



Why do people develop Anorexia?

Whenever anybody suffers with a debilitating, all-consuming physical or mental illness, the first question many people around them ask is 'Why?' Why this person?' Because Anorexia has devastating physical and mental consequences, it can be even harder for family members and friends to accept - especially because it is difficult for anybody without the illness to truly understand. I know from personal experience that misunderstanding (especially alongside anger) can make things worse for an individual with Anorexia, so I wrote this post to help the people around them to understand the illness a little better and hopefully to go some way to answering that all-important question: 'why'?

Everyone is different

It's difficult to be able to place the 'blame' for Anorexia at the feet of one thing in particular, because it's often an accumulation of things which results in Anorexia rather than one issue. There are triggers - such as a traumatic life event such as the death of a loved one, or events which build up over time like bullying or sexual abuse. It might be that there's nothing blindingly obvious - just a feeling of discontentment which has been bubbling away for months or even years and slowly leads to Anorexia. Anorexia is also often accompanied by other mental illnesses - for example, I had OCD and Body Dysmorphia too. Others might have bipolar disorder, depression or anxiety. Recognising this can help people to understand how complex an illness this really is - especially when it does come along with other illnesses.

Media and culture DO have roles to play

I once read an article written by a top psychologist claiming that society's obsession with 'perfect' and in particular 'the perfect (slim) body' had absolutely nothing to do with the development of Anorexia. As someone who went through Anorexia, I have to disagree. I developed Anorexia for many different reasons - but the root for me was being bullied for being fat. I decided (with the help of the media and kids at school) that thin people were liked, and embarked upon a journey of fad dieting which ultimately led me to become completely obsessed and very poorly. Whilst my self-hatred, perfectionism and lack of control over my life certainly had a lot to do with my illness, with the correct nutritional advice, kindness and encouragement from the right sources I might have better understood how my body worked, respected it rather than hated it, and been able to see the world with a more rational perspective. I may have developed a healthier level of self-worth, lost the weight I needed to lose safely and with a new-found self-confidence I might not have cared so much about what people at school said about me. Instead I was influenced by celebrity magazines and

dubious information from diet companies. I was taken in by adverts and TV programmes which showed me who I 'should be' and clearly highlighted who I was not and why I didn't fit in.

Pressure in today's society isn't purely aesthetic, either. Pressure to excel in every area of our lives is becoming a huge trigger for Anorexia, as is a life increasingly lived on and through a screen. We're exposed to other people's lives more than we ever have been before, and this in turn encourages us to compare, often unfavourably.

Perfectionism and control matter

I am naturally a perfectionist and I like to be in control. This is in part perhaps a personality trait, perhaps a product of what I have been through in life. Several studies have shown that people who have these personality traits can be predisposed to developing an eating disorder - because contrary to popular belief, Anorexia is not about food. That's the resulting behaviour - because food is easy for us to control. The root is self-loathing, a feeling of total lack of control, a desire to be 'perfect' and a strong determination to reach goals. And when goals are not reached, a punishing, critical voice inside which scrutinises everything which could have been improved upon and berates you internally. All of this in turn can of course affect how you behave externally. As above, it's different for everyone - but these are just some of the things I experienced and things I know others with Anorexia do, too.

It's not them

Many people with Anorexia find themselves at the centre of blame for their condition - mostly because of a lack of understanding at best and ignorance or concept at worse. I encountered so many people who believed that I was poorly by choice - and therefore I deserved what I got because I was being deliberately obstinate. I think this is true of many mental illnesses - because it's hard for people on the outside to differentiate between the person inside and the 'demon' alongside them which forces them to behave out of character.

In my books I describe Anorexia as a demonic entity - because it's the best way I can truly relate how it feels to suffer, but also to help people supporting someone who is suffering to differentiate between the two 'people' inside their loved one's head. If you can do this and effectively support and nourish the person left inside, then slowly the Anorexia will wither away as it lacks negatives to feed from.

For further help and support you can find more articles the Tough Cookie Parents Resource page.