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## **Eating Disorders Research Paper**

Eating disorders are sweeping this country and are rampant on junior high, high school, and college campuses. These disorders are often referred to as the Deadly Diet, but are often known by their more popular names: anorexia or bulimia. They affect more than 20% of females between the age of thirteen and forty. It is very rare for a young female not to know of someone with an eating disorder. Statistics show that at least one in five young women have a serious problem with eating and weight (Bruch, 25).

The Deadly Diet appears to be a mostly female problem. Eating disorders are most common in the middle to upper middle class families. Currently, the incidence is much lower in females from the "blue collar" families. The Deadly Diet can begin anywhere from the ages of ten to thirty. The peak age for the beginning of the Deadly Diet in females is eleven to fifteen; the peak for males is between fifteen and eighteen (Bauer, 89).

Most of the information on the Deadly Diet says that it is a problem of teenage girls, but as clinics have found, most of the people who come to get therapy are in their twenties and thirties. This may be because younger people are less likely to seek professional help. Most often it is the parent who brings the patient for help. Adults who have left home and had to deal with managing their lives usually tend to realize more clearly the need to seek help and make changes.

Everywhere one looks today, one will notice that our culture places a very high value on women being thin. Many will argue that today's fashion models have "filled out" compared to the times past; however the evidence of this is really hard to see. Our society admires men for what they accomplish and what they achieve. Women are usually evaluated by and accepted for how they look, regardless of what they do. A woman can be incredibly successful and still find that her beauty or lack of it will have more to do with her acceptance than what she is able to accomplish. "From the time they are tiny children, most females are taught that beauty is the supreme objective in life" (Claude-Pierre, p18). The peer pressure for girls in school to be skinny is often far greater than for boys to make a team. When it is spring, young girls begin thinking "How am I going to look in my bathing suit? I better take off a few more pounds."

Another reason that females are more prone to have this problem than males is that the personality characteristics underlying eating disorders are usually found in women. These characteristics are passed down from generation to generation, from mother to daughter.

The Deadly Diet almost always starts off quite innocently as a normal diet. As the person takes off weight, she is praised and congratulated for having so much willpower. When the weight is taken off (which is sometimes surprisingly quick), the person begins to think that maybe a few more pounds would be good insurance. Unfortunately, there is never enough "insurance." The pounds continue to slip away, and the person is caught in the unrelenting grip of the Deadly Diet.

>From this point on, the Deadly Diet is very different from the average diet. The average dieter may spend time thinking of weight and food, but with the Deadly Diet these thoughts are obsessive. Some people believe that it would be better to be anorexic, so they wouldn't have to think about food or weight, but nothing could be further from the truth. The Deadly Dieter thinks constantly of food. It is the first thing she thinks about when she wakes up in the morning and the last thing she thinks about

when she goes to bed at night. The time between is continually filled with thoughts about food, calories, and weight.

The major difference between the regular dieter and the Deadly Dieter has to do with the issue of control. It is not, as some professionals have stated, that the Deadly Dieter is too much in control and needs to learn to let go. The Deadly Dieter is totally out of control. Even the "perfect" diet, itself, is out of control. The regular dieter is in control of the diet. The Deadly Dieter is controlled by the diet.

There are five basic types of Deadly Dieter. Although there are probably as many variations of these basic types as there are people in the world, all eating disorders fall into one of the Deadly Diets.

**Fasting.** This type of Deadly Dieter will often try to exist on only 500 calories per day, even though most nutritionists claim that a starvation diet is no lower than about 1200 calories a day. This person can get so upset over any "extra" calories that they begin to see calories where there are virtually none. For example, some Deadly Dieters are afraid to chew one piece of gum for fear they would take in too many calories.

**Binging.** People who just binge, and consequently are obese, can also be called Deadly Dieters. They, too, are out of control. Their "diet" is constantly on their minds. It begins to kill them (not only in terms of their health, but socially and personally).

**Binging–Purging.** These people often begin their Deadly Diet as fasters. They soon learn that fasting also cuts them off from most social functions. In our society it is rare when people get together and don't have some type of food available. The solution to "being thin" and yet being able to eat is to get rid of the food they have eaten. The most common form of purging is vomiting. A much less common method is the overuse of laxatives.

