



February 1998 Vol. 1 No. 1 // [First Issue]

The Starvation Club

Eating disorders used to be shameful secrets with victims who suffered in private. But in a scary new twist, more and more girls are bonding over bulimia and anorexia--and making their problems worse

By: Nancy Matsumoto

Section: Investigation

Starting Page: 96

Word Count: 1973

For four years Kathy Fant fought a losing battle with anorexia. By the time she was 16, she had starved herself to an emaciated low of 80 pounds. Desperate for help, she joined an eating disorders therapy group.

There, Kathy found much more than a sympathetic ear. Listening to other girls talk about their struggles with bulimia, the 5'4" cheerleader discovered that she could eat as much as she wanted--or more--and still not gain weight. It was in the group that she learned how to make herself throw up.

In Kathy's cheerleader crowd, eating disorders were common. So were parties where alcohol was free-flowing. Occasionally, Kathy and her friends would binge together before bashes, knowing that after they arrived, they would drink enough beer or vodka to make themselves sick. "It was kind of the joke," says Kathy, now 20 and a junior at the University of Michigan. "We weren't known as bulimics; we were known as the lightweights who threw up easily because we didn't have the body weight to hold our liquor."

Reports of group bingeing and purging have risen markedly in the last 10 years. "[Group bulimia] is more common than it used to be," says Charles Murkofsky, M.D., president of the American Anorexia/Bulimia Association. "Among teenagers there's certainly a social aspect to eating disorders that you don't tend to see with adults." David Herzog, M.D., executive director of the Harvard Eating Disorders Center, explains: "It's a little like the individual who's in a fraternity and goes out and drinks with his buddies." For some, adds Herzog, bingeing offers "a kind of excitement" not unlike the prospect of getting extremely drunk. When several girls binge on ice cream or pizza in a group, he says, "it's sort of like using a drug together."

If Kathy found reinforcement--and acceptance--through bingeing and purging with her buddies, she also found that the situation fostered a horrible sense of competition. "We really compared ourselves with each other," she says. "If someone was looking thinner, we would try to drop 5 pounds so that we could be thinner than she was."

skating on thin ice

Sports teams, with their focus on group behavior, competition and, in some cases, thin bodies, can be dangerous breeding grounds for social eating disorders. Shannon Patton, who was once a nationally ranked figure skater, now has bones as weak as a 60-year-old woman's--and she's only 19. She menstruates irregularly and suffers ugly bruises at the slightest bump. "It makes me feel bad," she says quietly, "because I did this to myself."

Shannon was hospitalized at age 15 after she dropped 50 pounds in just three months. "Our coaches told the team members that if we lost weight, we'd jump higher," recalls Shannon, now a freshman at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia. "So during the week we'd hardly eat anything. Then on the weekends, we would be so hungry, we'd eat ice cream sundaes, doughnuts, little cakes--you name it, we ate it. Then we'd all take turns [throwing up] in the bathroom and weigh ourselves afterward."

"Everything was great--if we made weight," she adds. "If one of us didn't make it that week, we'd be like, 'It's all right, just don't eat with us on the weekend.' So we egged each other on."

sharing secrets and lies

Julie Stene, an energetic blonde sophomore at Eaglecrest High School in Aurora, Colo., plunged headlong into nine months of anorexia and bulimia after a boy teased her about being too fat to make the cheerleading team. "Things like that were what made me really self-conscious," says Julie, 15, who went out and bought diet pills with her best friend. "We would exercise together and weigh ourselves three times a day." Julie says she learned how to purge watching Models Inc. "They showed a girl who was suffering from bulimia throwing up," she recalls. "So I'm like, 'Cool!' That made it a lot easier. If you ate something and didn't feel comfortable about it, you could just throw it back up."

Julie is currently seeing a therapist and a nutritionist to keep her disorder in check. But she and her girlfriends still spend a lot of time obsessing about weight--and how not to gain it. "Julie and I talk all the time about how much fat is in things," says her friend Elaine Lewis, 15. Adds Julie, "Yeah, it's normal for us to look at the label to see how much fat everything has."

Elaine and Julie are part of a group of five girls who have gathered to talk to TEEN PEOPLE after watching a school performance of Body Loathing...Body Love, a play produced by an Indianapolis-based troupe called the American Cabaret Theatre Outreach Ensemble (A.C.T. Out).

In one of the 10 sketches dramatizing different aspects of eating disorders, a new college student is horrified to learn that all the girls in her dorm throw up after meals. "It's just sort of understood," says her roommate. "I know you just moved here. But you'll see, it's what the hall does...it's what we all do."

Jessica Weiner, the director of A.C.T. Out, based the sketch on stories she heard from students at two Indiana universities. "The first time I heard it," she told the Eaglecrest High audience, "I thought, 'You've got to be kidding!'" But Jessica, 24, now understands the mentality behind group bulimia. "You do it because you're safe and you're comfortable--because other people will let you stay in your disorder," she says. "But nobody in the group is challenging anybody to go beyond that self-hate."

from group hurt to group help

Entering the college pressure cooker--a parent-free zone of cool parties, cute guys and heavy-duty studying--usually makes matters worse. Campus life gives girls the opportunity to compare and compete, and the freedom to act on their twisted perceptions. Amy Robbins, a 20-year-old junior at

the University of Michigan, says campus eating disorders are "much more of a social thing. This person's not eating fat, so you're not going to eat fat. If everyone's eating salad with fat-free dressing, you feel like people are going to stare at you if you get french fries and fried chicken."

