

Kaylee, 26

Creative art therapist & disability support worker who faced regional challenges in accessing anorexia nervosa treatment & care, **WOLLONGONG**

Creative art therapist and disability support worker Kaylee, 26, Wollongong, was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa in 2012, following a complex series of medical events.

Showing signs of anxiety and depression – conditions that often co-occur with eating disorders^{1,2} – Kaylee's mother grew concerned after discovering her daughter was self-harming, and became a strong advocate for securing a diagnosis.

Routine tests revealed Kaylee was living with high iron levels which led to a haemochromatosis diagnosis – a blood disorder that is uncommon for a minor. Told to avoid iron-rich foods, Kaylee's dietary restrictions, combined with her mental health struggles, triggered obsessive behaviours around food.

A year later, following frequent fainting spells, Kaylee's GP referred her to a paediatrician.

At 13 years of age, while hospitalised, Kaylee was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa.



Characterised by psychiatric and physical symptoms,^{3,4} anorexia nervosa is a serious and complex illness marked by extreme food restriction and significant, and often concerning weight loss.⁵

The diagnosis brought a profound sense of shame for Kaylee – not only for what she was experiencing, but for the distress it was causing her mother, who blamed herself for not recognising the signs sooner. With no access to specialised eating disorder treatment in Wollongong at the time, Kaylee was forced to make regular trips to and from Sydney to receive the professional care she required.

Kaylee's eating disorder profoundly disrupted her childhood, particularly after hospital discharge. Her efforts to resume everyday life were overshadowed by anxiety and an intense focus on food.

Today, Kaylee works as an art therapist, helping children with disabilities and mental health challenges, while drawing on her own experience to connect and support them.

Given her first-hand experience with anorexia nervosa and the many barriers she faced to secure access to professional care in regional NSW Kaylee welcomes the launch of the InsideOut Institute's eClinic – Australia's first free, fully online, national treatment hub for eating disorders. The eClinic offers flexible, self-paced programs, including BEeT for binge eating and bulimia nervosa, Skilled for a wider range of eating disorders, Supported for carers, and a Healthcare Professionals (HCP) Hub.

By removing traditional barriers to care, the eClinic ensures people like Kaylee can access vital support when they need it most, regardless of their postcode, socio-economic status, or cultural background.⁶

This is Kaylee's story.

Kaylee began experiencing depression and anxiety in her early teens and was later diagnosed with a rare blood disorder. The dietary changes required to manage the condition increased her preoccupation with food, which contributed to the development of anorexia nervosa.

"It started with anxiety and depression, then my mum discovered I'd been self-harming. She pushed for a diagnosis so I could get the help I needed.

"Tests showed I had high iron levels for my age, which led to a haemochromatosis diagnosis. I had to cut out iron-rich foods, and with the anxiety and depression, I became obsessive about my diet," said Kaylee.

As her condition worsened, Kaylee developed a range of physical symptoms that signalled the seriousness of her eating disorder.

"Fainting, a low heart rate, and losing my period were my main symptoms.

"I never really stopped eating. I just stuck to very low-calorie meals.

"I also exercised excessively, either in private or through long walks.

"Looking back, my eating changes weren't missed, but they weren't recognised as an eating disorder early enough to prevent things from getting worse," said Kaylee.

Kaylee reflects on the emotional toll of her diagnosis, particularly on her mother.

"I felt quite ashamed, but what upset me most was seeing how hurt my mum was and she wishes she'd noticed the signs sooner. Once admitted into hospital, it hit me - this has gone too far," said Kaylee.

Kaylee shares how recovery challenged her sense of what felt normal, making every day social situations feel unfamiliar and overwhelming.

"It robbed me of my childhood. After hospital, it was all about ensuring I ate every meal. A year later, going out with friends was stressful – worrying about what I'd eat made it feel more like a chore than fun," said Kaylee.

Given the substantial physical, mental and social toll of living with anorexia nervosa, Kaylee welcomes today's launch of the InsideOut Institute's eClinic.

"If a resource like the eClinic had been available back then, it could have really helped me stay on track and avoid slipping back into old patterns. It's incredible to see how far technology has come in supporting recovery.

"Having access to a 100 per cent free, and digital service like the InsideOut Institute's eClinic, addresses many of the challenges I encountered in seeking ongoing treatment for my eating disorder," Kaylee said.

Now in recovery, Kaylee has an important message for other Australians living with an eating disorder.

"Seek help from family, friends, or someone you trust. Don't hide from the world, or let your disorder get worse.

"And use every easily accessible resource, particularly the InsideOut eClinic, to mount a recovery from your eating disorder," said Kaylee.

To learn more about the InsideOut Institute's eClinic, head to eclinic.insideoutinstitute.org.au or email admin@insideoutinstitute.org.au.

Should you suspect you, or a loved one, may be living with an eating disorder, speak to your local healthcare practitioner without delay, or head to insideoutinstitute.org.au to complete their online screener and assessment, and to access more information and professional support.

Australian professional patient support services offering 24/7 helpline services include:

- **Butterfly National Helpline: 1800 334 673**
- **Beyond Blue: 1300 22 4636**
- **LifeLine: 13 11 14**
- **Men's Line Australia: 1300 78 99 78**
- **Kids Help Line: 1800 55 1800**

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To coordinate an interview with Kaylee, please contact:

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