

## **National Crisis: Recognizing the Culture of Eating Disorders in School Settings**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Presently in America, children are living in a society where an often-unhealthy emphasis is placed on an individual's external appearance. It is incumbent upon all individuals charged with the responsibility of rearing young people to help them develop a positive and healthy self-image. This article is intended to assist educators in recognizing the signs of children in bondage to eating disorders.**

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**I**n today's world, women, men, teens, children, the young and the aged, are inundated with a barrage of images focused on glamour and excess. These images appear in numerous and varied locations: on billboards, commercials, movies, videos and magazines. In present "popular culture," these vivid and intoxicating images display beautiful men and women enjoying lavish lifestyles, indulging in every sensory stimulating pleasure while maintaining the perfect picture of health. In extreme cases, the most indulgent ad campaigns feature the gauntest yet beguiling models. These unrealistic images have wreaked havoc in our society.

In a presentation at the University of Maine called, *The American Beauty Myth*, former actress and model Camille Cooper revealed how the media employs image retouching, lighting techniques, and camera filters to distort the images that we see. A Los Angeles-based retouching lab even admitted, ‘we retouch every photograph of any girl over the age of fourteen (Cooper 2004).

The purpose of this article is to discuss the devastating effects of eating disorders on today’s youth. Educators must be cognizant of the dangerous “tell-tale” signs of youths engaged in such activity. This article serves to provide an overall overview of the societal impact of eating disorders, the cultural characterizes of individuals in bondage to an eating disorder, and this subjects relevancy in education.

As individuals have aspired to reflect and embody these images the results can be disabling and deadly. People have discovered that all encompassing and immeasurable sacrifices must be made to look like the images revered in popular culture. It is often the case that essential components of life must be abandoned to achieve the goal of looking like the models and movie stars celebrated in the media.

Oftentimes, the most extreme sacrifice to dwell in a body that looks like the celebrated model and superstar is a very essential item-food. Hence, the prevalent and pervasive presence of individuals suffering with eating disorders exists in our country.

With images of ideal bodies and messages about physical perfection lurking everywhere we turn, it’s not hard to figure out why just about every young girl in the Western world obsesses over her physical appearance or fantasizes about becoming a successful model or celebrity someday . . . very few meet the demanding physical requirements to achieve this dream. Actresses and models compose only 5% of the female population, and they weigh 23% less than the average female . . . In fact, by medical standards, most models are anorexic . . . Clearly, young females are constantly exposed to images of unrealistically and often unhealthily thin figures. What most girls do not realize, however, is that the majority of the images they see in advertisements and on magazine covers are mere fabrications that have been altered to deceive the public eye (Hoffman 2004).

### **What Are Eating Disorders?**

Eating disorders are illnesses that manifest themselves in a harmful way in all aspects of the sufferer’s existence. Eating Disorders are brought on by varied factors and influences and affect the lives of the loved ones of people battling this illness.

Eating Disorders are about trying to make your whole life better through food and eating (or lack of). Eating Disorders are about seeking approval and acceptance from everyone through negative attention. Eating Disorders are about

how life won't be good until a bit (or a lot) of weight is lost, and there's no concern for what kind of damage you do to yourself to get there. Eating Disorders are about being convinced that your whole self-esteem is hinged on what you weigh and how you look. Eating Disorders are about attempting to control your life and emotions through food/lack of food -- and are a huge neon sign saying "look how out of control I really feel" Eating Disorders are about everything going on in life -- stress, coping, pain, anger, acceptance, validation, confusion, fear -- cleverly (or not so cleverly) hidden behind phrases like 'I'm just on a diet' (Something-fishy.org).

A common thread with sufferers of Eating Disorders is low self-esteem.

### **Eating Disorders**

There are many eating disorders. This article will explore Anorexia, Bulimia, Binge Eating Disorder, Pica, Prader-Willi Syndrome, Night Eating Syndrome, Sleep Eating Disorder (SED-NOS), Body Dimorphic Disorder (BDD), Orthorexia Nervosa, Bigorexia and Compulsive Overeating. Definitions of these conditions were found at recovery site, Something-fishy.org:

**Anorexia Nervosa** The person suffering with Anorexia may be abnormally sensitive about being perceived as fat, or have a massive fear of becoming fat -- though not all people living with Anorexia have this fear. They may be afraid of losing control over the amount of food they eat, accompanied by the desire to control their emotions and reactions to their emotions...

