

## **Anorexia Nervosa: Running on Empty**

*One woman's struggle with a disease that threatened to take away her life.. dreams.. and sanity...*

“I wanted to look good and sexy. I thought I finally did- until realized I was literally bone thin.”

Now more than ever, the pressure on having that “ideal” figure has alarmingly increased. This comes from This obsessive dieting behavior reflects today's societal pressure to be thin, which comes from all the four walls- Friends, Family, Society and the Media. It seems that real beauty is dictated by the collective generalizations of everybody and that if you don't meet the standard, you become an outcast and a social road kill. With such an intense demand like this- who can ever measure up?

This is the very reason why Anorexia Nervosa has become the third most common medical disorder in adolescents, and is more common in the young female teenager with certain personality traits such as low self-esteem, social isolation and perfectionism. These people tend to be good students and excellent athletes.

This profile fits Calista perfectly. She was one among the popular crowd in her high school, though not the prettiest or desirable. In fact, is quite the chubby one in the group and never really measured up to her other more popular peers. This caused her much insecurity and developed in her a longing to fit in. After several aborted tries at weight management, Calista decided to skip meals and exercise. This is where the disease made its way in.

Anorexia nervosa is a serious, often chronic, and life-threatening eating disorder defined by a refusal to maintain minimal body weight within 15 percent of an individual's normal weight. Other essential features of this disorder include an intense fear of gaining weight, a distorted body image, and amenorrhea (absence of at least three consecutive menstrual cycles when they are otherwise expected to occur). In addition to starvation, some people will also engage in recurrent binge eating and purging episodes. Anorexia nervosa is among the psychiatric conditions having the highest mortality rates, killing up to six percent of its victims.

The term *anorexia* literally means loss of appetite, but this isn't exactly how it works. In fact, people with anorexia nervosa ignore hunger and thus control their desire to eat. Obsessive exercise may accompany the starving behavior that may cause others to assume the person must be healthy.

Classmates started to notice the change and complimented her. Eventually, she became irritable, dizzy and restless. Her grades started to slip. She even fainted on two occasions in church, blaming it on the heat.

It often starts innocently enough as a simple attempt to diet. Food rituals may then result to weight loss, which is often the catalyst for going on to further food control measures. Eventually, food is considered a foe. The sense of hunger can disappear with food deprivation until it is practically gone. Psychological consequences make this a vicious cycle. The more they diet, the more they lose weight, and the more they lose weight the more they want to diet.

One of the most frightening aspects of the disorder is that people with anorexia nervosa continue to think they look fat even when they are bone-thin. Their nails and hair become brittle, and their skin may become dry and yellow. Depression is common in patients suffering from this disorder. People with anorexia nervosa often complain of feeling cold (hypothermia) because their body temperature drops. They may develop lanugo (a term used to describe the fine hair on a new born) on their body. People with anorexia nervosa also tend to have higher than normal levels of cortisol (a brain hormone released in response to stress) and vasopressin (a brain chemical found to be abnormal in patients with obsessive-compulsive disorder).

In time Calista began to experience headaches, body weakness, skin dryness, nausea, constipation and palpitations. She cried often and at no apparent cause. She lost all her desire for food and no amount of bribery or coercion worked.

She was in denial for quite some time. “It wasn’t until that horrific time on the beach that I realized how scary I actually looked,” she recounted. “I was in my bikinis. As I was emerging from the water to join my friends a little boy playing on the beach started crying really loudly.” The boy actually got spooked of Calista’s appearance since all her rib bones were sticking out of her body. “After that I stared at myself on the mirror until I can’t bear to look at myself any longer. I knew then I needed help.”

Treatment for anorexia nervosa requires an intensive commitment toward virtual reprogramming of eating and living habits. Initial follow-ups require regular visits over a prolonged period of time. As much as 30 percent of the patients can relapse and another 30 may eventually become chronic or long-standing problems. Only a third is often completely cured.

Today, Calista has gone back to college and on her way to reaching her dreams, which were once threatened by a disease she feels would forever make a mark in her life. “I don’t think I’m fully cured but I’m recovering. At least now, kids don’t go crying when they see me.” She chuckles. “For others who may be in the same situation I’ve been in. Stop and think for a minute. The definition of beauty changes through time. Years ago everybody thought voluptuous is sexy and now people scorn at that glass hour figure. Don’t go risking your life to follow a trend. Go against the mainstream.”

Although concern for weight is so common among adolescents that some may even consider it normal, awareness of the dangers of unsupervised weight reduction can go a long way in preventing serious and long lasting effects. Anorexia nervosa is an abnormal

extreme of dietary and weight control. Living and running your life on an empty stomach could never make you look good.