

'I'm proof that the light at the end of the tunnel will come'

Emma Carpenter spent years in and out of eating disorder clinics. But now she has beaten the odds and become a personal trainer, and wishes to inspire others. By **Danielle Lett**

Eating disorders can prove to be some people's biggest battle in life – and with an estimated 1.25 million people living with one in the UK, one Ipswich woman has decided to open about her journey in order to help others overcome their struggle.

Emma Carpenter battled anorexia for a decade, and spent the majority of her adolescence in and out of treatment facilities.

But after successfully beating her illness, the 28-year-old has managed to set up her very own body-positive personal training business, Muscle Mind Wellness. And business is booming.

But what were the moments that led her to this point in her life?

"When I was younger, I had a really happy and normal childhood," she explains.

"But it was towards the end of primary school where it started to go downhill. Girls all have puppy fat, but I was bullied constantly and was always called 'fat'. I never wanted to go to school, but I never really spoke to my mum and dad about it."

Emma soon made the transition to secondary school – and unfortunately the taunting persisted.

"The bullying continued, and in my mind the only thing I could control was my eating. What I used to do what skip meals – my mum would pack me a lunch and I'd start throwing things in the bin."

But Emma's gradual weight loss didn't stop the bullying – and she found herself on the receiving end of more cruel jibes from her peers.

"Once I started to lose weight, they called me 'lanky'. I couldn't win. It was a domino effect from there really, and I couldn't stop."

By the age of 12, Emma's issues with food worsened, and she found herself hospitalised in a facility that specialised in eating disorders.

"My weight dropped to under

four stone, and they told my mum if I wasn't in hospital that week, I probably wouldn't have made it."

She spent seven months in recovery, and after getting her weight back up to a healthy body mass index, she went back to school.

"But because I was out of school for so long, I was the outsider and the bullying started again. I then relapsed and ended up in another facility for eight months before going back to school."

By this point, Emma had missed around two years of education.

Determined to catch up however, she successfully completed her GCSEs, obtaining all A* to C grades.

GCSEs in hand, Emma made her way to sixth form – and it was during her time in further education that she had an epiphany.

"When I turned 18 and started going out, I realised I didn't want to keep going in and out of hospital. I wanted an adult life for myself, and by that point I'd lost seven years of my life to my eating disorder. But I would never change what I went through and the journey I've been on."

And it was during her battle that one of her doctors said something that resonated with her – and changed the course of her life from then on.

"He said to me 'You'll never have a healthy relationship with food and exercise again'. That stuck with me, and is essentially what led me to set up my business years later."

Emma, who was working with children at the time, eventually

I would never change what I went through and the journey I've been on

Emma focuses on gentle exercise, with an emphasis on the relationship between mental and physical wellbeing

Picture: CHARLOTTE BOND



decided to pursue a new path in life and began studying personal training.

"The thing with eating disorders is they go hand in hand with anxiety and self-doubt, and it wasn't until I met my partner Tom that he really pushed me into doing what I wanted to do.

"I'm always so open when it comes to speaking about what I've been through – and I certainly don't think it's something you should be embarrassed about, as it's shaped me into the woman I

am today."

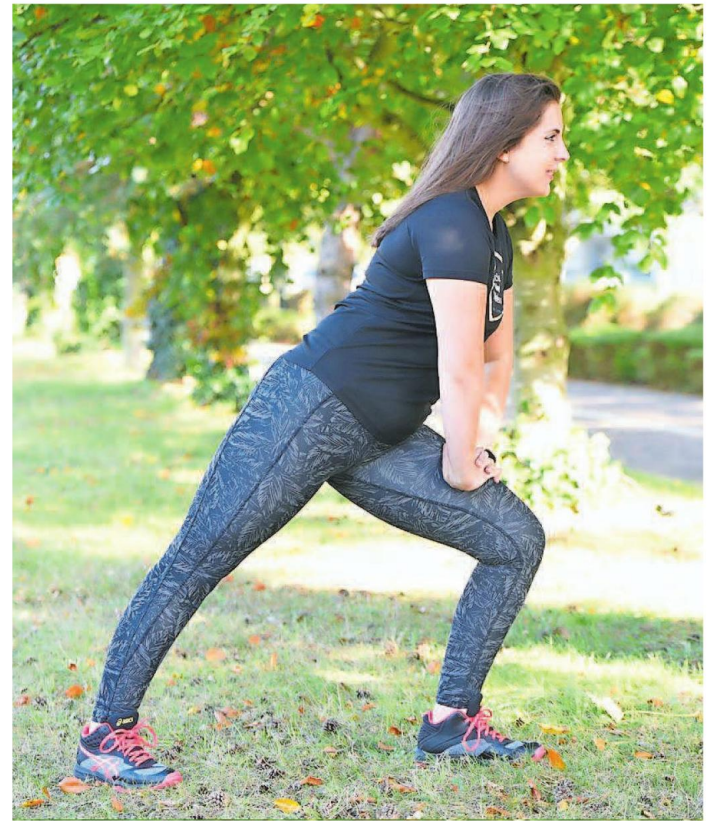
After successfully obtaining qualifications in both personal training and mental health training, Emma was ready to take the plunge, and at the end of 2020, she finally established Muscle Mind Wellness.

With a focus on both physical health and mental wellbeing, Emma wants to help others feel their best – and she understands that often starts from the inside.

"Mental and physical health go hand-in-hand, and I found gently

exercising was my outlet. Back in hospital, they say you shouldn't exercise if you're too poorly. But when you're well enough to, it's a great way to help build up your mental stamina. Going on walks when I was hospitalised really helped me – and everything felt clearer.

"I thought with my experience and what I've been through, I can help people who have been, or are going through, something similar. Some of my clients have body image issues and feel they



shouldn't be in a gym, and that it's only for the fit and muscular, so they come to me because I know how they're feeling."

With the pandemic affecting many people's mental health – Emma feels her venture came at the right time.

"I've been able to reach out to people who have been going through it, and I really wanted to show that recovery is possible. That light at the end of the tunnel that feels like it's never coming to come, will eventually come – and

that's what I wanted to show others."

Emma focuses on offering her clients gentle one-to-one training sessions, tailored to what they want to achieve – without the added pressures that may come with a conventional personal trainer or gym session.

"A lot of people have said to me that because it's just us two, they can open up to me and that it's almost like a therapy session," she explains.

Emma – who operates in

Ipswich and Colchester – also offers group sessions, and classes specially-designed for pre- and post-natal women thanks to her specialist qualifications.

"Mummy and Me' is a 45-minute class, and I know a lot of mums struggle to exercise due to childcare but they're free to bring their babies, and the mums can get to know each other while the babies play. It's helped build a community, as the other mums find they have someone to speak to."

As Emma approaches one year of being her own boss, she's determined to grow her business, and has dreams of one day running her own gym.

"I'd love to open a gym aimed at people who don't want to go to these big, intimidating gyms. I want to help people build their confidence and body image, and I just love when I see my clients slowly but surely start to believe in themselves. I want the gym – and working out in general – to be a positive experience for everyone.

"I always say if I can help even just one person change their mind into thinking recovery is possible, then I've done my job. You don't need to suffer in silence, and I'm walking proof that the light at the end of the tunnel will come."

To find out more about Emma and the work she does, visit musclemindwellness.co.uk

For anyone who needs support with eating disorders and similar issues, visit beateatingdisorders.org.uk