by other anorexics, it was impossible to let go of my obsession. One girl was carried in on a stretcher after only eating two slices of melon a week.

At 23, I'd reached an all-time low. I

Eating disorders stem from low self-confidence

was so weak, doctors threatened to section me. I was tired of being tired. Life was becoming too painful. As a last-ditch attempt, my family forced me into rehab.

For 10 months I was policed 24 hours a day. I was never allowed anywhere by myself, not even the bathroom. I hated it, but it saved my life. The centre treated addicts of all kinds - alcoholics, drug addicts, anorexics. The focus wasn't on food but on emotions. For the first time, I didn't need to compare food stories - I could just talk about my feelings.

I came out feeling much more confident. I was invited to talk at my old school, and it felt great to be doing something positive and helping others. Now I have my own company, Springback. I visit around 70 schools a year around the country, telling my story to encourage others to speak.

I'm cautious about showing photos or talking about how low my weight went. I'm not there to tell people how to be a 'good' anorexic. If I'd heard someone like me talking when I was a sufferer, I'd probably have used their weight, and photos of their emaciation, as a goal or benchmark for my own weight loss, and I don't want to be that kind of role model.

Interestingly, although eating disorders are most common among young girls, it's always the boys who ask the most questions. Eating disorders come from a lack of self-esteem, feelings which are just as common in boys as well as girls.

I think prevention's always better than a cure. People who feel worthless need to be helped before they slide any lower.

Today I'm 31. I'm a healthy weight and have my own home in Sussex. I'd love to get married and have children one day, but who knows what will happen in the future. I don't worry so much any more. I just try to live each day as it comes.

For more information about Alex's company, visit www.springback.org.uk

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Success story

Alex beat anorexia - now she visits schools to share her experiences

WOMAN Real life

Could your child have anorexia?

From her work with schoolchildren, Alex knows young people from all backgrounds can be vulnerable to eating disorders. A national study last year highlighted children as young as six who are being diagnosed. Anorexia can stunt growth permanently, affect future fertility and damage bones. Young children tend to be very body-aware and take an interest in fashion and celebrities. They are also influenced by parents who diet or exercise excessively. Research has shown anorexia may have a genetic link.



On the brink

Even confronted with these photos, Alex, 23, still denied she had a problem

Anorexia made me an old woman

Alex Corkran devotes her life to warning kids about the dangers of eating disorders...