

# Socialized disease

By Liz Neve

"Within an hour, I'd eat a pint of ice cream, a big bag of chips, a loaf of bread smothered with cheez whiz, and as much liquid as would fit in on top of that. Then I'd head to the bathroom and stick my finger down my throat. I did that at least once a day, right after school . . . I knew it was wrong, that I was not the perfect person I was supposed to be, and I hated myself, really hated myself, for doing it. But I couldn't stop. I made excuses to get away from friends. I had to eat. And then throw up. God, I hated that. Sometimes I cried afterwards. But I'd always do it again. I had no control." (Karen)

Karen is bulimic. She binges on food and then throws up to get it out of her system. Bulimia and the related disorder, anorexia nervosa, are both increasingly common. Up to 95 per cent of those affected by these disorders are women. The physical and psychological effects of these eating disorders are devastating.

They know it's bad for them. But they're hooked."

It is difficult to imagine how someone could become involved in this cycle of self-abuse, yet the number of bulimics is increasing. "In the last 20 years, the cultural ideal of what a woman should look like has become increasingly slimmer than what is natural for the great majority of women. Women inevitably fall short of this so-called ideal," says Day.

For many women, dieting is a major part of life. For some young women the pressure to fit the "ideal" image is combined with other social and family pressures and leads to anorexia or bulimia.

"These women are less sure of themselves and of their body image. At that age, there is more importance in being attractive, and they have fewer coping skills," says Day.

"My parents just assumed that I'd go to university, get a master's degree and have a beautiful, suc-



**Psychologically, bulimia is like any addiction.**

The self-imposed starvation of anorexia results in weight loss of more than 25 per cent normal weight. It also leads to dangerously low levels of necessary metabolites, and imbalances in acid/base supplies. This may result in loss of fine motor control, irregular heartbeat, kidney malfunction, and in five to 10 per cent of cases, death. In trying to cope with fewer nutrients, the body shuts down its less vital functions to keep the heart and brain going. Dr. Victor Day, psychologist and counsellor at Dalhousie University says, "If you don't have enough calories and nutrients, at a certain point the heart, the liver, the kidneys will give out. They'll just stop.

With bulimia, "there are no immediate effects. People can be bulimic for years," says Day. The purging methods, however, have many dangers. "They (Bulimics) become dependent on the laxatives for normal bowel functioning — this, by the way, is an inefficient method of purging. Most of the calories are absorbed anyway. This and vomiting can deplete potassium, fluids and metabolites," he says. Vomiting can harm the stomach lining, and acid from the stomach can eat away the teeth's enamel, causing serious dental problems. Psychologically, Bulimia is like any addiction.

"It starts out as a way to feel better, but eventually it causes more bad feelings than it removes. These are bright people.

successful life with a happy beautiful family..." says Karen. "It was never said outright, but what I had to be was smart and gorgeous. And I wasn't. I was always about 10 pounds overweight. I couldn't lose it, and I felt like everyone's including my own expectations were being crushed."

Day: "Bulimics, like most women, are dissatisfied with their bodies. However, they don't succeed in dieting. They get frustrated and overeat. Then they feel guilty. It's prevalent in high-achieving women who are under more pressure to be perfect." One way of dealing with stress is in "the immediate gratification of food. Eventually, the indulgence becomes a habit and they begin to gain some weight. They can't fail in this way, so they find other ways to get rid of the weight."

While appearing in control, the women with bulimia has no control over her impulses to binge and purge. For the anorexic, though, weight is the only thing she can control.

"The anorexic usually has a lower self-esteem and perhaps feels she's not in control of things. She succeeds in dieting when so many others can't. She gets social encouragement for this, and she realizes this is something she can control."

Men also experience pressure, but it is overwhelmingly women who develop eating disorders. Day explains: "There's more pressure on women to be slim, so they're more likely to be dieting"

says Day. "Food becomes a more self-conscious issue. Men are more likely just to eat, it's no big deal."

Men who do exhibit anorexic or bulimic behavior are usually models, ballet dancers or others who, "experience similar social pressures regarding their body shape as women."

As well, says Day, although "it's more acceptable for women to express their feelings, it's less acceptable for them to express anger." So women less able to vent frustration outwardly, turn inward. These eating disorders become an expression of their anger.

Changes in cultural ideals could help immensely in reducing the incidence of eating disorders. A fashion change so that there was not such pressure on women to be slim would probably have a profound effect, says Day. "We as a culture must develop a different way of judging people, with less emphasis on appearance" says Day.

After 9 years, Karen considers herself partially cured. "I only do it ((binge and throw up) about 4 or 5 times a year now. I am more self-confident and at ease with myself. But as long as society keeps telling me I'm fat, I still have to fight the urge to eat a whole cake instead of just one piece. I only want one piece, but by eating the whole thing, I could throw it up and pretend it didn't happen. Sometimes the urge is too strong. I'll never be free of it."

Live it,  
love it,  
eat it

By KATHY O'BRIEN

The woman on the box of "Inches Off" is reaching out to you. You know she is. You feel your body gradually expand as the packages of appetite suppressant close in on you.

Scrambling away you bump into Jane Fonda. Sucking in your abdomen, you replace her on the paperback rack. Eyes lingering on the Hostess chip display, you walk steadily down the aisle. Standing in the checkout line you unobtrusively stretch the muscles of your calves while staring at the chocolate-covered raisins.

You walk out of Sam's Super Drugland past store whose plate glass windows are decorated with signs and numbers. \$965 buys a dream vacation in Hawaii. Fifty per cent off Fran's Fashion Boutique. You gaze reverently at the blonde mannequin in the window.

The neon sign of Diet City sways in the wind.

You hesitate, then enter the baby blue waiting room. Herbal tea is waiting beside a basket of pink packets of Sweet and Low. A "Before" and "After" poster hangs on the wall. Grace G. of Boisetown, New Brunswick has been converted from the well-fed Holstein on the left into the lithe creature on the right. The diet counsellor calls your name. You too, she says, can look like Cheryl Tiegs.

You head for home in fresh air and sunlight feeling motivated, determined and enlightened.

After religiously reading the Diet City food manual, you measure out the two cups of raw vegetables and worry whether the potato in the oven is medium or large. As the four-ounce chicken breast sizzles in the oven you read the latest issue of *Shape*. The 111 lb. model on the cover, who confesses she once weighed 157 lbs., is in a constant state of paranoia that she might revert to her heavier self. You can't help wondering, hopefully, if you too will ever revert to 157 lbs.