**Bulimia Nervosa** Men and women who live with Bulimia seek out binge and purge episodes -- they will eat a large quantity of food in a relatively short period of time and then use behaviors such as taking laxatives or self-induced vomiting - - because they feel overwhelmed in coping with their emotions, or in order to punish themselves for something they feel they should unrealistically blame themselves for...

**Compulsive Overeating** People suffering with Compulsive Overeating have what is characterized as an "addiction" to food, using food and eating as a way to hide from their emotions, to fill a void they feel inside, and to cope with daily stresses and problems in their lives...

**Binge Eating Disorder** Men and Women living with Binge Eating Disorder suffer a combination of symptoms similar to those of Compulsive Overeaters and Bulimia. Reasons for Binge Eating can be similar to those of Compulsive

Overeating; Using Binges as a way to hide from their emotions, to fill a void they feel inside, and to cope with daily stresses and problems in their lives...

**Compulsive Exercise** With an Eating Disorder too much exercise, or Compulsive Exercising, is just another outlet of behavior; Compulsive Exercise is another way to "purge" and disordered eaters who suffer with these symptoms are typically considered to be suffering from Anorexia, or Bulimia non-purging type...

**Pica**, a widely misunderstood phenomenon, is defined as a compulsive craving for eating, chewing or licking non-food items or foods containing no nutrition. These can include such things as chalk, plaster, paint chips, baking soda, starch, glue, rust, ice, coffee grounds, and cigarette ashes. It may sometimes be linked to certain mineral deficiencies (i.e., iron or zinc). Pica can be associated with, developmental delays, mental deficiencies and/or a family history of the disorder. There may be psychological disturbances that lead to Pica as well, such as conditions in which a child lives in a low-income or poor family, or who lives in an environment of little love and support.

**Prader-Willi Syndrome** The person with Prader-Willi Syndrome has an insatiable appetite. This can lead to obesity, stealing, and eating pet foods and items that are spoiled. This continuous appetite is caused by a defect in the hypothalamus -- a part of the brain that regulates hunger -- that causes the person to never actually feel full. There may be sleep disorders and abnormalities, bouts of rage, a higher threshold for pain, compulsive behaviors such as picking at the skin, and even psychoses.

**Night Eating Syndrome** Night Eating Syndrome consists of morning anorexia, evening hyperphagia (abnormally increased appetite for consumption of food frequently associated with injury to the hypothalamus) and insomnia. Attempts at weight reduction in these 2 conditions, (referring to bulimia as well), are usually unsuccessful and may cause the patient unnecessary distress.

**Sleep Eating Disorder (SED-NOS)** Sleep Eating Disorder typically fall into the category of Sleep Disorders, though it is a combined sleep-eating problem. Sufferers tend to be overweight and have episodes of recurrent sleepwalking, during which time they binge on usually large quantities of food, often high in sugar or fat. Most often, sufferers do not remember these episodes, putting them at great risk of unintentional self-injury.

**Body Dysmorphic Disorder** BDD, or Body Dysmorphic Disorder is a preoccupation or obsession with a defect in visual appearance, whether that be an actual slight imperfection or an imagined one. Some example of this would be obsessing to the point of severe depression (sometimes including thoughts about or attempts at suicide) over physical attributes such as freckles; a large nose, blotchy skin, wrinkles, acne, scarring. Though the preoccupation can include any

part of the body, areas of the face and head, specifically the skin, hair and nose, are most common.

**Symptoms as per the DSM-IV** Preoccupation with an imagined defect in appearance. If a slight physical anomaly is present, the person's concern is markedly excessive.

**Orthorexia** is an obsession with a "pure" diet, where it interferes with a person's life. It becomes a way of life filled with chronic concern for the quality of food being consumed. When the person suffering with Orthorexia Nervosa slips up from wavering from their "perfect" diet, they may resort to extreme acts of further self-discipline including even stricter regimens and fasting.

**Bigorexia** Found typically in bodybuilding circles and known as muscle dysmorphia or reverse Anorexia, Bigorexia is a condition in which the sufferer is constantly worried that they are too small. This goes beyond the typical bodybuilding gym-goer, and transcends into dangerous realms when men and women are willing to go to all lengths to increase muscle mass (Something-fishy.org).

### The Culture of Eating Disorders

In the book, *Cultural Diversity and Education Foundation, Curriculum, and Teaching*, the author, James A. Banks explains that “. . . culture consists of shared symbols, meanings, values, and behaviors” (Banks 2006). Banks also states, “Members of a cultural group usually interpret symbols and behaviors in similar ways” (Banks 2006). He asserts, “The sense of connectedness that individuals have with their cultural group is often manifested as ‘us’ and ‘them’ feelings, perceptions, and behaviors” (Banks 2006).

