

PATIENTS AS PARTNERS

Brought to you by The South African Depression and Anxiety Group

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A New Generation of Eating Disorders Eating Disorders – Not Only for Girls

By: Ryan G. Edmonds

Ana. Mia. Manorexia. Thinspiration - all words associate with the growing social culture of Eating Disorders among adolescents and young adults worldwide. Eating disorders have become a way of life, a sub-culture, kept aflame on websites dedicated to a destructive new movement called 'Pro-Ana.' In this article we will take a look at the growing trends of Pro-Ana and Pro-Mia (slang terms for "pro-Anorexia/Bulimia") among young people, and how this culture is re-enforcing Eating Disorders, and destructive behaviours, within the teen communities. Although the word "teen" is used in this article, the term also encompasses young adults below thirty-years-old.

Type the terms pro-ana, pro-mia, or thinspiration into your search engine, and you might be surprised by the onslaught of websites, images, and literature associating Eating Disorders with people who are cool, hip, powerful, beautiful, in control, and confident. For instance, Pro-Ana poetry, music, fashion trends, and quotes can be found in abundance. Another aspect of these websites is the emphasis on community and social support. Pro-Ana/Mia teens can compare notes, exchange ideas and dieting tips, as well as motivate one another and positively reinforce success. By utilizing the support networks these sites have to offer, sufferers of Eating Disorders are able to start and end each day with a dose of thinspiration, and learn ways to hide signs of suspicious behavior" Stephanie Watson, a social worker, and the Eating Disorder Unit Manager of Crescent Clinic, Johannesburg, had this to say: 'In my experience these movements "feed" into the destructive beliefs and behaviours of Eating Disorders. I believe they provide a forum that entertains the pathology of [these] Disorders.'

Until a few years ago, Eating Disorders have predominantly been perceived as affecting women and young girls only. It is only with the development of research in the field that professionals have started to see a growing trend among men, and specifically adolescent men, and those in their 20's. Although the research in a South African context still needs much analysis, extensive studies in America and the UK have shown that young men are now presenting more and more with a Disorder once only believed to affect the female sex. Stephanie Watson continues to tell us, 'The interesting thing I have observed in males presenting with Eating Disorders is that the presentation of symptoms in terms of compensatory behaviours, distorted beliefs and fears around foods are the same as females presenting with the same.' Johannesburg-based Clinical Psychologist, Liane Lurie, had this to say: 'Females often tend to be more vocal about issues related to body-image, needing to be in control, weight and feelings of self-worth. Men have tended to be more silent about their struggle for physical perfection, and may feel ashamed to seek treatment for something often deemed to be a "female" problem. Furthermore, diagnostic categories (such as the loss of a menstrual cycle) have been used to describe women specifically. While women may strive to be super skinny, men may strive to be more muscular and lean. The problem hence manifests in different ways.' The South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) offers assistance to people who are seeking professional help. Further details on how to contact them are given at the end of this article.

It is no secret that Western culture is obsessed with youth and beauty, and strives to attain physical "perfection." Modern Teenagers and young adults have grown up in a world bombarded with social media reinforcing these ideals. Pop-stars, celebrities and athletes all model cultural ideals of bodily aesthetics, and youngsters are taught to believe that you can only find love, friendship, wealth and fame through the (often unrealistic) attainment of physical beauty. Michael*, a student at a South African university, says this: 'Guys are meant to look hot. If we can't, potential partners can easily find someone else who meets



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the criteria. I am proud to identify myself as Pro-Ana. To me it means I am in control, empowered, and can maintain a body that pleases me.' When asked to speak more about his lifestyle, he was happy to inform us: 'The scale controls my life. Calorie-counters are my Bible. I live in the gym, and probably have a closer relationship to the weights and treadmill than my own friends. I sometimes fast for three days and then, just before I pass out, I eat a low-cal food like an apple. I feel so guilty afterwards – like I have failed.' Michael is 24-years-old, 1.85m tall, and currently weighs 66kgs. He also says that it is easier for men to have eating disorders, as 'guys who constantly gym and monitor diet are applauded by society.'

Shannon Smith*, after having suffered from Bulimia for many years of her life, now runs talks where she addresses young people on the truth behind Eating Disorders. Shannon revealed some shocking statistics: '1 in 3 girls, and 1 in 10 boys, suffer from an Eating Disorder in South Africa. 87% of sufferers are younger than 20-years-old, with average onset age being between the ages of 9-12 years of age. 20% of anorexics die.' She also adds that many studies in South Africa are lacking in this particular field. 'I am now conducting 2-3 talks per week, and the referrals I am receiving are incredibly inspiring,' Shannon goes on to say. 'It seems that the talk resonates with a great many children and their elders. I am overwhelmed with the incredible feedback I receive from the talks, and in some instances I have had as many as 6 girls and 3 teachers come up to me afterwards and confide their own stories.'

Although patients presenting with Eating Disorders in South Africa appear to be far less than other those with other Mental Health issues, they are very often co-morbid with disorders such as Depression, Anxiety, Post-Traumatic Stress, and even Suicide. Anorexia, Bulimia, and other forms of Eating Disorders, need immediate psychiatric, psychological, and even medical assistance. Although not as well-equipped as our American and European counterparts, South Africa still has a few excellent programs in various hospitals that are helpful in the treatment process. For more information on Eating Disorders, Depression, Anxiety, and other Mental Health issues, contact the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) on 0800 567 567, Mon-Sun, 8:00-20:00. One can also take a look at the SADAG website, www.sadag.com for articles, professional advice, suggested reading lists, and support groups throughout South Africa. For further information on talks, contact Shannon on 084 281 2109, shannon@borntobeyou.co.za, www.borntobeyou.co.za.

**name changed for privacy purposes*

IMPORTANT NUMBERS TO REMEMBER

Suicide Crisis Line: 0800 567 567 or SMS 31393

Pharmadynamics Police and Trauma Line: 0800 20 50 26

AstraZeneca Bipolar Line: 0800 70 80 90

Sanofi Aventis Sleep Line: 0800-SLEEPY (0800 753 379)

Dept. of Social Development Substance Abuse Line: 0800 12 13 14 or SMS 32312

Dr Reddy's Helpline: 0800 21 22 23

Office Lines: 011 262 6396

Website: www.sadag.co.za