

'We've finally learnt to LOVE our bodies'

For years, Victoria, Nicki and Ximena have suffered from anorexia and bulimia. So how did they gain the body confidence to pose naked for a charity photo shoot?

The three women in these sexy portrait pictures look happy, healthy and confident about their bodies. But they didn't always feel that way. All three once suffered from eating disorders and would do everything they could to hide themselves away. It was only when the eating disorder charity, Beat, asked them to pose naked for a photo shoot to raise awareness for their cause, that they decided it was time to put their demons to rest. Victoria, Nicki and Ximena agreed to be photographed by specialist female portrait company For Your Eyes Only, and were so happy with the results that they bravely decided to tell their stories and have their pictures published exclusively in *Company* magazine...



'I USED TO HIDE MY BODY IN BAGGY SWEATSHIRTS'
Victoria Old, 31, a yoga teacher from Truro, Cornwall, started suffering from anorexia five years ago. But having these photos done last year has brought her close to recovery...

“Looking at myself naked in the mirror I could see my ribs protruding. But rather than thinking how awful it was, I felt proud. Now, four years on, I'd be devastated if these nearly-naked pictures showed me as a skeleton. Anorexia only took hold in my mid twenties, after my boyfriend of six months dumped me. I found it hard to cope with the rejection and, because my self-esteem was low, I had to find something to make me feel good again. I

remembered the buzz I felt when I'd lost weight in the past, so although I was a healthy 9st for my 5ft 7in height, I started to restrict my diet. I cut out fried foods and carbs, then became a vegetarian. I felt that if I couldn't control my feelings, at least I could control what I ate. I weighed myself several times a day and, in one week alone, I lost 3lbs.

Eventually I was eating a baked apple and raisins for breakfast, a home-packed salad of lettuce, tomatoes and cucumber for lunch, and the same for dinner. Every other day I allowed myself a bread roll.

Anorexia is like having another person in your head, talking to you. 'You didn't eat a roll yesterday, so you can have one today,' she'd say.

At my lowest, I weighed just over 7st and wore layers of clothing to hide how skinny I was. The hunger was terrible,



Victoria in the grip of anorexia on holiday in Cornwall in 2005, and left, in her photo shoot

and I had stomach pains, headaches and blurred vision. I was exhausted, found it hard to concentrate and was constantly snapping at people. When I'd lost weight before, I felt good about my body. But now I felt nothing.

Things only changed when I started dating a new guy, who I met at a party. It was almost impossible to hide my anorexia because he'd suggest eating out and takeaways. After about nine months he told me he thought I had an eating disorder. I was furious and denied it, but I knew he was right.

I finally spoke to my doctor and was referred to a therapist and a dietician, who advised me on healthy eating. Learning to teach yoga also helped, as it made me realise how important it is to take care of your body. But the most important part of the recovery was telling that little voice inside me to shut up and go away.

When I told my friends and family I was anorexic, most of them said they'd thought something was wrong but didn't dare say anything. Beat, the eating disorders charity, also really helped, because reading about other people's experiences made me realise I wasn't alone. So when they were looking for people to do a naked shoot, I volunteered. It was a major breakthrough. Anorexics lose all sense of their size and can't tell if they're normal, fat or underweight. But when I looked in the mirror after I'd had my hair and make-up done for the shoot,

'If I couldn't control my feelings, at least I could control what I ate'

I thought, for the first time in ages, 'Wow! I look amazing!'

When I saw the pictures a couple of weeks later, I couldn't believe it was me. I looked so happy and healthy. I'm still 10lbs underweight, but I'm trying really hard to put on weight! On my birthday recently, I tucked into cheese fondue and cake. But the best present of all was the self-confidence these portraits have given me."



'IT TOOK ME SIX YEARS TO EAT NORMALLY AGAIN'
Nicki Hall, 26, an employment coach from Wakefield, Leeds, did her

For Your Eyes Only photo shoot last year, despite a battle with anorexia that left her fighting for life...

“I watched the start of the aerobics video in darkness, petrified Mum would hear the music. It was the middle of the night, yet I was warming up for an exercise session. I was 13 and terrified of putting on weight. I went from cutting out saturated fats, then all fats, and then carbs. For breakfast, I'd have a handful of cereal in water with skimmed milk. For lunch, I drank water to trick myself into feeling full. I'd go running every day and never walked passed the school canteen because I thought the smell of food contained calories. My friends had parties, but I didn't feel comfortable in party clothes. I think everyone just thought I was shy.

