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## Walking a Thin Line: Pro-Eating Disorder Websites and Their Damaging Effects

by Colleen Lynch

(English 1102)

In recent years, a troubling trend has emerged. Though technology offers great potential for growth and expansion, there can be a dark side as well. This is evident in the proliferation of pro-eating disorder websites available on the Internet, with over 3,245,000 searches for these sites alone conducted each year (Lewis and Arbuthnott 201). Pro-eating disorder websites serve, primarily, as a way for those who suffer from disordered eating to find encouragement about maintaining their illness and to help them be successful in reaching their ultra-thin goals. It seems obvious that these websites would be inherently harmful, but it may be unclear to what extent. What are the dangerous features of these increasingly prevalent pro-eating disorder websites, and what are the implications for their viewers?

Pro-eating disorder websites are sites that eating disorder sufferers and interested parties may visit for a host of reasons. Many of these sites initially masquerade as a resource for positive support, but there are sinister implications for what the websites are truly trying to achieve with many of their recurring features. Perhaps the most common of the many harmful hallmarks of pro-eating disorder websites is “thinspiration,” usually in the form of quotes or images of “emaciated young females aimed to provide encouragement and serve as motivation for continued and sustained weight loss” (Norris et al. 446). Other dangerous and common features include tips for hiding food avoidance, instruction on how to best restrict or purge, and forums through which users may communicate (Lewis and Arbuthnott 200). These forums foster the sharing of tips and tricks on how to lose weight, and typically breed a competition between users over who can be the thinnest of them all.

It is worth noting that on these websites, having an eating disorder is touted as a “lifestyle” (Bardone-Cone and Cass 256) rather than an illness, and it is encouraged for sufferers to adopt this view and feel empowered in their choice. Themes of “control, success, perfection, isolation, sacrifice, transformation, coping, deceit, solidarity, [and] revolution” (Borzekowski, et al. 1528) are some of many that are established on these sites. Many of these websites may initially present themselves as being a source of support from people struggling with similar problems, and some even provide cursory links to information regarding treatment, but they are truly a haven for eating disorder sufferers to communally perpetuate disordered behaviors (Lewis and Arbuthnott 200). It is posited by the article “Searching for Thinspiration: The Nature of Internet Searches for Pro-Eating Disorder Websites” by Lewis and Arbuthnott of the University of Guelph that these websites help those struggling with eating disorders avoid treatment and guide them away from recovery.

If the concept alone is not troubling enough, the apparent consequences of viewing pro-eating disorder sites certainly are. Many studies have examined the various ways in which these sites affects those on the viewing end, and none of the results are positive. A study conducted by Anna Bardone-Cone and Kamila M. Cass of the University of Missouri-Columbia found that those who had viewed pro-anorexia websites exhibited “fluctuations in state self-esteem” (Bardone-Cone and Cass 259), and negative effects were evident, as demonstrated by decreases in self-esteem, appearance self-efficacy, and perceived attractiveness to the opposite sex, in addition to an increase in perceived weight.

Another study by Jett, LaPorte, and Wanchisn of Indiana University of Pennsylvania exposed college-aged women with healthy body mass indices and no history of eating disorders to pro-eating disorder websites for an hour and a half and followed their behaviors subsequent to the exposure

(Jett, LaPorte, and Wanchisn 410). They found that many of those who had viewed the pro-eating disorder site significantly decreased their caloric intake in the week that followed, on average eliminating “2470 calories with 21 (84%) out of 25 participants reducing their intake” (Jett, LaPorte, Wanchisn 412). The study disturbingly goes on to say, “Further, 60% of this group reduced their caloric intake by at least 2500 calories or more, 33.3% of these participants reduced by at least 4000 calories or more and 8% by 6000 or more” (Jett, LaPorte, Wanchisn 412-13). Many of the study’s participants also admitted to using the site’s suggested tips and tricks, particularly regarding ways to assist in food restriction, for at least three weeks after the study was concluded. Bardone-Cone and Cass specially note that in their study, one viewing alone created the aforementioned negative effects on their participants, and the Jett, LaPorte, and Wanchisn study seems to confirm that a singular viewing can be incredibly detrimental to the mental health of the site’s visitors. Moreover, the Jett, LaPorte, and Wanchisn study examined the effects of pro-eating disorder sites on college-aged women, but the first study, by Bardone-Cone and Cass, states that the main audience for these websites appears to be “girls and young women” (Bardone-Cone and Cass 257), and that exposure may be particularly dangerous to females in these formative developmental periods.

Eating disorders are renowned for being extremely difficult to treat. In “The Dangers and Draw of Online Communication: Pro-Anorexia Websites and their Implications for Users, Practitioners, and Researchers,” Stephanie Tierney of the University of Manchester relays a quote from another academic examination of eating disorders by Vitousek, Watson, and Wilson which states that anorexia is “one of the most frustrating and recalcitrant forms of psychopathology” (qtd. in Tierney 185). Pro-eating disorder websites are often dominated by a specifically pro-anorexia sentiment, as opposed to other eating disorders. Many anorexics report feeling that their clinicians do not understand their condition and turn to pro-anorexia sites as a way to educate and support themselves, but Tierney points out that the use of these websites “reinforces an existing ‘eating-disordered’ identity” and “[makes] it difficult for change to transpire” (186). If clinicians and other mental healthcare providers are aware of these websites and their damaging effects, they may be better able to help their patients. If they are aware of the damaging content that these sites bombard their patients with, they may be able to “challenge individuals, in a non-confrontational manner, to think critically” (Tierney 186-87) about the material the eating disorder sufferer is being presented with, and urge them to “consider the damaging nature of their behaviours and attitudes, encouraging them to modify their thoughts and activities” (Tierney 187).

In this day and age, it should come as no surprise that something so harmful could be made accessible through the simple click of a button. Regardless of whether one already suffers from an eating disorder or not, viewing pro-eating disorder websites has immensely detrimental psychological effects on the viewers, whether they view the content repeatedly or just once. The damaging effects of things like “thinspiration” and competitive user-run forums has been measured and recorded, and range from general decreases in self-esteem to extensive food restriction. The movement for eating disorders to be considered a lifestyle choice rather than an illness empowers those entrenched in their disorder to remain stuck and grow even stronger in resolve. There is hope, however. By learning more about these sites and understanding the messages that they convey, healthcare providers may be able to better assist those in need of help and make an immeasurable difference in the lives of those they care for.

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### Note

1. "Thinspiration," also called "thinspo," is a ubiquitous term used across all pro-eating disorder websites. It can be broken down into "thin" and "inspiration," and as the name suggests, it does just that. This is achieved primarily by presenting viewers, particularly women, with examples of women with the skeletal body types they're striving for. "Thinspiration" may also come in the form of motivational quotes, such as Kate Moss' infamous "Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels." In these ways, "thinspiration" serves to keep those with disordered eating on their path of self-destruction. Examples of "thinspiration" can be found here: <http://www.myproana.com/index.php/gallery/category/2-thinspiration/> <https://theproanalifestyleforever.wordpress.com/thinspiration/>
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