

Ash, 26

Art director in advertising who battled an eating disorder for four years, *SYDNEY*

Advertising Art Director, Ash, 26, Sydney, first began to show signs of an eating disorder at 19 years of age.

It took more than a year of exhibiting worrisome food-related behaviours before Ash finally recognised she required professional help. She was subsequently diagnosed with the eating disorder, Anorexia Nervosa.

Although her journey to recovery was littered with relapses, Ash staunchly persisted, and managed to achieve recovery three years ago.

Nowadays Ash is advocating for reformative action on how eating disorders are viewed, diagnosed, and treated in Australia. As a passionate champion for the *InsideOut Institute*, Ash believes the organisation will make a positive step towards attracting heightening attention, funding and research in the eating disorders space.

This is Ash's story.

In 2011, at the age of 19, Ash commenced a 'health kick'. However, this behaviour soon spiralled out of control.

"I started counting calories, and before long, the health kick took over my life. I developed an unhealthy and destructive relationship with food and body image," said Ash.

Over the next year and a half, Ash battled her eating disorder behind closed doors. Fortunately, one day she came to the realisation that professional help was necessary to overcome her deeply rooted issues.

"I realised what was going on wasn't normal, and my gross fear of food and the overwhelming control I needed, had to be addressed, as well as my depression. I then decided that I wanted to beat this, so I went to my GP.

"Even just having my disorder validated, to understand what was going on, and also get the right diagnosis, was immensely helpful," Ash said.

After being diagnosed with Anorexia Nervosa, Ash began to work towards mounting a recovery from the potentially devastating eating disorder.

"I had to reach a more physically stable level before beginning work on the underlying causes of my disorder. I was subsequently admitted to a hospital in-patient clinic for 13 weeks.

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Luckily, I had a lot of support from my family. Even friends with whom I'd lost contact, returned to rally around me. Everyone was trying to get me to a better place."

Over the ensuing three-and-a-half years, Ash battled multiple relapses, which were subsequently followed by re-admissions to hospital.

"There are always ups and downs. The recovery process certainly isn't linear. Each time I relapsed, I'd learn something new about myself. Once I'd worked my way through each relapse, things started to become a bit clearer," said Ash.

Ash's physical health suffered during her up-hill battle with the eating disorder, as well as her mental health, relationships, and career.

"The disorder basically put my life on hold. I didn't have a life for about three or four years, and it affected everyone because I wasn't physically well and couldn't hold down a job.

"I had such a strict routine with my food, I couldn't even think properly. I was overrun with feelings of low self-worth," Ash said.

"I had no relationships, because my only relationship was essentially, with my eating disorder. My friendships suffered. A lot of people connect over food, and I couldn't do that. My family relationships suffered because they were basically watching me self-destruct and they didn't know how to help."

In 2014, Ash reached a critical point on her journey toward recovery.

"I reached my lowest point in terms of my physical and mental health in August of 2014. I knew my health wouldn't last through another relapse, so I put my foot down and was able to say to myself 'this is it. I'm going to beat this.'"

Now, three years later, Ash is in full recovery, and is a proud 'Champion' for the *InsideOut Institute* – the nation's first institute for research and clinical excellence in eating disorders.

"The more focus and resources we can allocate to this issue, the better. I'm really excited that I can be a part of this new initiative.

"We grossly need more funding and research to fully understand this very complex illness and break the stigma. Anything we can do to ensure people have access to better treatment and information, and early diagnosis and prevention, is key," said Ash.

"I know I'm one of the lucky ones, since I had the right treatment and support. There are some people who are unable to access the right treatment, diagnoses and support, and it just means that people end up living with the wrath of their eating disorders for longer, which is unacceptable.

"Everyone deserves to live a life free of their illness."

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For more information, or to coordinate an interview with Ash, please contact Rachel Fergus Media and Public Relations Advisor, University of Sydney +61 478 316 809