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Some Facts About Anorexia Nervosa in Young Women

While anorexia often begins as a battle of control between the desire to eat and the desire to lose weight, it eventually becomes a complex disease that is much more about control and self esteem than about food.

The anorexic may develop her identity through her thinness and relish the special attention she gets for it. The special feelings of uniqueness can perpetuate her patterns of behavior and reinforce her controlling relationship with food. In other words, this behavior and attitude make her feel in control and seemingly good about herself. Her symptoms are egosyntonic.

The physical and emotional price of this behavior can be very high. Physical problems can range from stomach pain, diarrhea, bloating, and constipation to the very dangerous electrolyte imbalance, teeth chipping, osteoporosis, and cardiac arrest. Because the anorexic often has to rationalize and sometimes hide her behavior, anxiety and depression are common. Her focus is less on herself and more on others' perception of her, always thinking ahead and anticipating other people's criticisms.

Successful treatment of anorexia requires that the patient's symptoms be egodystonic enough for the patient to be motivated to do something about them. In other words, rather than seeing herself as victorious in achieving and maintaining weight loss, she must experience her symptoms as enough of an interference in her quality of life in order for her to become a willing and active participant in her treatment. Success must be redefined as not being achieved through dieting, a target weight or a clothing size, but by feeling good about who she is and an inner sense of integrity.

Research findings seem to suggest that it is possible to recover from this disease without therapeutic intervention, by possibly experiencing a profound epiphany or a terrible loss, by gaining ego strength or through positive relationships, but such instances are rare. While medical, psychiatric and nutritional interventions address many of the physical symptoms of the anorexic and are of vital importance, the consensus among the clinicians in my study is that the primary cause of this disease is rooted in family dysfunction, and, therefore, psychotherapy is an essential part of the recovery process.

This information was excerpted from my thesis, "The Determining Factors in Successfully Treating Anorexia Nervosa in Young Women—A Qualitative Study," May 17, 1997. For more in depth information, a copy of the complete study is available in the library at Phillips Graduate Institute, Encino, California.