

 WA NEWS

Doctor tells of 40-year anorexia battle

Cathy O'Leary | Medical Editor | The West Australian

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Sue Cruthers has battled the eating disorder anorexia nervosa for more than 40 years. Picture: Nic Ellis/The West Australian

For 40 years, Sue Cruthers did her best to hide the life-threatening eating disorder that was slowly killing her.

Even her high-profile parents -- the late WA television pioneer and philanthropist Sir James Cruthers and his wife Lady Sheila -- struggled to understand how their bright daughter could become so sick.

It would not be until she reached her early 50s that she would finally take her control of the anorexia nervosa that saw her weight plummet as low as 27kg.

Now aged 57, thin but feeling well, she wants to help other people who find mainstream treatment does not work for them.

“My life might have been so different if I hadn’t been treated as mentally ill early on and had all control taken away from me,” she said.

“After that I learnt to behave ‘normally’ to the world, and never have time off work, but hid the fact I wasn’t eating properly and exercising a lot.

“But living that half-life was exhausting and took a toll on my relationships and physical health.”

From her teenage years, she seemed to have it all, born into one of Perth’s most privileged families and becoming a school dux and prize-winning doctor.

But all the time she kept a nagging eating disorder under the radar so no one would force her to eat.

When she was diagnosed in the 1970s at the age of 14, anorexia nervosa was largely unknown but her parents were relieved to know what was wrong with their daughter.

She remembers feeling isolated from her well-meaning but strict mother, and initially decided to stop drinking fluids.

Later, a trip to Rottnest with girlfriends who were on diets and took the batter off their fish gave her the idea to stop eating, which she found surprisingly easy.

“After always being told at home I had to eat everything put in front of me, I found the idea of not eating so different, and I was good at it,” Dr Cruthers said.

Her parents saw a simple solution to her diagnosis -- all she had to do was eat, and she was put under strict instructions to eat everything given to her.

At first she fought them, hiding food in pot plants or under the rug, and putting heavy objects in her pocket when she was weighed.

But after being put into a psychiatric hospital and given antidepressant and anti-psychotic medication, she vowed to knuckle down at school so she could get a good job and be independent.

She graduated from medicine at the University of WA and worked for 28 years at several Perth hospitals, but her life was still ruled by anorexia.

By 2014, her physical health had worsened and she was forced to see emergency medical help for complications from chronic malnutrition, including gastrointestinal bleeding.

That led to an almost four-month stay in Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital, where she was forced-fed and warned that if she did not comply she would be sent to Graylands.

“Forcing me to eat, and taking all control away with that threat, was the worst thing for me,” Dr Cruthers said.

“It’s like saying to someone who is obese if your weight goes above a certain level we’re going to make you an involuntary mental health patient.”

She started to recover only after her private psychologist, Sharon Faye, negotiated a change to her nasal gastric feeds and engaged a lawyer to establish Dr Cruthers’ rights as a voluntary patient.

Now the pair are working through the not-for-profit Sharon Faye Foundation to set up a support group for people with anorexia, to give them the emotional strength to overcome the disorder.

“Someone like Sue never had control over her life and felt invisible, but now she is finally feeling like she has a voice,” Ms Faye said.

For details of the support group phone 9381 1596 or email tristan@sharonfayefoundation.com.au