

When Food Is the Enemy

Eating disorders are on the rise

This is one woman's typical menu: three shrimp crepes. Half a cake. A dozen cookies. The other half of the cake. The rest of the box of cookies. A quart of ice cream. Potato chips. And why not—more ice cream. She would routinely wolf down this overdose of sugars and starches at just one sitting—only to then force herself to vomit it up before the calories could be absorbed by her body.

Such secret rituals make their practitioners feel that they are in control of their weight. In reality, they are in the grip of bulimia, the binge-purge eating disorder that afflicts far more Americans than had been thought. Only seven years after it was officially classified as a mental disorder, bulimia appears to be increasingly common among college women: 5 to 8 percent have "clinically significant bulimia," says Dr. Craig Johnson of Chicago's Northwestern Memorial Hospital, and up to three times that number occasionally binge and purge. Colleges are trying to treat the problem through their existing health services and by establishing special support groups—but the scope of the task keeps growing. Although bulimia still strikes mainly young white women from educated, middle-class families, it now affects other groups—including men. "This is a cult sweeping the country," says Helen Wilks, director of student health services at Northwestern University.

Like the less common disease of anorexia, whose victims starve themselves to concentration-camp thinness, bulimia seems to be a product of a culture that equates slimness with goodness, especially in women. "Society has a distorted view of thinness as an end in itself," says Bettie Hardy, associate director of the Mental Health Service at Southern Methodist University. Among college women, the obsession runs deep: when Wellesley College surveyed 530 of its students, it found that 80 percent wanted to lose weight and 7 percent fasted regularly. "Even students who are average weight or

under think they're overweight," says Connie Bauman, the head athletic trainer at Wellesley. "There's a real body-image problem among females in general." At the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana, for instance, women recently estimated that they needed to lose, on average, 10 pounds. But standard weight tables said their avoirdupois was just fine.

Both anorexia and bulimia frequently begin when a diet gets out of hand. But clearly, not every dieter succumbs.

Anorexia, which appears around puberty, strikes some 5 percent of college-bound women—twice the incidence 20 years ago. The victims tend to be shy, compliant, self-critical over-achievers with a poorly developed sense of identity, says psychiatrist Arnold Andersen of Johns Hopkins. Their families, usually middle or upper middle class,

are often overprotective, so when the girls enter adolescence they are "struggling to define their identity to escape overinvolvement with their mother," says Craig Johnson. By starving themselves, they believe they are exercising willpower and carving out an identity.

Hungry for love: About half of all anorexics become bulimic. Victims of bulimia, which usually appears around college age, generally lack self-esteem and need others' approval; they tend to be disorganized, impulsive and less socially isolated than anorexics, but are more likely to have been overweight. In a recent paper, psychologist Laura Humphrey of Northwestern Medical School reported that bulimics got little affection or understanding from their families. Bulimia, she concludes, reflects a hunger for love and empathy.

That hunger sends bulimics on an emotional roller coaster. They can consume up to 20,000 calories at a sitting (though 4,800 is average) in response to anger, depression or anxiety: SMU's Hardy notes that bingeing becomes more frequent during exam week. But the binger quickly feels guilty and disgusted, and so tries to purge those emotions by vomiting or downing numerous laxative pills. Purging re-establishes her sense of control, for she equates mastering her body with mastering her destiny. Indeed, for some, bingeing is only a means to purging. "I'd feel really incredibly upset until I vomited," says Anne, a student at Northwestern. "Once the food was all out of my system, I felt pure."

Males who suffer from anorexia and bulimia—they make up an estimated 5 to 10 percent of the victims—are similar to female victims in personality and family backgrounds. But researchers at Massachusetts General Hospital recently found that male bulimics at MGH's eating-disorders clinic



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