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Pushed to the limit

When a child develops an eating disorder it is every parent's nightmare, but after crucifying herself over her daughter's disease, **Anne Tonner** came to the fore in search of solutions and understanding

WORDS PENNY McLEOD

PORTRAIT MATHEW FARRELL

There was a time, 10 years ago, when Anne Tonner's young son would regularly close all the doors and windows of the family's suburban Sydney home so no one would hear the fighting. The family was in virtual lockdown as Tonner's teenage daughter Chloe was savaged by anorexia nervosa – at times a fatal illness, which Tonner says made her child “at worst, a violent and abusive monster” during mealtimes.

Tonner's award-winning memoir *Cold Vein* describes her family's painful experience with anorexia. It is so searingly honest and intimate, her tone at times so self-mocking and self-accusatory, it feels almost uncomfortable after reading it to meet in person.

The Tonner of *Cold Vein* is at breaking point: she screams at her sick daughter to eat, threatens her, slams plates into the dishwasher and cries with frustration and self-pity. Her relationship with husband Ray is severely tested, and she is scathing about herself. Early in the book, when Chloe is first hospitalised for anorexia as a 13-year-old, Tonner writes of her meeting with the doctor: “I took the reins, all brief and efficient in my navy pantsuit (I'm a lawyer, you know).”

Over coffee in Hobart, Tonner is softly spoken and reserved. There's a hint of the cool and determined human rights lawyer described in the book but also warmth and poise. The mother of four is comfortable with her decision to share her harrowing experience in *Cold Vein*, which won this year's Finch Memoir Prize.

Chloe, now 26, fully recovered and working as a lawyer, is happy their story is being told to raise awareness about anorexia. Since the illness, she's travelled overseas, completed her degree and lived with friends. “I'm 110-per-cent recovered, not just in the sense of having a healthy BMI [body mass index] and functioning,” she told her mother in a text message to be shared with others.

“I do not spare a single thought for calories or compensating through exercise. It is simply not part of my life anymore.”

Tonner, who commutes each week between her home on acreage in the Huon Valley and Sydney, where she works part-time, says her children prompted her to publish her memoir.

“I started writing it 10 years ago and it took me about four years to complete,” she says. “I couldn't decide what to do with it. My children had different reactions to it. Ryan, my eldest son, said he found it hard to read because it's so vivid and it makes him feel like he's back in those times.

“But I think it's important these things are written about. It was about processing the trauma of it. In my work with refugees, I'm understanding there are many ways to process trauma. For me, the writing really helped. I wouldn't like the book to be seen as being only about an eating disorder. It's also about dealing with adversity.”

The book is gripping and powerful on many levels. Like the new Netflix film *To the Bone*, which follows a 20-year-old woman's treatment for anorexia, *Cold Vein* unpacks every aspect of the disease – from its initial misdiagnosis as lethargy caused by a virus, to near death, hospitalisation and treatment for it at age 13 in Sydney and again at 16 at a clinic in Stockholm, Sweden, to Chloe's eventual recovery.

We learn of treatment options available to the family; the lack of knowledge about the disease within the broader community; its devastating physical and mental effects (organ failure from malnourishment, anger, depression, suicidal thoughts and suicide); and, as in *To the Bone*, the methods anorexia sufferers use to lose weight. Critics of the film have said this level of detail is potentially harmful because of concerns about copycat behaviour.

Cold Vein, however, doesn't glamorise anorexia. The brutal, and at times disturbing portrayals of Chloe's illness, which the family nicknames Cold Vein, will likely serve as conversation starters about eating disorders, which affect an estimated 4 per cent of Australians. Research shows that one in five patients with anorexia, who died prematurely, had died by suicide.

“As a teenager, I'd been through a period myself of being obsessed with weight loss and calories and losing quite a lot of weight, so it may have been undiagnosed anorexia. But I was certainly never as sick as Chloe was,” Tonner says.

“I saw the link between us – noticing some of the things I used to do – and it made me very worried because I know what a dark place it is. I was never hospitalised and I think I recovered reasonably quickly, though I'm not sure why. I certainly didn't sink to the depths that she did.”

In Chloe's case, the first sign of a problem was a change in her eating habits, Tonner says. “The eating behaviour is the thing that becomes disordered. Chloe drastically changed her eating habits. She started eating particular foods, decreasing the amount she ate, and she started eating on her own in her bedroom. She also started exercising a lot.

