

Chapter 12

Health Challenges

Eating Disorders—Dying to Be Thin

Directions: Read the text below to gain a personal perspective on an eating disorder. Then answer the questions under *Thinking Critically*, and complete the activities as directed by your teacher.

Why would anyone want to starve themselves almost to death? If you asked someone who is dealing with anorexia, you might hear a story like this.

Gradual Beginnings

“A lot was changing when I was about fourteen. I was growing physically, and I started high school. I felt pressure from my family, friends, and others at school to be and act in certain ways. I felt like everything was getting out of control until I found something I could control—my eating.

“I have always been a little overweight, so I decided to lose ten pounds. It felt great. My friends complimented me, and my dad said he was proud of me for sticking to my diet. Let’s face it, thin is in, but it was not just a matter of how I looked. I liked the feeling of being in control. I was afraid that if I stopped watching my weight, everything would fall apart.

“I became compulsive about exercise. I had to exercise for twenty minutes every morning, no matter what. If I missed the school bus and my mom had to give me a ride, it didn’t matter.

“To make sure I did not eat too much, I developed all kinds of habits. I weighed everything I ate. Just three-quarters of an orange was my limit because I thought a whole one had too many calories. I cut my food into tiny pieces to make it last longer. I started to get uncomfortable eating with other people, so I stopped eating lunch at school and avoided meals with my family. I was embarrassed about eating so little but felt guilty about eating at all.

“The funny thing was, I liked to fix food for other people, and the more they ate, the better I liked it. In a way, it put me in charge of *their* eating too.

“After about a year, I was twenty pounds underweight. I was losing my hair, had no energy, and was cold all the time. My hipbones and shoulder blades were sticking out, but I still felt fat. In fact, I was getting worse—more rigid and more frightened. I started dieting to feel in control, but I was anything *but* in control.

“It was awful for my family too. They used to plead, threaten, bribe, cry—anything to get me to eat. Once I was in a phase when I ate only graham crackers. My dad went out at eleven one night because we were out of them, and I was crying that now I could not eat *anything*. I was so wrapped up in myself that I couldn’t see how I was hurting them.”

A Turning Point

“Then I caught a bad cold. My body was so starved that I couldn’t fight it off, and it developed into pneumonia. I was hospitalized for a week. The doctors told me I was literally killing myself. That was a real shock.

“The doctors sent me to a counselor who got me to see that weight wasn’t really the problem. It went much deeper. It involved my feelings about me—my lack of trust in myself and others, my fear of taking risks and failing. The counselor got my whole family involved. She suggested ways to cope with my problem—because it was *my* problem. They could help with love and support, but I had to solve this for myself.

“That was ten months ago. It’s been a lot of work, and it’s not over yet, but I know I’m getting better. My weight is healthy now, and I’m learning that I do not need to control everything and everyone to feel secure. I see that there’s more to me than how I look, and I like what I see.”

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Thinking Critically

1. People are often more critical of their own appearance than others are. Why? Can this lead to an eating disorder? Explain your answer.

2. How might weight-loss diets lead to an eating disorder?

3. Anorexia nervosa is often called the starvation diet. Do you believe there is a difference between anorexia nervosa and starvation? Explain your answer.

4. How can bulimia or binge eating be just as harmful to a person's body as anorexia?

For Further Study

- ◆ Ask yourself: What is normal? What does it mean to be normal? Then write a short essay on the topic: *What is normal eating?* Survey five of your friends, and ask them to make a list of at least five characteristics of *normal* eating. What characteristics did you share? What characteristics were different? Revise your essay to account for these characteristics and submit it to your teacher.
- ◆ Write a case study or scenario about a friend who has an eating disorder. Pose three questions to lead a class discussion using your case study as the example.
- ◆ Develop a brochure on the warning signs of anorexia or bulimia nervosa. Make copies and put them in your school library as a resource for other teens. The American Anorexia Bulimia Association Web site is a good resource for additional information.
- ◆ Investigate hyperglycemia and hypoglycemia. Explain the differences. Make a list of the food challenges each of these health conditions presents. Share your findings with the class.
- ◆ Do French toast, apple pancakes, lasagna, stuffed peppers, and chocolate cake sound like food for a diabetic, lactose-intolerant, or gluten-intolerant diet? They can be! Find a recipe acceptable for either a diabetic or lactose- or gluten-intolerant eating plan. Compare the recipe to a traditional recipe for the same food. What does your comparison suggest about guidelines for a healthful diet for people with food challenges? Write a summary and submit it to your teacher.