My weight dropped by 1st in a year and I had to wear a school skirt for a seven-year-old. My mum was so worried she took me to the doctor, who referred me to an eating-disorder unit. But when



I was diagnosed with anorexia, things got worse rather than better – I saw my condition as an excuse not

Christmas 1997, and Nicki was suffering from anorexia, but is on the road to recovery in her photo for Beat, below

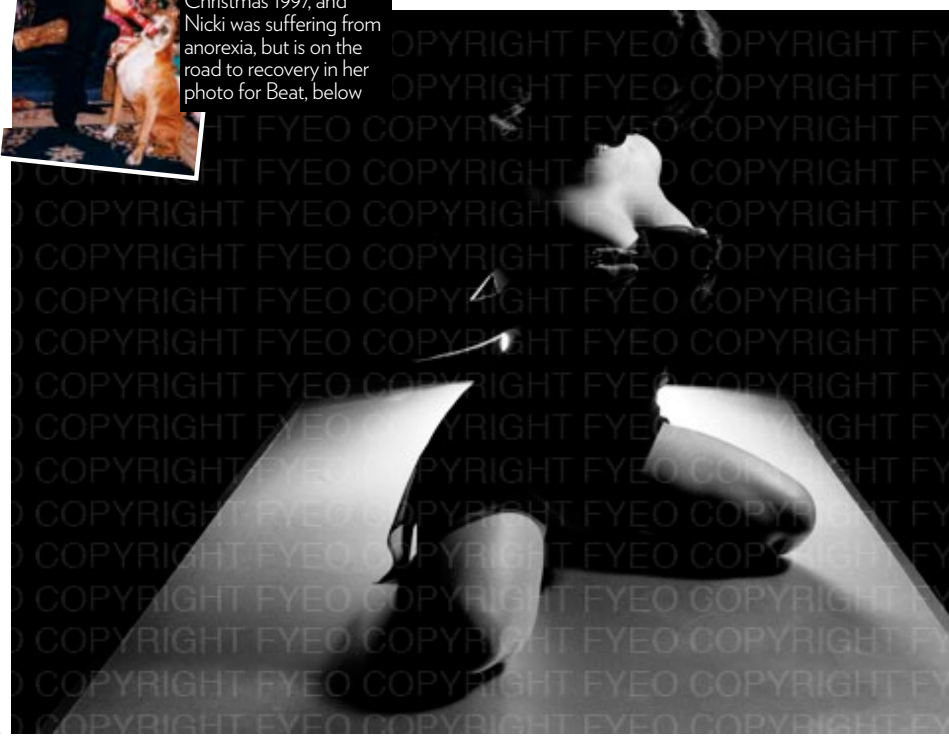
to eat. I'd have just two cornflakes for breakfast and a mouthful of cottage cheese for dinner. I kept passing out and grew a layer of downy fluff all over my body. My hands were blue and my hair came out in huge clumps in the shower.

When I turned 15, I weighed just 5st and was told to put on 1lb a week to survive. I had to eat six meals a day in front of someone, and I saw a psychiatric nurse. It was a real struggle, and eating caused agonising pains in my stomach. But the weight crept on and I started wearing skirts for 11- to 12-year-olds.

I'd turned a corner and, although I still had issues with food, once I started university I kept them under control. I'd count calories and eat small portions, but I ate three healthy meals a day.

In the grip of anorexia, I didn't want to be pictured at all, let alone in my underwear! So this photo shoot was a real challenge. I looked on the For Your Eyes Only website first to get an idea of what it would involve. The women looked so amazing I thought I'd never be able to do it. I was nervous on the day, but the photographer put me at ease, playing Beyoncé as she snapped away.

