

Ana & Mia: The Online World of Anorexia & Bulimia

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Imagine this: a 12 year old girl struggling with her weight, feeling insecure and alone goes online to find a better diet – something to help her lose weight faster before entering Grade 7. She often wonders if she has an eating disorder – not fully comprehending what that means. She goes to a search engine and types in “eating disorders” – up come 650,000 entries. Confused, she narrows her search to “anorexia” – 417,000 entries. She clicks haphazardly on one entry and is taken to a page where she sees a photograph of an emaciated model and beside it the “10 Thin Commandments”:

- 1.) If you aren't thin, than you aren't attractive.
- 2.) Being thin is more important than being healthy.
- 3.) You must buy clothes, cut your hair, take laxatives, starve yourself, do anything to make yourself look thinner.
- 4.) Thou shall not eat without feeling guilty.
- 5.) Thou shall not eat fattening food without punishing oneself afterward.
- 6.) Thou shall count calories and restrict intake accordingly.
- 7.) What the scale says is the most important thing.
- 8.) Losing weight is good; gaining weight is bad.
- 9.) You can never be too thin.
- 10.) Being thin and not eating are signs of true will power and success.

She has stumbled upon a pro-anorexia website.

It seems unfathomable; a movement that encourages anorexia nervosa – a devastating eating disorder that claims the lives of thousands of women each year. Yet, through the unleashed power of the internet, this is exactly what health professionals faced last summer when the issue first came to light - hundreds of websites that describe anorexia as a chosen lifestyle, and refer to these potentially deadly disorders by affectionate pet names “Ana” (anorexia) and “Mia” (bulimia). With names like “Dying to be Thin”; “Anorexic Nation” and “Stick Figures”, these websites are fully developed web based communities.

Background

It is not clear how or when this movement began. Some claim that they’ve known of sites like these for over 4 years. Yet, it was only during the summer of 2001 that the media found and exposed this underground world. There were articles in major newspapers and clips on the news; it shocked the health professional world and sent chills through the public. Organizations and associations struggled to figure out how to respond. One response was to petition the servers hosting these websites to shut them down. Yahoo

decided to pull the plug on some of the websites citing that they violated their user agreement to not post “harmful, threatening or abusive” material. Several other servers followed suit. Many of the websites are no longer in operation, others have simply changed servers and URL’s, added password protection and gone further underground.

Several months later the issue is still hot and widely debated but the hype in the mainstream media has died down. Now the health profession must thoroughly contemplate the issues and work towards a long term, strategic response.

What is on a pro-anorexia website?

The pro-anorexia movement is comprised of websites; chat rooms; electronic message and discussion boards. The websites are largely created and hosted by girls and women struggling with eating disorders. Some websites are being run by girls as young as 14 and in one reported case, a young girl’s site remained static but online after friends and family were unable to access the site following her death from her eating disorder.

These websites contain dangerous and incorrect information about restrictive eating, metabolism, bingeing and laxatives. Common inclusions on pro-eating disorder websites are:

Journals - filled with gory details of the lives of girls and women struggling to deal with very serious eating disorders, some of whom are also plagued by depression, anxiety, self-injury, abuse and a host of other issues.

Triggers - pictures intended to inspire visitors to stay thin or become thinner (they are called “thinspiration”); pictures of thin and often emaciated superstars like Kate Moss, Ally McBeal, and Lara Flynn Boyle. Sometimes these are modified to make the woman look thinner and sicker; but often there is no need to distort the pictures. Some sites also display pictures of individuals with anorexia who are extremely ill.

Reverse triggers - pictures of fat women are intended to remind visitors that they “never want to end up looking like that”.

Quotes – are intended to inspire visitors to restrict their eating and maintain dangerously low weights - “If you eat over 500 calories, vomit, use laxatives or fast the next day.” “A good anorexic is one who does not die”.

Tips & Tricks – on how to purge more effectively, binge secretly, trick doctors, restrict eating, burn extra calories, use vegetarianism as an excuse, etc.

