

# Study asks if recovery tales help those with anorexia

April 30 2014, by Verity Leatherdale

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Many mental health organisations, including those treating people with anorexia nervosa, feature testimonials on their websites from survivors and sufferers who describe the road to recovery.

But how helpful are recovery stories to dealing with anorexia? "While anecdotally it is well known that people with anorexia often read memoirs of survival we do not know of any [academic research](#) into whether those stories are always helpful. If they are helpful then when and why they are helpful are the next questions we'd like to answer," said Lisa Dawson, a PhD candidate at the University of Sydney's School of Psychology.

"While our study is squarely aimed at people with anorexia nervosa it may have implications for the treatment of other [mental health](#) issues."

Dawson is currently leading a study into how useful reading a variety of survival accounts is to people with anorexia. The five survival stories come from recent research Dawson did into the crucial stages of recovery for people who survive chronic anorexia, the [mental illness](#) with the highest mortality rate.

"In the study we identified an interplay of factors which helped people recover. Crucial elements were having an insight into their illness - perceiving their experiences as an illness and recognising the people who also understood the illness and could support them," said Dawson.

"Sadly many people had to hit 'rock bottom' - to be so mentally and physically exhausted by the illness that, perhaps paradoxically, they could find the strength and motivation to confront it. Their stories were inspiring, outlining the difficult journey of recovery but also providing hope."

The stages of recovery people with anorexia progress through may mean that early in the illness survival accounts may be unhelpful or even damaging.

"As odd as it sounds to people unfamiliar with this [illness](#) it can include an element of competition, of wanting to be the 'best' anorexic. This sentiment is reflected in the existence of disturbing pro-anorexia and 'thinspiration' websites which provide encouragement to people with anorexia," said Dawson.

"For those people survival accounts may be irrelevant or an inspiration in the worst sense." June Alexander struggled with anorexia for decades before recovering and her account is one of those being used in this research. "Reading other people's stories of recovery spurred me on the way to freedom. They showed me I was not alone, not mad and that it is possible to recover," said Alexander.

People who have [anorexia](#) nervosa or an eating disorder similar to [anorexia nervosa](#) can take part in the study which is conducted online. All aspects of the study, including results, are strictly confidential.

Participation involves completing a brief questionnaire online to assess your eligibility for the study. If eligible, the study involves completing questionnaires online on two or three occasions, two weeks apart.

Provided by University of Sydney

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