



Connect with Kids

WebSource

For the Classroom Pro-Ana Websites

Video Overview

“I would never want to look at one. I think that would be really depressing to tell you the truth.”

- Mary Hardin, 14 years old

What Mary doesn't want to see, to millions others is just a few key words and mouse clicks away.

“Who's the skinniest and how can they stay the skinniest (or) here's how you can have only one thing to eat all day or how you can survive on water and gum,” explains Bryna Livingston, a licensed clinical social worker who specializes in eating disorders.

Livingston is referring to pro-anorexia websites – where girls are applauded for losing weight and surviving hunger – that are emerging on the Internet. On many such sites, anorexics journal thoughts and feelings and even post pictures of their thin celebrity idols.

“It's a pseudo-support group, and the problem is you're not really getting support,” says Livingston. “You're feeding a competition. You're feeding a disease, and you're feeding what you want to hear so you don't have to make any changes.”

For Mary Hardin, change was hard. She struggled with anorexia for three years. These websites, she says, spell danger. “I think (the websites) could have really made me worse and (made me) fall more into my eating disorder and encouraged me more,” she says. “That's the last thing I needed was to be encouraged to be in an eating disorder.”

Experts say parents of anorexics have to show tough love, especially if their child is being enticed by these Internet sites. “I'd turn off the computer. I'd get it out of the house,” says Livingston.

Mary's advice: “Listen to who you trust. Do you trust your family and your friends, or do you trust these people (on the Internet) that you don't even know that are trying to give you lessons about your life?”

Luckily, Mary avoided the lure of anorexia websites when she was struggling with her illness. After years of therapy and family support, she says she is now healed. “It is possible to recover and to be a healthy girl with a happy life after it all,” she says. “There is hope to get through it.”

Feeding a Disorder

Many dangerous places exist in cyberspace, especially for those with body image difficulties. A quick, easy Google search can produce a long list of pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia websites – places where those who suffer from eating disorders (ED) support each other and establish a sense of community. There are at least 100 active pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia sites. Some statistics state that several of these sites have accumulated tens of thousands of hits. Many sites treat eating disorders as lifestyle choices, rather than the illnesses they truly are. Most personify anorexia (“Ana”) and bulimia (“Mia”) into companions – individuals one can look to for guidance and strength.

The medical community classifies eating disorders as mental illnesses. Experts say girls with eating disorders focus on their bodies in a misguided bid to resolve deeper psychological issues, believing that they can fix their inner troubles by achieving a perfect outside. Eating disorder specialists say pro-anorexia sites are particularly dangerous since those suffering from the disease are usually in deep denial and cling to the illness to avoid dealing with its psychological underpinnings. Websites that glorify eating disorders make treatment increasingly difficult.

- Eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any mental illness.
- There are an estimated 7 million females and 1 million males suffering from eating disorders in the United States.
- The Harvard Eating Disorders Center estimates that 3 percent of adolescent women and girls have anorexia, bulimia or binge-eating disorders.
- Four-of-five 13-year-old girls have attempted to lose weight.
- One study showed that 42 percent of first- through third-grade girls want to be thinner.

What Parents Need to Know

About 1 percent of females between 10 and 20 have anorexia nervosa. Between 2 percent and 3 percent of young women develop bulimia nervosa. Almost half of all anorexics will develop bulimia or bulimic patterns.

Without treatment, up to 20 percent of people with serious eating disorders die. With treatment, the mortality rate falls to 2 to 3 percent. The recovery rate with treatment is about 60 percent. Alas, only 10 percent of those with eating disorders receive treatment.

Pro-ED sites are just one reason why parents need to monitor children’s online behavior. In the web journals or logs (blogs) of these sites, users share near-starvation diets, offer tips for coping with hunger and detail ways to avoid the suspicions of family members. They post “thinspiration” – images from the media of their ideal celebrities, such as supermodel Kate Moss and the Olsen twins. They discuss extreme calorie restriction and weight loss through laxatives, diet pills and purging (self-induced vomiting).

- Between the ages of 8 and 14, females naturally gain at least 40 pounds.
- More than half of teenage girls are – or think they should be – on diets.
- Websites were changing the very culture surrounding eating disorders, making them more acceptable to girls on and off the Internet.
- Pro-ED sites thrive off the denial aspect of the illnesses while promoting the perceived benefits of having an eating disorder.