

# 'At 23

## I had the body of an old woman and my hair was falling out'

**For over a decade Alex Corkran battled with eating disorders that nearly killed her. It took tough love from her family to finally make her confront her illness. Now she's inspiring others to do the same**

**Report**  
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**I**t is early afternoon at Sir William Perkins's School in Chertsey, Surrey, and the 100 or so sixth-formers filing into the assembly hall are engrossed in animated chatter. This is a school that thrives on its reputation for turning out rounded, personable girls. Its pupils are among the brightest and the best – but they are also aware that, for some, there is a bleaker side to life. Moments later, when Alex Corkran tells them, 'Most of you will know someone with an eating disorder,' several lower their heads and an intense silence pervades the auditorium.

Alex is 31 and describes herself as a 'recovering anorexic'. Throughout her teens and her early 20s she was locked in a psychological battle with food that almost killed her. Her illness involved mostly starving herself but also bouts of bulimia. 'At 23, I had the body of an old woman,' she says. 'My hair was falling out, my skin was like paper and my teeth had eroded. I was unable to sleep at night because of hunger, and in the morning, I would see fresh bruises where my bones had dug into the mattress.'

Today, with her glossy hair and luminous complexion, Alex is unrecognisable from her sick self. But she is here because warning others about the grave dangers of eating disorders is now her life's work. Over the past six years, she has told her story to thousands of teenagers in hundreds of schools in the UK. She speaks without notes – often for more than an hour. Her voice is low-key, her message powerful and unfaltering in its delivery. Nicki Jenkin, head of sixth form at Sir William Perkins's says: 'Girls take note of Alex because they identify with her. She doesn't bombard them with statistics, she tells it as it was for her, from the heart.'

For Alex, there is no hard-luck story of poverty, neglect or tragedy to explain the onset of anorexia. The younger daughter of an army officer father and a mother who worked as an

administrator, her upbringing was stable and seemingly idyllic. 'A roof over my head, trips to the seaside – from day one, things were good,' she says. 'But some of my lasting memories were about the awkwardness I felt. I should have been happy but I was fearful. Fear of failure, fear of the unknown, fear of being talked about, or worse not being talked about, made me uncomfortable.'

She was, she concedes, a sensitive child who often immersed herself in a dream world. 'I had my life mapped out. I was going to become a doctor and then get married and have four children, two boys, two girls. I knew what I was going to call them, and the pets, holidays and cars we would have.'

Because there was always the possibility of her father being posted abroad – he was a lieutenant colonel in the Grenadier Guards – Alex followed her sister Claire to boarding school at eight. Although she did well, becoming head girl of her prep school, she did not take easily to living away from home, and recalls agonisingly tearful partings from her parents.

At 12, she transferred to another boarding school. 'My sister was there, I was going to make new friends and gain confidence. Secondary school would fix me. But it didn't happen like that. It was huge and alien, full of hundreds of people who were taller and louder than me. I felt like I was drowning.' It was, she says, the first point in her life when she used food to deal with the way she felt.

'That first term, I barely ate. It had nothing to do with my weight or peer or media pressure and everything to do with my self-esteem being somewhere on the floor.' Although her eating pattern did return to normal, she failed to enjoy school and 'because people like me who need constant reassurance are very annoying, I was the perfect target for someone to pick on'.

At 16, Alex moved to a day school where, at first, she appeared much happier. 'But inside, I was still me – and that >



