

## **Anorexia Nervosa: A Symptom of the Modern Society**

Psychological disorders in a way show what a society suffers from at any given period of time. For example, in the years when Freud lived and worked women were oppressed in various ways by social and family standards and therefore the emergence of hysteria (in response to this oppression) in the female population was commonplace. And in our era too, society shows its symptoms through its members. The most common of these symptoms are anxiety, depression and in recent years, eating disorders.

Anorexia nervosa, one of the eating disorders, has caught the attention of the public and the media and rightly so since the disease has begun to take epidemic proportions, has gained supporters who promote it as a way of life in the world of internet and has come to cost the emotional, physical health and even the lives of many individuals. At the moment we cannot talk about definite causes of anorexia but there are definitely factors that might induce its appearance.

Anorexia effects, in the majority (10:1), the female gender. The dominating features of the personality of young women suffering from anorexia, is the effort to reach “perfection” as well as the constant need to have “everything under control”.

### **Inducing factors**

The most obvious and “sneaky” factor is the social influences that inundate us daily. Super-beautiful, super-tall and foremost super-thin girls are all over the movies we watch, the magazines we flip through in our spare time, in the videos of our favourite songs.

We live in a time when “thin” is equivalent to “good”, happiness, the ideal partner and even wealth. And all these put together symbolize success and perfection. Therefore it is no coincidence that the vast majority of sufferers demonstrate their first anorexic symptoms during their teenage years, where impressions are taken in with great intensity and the individual is at the most vulnerable and revolutionary phase of their life, or during the first years of adulthood when “success” is the target for many. Nevertheless anorexia can occur at older ages usually after a severe loss or another major crisis in life.

Some personality traits have been observed to affect the development of anorexia. Examples of such traits are the persistent perfectionistic attitude and pathological anxiety, which can lead a person to replace the actual stressors by an excessive preoccupation with weight, food or/and a specific part of their body.

The family environment is another factor that can play an important role in the onset of anorexia. Considering that anorexia usually occurs in adolescence, when the teenager feels that their parents/guardians are “in control” of their life, controlling eating patterns can become an unconscious way to gain the control that is perceived to be missing from them.

This can happen in families where the environment is overprotective or on the other end, indifferent, overly critical and controlling. The excessive preoccupation of another family member with food, diets and general appearance, can also have an effect on an impressionable young girl or boy. The combination of control and desire for perfection could therefore push a person to achieve their goal by starting to control the simplest thing: food. In this case he or she is the only one who can control what is received and achieve perfection, initially on the outside.

### **Characteristics and Consequences of Anorexia Nervosa**

As anorexia progresses the person develops a phobic relationship with food, they consider it a threat and as a result they eat very small quantities of food. If they eat something that is considered inappropriate they feel deep guilt and they will possibly try to take it out of their system through excessive exercise, consumption of laxatives or vomiting (Purging = purification). Depending on the weight before the onset of the anorexic behaviour, the individual may lose from 15% to 50% of his/her initial weight.

The perception of body image is distorted and there is a strong conviction that there is unnecessary weight that needs to be lost even when there is clearly no weight problem, or even when the weight is below normal for one's age and height. The characteristic mental inflexibility is enhanced over time (if it is not dealt with), which leads to an even more intense commitment to the goal of weight-loss. Similarly, the idea of putting on weight or maintaining a healthy weight causes intense fear, which could be interpreted as a fear of losing control.

There is a long list of consequences of anorexia nervosa that appear over time. Usually the menstrual cycle is interrupted, there are gastrointestinal symptoms, weakened immune system, thin body hair appears, sleep pattern is disturbed, there is lack of concentration and other problems in the thinking process, there is loss of sexual drive, depression dominates, heart problems and osteoporosis may appear in time, and in extreme cases anorexia may result in death.

Because there are so many factors that contribute to the development of anorexia as well as many effects on one's health, the individual who suffers from it may require the attention of various health professionals to deal with it in a holistic way, such as a psychotherapist, a physician and a nutritionist.