**Fasting–Purging.** This form of the Deadly Diet combines the worst of two other categories. The binge–purge individual may at least get some nutrition into her body and might even maintain a normal weight. The faster–purger will throw up her food or take laxatives even while only allowing 500 calories into her body a day. This devastating combination is what most often kills the Deadly Dieter.

**Fasting–Binging.** This is the most frustrating category, because the person will often go on a "normal" diet for as long as six months. After staying at a reasonable weight for a period of time, she will go on a binge, which can last another six months. During this time she will put on as much as 100 pounds. Most people involved in this person's life insist that she has the "willpower" to eat properly. Unfortunately, this attitude only confuses the issues. The person has the same problem with eating and weight as the other four types of Deadly Dieter—it just looks different on the outside.

The mental health community has defined two of the five types of Deadly Diet: anorexia and bulimia. "The official definition of anorexia consists of five components:

1. An intense fear of becoming obese, which does not diminish as weight loss progresses
2. Disturbance of body image, or claiming to "feel fat" even when emaciated
3. Weight loss of at least twenty–five percent of original body weight
4. Refusal to maintain body weight over a normal weight for age and height
5. No known physical illness that would account for the weight loss

The official definition of bulimia is also composed of five parts:

1. Recurrent episodes of binge eating
2. Awareness that the eating pattern is abnormal and fear of not being able to stop eating voluntarily
3. Depressed mood and self-deprecating thoughts following eating binges
4. The bulimic episodes are not due to anorexia or any other known physical disorder
5. At least three of the following conditions: (a) consumption of high caloric, easily digested food during a binge; (b) inconspicuous eating during a binge; (c) termination of such episodes by abdominal pain, sleep, social interruption, or self-induced vomiting; (d) repeated attempts to lose weight by severely restricted diets, self-induced vomiting, or use of cathartics or diuretics; (e) frequent weight fluctuations greater than ten pounds due to alternating binges and fasts" (Simpson, p64)

In addition to the symptoms above, anorexia and bulimia can also be accompanied by medical side effects. For anorexia, some of these symptoms may include feeling cold even in hot weather, fatigue and lack of energy, loss of menstruation, skin problems, inability to sweat, chilblains, swelling in the face, dehydration, and even gangrene of the fingertips.

Some of the physical symptoms associated with bulimia include sweating, breathlessness, rapid heartbeat, hot flashes, rotten teeth, digestive disorders, malnourishment, anaemia, infected glands, blisters in the throat, internal bleeding, icy hands and feet, ruptured stomach or oesophagus, kidney failure and many of the symptoms associated with anorexia listed above.

The most dangerous physical result of any form of the Deadly Diet is the potential for an electrolyte imbalance. This is often discovered as a low potassium level. Low potassium is one of the most common causes of nocturnal cardiac arrest, and many of the deaths associated with the Deadly Diet are the result of cardiac arrest. There are also mental and emotional effects that can be caused by the Deadly Diet, such as social isolation, fear, generalized anxiety, loneliness, and low self-esteem.

Deadly Dieters can be helped. The first step to recovery is to actually admit there is a problem. Once this giant step has been taken it is downhill from then on. There are several different ways to treat these disorders, but most doctors agree that therapy is the best. Deadly Dieters need unconditional love, understanding, and support from their families throughout the whole ordeal.

About 95% of all Deadly Dieters are women, but it is difficult to say how many people suffer from this. (Ardell, 76) Statistics may not truly reflect the total numbers because many Deadly Dieters are generally secretive about their behaviour. One source noted that between 25–33% of all female college freshman use vomiting to control their weight. (Hall, 57) Another source reported percentages of college women that range from 4.5 to almost 20%, high school girls of 8.4%, and more random selection of women between the ages of thirteen and twenty with a total of 17.7%. (Trum, 2)

Although most studies show that women are more likely to have eating disorders than men, our society is evolving. Men can act more sensitively. "We are finally a more humanistic culture rather than a culture of warriors." (Claude-Pierre, p.70) Eating disorders among men are on the rise—at least one million men number among the eight million people who suffer from them in the United States. The Deadly Diet affects many people, but it can be cured.

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