



THE THIN EDGE OF THE WEDGE

When her daughter developed an eating disorder, Anne Tonner took her to the other side of the world for a cure

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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, 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. 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 her husband, Ray, is severely tested, and she is scathing about herself.

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 any more." *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



Anne Tonner, author of memoir *Cold Vein*.

Chloe's eventual recovery. The brutal, and at times disturbing portrayals of Chloe's illness, which the family nicknames *Cold Vein*, will serve as conversation starters about eating disorders, which affect an estimated 4 per cent of Australians.

In Chloe's case, the first sign of a problem was a change in her eating habits, Tonner says. "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 things – brain and hormonal changes, and before very long she was very sick."

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." Desperate to help their then 16-year-old daughter recover, the Tonners decided

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to try an approach used by Melbourne's Mandometer Clinic, developed at Karolinska University Hospital near Stockholm, and they relocated to Sweden for Chloe's treatment. "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.

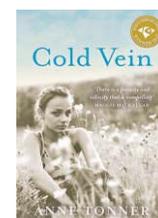
"They also relied on the Mandometer, which would weigh how much she was eating and then give feedback on how quickly she was eating."

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."

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, west of Sydney, 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 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.

"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 move forward."



***Cold Vein*, by Anne Tonner (Finch, \$28). If you or anyone you know needs help with an eating disorder: Butterfly Foundation, ph 1800 334 673, or Headspace, 1800 650 890**