

Hannah, 31

Legal secretary, breathwork facilitator & yoga studio co-owner who used her anorexia nervosa lived experience to help inform development of the InsideOut Institute's e-Clinic, **CANBERRA**

Legal secretary, breathwork facilitator and yoga studio co-owner, Hannah, 31, Canberra, struggled with anorexia nervosa from 15 years of age.

After receiving negative comments from her peers at school, Hannah began to restrict her food and over-exercise, which worsened her long-standing body image issues. She struggled with these symptoms for more than a year before her family urged her to see a GP. She was subsequently diagnosed with anorexia nervosa and referred to a psychiatrist for further professional support.

Characterised by psychiatric and physical symptoms,^{1,2} anorexia nervosa is a serious and complex illness marked by extreme food restriction and significant weight loss.³

Hannah's eating disorder emerged during a time of substantial upheaval. After relocating from New Zealand to Australia in her teens, she grappled with the loss of close friendships, weight-related bullying, and personal and external pressure to conform to body ideals within the dance and theatre communities to which she belonged.

Between the ages of 14 and 17, Hannah spent extended periods of time in eating disorder treatment programs, missing much of her formal education, and the opportunity to build lasting peer relationships.

Hannah's eating disorder pervaded every aspect of her life, and further placed immense emotional strain on both herself, and her family. The illness also resulted in long-term health consequences, including early-onset osteoporosis at age 15 and on-going hormonal imbalances.

Now in a stable phase of recovery, Hannah is committed to sharing her story to reduce stigma surrounding eating disorders, and to support others navigating similar experiences. She has also spent many years working to rebuild a healthier relationship with movement through yoga and Pilates.

Hannah participated in testing the InsideOut Institute's eClinic – Australia's first free, fully online, national treatment hub for eating disorders. It offers flexible, self-paced programs, including BEeT for binge eating and bulimia nervosa, SkilledED for a wider range of eating disorder symptoms, SupportedED for carers, and a Healthcare Professionals (HCP) Hub. By removing traditional barriers to care, the eClinic ensures people like Zoe can access vital support when they need it most, regardless of their postcode, socio-economic status, or cultural background.

According to Hannah, the eClinic would have proven invaluable when she was really struggling, due to its accessible and supportive design. Today, Hannah is continuing to use the eClinic and urges others experiencing eating disorder symptoms to explore the resource as part of their recovery journey.

This is Hannah's story.

Hannah began to restrict her food and over-exercise upon relocating back to Australia after living in New Zealand for 7 years and enduring bullying from her peers.



"I was a dancer, but didn't fit the typical dancer's physique. I received comments about my body from various people in both New Zealand and Australia," said Hannah.

After more than a year of witnessing her daughter's disordered eating, Hannah's mother took her to a GP, who diagnosed her with anorexia nervosa, and referred her to a psychiatrist.

"Despite their tremendous love and support, I know it was extremely tough on my mum and brother. It put a lot of pressure on our entire family" Hannah said.

"I had two subsequent hospital admissions, the first at a public hospital in Canberra and the second at a private hospital in Sydney. Being without my family's support was incredibly challenging, however this provided a sense of drive to want to get better so I could return home. Although I was resistant, looking back I know everyone was trying to fight the disorder when I didn't have the strength or capacity to do so myself."

Hannah's anorexia nervosa also led to her diagnosis with early-onset osteoporosis at just 15 years of age.

"I was diagnosed with osteoporosis at 15, and continue to experience the side-effects. I can't reverse the damage that's been done.

"It took about three years for my menstrual cycle to return to normal after coming off the contraceptive pill, which I was placed on at 18 as an attempt to restore body density and induce a regular cycle as I experienced hypothalamic amenorrhea since the age of 14. I relied heavily on natural therapies, stress reduction and sound nutrition to help restore my hormones," said Hannah.

Along with anorexia nervosa, Hannah also endured anxiety and depression.

"I've battled anxiety and depression on and off, which has been quite debilitating. The illnesses have taken me out of work, and have made it challenging for me to interact in social settings. I feel like I missed out on a lot of activities during my early teens and twenties due to these illnesses," Hannah said.

Hannah's eating disorder played a driving role in her career choices.

"In my early twenties, I taught dance largely because it was a physical job that let me keep moving and continue to perpetuate those behaviours.

"That also led me to Yoga and Pilates. Though I started them for the wrong reasons, they ultimately helped me rebuild a healthier relationship with my body.

"I began with poor intentions, but Yoga and Pilates turned out to be one of the best things I could have done for my recovery, physically, mentally and emotionally" Hannah said.

Now 10 years into stable recovery, Hannah credits rebuilding her sense of community and restoring a healthy relationship with food and exercise as key parts of her healing journey.

"My brother has been an incredible part of my recovery. We'd go to farmers' markets and cook together, and bit by bit, it changed my attitude toward food, showing me it can be a celebration, and something to enjoy. It's something we still do to this day.

"Exercise is also a celebration for me now, and as a teacher, I get to share that with others. Seeing the joy movement and connection in a supportive community environment has completely changed how I view food, exercise, my body and life as a whole" Hannah said.

Through the InsideOut Institutes eClinic, Hannah has found a place for eTherapies in her ongoing journey to full recovery.

"For those studying or juggling demanding jobs who can't spare an hour for a psychologist appointment, the InsideOut e-Clinic lets you work through personalised treatment at your own pace, from the comfort of home.

"This would have been invaluable to me during the height of my eating disorder and much more accessible than the often-intimidating one-on-one therapy sessions," said Hannah.

"The eClinic's design, incorporating cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), would have been incredibly helpful when I was struggling with anorexia nervosa.

"I find CBT very useful. It was a core component of the treatment program at the day program I attended regularly for 3 years as a teen, and I still apply it in many areas of my daily life," Hannah said.

Hannah has an important message for other Australians living with an eating disorder.

"Help is available, and the struggle doesn't have to last forever. Recovery is an ongoing journey – a transition to a better life.

"There's nothing to lose. The eClinic breaks down barriers like long wait times and the potential intimidation of one-on-one sessions or GP visits," said Hannah.

"It's an easy way to get started. You don't have to complete the whole program. Just starting is what matters most."

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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References

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2. Eating Disorders Victoria. Classifying Eating Disorders 2024 [Available from: <https://eatingdisorders.org.au/eating-disorders/what-is-an-eating-disorder/classifying-eating-disorders/>].
3. Walsh BT, Hagan KE, Lockwood C. A systematic review comparing atypical anorexia nervosa and anorexia nervosa. Int J Eat Disord. 2023;56(4):798-820.