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The deadly side of weight loss

By Tammy Batey
Emerald Reporter

Samantha said she hit bottom at age 17 when her doctor gave a frightening prediction: If she didn't gain weight, she'd die within two weeks.

At the time of her doctor's prognosis, Samantha was 5-foot-5 and weighed 90 pounds. She was diagnosed with both anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa.

When she entered puberty at age 11 she became "obsessed with remaining small," Samantha said. She said she survived on little more than toast, bananas and orange juice and exercised up to three and a half hours a day.

"Food became scary," Samantha said. "I thought if I just keep my weight down maybe I won't grow up in a way I'm uncomfortable with."

'Some girls who are 5-6 and 80 pounds look into a mirror and think they're fat.'

— Betty Merten,
Clinical psychologist

Samantha's eating disorder is not an isolated incident. Researchers estimate 20 percent of young women ages 12 to 30 are affected by eating disorders, according to a May 1991 Newsweek article. According to the article, five to 20 percent of people with eating disorders die.

Anorexics and bulimics are typically young adolescent or adult middle- to upper-class white women, said Mary Jan Murphy, a staff psychologist at

the University Counseling Center. Bulimics are generally older, she said, adding that men develop eating disorders but in smaller numbers than women.

Anorexia is self-imposed starvation characterized by an extreme fear of gaining weight, Murphy said. Anorexics experience guilt when eating and use laxatives, excessive exercise and drastic dieting to lose weight, whereas bulimia is characterized by a pattern of binge-eating and purging, Murphy said.

Bulimics will eat very large amounts of food in short periods of time. Then they'll experience guilt and rid themselves of the food through self-induced vomiting, laxatives, fasting, vigorous exercise or severe diets.

SYMPTOMS

Bulimia is harder to detect than anorexia, said Elise Curry, eating disorders coordinator at Sacred Heart General Hospital. Unlike anorexics, bulimics often are of normal weight or even slightly overweight.

People with both disorders worry about their body image and gaining weight.

If a person's weight drops to below 85 percent of what doctors estimate someone of that height and gender should weigh, it may be a sign that person is anorexic, Curry said.

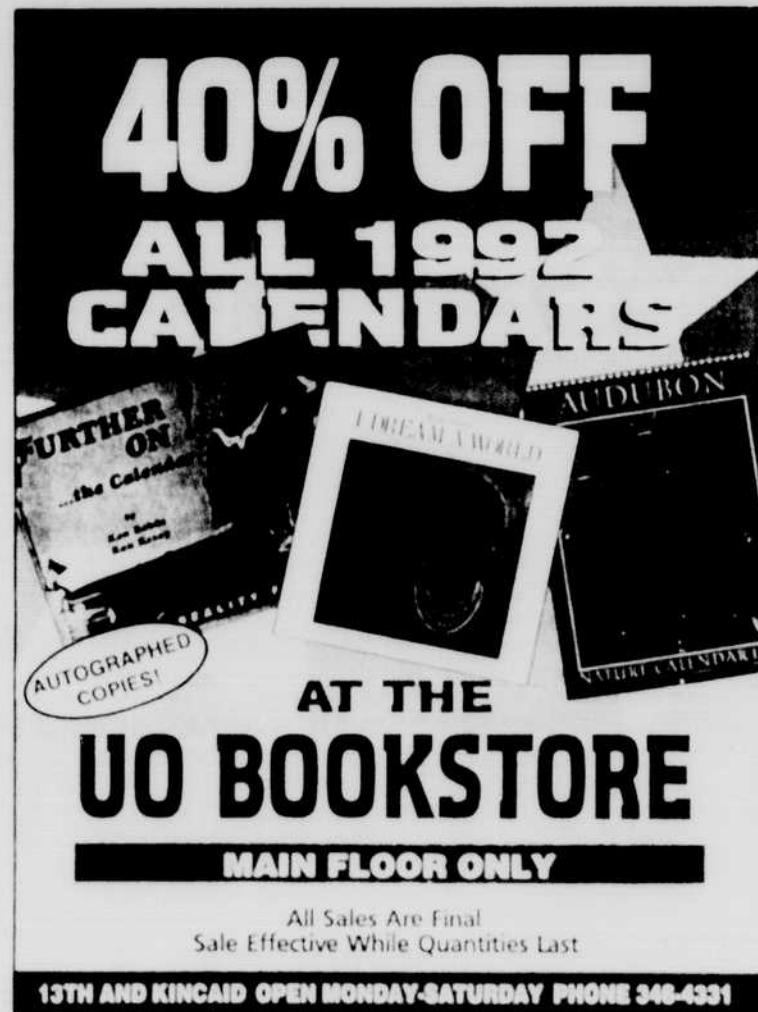
Despite their fear of getting fat, anorexics behave ritually around food, said clinical psychologist Betty Merten. For example, a person with anorexia may cut an apple into 14 slices before eating it, she said.

Other symptoms of anorexia include: hair, nail and skin problems; absence of menstruation in women; extreme sensitivity to cold; and growth of body hair.

Anorexics deny they have a problem but bulimics often recognize their behavior as abnormal, Curry said. Usually parents bring anorexics to therapy. Bulimics may seek out help themselves.

Signs of bulimia include: abuse of purgatives, weight

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