Message Boards & Chat Rooms - where girls and women with eating disorders gather to share their struggles, their stories, their beliefs, their reluctance to consider treatment as an option, and to share tips on being a “good anorexic”.

Why do these websites exist?

It's an obvious question to ask – why would anyone create such a disturbing website environment or torment themselves by viewing the contents? It's actually quite understandable when you consider the psychological and physiological affects of the disorder they are struggling with. When the brain is starved for nourishment, judgment is impaired. The movement seems to make sense to these girls and women; they feel isolated and scared and most would acknowledge that they are ill; yet they can't imagine their life without the eating disorder. To them, recovery means becoming fat and that simply is not an option. These sites provide them with a sense of community that is supportive, understanding and non-judgmental. They look to each other to validate their behaviours and feelings because despite knowing that they are sick, they are too scared to give up “Ana”. These women do not want to die; they want to be in control, and they use thinness as the visible means of this will power. Many of the women admit that they wouldn't wish anorexia on their worst enemy and don't wish to recruit new “members”, yet the eating disorder has become their identity and creates structure for their lives.

What are the risks?

Despite the support and understanding that these women get from each other, they also encourage each other to remain sick. Ironically, they encourage each other to “stay strong” and not to let “them” (parents or professionals) take “Ana” away from them.

The messages on these websites are ambivalent, which coincides with how the women feel about their own eating disorder. On one hand you have a statement indicating that it is not their intention to recruit new “members”, and on the other hand you will see tips on “how to become anorexic”.

Many of these sites have disclaimers. They post warnings such as: some viewers may consider the materials offensive, if you don't want to be triggered - do not enter, and that their intentions are not to lure anyone into the world of anorexia. However, these disclaimers will not help a young girl who wants to know the fastest way to lose weight.

Dissension & Controversy

The issues around this movement are complex and controversy is brewing. Even among advocates of the pro-eating disorder movement, there is some discord around the meaning of pro-anorexia. Some women refer to themselves as “pro-anorexic” because they support the web environments that provide them with a venue to express themselves, but denounce sites that glamorize and celebrate the disorder. Others more openly advocate anorexia as an acceptable and even admirable lifestyle.

Professionals also face a quandary and have varying opinions on how to deal with the proliferation of these sites. Some professionals believe that these sites must be shut down in order to protect the vulnerable, and continue to encourage the companies hosting these sites to remove them.

Others question the effectiveness of this, wondering if it alienates and discourages these women from seeking treatment. The fear is that such a strong reaction may push the movement further underground and make it more dangerous and defiant. This seems a valid concern given that the pro-anorexia community is very angry at the media which has labeled them as uncaring, insensitive and evil, and at the professional world which is trying to shut them down – they see it as a personal attack and feel as if they are being silenced.

Next steps

It would be a superficial solution to blame the women who have created these sites and simply force them all to shut down. These women are not uncaring, insensitive or evil – they suffer from a debilitating disorder, which affects their logic and their emotions. And we've seen sites forced to shut down, pop up somewhere else and new ones are constantly being created. At the same time we are forced to acknowledge the potentially dangerous consequences of vulnerable individuals coming across these sites. Young girls and women are learning how to slowly kill themselves. We need to focus on the big picture and figure out how to deal with this issue over the long-term – the internet is here to stay and it is likely that the movement will continue to grow as long as it continues to serve a purpose to its members. We need to focus on the bigger evils that exist by challenging the diet industry and the cultural messages that dictate thinness as the only acceptable size and the only means to self-efficacy and self-esteem.

Health professionals must band together and find answers to the following questions:

- How do we protect vulnerable individuals from the dangerous effects of these websites without alienating a whole community in need?
- Does shutting the sites down create a greater divide between professionals and sufferers?
- Who is morally and legally responsible if a child were to die as a result of following the directions on one or more of these sites?
- Do these websites actually scare some women into treatment and recovery?
- Is the moral support these women outweigh the constant messages to stay sick?
- How do we effectively counteract these negative, unhealthy environments – what kind of positive online and offline environments can we create to provide individuals with more options for support and sharing and opportunities to build resilience?

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