

My Story

FREED: First Episode & Rapid Early Intervention for Eating Disorders

Anna Doherty is a third-year student at the University of Leeds and a champion for raising awareness of anorexia and other eating disorders, using her own experience to get people talking about the issues. This is Anna's story of how FREED changed her life.

"I came to Leeds in 2015 and I think the shock of living away from my family, along with homesickness and the pressure of university, made me quite down. I think of myself as quite an anxious person. By the end of my first year this had manifested into restricting food as a sort of coping mechanism, dealing with anxiety and eventually depression. I started getting cognitive behavioural therapy for anxiety and depression, and was prescribed antidepressants as well, but by that point it was kind of too late - I had managed to 'catch' an eating disorder."

"I just thought there was something wrong with my eating"

"It was only because I was on the [contraceptive] pill that my GP realised I had lost so much weight, because you have to get weighed regularly. They started asking questions. But to me, I just thought there was something wrong with my eating. I thought I had celiac disease (reacting to gluten). This didn't help because it meant I started cutting out carbs."

"I wanted to find something physically wrong... I couldn't accept that it had something to do with my mental health"

"I was completely in denial. I wanted to find something physically wrong with me, because I couldn't accept that it had something to do with my mental health. I went to behavioural therapy for a while where they tried different techniques, but it wasn't specialised enough. I was trying to carry on as best I could, doing my normal university stuff, getting good grades, going out - stuff like that. But my eating disorder was taking over my life. Then my doctor referred me to the FREED programme - First episode Rapid Early intervention service for Eating Disorders."

"The therapy before FREED wasn't making it worse, but it wasn't making it better"

“Before FREED, every time the doctor said: “you need to put on weight” or “you need to eat more”, I thought of it as a challenge to not do that. I was absolutely in a place where I wasn’t happy. I wanted help. I needed help. But I was completely in denial. When I started FREED, it was quite a ‘shell shock’ initially. It got worse before it got better, because I didn’t quite believe I had that diagnosis. Before the eating disorder, it was all about anxiety and depression, and a coping mechanism for that, so that was the real issue that needed addressing. FREED started to make me realise that whilst I could not control my thoughts, I could be more accepting of them. It taught me methods and ways to deal with negative emotions, to not hide away from them, and not be scared of them. I can deal with failure a lot better than I used to.”

“Now I look in the mirror and think... we’ve all got flaws and I am no different from anyone else”

“It was literally the hardest year of my entire life. I’ve never experienced something so emotionally and mentally draining than having an eating disorder and getting over it. I will never stop talking about this, because it needs to be talked about - it needs to be publicised. There is so much stigma around eating disorders. And not just eating disorders, but the way people think about perfectionism. I think one of the reasons I didn’t speak about it, was because I thought it was, like, my secret power. So, whenever I didn’t do something, I thought: ‘Well at least I’m anorexic, at least I’ve got that.’ It doesn’t make sense and it made me a shell of the person I am now. I have completely changed my outlook on life, and I think anyone who is facing the same sort of thing absolutely deserves FREED.”



The FREED model of care provides a rapid early response intervention for young people aged 16 to 25 years with short (three years or less) first episode eating disorder duration.

- A 2015 report estimated the UK prevalence of eating disorders at between 600,000-725,000
- FREED has reduced waiting time for treatment by approximately 50%
- 59% of patients with anorexia nervosa supported by FREED reached a healthy weight by 12 months, compared to 17% of the audit sample

For more information visit www.FREEDfromED.co.uk