No one's totally happy with their body, but I'm a lot prouder than I used to be. The photographer captured all my best bits, so I'm really pleased. My boyfriend loves the pictures and my mum was amazed at my bravery. The fact I'm willing to have these images published shows just how far I've come." >



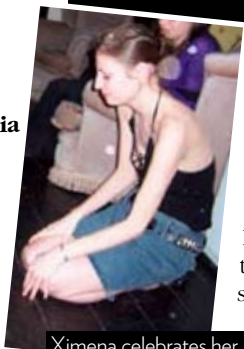


'I BINGED ON CHOCOLATE, CAKES AND CHEESE - THEN THREW IT ALL UP'

Law student Ximena Baddeley, 24, from Leamington Spa, suffered from anorexia and bulimia for eight years and saw her weight plummet to just 7st for her 5ft 9in frame. Despite going on an intensive therapy course to recover three years ago, she was still stunned when she saw her photographs...



Law student Ximena Baddeley, 24, from Leamington Spa, suffered from anorexia and bulimia for eight years and saw her weight plummet to just 7st for her 5ft 9in frame. Despite going on an intensive therapy course to recover three years ago, she was still stunned when she saw her photographs...



Ximena celebrates her 21st birthday as a student in 2005, and top, showing her new body confidence

“As I undressed and stepped into the studio, I wondered what the hell I was doing. I don't wear bikinis because of the self-harming scars on my hips, legs and arms, yet here I was about to be photographed almost naked. But then I thought, 'Why not?' It's taken time, but I'm proud of how healthy I am now, and happy to show off my body.

I'd always been skinny, but at 13, my body started changing and I didn't like putting on weight. So, like many anorexics, I started to restrict my food. For breakfast and lunch I ate a piece of fruit, and nothing after school. I just told Mum that I'd eaten at a friend's house.

Eventually my family noticed that I was losing weight when I should have been growing. The first time I made myself sick, I was 15 and I'd had friends over after school. We'd eaten a whole bag of sweets and I was horrified when I read the calorie content after they'd gone. I had to get them out of my system. So I went to the bathroom and stuck my fingers down my throat.

From then on, to keep my family happy, I'd eat an evening meal with them and then throw it up. My weight dropped to 7st 7lb and the urge to binge – and vomit – took over my life.

My eating disorder became less about my appearance and more about me

thinking I would be a better person if I were thinner. I put myself under enormous pressure and that led to self-harming. I remember the first time I sliced into my skin with a razor blade and watched the blood seep out. The release of pressure was incredible. I felt

the pain, but it was also therapeutic. I kept a razor blade in my wallet so I could use it whenever I felt I needed to.

At 17, my family found out about the self-harming and I started counselling. But because I wasn't truthful about my

'Sometimes I'd binge and vomit three or four times a night'

eating disorder, I felt the sessions weren't helpful and I stopped going.

Then I went to university and, unobserved by my family, things got worse. I knew that bingeing and vomiting was wrong, so I'd try not to eat at all. But by the evening I was starving and desperate. I'd start eating – and then I couldn't stop. I ate anything I could get my hands on, as quickly as possible, and reasoned that since I was going to throw it all up again, I could stuff myself with cakes, cheese, chocolate and ice cream. Sometimes I'd be bingeing and vomiting three or four times a night, eating until there was nothing left in my fridge.

I threw up, drank water and then threw up again, repeating this until

nothing but water was coming up, so I knew my stomach was empty. Sometimes I'd have to stop because I'd get so dizzy and faint that I'd have to lie down. Then I'd cut myself as a punishment for eating, which I saw as a failure.

Eventually, in 2005, I realised I needed help and decided to confess to my boyfriend Finn. We'd been together for 18 months, but we'd known each other since the age of 14. He knew I'd been self-harming and suffered depression, but he didn't know about the eating disorder. Confessing to Finn was a relief and he encouraged me to get help, so I'm back in therapy. Although we're not together anymore, Finn really encouraged me to go through with the shoot. I have a picture framed in my room, so I can look at it every day if I need a little boost.

I still have bad days when I'm stressed and only want to drink tea, but I make sure I eat something, too, and stop myself from going to the bathroom afterwards. I do feel as though I've recovered, although at 8st 10lbs, I'm still slightly underweight. I thought this illness would be with me forever, but I want to tell people that no matter how hard it is, you can – and will – get better.”

FOR MORE INFORMATION

If you are suffering from an eating disorder and would like help, call the beat helpline on 0845 634 1414 or email help@b-eat.co.uk.

For Your Eyes Only has studios in High Wycombe in Buckinghamshire, and in Manchester. For more information, call 0870 080 1790 or visit www.fyeoportraits.com.