Banks expresses that cultures are multifaceted (Banks 2006). He states, “Cultural groups are not monolithic but are dynamic and complex” (Banks 2006).

Individuals struggling with eating disorders comprise a culture. Numerous web sites, videos and books detailing techniques regarding how to best develop and enhance a desired eating disorder are available. Some of these sites are “underground” and possess an essence of a sacred secret society. Some of the terms used on these sites are “Pro-Ana” and “Pro-Mia.” Secrets and rites are shared. Common goals are shared, supported and celebrated when attained:

Want to meet and network with other pro-anas, trade tips, share secrets, support one another on the quest for perfection? Come visit the new, improved, exclusive pro-ana forum, [~Project Shapeshift~](#), hosted securely on its own private server through [plagueangel.net](#). Come help us revitalize the Project Shapeshift

Anamadim Temple as well! Sign up to submit articles, weight loss and exercise tips, and more. Let's make this place a revolutionary storehouse of information for the discerning elite! Our [LINKS page](#) has been completely rehabilitated with dead links purged and new locations keyed. Check it out (.oOo...ana's underground grotto...oOo.).

On the following site entitled: **.oOo...ana's underground grotto...oOo.** any individual seeking to enhance their ability to be able to adhere to the tenants of the “Pro-Ana” or “Pro-Mia” movement are equipped with skills and techniques for their desired eating “lifestyle.” Claims like, “Anorexia is a lifestyle, not a disease” are promoted:

You have stumbled upon ana's underground grotto. This is a gathering point for sentient individuals who are working to cause changes to occur in body in conformity to will. There are no victims here, and maturity is measured in the acceptance of personal responsibility, not the number of birthdays survived. This is not a place for the faint-hearted, weak, hysterical, or those looking to be rescued. This is not a place for those who bow to consensus definitions of reality or who believe in the cancerous fallacy that there is any other authority on earth besides their own incontrovertibly self-evident, inherent birthright to govern themselves. This is a place for the elite who, through personal success in their ongoing quest for perfection, demonstrate daily the power and results of applying will, imagination, creativity and effort toward meeting their goals (.oOo...ana's underground grotto...oOo.).

Upon entering the websites of this nature, the explorer is told that the creator of the site bears no responsibility regarding the health of anyone who chooses to follow eating suggestions listed:

**Disclaimer:** (first-time visitors, please read) This is a pro-ana website. That means this is a place where anorexia is regarded as a lifestyle and a choice, not an illness or disorder. **There are no victims here.** If you regard anorexia exclusively as a disease, see yourself as the "victim" of an "eating disorder" in need of "recovery", or are seeking "recovery," it is strongly suggested that you leave this site immediately. IF you choose to ignore this warning, you WILL be triggered by the content of this site. I REFUSE to be held responsible for YOUR decisions since I am not able to make YOUR judgment calls for you. If you are under the age of 18, current laws in your geographical region may require you to obtain parental consent to view the contents of this website. You and **you alone** -- not me -- are responsible for determining if such laws exist and whether you obey them. By entering this site, you automatically certify that you are either 18+ or have obtained parental consent to do so. In the event anyone under 18 should enter this site without parental consent, I will **NOT** be held responsible for any federal, state or local law they may violate by doing so, nor for **ANY** resulting consequences to their physical, mental, emotional or spiritual health ( .oOo...ana's underground grotto...oOo).

For individuals seeking support to achieve their weight goals while engaged in the “lifestyle”, “Thinspiration” links are provided that includes visual images for motivation. The images range from “gaunt” to “skeletal” The reader is encouraged to peruse images of emaciated models when confronted with the twinge of hunger pains. The site also features “reverse triggers.” The “reverse triggers” seek to provide very vivid pictures of extremely obese individuals characterized in various intentionally unappealing scenarios:

These images represent what we never want to become. If you want to know why ... just look around you at how these people too often end up being treated. Perhaps you yourself have been guilty of this at times. For the record, this site does not condone bashing fat people. We just choose not to be among their number, is all (.oOo...ana's underground grotto...oOo.).

Various secret rituals and rites are shared. Secret passages to other sites are introduced. The topics on **.oOo...ana's underground grotto...oOo..** include support aids in the forms. For instance, links providing quotes, other links, rituals, thinspiration, letters from “Ana”, the goddess of Anorexia, and “ Mia”, the goddess of Bulimia, are available, essays and poetry are provided (**.oOo...ana's underground grotto...oOo.**).