“Her behaviour changed a lot and that process sparked other



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things: the brain and hormonal changes, and before very long she was very sick. It was self-imposed starvation."

Chloe's obsession with exercising as a way to stay thin hindered her recovery. "A big part of Chloe's anorexia was this compulsive exercise, so she would be in her room doing 1000 star jumps without us knowing and that had a big impact on her. It kept her sick because if you do that much exercise you can't put on weight, you can't recover," Tonner says.

Desperate to help their then-16-year-old daughter recover, the Tonners decided to try a treatment approach used by Melbourne's Mandometer Clinic, developed at Karolinska University Hospital near Stockholm, "where the medical advice given in one hemisphere was flipped on its head", Tonner writes.

For Tonner, this meant relocating to Sweden indefinitely while Chloe had treatment at an inpatient clinic at Karolinska. "At Stockholm, they acknowledged this obsessive exercise was part of the problem," Tonner says. "She was encouraged to sit in a wheelchair in order to conserve energy for about three months - it was really tough ... they also relied on the Mandometer, which would weigh how much she was eating and then give feedback on how quickly she was eating.

"The problem for people with anorexia is they don't eat enough and they eat too slowly. The Mandometer was gradually training them to increase both. So over the weeks and months, she would put more on the scale and eat more quickly. The feedback was from a machine that she couldn't argue with. So there were no more arguments."

Stockholm was the turning point for Chloe. "She's never relapsed since we got back from Stockholm, which is amazing. Life has been pretty normal since then," Tonner says. "The kids say the experience has made us closer as a family. It's made them very compassionate. They are very aware of other people going through tough times and usually they are very helpful to people who might be suffering from mental illnesses."

A gripping aspect of *Cold Vein* is its portrayal of a family in crisis, and the illness's devastating impact on family life. Tonner grew up in the Blue Mountains and studied law at the University of Sydney, where she met Ray. She worked as a corporate lawyer, academic and in the not-for-profit legal sector, and "had a blessed life with no major health problems" until Chloe's anorexia diagnosis.

In the book, she blames herself for her daughter's illness and this has implications for her family as she becomes obsessed with understanding why Chloe has anorexia and how to save her from it. She writes about feeling judged by Chloe's doctor: "I was

the mother who couldn't get her child to eat. I was the mother of the anorexic. What would Freud have said about me? That I was too controlling? Too absent? Either way, this could only be my fault."

Tonner says there has been a lot of research into the potential causes of anorexia, "but there's no one thing". "In Chloe's case it might have been triggered in Year Six by a boy who called her fat," she says. "That may have been enough to trigger the weight loss and, because she's a perfectionist, she took it to the extreme. I don't blame myself anymore for causing the anorexia."

She'd like there to be more funding for treatment of anorexia in Australia. "I'm not saying the Swedish method is the only way to recover, but certainly for us 10 years ago we are glad we did it," she says. "There needs to be recognition of how serious an illness it is and how high the suicide rate is."

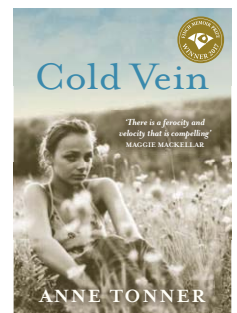
Tonner says her family felt isolated during the experience. "We didn't know anyone who had been through it," she says. "It certainly tested my relationship [with Ray] because we had very different approaches to the illness for a long time.

"I was very much the no-holds-barred warrior woman who wanted to fight it bare-fisted in the trenches and he was much more gentle, much more conciliatory.

"Ultimately, neither of those approaches really worked. It wasn't until we got to Stockholm where we had someone really helping us that we felt we were on the same page again. Our marriage has become a lot stronger as a result.

"I went from being a logical, rule-driven lawyer-type person to bewildered and confused. The book is about finding hope in very dark periods of your life and managing to find a way forward."

Cold Vein, by Anne Tonner, Finch Publishing, \$27.99. If you or anyone you know needs help with an eating disorder, phone Butterfly Foundation on 1800 334 673 or Headspace on 1800 650 890





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Anne Tomner's new book *Cold Vein* tells the story of her daughter's battle with anorexia and the family's struggle to cope with the effects of the disease.