

Anorexia ruled my life but I'm battling back

by Gillian Potts

WHEN she was seven Ilona Burton wrote in her school book: 'My new year's resolution is to lose weight'.

Ilona's innocent childhood admissions revealed an eating disorder which would blight the rest of her youth and leave her battling anorexia.

Her horrified teachers spoke to her mother but she managed to mask her poor diet at home by eating 'a tiny breakfast and a little bit of tea'.

She would throw her lunch in the bin and gave her snacks to friends, with only a bottle of diet cola to sustain her throughout the day.

Now aged 24 and studying journalism at Salford University, Ilona is using her experiences to help eating disorder charity Beat publicise February's national Eating Disorders Awareness week.

Ilona says at her lowest point her body mass index (BMI) was 17.5 - a healthy adult should be between 20-25 and anything below 18 is deemed anorexic.

She says things really started to go downhill when she went to Aberystwyth University.

"I was so far away from home and didn't know anyone, things got really bad," she said.

"By the end of the first year I was collapsing and having blackouts. I missed a lot of my lectures."

It was only seeing her mum upset at how she had deteriorated when she returned to her family home in Stockport that shocked her into getting help.

"The worst thing was looking into my mum's eyes and seeing the worry and pain," said Ilona. "While everyone

was going out enjoying themselves I was stuck in my room, too weak to do anything.

"Some people with eating disorders say it's about control but it controlled me and took everything away."

By the time Ilona was referred to the North West Centre for Eating Disorders in Stockport she had to be forced to eat even an apple.

And although she believes she was helped by counselling and therapy, forcing herself to put on weight left her spiralling towards bulimia and taking laxatives.

"I gained a bit of weight but because I felt bad about that I began bingeing and purging," she said. "I would allow myself things I would never normally eat like cakes

and sweets but I would exercise excessively as well."

After finishing university, Ilona was admitted to Cheadle Royal Infirmary's eating disorder unit for three months. Later she relapsed but was re-admitted for nine months and is now on the road to recovery.

"I still have a massive fear of gaining weight," she said. "I want to get married and have children and that's what really scares me, that I've put that in danger."

"Anorexia takes everything away from you; it ruins everything, relationships, lives. It's a terrible thing."

If you're concerned about eating disorders Beat are running a series of support sessions around Greater Manchester during Eating Disorders Awareness Week, beginning on Monday.

A drop-in session will be held at Eccles Gateway, on Barton Lane, on Tuesday from 4.30pm. For more information visit iloveme.org.uk/EDAW.



YOU CAN BEAT IT... Ilona Burton had issues with her weight from the age of seven but finally got help to beat the disorder in her early 20s. Picture by Paul Cox

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