The following is an example of “helpful hints.”

**“Avoid that plate!”** Here are some things to do INSTEAD OF eating:

1. Clean house! Get busy "hoeing and throwing," go through old stuff and purge out what you don't wear, don't want, don't need anymore. Dust. Vacuum. Scrub. Keep busy! It engages the attention and keeps the thoughts off food. If you're a teen, your mom will be amazed and VERY grateful, so grateful she'll forget to nag you about food! If you're an adult, you'll thank yourself when you're done!
2. Keep sipping on that lemon-water, tea, or diet Pepsi while you work! Keeps the tummy sated so it won't growl at ya.
3. Put on some music and dance! Or keep the tunes rolling while you clean house, it keeps the work from getting boring and you can boogie while you sweat!
4. Work on your new pro-ana website, or update your online ana journal.
5. Network with other pro-anas through chat, email, messenger or club sites - - get some support and motivation from your sisters/brothers when you NEED it!
6. Put together a pro-ana scrapbook (or add some new things if you already have one) with lists of safe foods, low-cal, low-fat, low-carb recipes, word collages, and of course, TRIGGER PICS!!!
7. Surf the web and make a list of all the pro-ana sites you can find, or all the safe-food sites you can find, or all the places online where you can buy diet pills, shake mixes, etc. These lists are VERY handy for research and sharing with others!

8. Get up off that lazy cow butt and take a walk or start working out! You still have fat to burn, don't you??? Quit lying around dreaming of donuts and pizza and GET BUSY! (Bristol Aerobic & Fitness Club newsletter)

Other sites give hints on how people engaged in this “lifestyle” may identify each other. Red and black bands on the wrist may help “Pro-Anas” and “Pro-Mias” identify each other. The ultimate goal is to achieve the appearance to be recognized by a mere glance.

Researchers are currently exploring the prevalence of these phenomena and finding that this disturbing trend crosses ethnic, gender and socio-economic lines.

### **The Texas State Board of Educator Competencies**

Educators have a responsibility to be aware of this trend. The **Texas State Board of Educator Competencies** details this need in numerous domains. For instance:

#### **DOMAIN I—SCHOOL COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP**

##### **Competency 002**

The principal knows how to communicate and collaborate with all members of the school community, respond to diverse interests and needs, and mobilize resources to promote student success.

#### **DOMAIN I – UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS**

##### **Competency 002 (Student Diversity)**

The school counselor understands human diversity and applies this knowledge to ensure that the developmental guidance and counseling program is responsive to all students (Texas State Board for Educator Certification).

### **Strategies**

It is imperative that educators recognize the warning signs and techniques these students use to hide their condition. Some strategies used by sufferers are as follows:

**“Tell 'em what they wanna hear!”** So what do you do when others are pushing you to eat? Here's some effective ways to excuse yourself from joining the piggies at the trough:

1. "Oh, thank you, but I already ate at work (school, friend's house, on your way home, etc. wherever you just came from)."



2. "Well, I haven't really been feeling well today. My stomach is kind of queasy; maybe I'll just have some hot tea and see if it settles for now."
3. "Man, I've got a massive headache -- I'll just take a big glass of water and an aspirin (Tylenol, ibuprofen, whatever) if you don't mind..."
4. "Well, I had a really HUGE breakfast (lunch, snack, whatever) and I'm still full from that ... maybe later."

In ALL cases, if you are really being pressured to eat (from parents, friends, boyfriend, whomever), often nibbling a few safe bites here and there and drinking a TON of water at the table serves as a good compromise. Often they won't notice how little you are eating, or will overlook it if you combine a few "brave" nibbles with one of the excuses listed above (.oOo...ana's underground grotto...oOo.).

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this article was produced to assist educators in recognizing the "tell-tale" signs of children in bondage to eating disorders. In a society where such an emphasis is placed on the external it is incumbent upon all individuals charged with the responsibility of rearing young people to develop the internal and develop a positive and healthy self-image. Adults will also do well to exhibit this principle in their lifestyle and choices.

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**.oOo...ana's underground grotto...oOo.** <http://www.plagueangel.net/grotto/>  
Something Fishy Website on Eating Disorders  
<http://www.something-fishy.org/whatarethey/other.php>

Texas State Board for Educator Certification. [www.sbec.state.tx.us](http://www.sbec.state.tx.us)

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