

Amelia's story: Still struggling...

Please note: This story highlights struggles that some people with eating disorders describe having experienced in Christian contexts. If you are looking for encouragement during an eating disorder, you might like to listen to Jing's story instead.

My name's Amelia, and I'm a 40-year-old accountant. I've been battling anorexia nervosa since I was 15.

I grew up in a Christian family with my parents and two younger siblings. Dad was a pastor and there were a lot of rules in my family and church. I sensed that there was a 'bar' of goodness that I needed to meet by ridding myself of all sin. And as a pastor's child, I just felt pressured to be all of these things that I wasn't. But we didn't talk about emotions at home. And people at church seemed to think that Christians don't struggle with mental health issues.

When I grew up, I trained as an accountant and I went to work at a Christian workplace. I felt a familiar pressure at work. People said that salvation's by grace, not works. But they also emphasised that performing to an exceptionally high standard was how other people would know that I had a genuine faith.

Self-restraint was highly valued. And my outward appearance was seen as evidence of whether I was a good person. That meant I was not to be overweight. I also had to dress modestly and not look 'too feminine' to avoid causing men to stumble.

I've always been a perfectionist, and I tend to see things as 'black and white'. I feel like my own perfectionism just collided with church spaces. I developed anorexia nervosa when I was 15 but I wasn't diagnosed until I was 25, when I fainted at the gym. Initially I didn't tell anyone at work or church. But when I was hospitalised, I couldn't hide it anymore. The pastoral care worker at my church told me that the anorexia was obviously a form of spiritual oppression because of my sin and lack of faith. And most of my Christian friends withdrew. Though a couple stuck with me - they visited me in hospital and just sat with me. And they looked after my family when I couldn't.

When I think about God now, I just feel intense guilt and shame for what I'm doing to myself. I'm constantly at war with myself, and confused and angry at God. And I've stopped attending church - I just don't have the headspace for it at the moment. I'm really not sure if I'd still call myself a Christian. But I do miss it, in some ways. Having that concrete belief in something felt secure.