

SCRAWNY TO BRAWNY

How I became mentally as well as physically strong

By Alexandra Wilson

Photos by : Matthew Embury

Not everyone who wants to get fit is looking to lose weight – for some of us, the challenge is quite the opposite. My story is certainly not the classic weight loss story – nor is it a simple scrawny to brawny tale. In my early 20s, I battled with anorexia and bulimia. I just didn't feel good about my body or who I was. But if I can change, so can anyone. Now, I'm a successful personal trainer, fitness model and bikini athlete. My journey has been about becoming mentally strong as well as physically fit – and I believe if you do that, you can make anything happen.

Like many young women, I battled with low self-worth and confidence. I always felt I had to win approval, and I set myself ridiculously high standards. At the age of 21, my perfectionism grew out of control. I was living away from home for the first time and I just pushed myself over the edge. I was getting to the gym at the crack of dawn, doing loads of cardio, and working like a maniac putting

in long days and lots of travel. I was on the go all the time: just trying to be perfect in every way. Then I started to skip the odd meal and soon I was starving myself.

I was diagnosed as anorexic and prescribed anti-depressants and a few self-help books, but I still struggled. At my lowest point I was under five stone (70 lbs), and developed amenorrhoea (loss of periods) and osteopenia (low bone density which put me at high risk of osteoporosis).

After moving from one country to another for a new job (ironically, I worked in the food industry), I spiralled into bulimia. I would overeat, then feel I'd lost control, and take laxatives. I felt empty. I had hit rock bottom. It was at this point that I turned a corner.

My doctor recommended counselling (cognitive behavioural therapy), and I began to realise that I had to get healthier, mentally, before I could improve physically. I had to take small

steps to changing my attitude to food, understanding my emotional triggers, and accepting that others' approval would never make me happy.

The term 'positive mental attitude' is used a lot in sports and fitness, but working at gaining or maintaining that mental resilience is important for everyone, regardless of age, occupation or lifestyle. It really can turn your life around.

Gradually, my health improved and I realised what I really wanted to do with my life: to turn something that had become pretty negative (fitness), into something positive. I left work, retrained in personal training, and eventually set up my own workplace health consultancy, and then later on a personal training business.

Although, I was on the road to recovery, I would experience a few more setbacks along the way – including marital problems ending in divorce. I took no chances that time. My health and wellbeing came first. I was really gentle on myself – doing the basics well - sleeping, light exercise, and eating nutritious wholesome food.

When I felt stronger, I decided to do something that would challenge those patterns of negative thinking and emotional eating that had floored me when I faced difficult times in the past. With just six months to go, I entered my first competition with Fitness America in Miami (2009). Even though I was





fit and healthy, I would need to train hard and most importantly, eat to gain muscle and transform my body shape. And I did it.

I realised that I had found my element in strength training, the discipline of eating healthily, and in competing. I achieved top 10 in the bikini category and third in my height division. But more importantly, I loved the challenge, and I loved the people and their attitude. Since then, I've competed in competitions in the UK and US and have been featured in many international magazines. I've been selected to be a UK advocate for Gaspari, one of the world's leading sports supplement brands, and invited to join Jennifer Nicole-Lee's elite Fitness Model Factory. I'm also the face of Biondi Couture's new fitness competition range.

It's a far cry from where I was ten years ago. Whatever your challenge – weight gain, weight loss, psychological – being mentally and physically healthy is paramount to a more fulfilled 'you'. I've come through a lot, and it has taken time, but I'm a lot wiser and happier. I am two stone (26 lbs) heavier, have regular meals and snacks and I weight train rather than focusing on cardio. I'm 36 and I'm finally loving every part of my life.

Eating disorders – what to look out for

If you're concerned that you may



be suffering from an eating disorder, or slipping into one, there are a few characteristics to watch out for:

- Perfectionism, overachievement – the feeling that nothing you do is ever good enough
- People pleasing – wanting people’s acceptance, doing anything you can to please
- Hiding your feelings and opinions – not being able to express how you really feel
- Not liking yourself – and constantly comparing yourself to others who you feel are better, more successful/attractive
- Feelings of hopelessness and lack of motivation
- Depression, mood swings, stress, panic attacks, anger, insomnia
- Changes in eating habits – e.g. avoiding food, self-starvation, chewing food and spitting it out, or over-eating/binge eating
- A feeling of relief when you’re starving yourself or bingeing, and guilt afterwards
- A feeling of being out of control when you’re eating
- Secretive behaviours – hiding food, lying about your eating habits
- Family members being concerned about your eating habits/appearance

Change your attitude, get the body you want

Here are Alex’s top five practical steps to kick-starting a positive mental attitude:

1. Make small changes at first - eat breakfast (it's been proven to help your mental health), make a time in the week to do something that you really enjoy, and set some tiny goals that you know you can achieve – tick them off at the end of the week for that sense of satisfaction.

2. Eat well – and by that I mean healthily, no fast food, but don't deny yourself things that you like either. Eating should be a pleasure; it shouldn't all be about denial. Do you eat 5 times a day? How about protein? Serotonin, the 'happy hormone' is manufactured in the body from the amino acid tryptophan, which is present in most protein-based foods, so there's a double bonus, as protein is low in calories and will help your muscles recover after training. High levels of tryptophan are found in cheese, meat, soya beans, sesame seeds, chocolate, oats, bananas, dried dates, milk and salmon.

3. Do exercise that you enjoy – don't just pump iron in the gym. Find something like dancing, cycling, walking or badminton that will put you in touch with other people and boost those happy chemicals.

4. Practice being thankful. It may sound a bit far-fetched, but this really does work: every night, write down 3-5 things that you enjoyed or are thankful for. In time you'll find you notice more and more things, and it becomes automatic to see the positive side of your life.

5. Practice the five ways to wellbeing: connect, be active, take notice, keep learning and give. **EF**

