

Multiple
Perspectives
Piece

The Psychology of Eating Disorders:

**Investigating the Psychology Profession and the
treatment of Eating Disorders**

An AP Lang Junior Research Project by:

Kathryn Kotlarz

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Perspective piece #1 - Letter from a Parent

To Whom It May Concern,

I'm writing this letter out of genuine concern for my daughter. Over the past year or so I've noticed a drastic change in her eating habits, accompanied by a change in her appearance. I feel that it's time for me to give in and admit that my greatest fear has come true. I'm afraid that my daughter has an eating disorder.

I first noticed signs the summer before her freshman year of high school. My husband and I began to notice a change in her eating habits. It first became known to us when we were at a Labor Day party, and one of our friends commented on the way our daughter ate. She said our daughter was eating like an anorexic. At that point we were in denial about the whole situation, so we paid no attention to her comment and shrugged it off. Yet the more we thought about it, the more we noticed the change in her eating habits. She seemed to become more conscious about what she ate and began picking at her food. At the time, it didn't appear to be that severe, so we didn't think much of it.

When school began that year, she started expressing her concern about nutrition, exercise and staying healthy. We were overjoyed at her motivation to maintain a healthy lifestyle, yet over time, she began to take it too far. To help her develop an exercise regimen, she began going to the weight room at her school with a few of her friends. They each had a gym teacher work out a plan for them and our daughter was determined to stick with it. Our worry soon changed to concern because she was too determined. She

began to follow the exercise plan with such rigidity that her eagerness and persistence to go each day she was scheduled was frightening and led us to become concerned. Exercise seemed to be becoming a big part of her life, almost too big.

In addition to working out at the gym, she begged us to buy her the interactive video game, Dance Dance Revolution. She received it for Christmas and was overjoyed. She started to play the game daily. This didn't concern us because it appeared that she was still eating properly. After she would come upstairs from playing the game, she would always eat something to regain the calories she burned off. Then it took a turn for the worse. Instead of eating after she worked out, she would eat before so she could burn off what she ate. This was one of the first major warning signs.

Soon enough, she became obsessed with this video game, and began playing it everyday, for 45 minutes at the highest level, but refused to eat enough to maintain a healthy weight. The more she exercised, the less she seemed to eat. She used the excuse that the more she exercised the less of an appetite she had, but this seemed a bit suspicious to us. When she started to drop a noticeable amount of weight, we tried to regulate her activity and limited her time playing to 20 minutes. She would throw a fit about it, and would compensate by eating less that night.

Another warning sign we noticed was when she did her classroom gym project she was very secretive and precise about it. That particular year, they learned about body composition. Their assignment was to monitor and record what they ate for three days. She would, and still does refuse to eat certain items of food because she didn't know how many calories were in them. And although she made us center our

eating around foods where the calorie count was easily accessible, she never told us how many calories she was consuming each day. We still don't know to this day, but we assume it's a low number, judging by how much she eats at meal times.

No matter how hard we try to help her out, it just seemed to get worse. It's almost like our efforts are and were counterproductive. It's so difficult to see our daughter struggle with her appearance. She never had a problem with food or appearance in the past. She would always eat what she wanted, when she wanted it without a second thought. She used to love food. She was never overweight. She always appeared fine to us, but now she is developing skeleton-like characteristics, and refuses to acknowledge that she has an eating problem. Any time the subject is brought up, she gets upset and it ends in a verbal war. I'm worried about her, and I know we can't help her out on her own, she needs a professional. If you have any way to help, please let me know, it would be greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

A Worried Parent

Kathryn Kotlarz

Perspective piece #2: Letter from a Nurse Practitioner

Worried parent,

I've read your letter, and understand your concern. I think your assumption is correct, it seems as though your daughter does have an eating disorder. It was a smart move on your part to send a letter in search of finding professional help; it appears to be the only way progress will begin now. Luckily, you have caught it early on and taken action, otherwise I don't know how difficult treatment may have been.

I'll start by explaining our approach to eating disorders:

We believe that there are two sides to an eating disorder, the biological aspect and psychological aspect. In order to accomplish a full recovery, both aspects must be focused on because the eating disorder is just as much biological as it is psychological. It's unfortunate because many people don't realize this. They assume it's only biological because of the rapid loss of weight; however there are so many struggles the patient deals with that accompany the weight loss.

When treatment begins, we will focus on weight gain. In order for us to help her with her struggles, she must be at a healthier, more stable weight. Because the weights of our patients are generally very low, progress will be very noticeable during the first few months of treatment. You will see your daughter eating much more, and gaining weight fairly rapidly. However, once she gets up to a weight that we feel is safe for her to maintain, progress will become less physical and more psychological.