It can be all too easy for some girls to get sucked into the warped social scene of competitive dieting or the greater extreme of group bingeing and purging. But bringing eating disorders out of the closet can also make it easier to get help. EDEN (Eating Disorders and Exercise Network), a non-profit organization in Ann Arbor, Mich., is run entirely by women recovering from eating disorders. Although EDEN doesn't treat patients, it offers a range of services, including referrals to dieticians and workshops on body image. More importantly, it's a place where girls who are struggling with eating disorders can hang out with recovering role models.

Kim Wiza, EDEN's 23-year-old cofounder and corporate secretary, battled anorexia and bulimia for nine years. She recalls that among her close-knit group of 12 high school friends at least half of them suffered from an eating disorder. "It was kind of like we complemented each other," says Kim--who binged regularly with one friend in particular "the way someone has a buddy who always goes to the bar with them. But when one of my friends had to be hospitalized [for bulimia], I knew I had to start getting better."

Help can also come from a best friend who's been there. After struggling for three years and finally learning to control her eating disorders, skater Shannon Patton was terrified of facing college life. "I went into this thinking, 'Oh my God! I'm going to relapse because I'm in college,'" she says. "You hear that eating disorders are so common there."

Shannon has indeed met students who are just starting the cycle. "You can just tell by watching what they eat or by looking at them," she says. The telltale "chapped and broken skin at the corners of their mouth, the really red knuckles, the really short nails, the dark teeth marks on fingers that you get when you stick them down your throat" are all signs of bulimia. "I said to one girl, 'I don't want to sound like I'm prying, but I had an eating disorder, and you look like you're starting to flow into it.' She just started crying. I told her, 'It doesn't have to be that way.'"

Shannon is proof that it doesn't. After five months at St. Joseph's, she has bonded with her roommate, Kelly Abrams, 18. Shannon credits Kelly--along with counseling and support from a favorite psychology teacher--with keeping her from a relapse. "My roommate is my best friend," says Shannon. "She knows everything I'm going through and can understand it."

Kelly understands because she had a brush with anorexia in high school as well. "I lost something like 30 pounds in two months," she says, "and it was addictive. I looked good, I had more friends, more boyfriends." But Kelly was always tired and started losing strength, so she gave up dieting. Now, she says, "I understand the psychological aspects." And when she met Shannon, "We just clicked."

Now, Kelly helps keep Shannon on her path of recovery. "If I'm having a bad day, Kelly will sit there and talk to me," says Shannon. "She'll say, 'Calm down, you don't have to go to the bathroom. You're beautiful. You don't have to do that to yourself.'"

Hopefully, other group bulimics will learn the same lesson Shannon did: Whether it's with a dozen friends or just one, there are healthy ways to find safety--and solace--in numbers.

What's your eating attitude?

So, you're dieting...again. If counting calories is a constant in your life, you could be on the road to losing a lot more than just weight. "The whole dieting mentality is exactly what leads to severe cases of anorexia and bulimia," says Ilene V. Fishman, an American Anorexia/Bulimia Association board member and a private-practice social worker. "It's normal to wake up and stress out about what you're going to wear. It's not normal to stress out about what you are or aren't going to eat that day."

Take this quiz to find out where your thoughts about food fit in. Reply OFTEN, SOMETIMES or NEVER to these statements:

_____ I feel guilty after I eat. _____ I am on a diet. _____ I eat in secret or sneak food.
_____ I am afraid of gaining weight. _____ I hate what I see in the mirror. _____ I vomit after eating.
_____ I feel faint or dizzy. _____ I ask people if they think I'm fat. _____ I exercise to burn calories.
_____ I make excuses to avoid eating. _____ I weigh myself. _____ I think about food.
_____ I compare my body with my friends' bodies. _____ I eat diet or fat-free foods.
_____ I take laxatives or diuretics.

If you answered:

Mostly NEVER: You've got a great body image. You know your body's healthy when it's well fed, so you eat what you want, and you don't obsess about your weight.

Mostly SOMETIMES: You may be at risk for developing a serious eating disorder. Try staying off the scale and off that diet roller coaster; concentrate instead on things that make you feel good.

Mostly OFTEN: You may already have an eating disorder. Don't be afraid to seek help. Confide in someone you trust, and contact one of these organizations:

--American Anorexia/Bulimia Association members.aol.com/AmAnBu 212-575-6200

--National Eating Disorders Organization www.laureate.com/nedointro.html 918-481-4044

--Anorexia Nervosa and Related Eating Disorders, Inc. www.anred.com; 541-344-1144

© Time Inc.

Reprinted with the permission of Time Inc.