

Tanya's story: A mother's journey

I'm Tanya, and I'm a 58-year-old early childhood teacher and mother of three. My son, Mark, is 16-years-old, and he was diagnosed with atypical anorexia nervosa last year.

I noticed that Mark had decided to take up gym, running and eating healthily at the start of last year. Initially, I was happy that he was motivated to look after himself. But when he started eating less and less and just kept losing weight, I got worried and took him to the GP. The first GP we saw reassured us that Mark was OK because his weight was in the 'normal' range. A couple of months later, Mark saw another doctor because he was feeling tired. She diagnosed Mark with atypical anorexia nervosa.

Apparently, that's the same as anorexia, except that despite having lost a lot of weight, Mark's weight was still in the range that doctors consider to be normal. The GP immediately referred Mark to the Emergency Department at the hospital because he had a dangerously low heart rate. He was admitted to hospital for two weeks. Then he was discharged home with an appointment at the outpatient clinic for follow-up treatment.

I felt completely out of the loop when Mark was in hospital. And I was given two hours' notice when he was discharged. I was in no way prepared for the horrendous journey that would follow - the battles six times a day at mealtimes, the secrecy, the blame that Mark has levelled at us. I know that it's the eating disorder talking, not Mark, but it still hurts. I've stopped work to care for Mark, and this illness has turned our family's life upside down. Mark's been readmitted to hospital twice and continues to struggle.

I've been a Christian for as long as I can remember and I attend church regularly. Mark grew up going to church and made a commitment to Christ when he was six. But since he's been unwell, he's lost all interest in God. That's just heartbreaking for me. When Mark was discharged from hospital, I tried to find a Christian psychologist who could work with him in a way that aligns with our values and brings faith into treatment. But I couldn't find any Christian psychologists who work with people experiencing eating disorders. In fact, I didn't even really know where to start looking. I don't think the psychologist that Mark's seeing now is a Christian. But she does seem pretty good. I do worry, though, about whether what she's telling Mark aligns with a Christian worldview.

I could not do this journey without my faith in God - I would certainly have crumbled by now. I've been getting up early every morning since Mark became ill to pray for him. I don't hold back in voicing my questions, confusion and complaints and begging God to intervene. I've tried talking to people at church, but they don't seem to understand. They just encourage me to pray and give it to Jesus - like I wasn't already doing that? Or it would make it all suddenly better? Nonetheless, knowing that God is with me and that He is in control gives me comfort, something permanent in the face of chaos. I have hope that He will bring something good out of all of this - but I choose to trust Him whatever the outcome.