Although it may appear that your daughter is making no progress at this point, don't be alarmed. We are now at the point where we spend our appointments talking to her to figure out what she struggles with, and try to find ways to cope. We also work on diminishing the eating disorder thinking which results in restriction of food. If you watch closely at this point, you should notice that

she will become more comfortable eating a variety of foods and her eating should speed up. Of course each case is different, and progress will occur at a different pace for each patient; but this is the general course of recovery for eating disorders.

We try our hardest to assist the patient in reaching recovery, but we can't do it alone. We believe that seeing a psychologist and nutritionist in addition to visiting a doctor is very beneficial. The psychologist can focus on coping mechanisms and give the patient tips on how to stifle eating disorder associated thinking. It can also be a place for the patient to vent, and talk about the things in their life's that are stressful and may be impeding progress. The nutritionist can help with the meal planning. Although we can assign the proper amount of calories that can be consumed, the nutritionist can give the patient a variety foods to eat as well as answer any concern about a particular food item.

Before putting your daughter in treatment, you have to remember that recovery is a long hard process. It's "two steps forward and one step back", so don't get frustrated, just be patient. She will recover at the pace in which she feels comfortable doing. I must also tell you that if she doesn't agree with something I tell her to do, she shouldn't have to do it, unless it is vital for her health. I believe that each patient can think for him/herself and make his/her own choices; I'm not here to dictate his/her life, I'm just here for guidance and to give recommendations. With the right amount of motivation and proper treatment, full recovery can be achieved.

I'm very glad you contacted us; it was the right thing to do. Your daughter may be angry at you, and it may be difficult for the entire family to deal with, but it should only get better from here. Just remember patience is key.

Sincerely,

A Motivated Nurse Practitioner

Kathryn Kotlarz

Perspective piece #3: Letter from a psychologist

Worried parent,

The nurse practitioner you have contacted has referred your case to me, asking for my assistance in treating your daughter. As I'm sure you have already been told, counseling is a big part of recovery from eating disorders and is very important. Being a qualified psychologist, I am very eager and willing to be the person who helps your daughter.

I believe eating disorders are very serious and must be approached with an open mind. Uttering one wrong phrase can upset the patient, and cause them to regress even further, so you have to watch what you say. Because of this, one has to think about how something should be said, and imagine hearing it from different perspectives to make sure that it won't be taken offensively. This obviously takes a great deal of patience and consideration and is a difficult attribute to acquire.

I also understand that each patient has multiple problems that must be dealt with each day. Not only does he/she have an eating disorder, but he/she also has the conflicts of everyday life to endure. In order to improve the lives of my patients, I try to give them as much of an opportunity as possible to express themselves, and explain what's been bothering them. Then I analyze what they say and attempt to come up with a reason to why a certain event happened, along with ways to cope with those struggles on a day to daily basis.

For the first few times I meet with a patient, I gear the conversation towards the eating disorder. I aim to get an idea of his/her personal background

and look for any symptoms of the eating disorder early on in his/her life. I also attempt to figure out why he/she may have developed an eating disorder in the first place. It helps me to form a foundation for each case so I can base my thoughts and suggestions on subjects that the patient can relate to. After this foundation of understanding has been developed, I begin each meeting with an open mind, to give the patient a chance to gear the conversation to whatever topic he/she chooses.

I take each case to heart, and believe that each patient has a different story that has been shaped by different struggles. Their main similarity is that although they suffer from an eating disorder, each individual copes with it differently and it affects each person in a unique way. No matter what their story is, I do my best to help my patients make a full recovery. I listen intently whenever they explain something to me, and I believe that each story holds some sort of explanation for another problem. And since I take each case to heart, I feel honored that people have enough faith in me to trust that I will not reveal any of the information they pass on to me, unless it is potentially dangerous to the patient. Because of this, I do my best to remain honorable to each and every patient; I'd hate to let them down.

Before I meet with your daughter, I would like her to write me a letter as well. It will provide good preliminary information for me to see what she struggles with and how different her perspective about the whole situation differs from yours. I want her to tell me how she thinks she developed the eating disorder and how she feels about treatment.

Until we begin meetings, I suggest that your daughter take up yoga. I believe that although eating disorders are associated with disordered thinking, there is a physical component as well. If the patient isn't healthy physically, then it's highly unlikely that they will recover from the disorder easily.

Just remember, have patience with your daughter and let her express how she feels. And when you're listening to her, keep an open mind and consider everything she says before responding.

Good luck, the turning point of your daughter's battle with an eating disorder happens now.

