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Headline: First gym session marked turning point in struggle with anxiety

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Bodybuilder Tyen Rasif, 22, who is also a women's fitness trainer. She started exercising and lifting weights about 4 years ago, but started Bodybuilding competitions about 2 years ago. Strong is now the new skinny, and an increasing number of women like Tyen are building muscle. Photo: Koh Mui Fong/TODAY

These days, Ms Tyen Rasif is a picture of health and juggles work, school and fitness – but laments guys in school do not want to date her

SINGAPORE — Only 11 when her father walked out on the family, Ms Tyen Rasif – the middle child of rogue lawyer David Rasif – lived in the shadow of self-doubt, depression and anxiety during her teenage years.

“Growing up, I had always struggled with anxiety issues, which worsened after my dad left. I used to be very close to my father and him leaving took a toll on me and my entire family,” said Ms Rasif, 22, who has not seen her father in more than a decade since he disappeared in 2006 with his clients' money. Her sisters are aged 24 and 20.

In an exclusive interview with TODAY, Ms Rasif shared how her obsession with “being accepted” by the people around her led to an eating disorder and a fear of social settings.

Weighing a mere 38kg at the height of her eating disorder, the 1.61m-tall Singapore Management University undergraduate used to experience frequent fainting spells as a result of poor nutrition.

By 17, Ms Rasif's emotional health became increasingly fragile and she had to be rushed to the emergency room for anxiety-related fits.

It was weightlifting that saved her health and sanity.

A HAPPIER PLACE

Four years ago, Ms Rasif picked up a pair of dumbbells for the first time at her gym-going friends' encouragement.

“My first session in the gym was bad. I could barely lift anything because I used to hate sweating or doing any kind of sport. I was so weak that lifting 1kg weights made me feel terrible, but I continued

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because I saw it as a challenge,” said Ms Rasif, who can now lift 80kg off her back and pull a 120kg weight from the ground.

She also started eating wholesome food like lean meat, rice and eggs. Previously, she had hated eating and it was not unusual for her to starve all day and then binge on fast food.

“I didn’t want to live that way anymore. Although there were many things in my life that were beyond my control, I realised that fitness and eating well were the things that I could control,” she said.

Two years ago, Ms Rasif picked up bodybuilding as it was “a fun way to exercise a competitive streak”. Since then, she has participated in several bodybuilding and physique competitions, bagging several medals along the way.

She emerged second in the bikini junior category at the International Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness Asian Championships 2017 in Mongolia, and fourth in the bikini open category at the Olympia Amateur Asia 2017 held Hong Kong last year, for instance.

Today, the multi-hyphenate juggles her business degree studies, bodybuilding and freelance work as a personal trainer and singer – all while maintaining an active social media presence.

Besides feeling healthier and stronger physically, she is in a happier place.

“Bodybuilding taught me how to take control of my body and the importance of setting and working towards goals. This (goal-setting) has also influenced the way I look at the other aspects of my life, be it career, family, relationships or finances. Mentally, I feel a lot better now because it gave me something to look forward to and take control of, in a positive way,” she said.

MENTAL TOUGHNESS NEEDED TOO

That said, even the best in the sport can fall prey to body-image issues, and some girls suffer eating disorders when they start gaining weight post-competition, she said.

To avoid this, Ms Rasif continues to train four to five times a week and maintains a clean diet on most days, even when she is not preparing for a competition.

“When you’re competing, you’re (in the) best shape in your entire life. But when you come out of that, it can get depressing for many people. That’s why I feel that mental strength, not just physical strength, is very important in this sport,” she said.

Mental toughness and perseverance are equally important for those who are just embarking on a healthier lifestyle, Ms Rasif added.

“Even when I train my clients, I don’t force them (to work out). If you want to be stronger and fitter, the attitude has to be there. You have to make that decision and commitment yourself, and that’s when the physical benefits will come along,” she said.

To help youths who may not be able to afford personal training or gym sessions, Ms Rasif started making her own YouTube videos a year ago.

Targeting teens and young women who find exercising and eating clean intimidating, her videos cover fitness and wellness topics ranging from how to work out more efficiently to eating more healthily at a hawker centre.

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“Personal training is expensive, and most of the clients I train are in their late 20s to mid-30s. For teens who are still getting pocket money and can’t afford to hire a trainer, I want to make fitness more accessible to them. I would like to show them that there’s a way to take control of their health,” she said.

THE DATING CHALLENGE

Although her self-confidence has improved dramatically, Ms Rasif has had to make sacrifices in her social life, particularly when training for a competition. “I’ve missed social events of friends and family because I’ve had to train or was too tired to go out after a long day of training and school,” she said.

She has also encountered her fair share of naysayers.

“Some people wonder why I’m sacrificing so much when the returns (from winning a bodybuilding or physique competition) isn’t equal. Sometimes, you may not even get any prize money. And there are others who feel girls should not be so muscular and bulky. Well, there’ll always be people who don’t understand,” she said.

For now, finding a date who understands and can tolerate her devotion to fitness remains her toughest challenge.

Declaring herself “un-dateable”, Ms Rasif lamented: “Guys in school don’t want to date me.”

She once scared a date off by taking out a portable food scale in a fancy restaurant and weighing her food – she had asked for the meat to be cooked without oil or sauce – in front of him. Fully in pre-competition mode at the time, it had not occurred to her that it was an odd thing to do on a first date.

“My first mistake – I took out the weighing scale. Next, I took out tissue paper to pat dry my chicken, you know, just to make sure there’s no excess oil. It was my first and last date with that guy,” she said with a laugh.

“I’ve long given up on dating but that’s okay. I grew up in a female-dominant family. Mum single-handedly raised me and my sisters. As a woman, it’s far more important to be strong and independent, and to be accountable to myself.”