

YOUR STORIES

Learning to fight for what I need: Ruth's story

BY RUTH HOLROYD ON 17 FEBRUARY 2022

READ IN 5 MIN



Life-threatening allergies filled Ruth with anxiety as she tried to navigate the world around her. It wasn't until later in life that she finally understood how her health affected the relationship she had with herself, and that's when everything changed

It was Christmas 2018, and I was enjoying a meal out with work colleagues when my most severe anaphylactic reaction happened.

I took a forkful of my 'special dairy-free' salmon starter, that the chef had prepared for me, and my mouth started to tingle and I felt that itching, swelling

feeling I dreaded so much begin to spread to my throat. I knew instantly that the dairy-free meal I'd been promised had more dairy in it than a dairy farm. Minutes later, hives began to spread up my arms and over my body and staff were dialling 999. In less than 10 minutes, my whole body was shaking and going into shock. I was unconscious, in an ambulance, on my way to intensive care.

My life-threatening anaphylactic reaction could have been avoided if the pub in Hertfordshire, which had a 5-star food hygiene rating, had had an effective communication process in place, and the staff had been trained. But the staff were oblivious to what a serious allergy meant and how to deal with one. In the end, the authorities fined the pub £23,000 after they pleaded guilty to offences under the Food Safety Act 1990 and Food Safety and Hygiene Regulations 2013.

Every time I walk into a restaurant, I am trusting them with my life. I am severely allergic to all nuts and dairy, and I live with a very real fear that any day could bring a fatal anaphylactic reaction.

I've had allergies all my life, starting with hay fever and reactions to dogs, cats, and dust as a small child. But it took my mum a while to work out that I was also allergic to nuts. I'd never liked them and avoided them, but kept eating them by mistake in chocolates, cakes, and biscuits. There were no labelling laws back then, especially for 'may contain' ingredients, so it was a bit like playing Russian roulette!



RUTH WITH HER MUM

I wasn't officially diagnosed until my first life-threatening anaphylactic reaction at age 19, after eating an Indian meal that contained peanuts. After one mouthful I began projectile vomiting, and it was much worse than previous reactions. In the morning I felt terrible. My eyes were swollen shut and my nose and throat were almost closed too. It really was like something out of a horror movie.

Fast forward through more than 20 allergic reactions to all nuts and now to dairy, and we get the point that things began to unravel. I knew anaphylaxis was serious and took responsibility for keeping myself safe. I always checked and carried my adrenaline but still had reactions after eating out, takeaway meals, cross-contamination at BBQs, dinner parties, cakes friends had made me.

I made mistakes myself when I just hadn't checked an ingredients label properly. But I'd always stayed conscious, able to administer adrenaline and speak to paramedics. Then something in my body changed.

Three years ago, at a work conference in Palm Springs, California, we had breakfast at a cafe where they didn't understand how serious my dairy allergy was. They served me a muffin that contained milk as an ingredient, despite assuring me it was OK. I ended up in A&E and fell unconscious before the ambulance arrived. Four hours in the hospital and I recovered, but that really scared me. I remember hearing through the haze of confusion one doctor telling a nurse: "She's not going to die on my watch!" That really hit home.

I've always been a positive person with loads of empathy for others. But after these two serious reactions, waking up and having no idea what had happened to me, I began to really struggle with anxiety and panic attacks.

It's strange looking back, but I just didn't realise what I was experiencing until I found myself stranded in London unable to figure out how to walk, let alone use public transport to get to my brother's house. This made me realise I had been having worsening anxiety for some time. I hadn't wanted to accept that these were panic attacks. I was strong. I could cope.

Except I couldn't cope. I would find myself crying in the toilets at work when invited out for lunch, unable to explain why I was so terrified. Each time I broke down, it became harder and harder to talk about things. I refused to open up and when anyone did ask me whether I was OK, I would be unable to discuss how I felt without crying. Instead of seeing this as a warning, I just clammed up even more.

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RUTH WITH HER BROTHER DAVE

I thought that by being positive and putting on a brave face I'd be OK. That by writing my whatallergy.com blog about eczema, allergies, and asthma – and

helping others understand and get support for their allergies, I was being positive and proactive.

I came to understand through counselling, was that I had zero passion for myself

I remember vividly when my therapist asked me to say out loud that I loved myself. I told her I couldn't, that I'd feel stupid. And she said, "But why can't you say I love you to yourself? Just try saying it". I wept and wept. It was uncontrollable. I suddenly realised that I didn't love myself and that hurt.

I had been internally berating myself for years. Telling myself the anaphylactic reactions were my fault. That I should stay at home. I was a freak. I had all these ridiculous allergies. I was alone, single, and no one would ever love me. It took a long time and lots of practice to have the same love for myself that I had for everyone else.

So, I discovered self-love in running, (it's my saviour), and in early morning walks. Listening to audiobooks, reading, and writing. Guided meditations, and poetry writing or journaling. Relaxing in an evening bath, listening to music or a podcast. Indulging myself with yin and restorative yoga. Cooking lovely free-from meals from scratch while dancing in the kitchen. I now make time for these things like these every day.

I wouldn't be in the position I am today without therapy. So, when I was asked to share my journey in a book I said yes. The writing was like another therapy session and it taught me even more about how far I'd come, what I'd learnt and how grateful I am to those people who saw me struggling and pushed me to get help.

'The Reluctant Allergy Expert: How to kill the fear that anaphylaxis could kill you' by Ruth Holroyd (£10.50) is available on Amazon.

Life coach Rachel Coffey says:

"Dealing with allergies can bring a sense of being out of control – especially when the impact is as significant as it is for Ruth. It isn't surprising then that when the panic attacks began, it made her question her own strength.

"The truth is, Ruth has been incredibly strong. Panic attacks are an attempt by our subconscious to protect ourselves from threat, but the trigger is over-heightened. Ruth's approach of positive habits, and seeking help is a wonderful way to move forward."

For more information about food allergies and intolerances or to find a nutrition professional to support you, visit Nutritionist Resource.

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The Happiful family began in 2005, when – inspired by their own experiences – sisters Aimi and Emma sought to help others by launching the Counselling Directory.

Happiful Magazine

We're dedicated to sharing stories about mental health, and every purchase of a print issue supports our mission to offer our digital magazine for free, so anyone who needs it has access.



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