

Rachel Favilla BHSc

Clinical nutritionist, yoga teacher & author who developed anorexia nervosa while undergoing treatment for liver cirrhosis, ADELAIDE

Despite being diagnosed with anorexia nervosa at the age of 14, Rachel, Adelaide, had always enjoyed cooking.

In December 2010, Rachel was diagnosed with autoimmune hepatitis by her gastroenterologist. The severe liver problems (liver scarring) she was experiencing at the time prevented her from digesting food properly, which in turn, heightened her wariness of food.

Over the ensuing four months, Rachel became emaciated due to her liver medications and her anxiety around food. In April 2011, Rachel was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa.



Eventually, after changing her diet, Rachel's liver health improved, and she finally managed to escape the tight grip of anorexia nervosa.

Today, Rachel is no longer receiving treatment for her anorexia nervosa. She has however, emerged as a passionate advocate for shaking the stigma associated with this illness, highlighting that people can develop an eating disorder as a result of pre-existing conditions that disturb digestive, neurological and immune health. Her debut book *'Periods, Poo & A Glorious You'* includes personal reflection of her experience with anorexia nervosa, and how she healed her relationship with both food and her body.

This is Rachel's story.

Four months after Rachel was diagnosed with liver cirrhosis, a psychologist handed her a diagnosis of anorexia nervosa.

"I never stopped eating. I just couldn't digest food properly," said Rachel.

Battling the two illnesses simultaneously prevented Rachel from physically attending school for most of year nine. Instead, she was forced to complete her school classes online, which left her feeling isolated from her friends.

"Living with anorexia nervosa was very overwhelming and isolating. I didn't understand what I was going through, which made it very hard for me to articulate it to others.

"I received a lot of judgement from others who thought I was starving myself, which was not the case. Although I had anorexia nervosa, at no point did I stop eating," Rachel said.

Rachel describes herself as a sensitive, people-pleasing person who constantly felt she was letting down her family and doctors while battling illnesses with contradicting treatments.

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“At mealtimes, I would try and explain to my parents which foods were making me feel sick. I would suggest alternatives, but they would often dismiss me as being difficult and had been instructed to dismiss any concerns I voiced about my prescribed meal plan,” said Rachel.

A key turning point for Rachel was when she finally sat down with her mum to discuss her preference for managing her illnesses moving forward. The treatment and meal plans Rachel had been receiving to aid her anorexia nervosa were designed to help her gain weight. But this proved counterintuitive when it came to her liver health and liver cirrhosis.

“I told my mum I no longer wanted to see a dietitian, as I felt the underlying autoimmune disease was not being addressed,” Rachel said.

Under the guidance of a doctor, Rachel eventually began to wean off her liver medication and implement nutrition and lifestyle-related changes, armed with support from her mum.

“I transitioned to whole foods and started learning how to read food labels, so I could understand the foods which would trigger my digestive issues.

“As soon as I changed my diet, my liver health and overall health improved,” said Rachel.

Rachel is excited to be contributing to the Eating Disorders Genetics Initiative (EDGI) – the world’s largest genetic investigation of eating disorders ever performed, aiming to identify the hundreds of genes that influence a person’s risk of developing anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge-eating disorder, to improve treatment, and ultimately, save lives.

Rachel believes genes can predispose people to eating disorders.

“I hope the Eating Disorders Genetics Initiative will spark wider conversation about all of the factors that can contribute to an eating disorder diagnosis, including genes and epigenetics (how the environment influences those genes),” Rachel said.

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