Sincerely,

An inspirational psychologist

Kathryn Kotlarz

Perspective piece #4: Letter from an Anorexic

Annoying medical personnel,

I don't understand why everyone is making such a big deal about all of this. I don't need any help because I don't have an eating disorder. To treat me would be a waste of your time. I'll refuse to cooperate with you, and ignore any of your suggestions. Although I'm quite a polite girl, I will be as rude as I can possibly be to you because you would also be wasting my time.

I don't know why everyone thinks I'm anorexic when I'm just interested in being healthy. A short time ago I was looking through my adoption records because I had just recently found them. I was reading my "medical summary" that explained the medical background of my mother, father and grandparents. I discovered that my maternal grandfather suffered from obesity, hyperglycemia and hypertension and my paternal grandmother has cancer. This frightening experience motivated me to change my ways.

Prior to finding the medical summary, I was much like your everyday lazy teenager. I would eat whatever I wanted and I would lie around all day in front of the computer or television. I didn't participate in a sport because I could never find one that suited me. The problem was that I didn't make up for this lack of exercise by any other means. I participated in minimal physical activity, and I knew that in order to protect myself from the same problems that affected my grandparents, I needed a change.

I'm not saying I thought I was fat, not at all, but I didn't want to become fat. In addition to finding out about my medical history, I was constantly hearing about the alarming rise in obesity of Americans. I was afraid that I would become obese as well if I didn't shape up. My first course of action was to begin working out. It just so happened that at the same time, two of my friends expressed interest in shaping up themselves, and we all decided to go to the weight room at school.

Going to the weight room was exciting, I really enjoyed myself when I was there, and I felt good about myself as well. We went there every other day to work out, and I looked forward to it all day long, I didn't want to miss it for anything. In addition to this, I also received the game Dance Dance Revolution for Christmas which is actually a very good cardiovascular work out, and you have fun doing it. I was determined to make it to the highest level of difficulty so I spent a majority of my free time playing it.

When I first started working out and playing Dance Dance Revolution, I tried to eat something afterwards to balance out what I burned. Yet I found that the more I exercised, the less of an appetite I had. Soon enough, I was rarely ever hungry, and I had no desire to consume much of anything. Just so I could keep my body functioning, I ate a little food, and over time, I became accustomed to eating what my parents refer to as "minuscule proportions." In my efforts to become healthy, I also tried to stay away from fatty foods. My parents automatically assumed that I had an eating disorder.

Like I've said previously, I don't have an eating disorder. I don't need treatment and I don't want it. I like what my body has become. I actually feel good about myself. For once in my life, I'm better than someone at something. I'm not amazing at anything I do, I'm just mediocre. I've never been anything special before. But now, girls envy me. They look at me, and think to themselves "I wish I could be as thin as she is." To be honest, I don't want to lose that. I like being noticed for something, it gives me a feeling of self satisfaction because I'm normally invisible to people. So don't bother trying to "heal me." There's nothing wrong with me. I don't need your help.

From,

An irritated teen

Kathryn Kotlarz

Perspective piece #5: Letter from a Nutritionist

Worried parent,

I apologize for my delayed response, however when I was contacted by your nurse practitioner, I got word that she would be receiving a letter written by your daughter, and I thought it was important that I read that before replying to you. After reading both letters, I too have come to the conclusion that your daughter has an eating disorder, and she is in denial about it. I believe that being a nutritionist causes me to be involved with a team of other medical professionals. My position on this team is to help improve my patient's relationship with food, and turn it from an unhealthy one, to one that is healthy and beneficial for the patient. My philosophy is that food is the medicine for an eating disorder. So of course, I would love to be a part of the team that helps your daughter.

When I meet with an eating disorder patient, I make sure I treat them like any of my other patients. I know if I treat them any differently, they may resist treatment more than they already do, as your daughter is. Once I assist them in feeling comfortable in a treatment situation, my main line of work truly begins.

I believe that my purpose is to help the patient with their food issues. It is obvious that eating disorder patients have problems with food. It may make them feel uneasy, or they may simply be afraid of it and its effects on the body. I'm here to answer any questions or concerns they may have. I will

be 100% honest with the patient and tell them the true answer to the question whether it's what they want to hear, or not.

After I have helped them to establish a safer relationship with food and stifled some of their fears, I then proceed to develop an eating plan to help them with their recovery goals. This may include maintaining a healthy weight, gaining weight, or eating different types of foods. During each session that we meet, I will go through which types of foods the patient feels comfortable eating, but enjoys as well. I then incorporate these foods into the meal plan so the patient will be more likely to follow it. I find that if you tell a patient to eat particular foods without the knowledge of what they like, they won't follow through, and they'll regress. I also try to include the foods they like in different ways, giving them suggestions of how to eat and prepare that particular food item.

