

As Olympic golden girl Victoria Pendleton admits self-harming ...

The secret pressures driving so many teenage girls to cut themselves



Turmoil: Amy Feltham, top, and Vanessa Findlay, above

I'd done, but the adrenalin, relief and pain were comforting.'

As the years passed Vanessa's self-harm escalated until, by the age of 14, she was cutting her legs, stomach, arms and chest up to four times a day with razor blades or dismantled pencil sharpeners.

'I wore long sleeves through winter and summer and told nobody what was happening,' says Vanessa, who started suffering panic attacks and, like Megan, developed anorexia. 'I was disgusted by my body,' she says.

One of Vanessa's friends realised what she was doing and spoke to the school's educational support officer. Following his intervention and unbeknown to her parents, Vanessa started seeing a psychiatrist once a week but, sadly, her problems persisted.

It was only when she turned 16 that her parents found out. 'They read my diary,' she says. 'When my mum confronted me, I denied it. Self-harm was a lifeline: I wouldn't let anyone stop me.'

VANESSA says she has lost count of the number of times she tried to take her own life between the ages of 16 and 18. 'I overdosed on paracetamol and anti-depressants,' she says. 'I felt completely alone.'

Like Amy and Megan, she was also a bright student, yet her deteriorating mental health meant she completed only two of her four A-levels.

At 18, after dropping out of a college nursing course and taking yet another overdose, she was admitted to a psychiatric unit in Hull and later sectioned for a month. Since then she has been in and out of hospital a dozen times.

She stopped self-harming 18 months ago, after agreeing to take part in a student's PhD research on self-harm. 'I was given a camera for two weeks and told to take pictures of anything that made me think of self-harming,' she says.

'They included everything from stinging nettles to shattered glass. Looking at all the pictures made me realise how strange this was. By taking away the emotion, I was finally able to understand my behaviour and learn how to stop it.'

Vanessa — who still suffers from anorexia — had a relapse a month ago, and still has a compulsion to self-harm every day. She has been living alone for four years now, but has built bridges with her parents.

Vanessa regularly sees her GP, a community nurse and a psychiatrist. She hopes one day to be well enough to study psychology, but admits: 'I'm just surviving from one day to the next at the moment.'

Anguish: 'I hated my body and wanted to hurt it,' says Megan

made the self-harm worse. 'I began cutting myself every day, whenever I felt fat,' she says.

Megan, who had once been an A-grade student, left school with four GCSEs. She enrolled at college to study an airline cabin crew diploma, and moved into a council house at 16. 'Mum and I weren't close and my problems highlighted our differences,' she says. 'Leaving home made it easier to self-harm.' That

year, a friend introduced her to her boyfriend Jason Hoang, also 19, an architecture student. 'He was upset by my self-harming but felt powerless to stop me,' she says.

Last March she left college and found part-time jobs at a fast-food restaurant and a sports store. It was having to wear short-sleeved uniforms for both jobs that forced Megan to stop self-harming.

'Whenever I feel sad or angry, I

still get urges to do it. But the thought of having more scars stops me — I couldn't stand the shame of people seeing.'

Mental health expert Lucie Russell says there has been a marked increase in cases of self-harm in young British Asian women, who feel torn between two cultures.

Vanessa Findlay, 23, from Leeds, is the daughter of a 55-year-old Muslim taxi driver. Her white mother, a 45-year-old health support worker, converted to Islam when they married.

Vanessa says her strict upbringing was at odds with that of her schoolmates. 'My parents were protective, and I didn't fit in at school,' she says. 'I was also an introspective child, and felt stuck in the middle of my older siblings' stronger personalities.'

At ten, Vanessa began banging her head against the walls of the family home. 'It wasn't so much that I wanted to hurt myself, more a need to stop my thoughts,' she says.

The following year, she started cutting herself. 'Some classmates were bullying me one day so I locked myself in the toilets then grabbed my compass and cut my forearms.'

'For a few seconds my worries disappeared. I was shocked by what

RAISE A GLASS Meat cocktails

carnivorous canapes and cocktails to match), insists: 'The drinks are unique, with more-ish flavours.'

Their Meatequita cocktail (tequila infused with chorizo, vegetable juice, balsamic vinegar, smoked salt, pepper and port) and Bloody Bacon (Bloody Mary mix and bacon

vodka, served with smoked bacon and a skewer of soft cheese) are surprise hits.

If fish is more your thing, how about a bottle of Alaska Distillery's smoked salmon vodka (£15.50, vine andtable.com).

AILSA LESLIE



Pictures: CLAIRE WOOD PHOTOGRAPHY LTD / IMAGENORTH / RICHARD CANNON