

## Articles and information:

### **Eating Disorders and Suicide**

Eating disorders are physically devastating diseases. The medical consequences of anorexia and bulimia include everything from anemia and bone loss to intestinal issues and infertility. The good news is that if caught early and treated, most of these medical problems can be reversed and health can be restored. However, what can not be resolved is the high mortality rate associated with these disorders. A full 10% of those struggling with an eating disorder will die from it. These deaths often occur as a result of cardiac damage or other extreme medical complications. A lesser known, but profoundly important, cause of death is suicide. Recent research indicates that suicide is a major cause of death among those with anorexia. Although suicide can and does occur in those struggling with bulimia, it is less frequent and more a result of an impulsive act vs. a planned action.

There are many reasons why suicide is so common in the eating disorder population. Perhaps the greatest factor is the prevalence of depression in these individuals. Approximately 90% of those with an eating disorder are also clinically depressed. This is a very dangerous combination. In fact, the incident of suicide in this group is markedly higher than in those who struggle exclusively with depression.

So ... why do they kill themselves? Of course, the reasons are varied, but let's try to consider the life of a woman who has struggled with anorexia for many years. Perhaps she has received outpatient, or even intensive, treatment, but the grip of the disorder remains incredibly strong. To this woman, living with anorexia is just like living with a chronic illness. Anorexia to her is not unlike cancer to another person. Every single day, she battles her disease -- there is no respite. Because she is severely malnourished, she does not think clearly, her thoughts are disordered and her perceptions are skewed. Positive Self esteem is non-existent. Every day, she is exposed to, and bombarded by, skinny females everywhere: smiling from magazine covers, mocking her from television ads. They are perfect; she is not. She is profoundly depressed and just plain exhausted. No matter how hard she tries, she will never be "good enough." Her life is defined by tremendous pain, both physically and psychologically. Deciding that life is simply not worth living is not too much of a stretch. Unfortunately, the odds of a suicide outcome are increased by three factors: the discontinuation of medication, previous suicide attempts, or a history of physical or sexual abuse.

Psychotropic medication is often prescribed to those suffering from depression or an eating disorder. These pharmaceuticals can be very beneficial in achieving recovery. However, they can't work if they are not taken. Far too often, a person will opt to discontinue medication because of side effects or an unwillingness to be "dependant" on some external force. In time, symptoms of the disorder will return. Unfortunately, the person either doesn't connect the two events, or worse, becomes so reengaged with the disorder that she is simply unwilling to get back on the medication. Another factor could be that the medication simply doesn't work, which can be a very real problem for those with severe anorexia. If a woman's body weight is too low, medication will not be absorbed, and therefore, cannot help her.

The second factor – previous suicide attempts – is equally important. If someone attempts suicide more than once, they can become desensitized to the act. Perhaps they tried to take their own life, but it didn't work; maybe they tried again, and still lived. The problem is, if someone tries long enough, it will work. And whether or not this is a ramification of being desensitized, what medical professionals are now discovering is that these suicides are very intentional. This means that these people are very committed to ending their lives, and therefore, use highly lethal methods.

The third factor is a history of physical or sexual abuse. Indeed, past abuse is the greatest risk factor for future suicide in an eating disordered person.

It is critical to remember that recovery from an eating disorder is a process. As such, it not only takes time, but a continued commitment to the process, especially if depression is a factor. The recovering person must stay on any prescribed medication, follow the recovery plan and remain involved with their therapist.

If you need additional information regarding eating disorders, or if you are concerned about the possibility of suicide in a friend or loved one, please get help.