If I find that the treatment isn't effective, I try to go about treating them in a different way. Instead of focusing on what to eat, and how it is actually good for their body, I'll focus on one of two things. I'll either stress an explanation on the negatives of maintaining the disorder, or the positives of overcoming it.

This, however, takes patience, just like the entire process of treatment. It is very difficult to develop an eating plan for a person who fears food. It is also very hard to see someone in such a state. You know that they need the food, but they refuse to eat it. And it hurts to know that they put so much time and effort thinking about food. You have to be very understanding in

situations like this. You must know what you're getting into, and have the motivation and tolerance to follow through. But the most important thing is that the professional must have faith that their patient will recover.

I'm very glad that you noticed the warning signs of your daughter's eating disorder and took immediate action. I believe that the parents must be involved in the recovery experience or it won't be a success because the patient needs to feel the love and compassion of those close to them.

As I'm sure you've already heard many times, you've done the right thing. And as I've said before, food is your daughter's medicine from now on, and we all know how resistant a child can be when given medicine. An eating disorder is just the same, the patient must eat food, whether they like it or not, and the more they get used to eating, the less they will resist. It just takes time.

Sincerely,

A Serene Nutritionist

Kathryn Kotlarz

Perspectives Piece #6: Letter from an Anorexic in treatment

To all Medical Professionals, Friends and Family,

I just want to thank you for all you have done for me these past few years. You've dealt with the stress of seeing me in such an emaciated state. You've seen me refuse to eat certain foods because I was afraid that I'd become fat. You've been through it all and you still stuck by me. Because of your efforts even I have noticed an improvement in my situation.

During my ninth grade year at school I didn't realize what I was doing. I seriously thought I was doing something good for myself. I was exercising and eating right. The problem was, I gradually started eating less and exercising more. It got out of control and I wasn't aware of any of it. Before I knew it, I was constantly yelling and arguing with my parents about food, exercise and doctor appointments. They would tell me to eat more; I'd say I wasn't hungry. They would say that I couldn't play Dance Dance Revolution and I'd throw a fit about it. They'd tell me I was anorexic and I needed to go see a doctor and I would become angry and scream at them. It wasn't a pretty sight, but looking back on it, I'm really glad my parents took action.

When I was first put into treatment, it seemed like I was regressing. I would go to see a nutritionist, and make frequent trips to Rochester to see a medical professional but I didn't seem to be getting any better. For the first few months, I actually lost more weight until I got to my lowest point. It was then that it hit me. I could die, I had low blood pressure and was blacking out all the time and I had an

abnormally low heart beat. I was ounces away from being sent to an inpatient program. I was given three days to gain a certain amount of weight or it was off to the hospital for me. On the ride home from that appointment I finally understood, I was anorexic. It took drastic measures to knock some sense into me, but I feel that once I accepted it, I began improving at once.

When I had this epiphany I tried my hardest to recover. I battled severe stomach aches, prominent eating disorder thinking and an extremely distorted body image. It was dreadful, but you all helped me through it. Overtime, I hit a bump in the road. I was sick of going to see the doctors in Rochester and I absolutely despised my social worker. I think we all knew I needed a change. Then we began seeing people in a more local and convenient region so I could see them frequently. By this point I was at a fairly stable weight and we were able to focus our meetings on how to cope with the disorder and how to overcome it.

I know now that I really needed that change of doctors because it helped me get to where I am today. I know that I still don't have a wonderful body image and I still struggle with the eating disorder thinking which still makes eating a chore, but I've gotten better. I can now look back on how I acted and I understand how irrational my thoughts were, and probably still are. I can finally see how much of a stronghold the disorder had on my psyche. The thinking is slowly but surely being eliminated and my body image is getting better as each day passes. I still have a long ways to go, but I'm feeling optimistic, comfortable and in control of the situation which is so much more than what I could have said two years ago.

I just can't stress how much everyone has helped me enough. My doctors remain confident with my ability to recover. My psychologist never ceases to inspire me whenever I meet with her. My friends are always there, and my best friend even brought me flowers when I was at my worst, which meant the world to me. But most importantly, my parents remained understanding and compassionate though it all. They never showed signs of wanting to give up and they did anything in their power to help me. It was all of this that has and will continue to help me get through this difficult situation that I don't really understand. If it wasn't for everyone, who knows where I may be right now; to be honest, I don't even want to think about it.

But until I reach full recovery, I need you all to stay by my side. I know times get rocky every once in a while, and rising tensions will occur, but just maintain your confidence in me, I know I can do this. I've begun to think of the eating disorder as something like a boy friend, one that won't go away. So until I finally break up with ED, I'll need your help. Once again, I can't ever thank you all enough.

My deepest gratitude and love,

A hopeful, recovering anorexic

Kathryn Kotlarz

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