

Information Handout

Professional Version | US English

What Keeps Anorexia Going?



Description

It is common for people to feel conscious of their eating, but extreme dieting and weight loss can lead to an eating disorder called anorexia (or anorexia nervosa), which may impact their physical and mental health. Symptoms of anorexia include:

- Eating less and less.
- Losing weight.
- Having strict rules about eating (e.g., what you are allowed to eat, when, and where).
- Thinking often about your weight and body shape.
- Feeling fat when others think you are too thin.
- Sometimes losing control over your food intake (binge-eating).
- Feeling low, irritable, and not wanting to be around others.
- Trying to prevent weight gain in other ways (e.g., vomiting or taking laxatives).
- Exercising excessively or compulsively.

Research studies have shown that Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a helpful psychological therapy for anorexia. CBT therapists work a bit like firefighters: while the fire is burning they're not so interested in what caused it, but are more focused on what is keeping it going, and what they can do to put it out. This is because if they can work out what keeps a problem going, they can treat the problem by 'removing the fuel' and interrupting this maintaining cycle.

The *What Keeps Anorexia Going?* information handout describes some of the key factors which act to maintain anorexia, and it illustrates them in a vicious flower format in which each 'petal' represents a separate maintenance cycle. Helping clients to understand more about these processes is an essential part of cognitive therapy for anorexia. Therapists can use this handout as a focus for discussion, or as a template from which to formulate an idiosyncratic model of a client's experiences.

Instructions

Suggested Question



One interesting way of thinking about anorexia is to look at why, for some people, it does not get better by itself. This handout shows some of the most common reasons why some people keep experiencing symptoms of anorexia. I wonder if we could look at it together and think about whether it describes some of what is happening for you?

References

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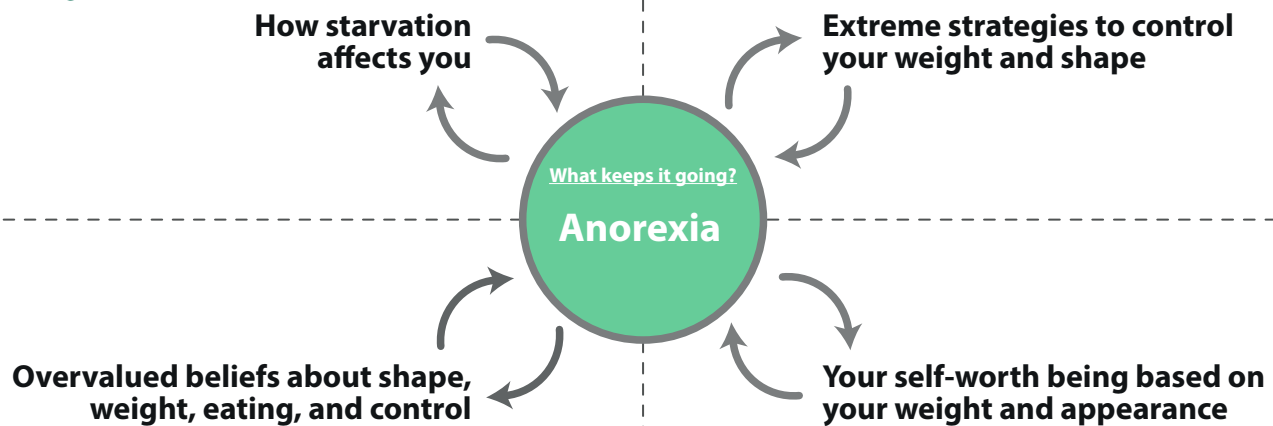
What Keeps Anorexia Going?

Limiting your food intake leads to symptoms of starvation ('Starvation Syndrome'), which has a dramatic impact on your thoughts, feelings, behavior, relationships, body, and overall health.

Starvation Syndrome can cause you to become more preoccupied with your eating and less interested in other areas of your life. You may worry about losing control when eating or feel uncomfortable after having food. These experiences make eating feel threatening and might lead you to restrict your food intake even further.

If you have anorexia, you may use extreme (and sometimes dangerous) strategies to control your weight, such as restricting your eating, setting food-related 'rules' or doing excessive amounts of exercise.

Control strategies make the effects of Starvation Syndrome worse. You might worry that relaxing your strategies will cause something bad to happen – e.g., suddenly gaining weight. You might find it difficult to follow these rules all the time – this can make you feel guilty or anxious, and causes these strategies to become more fixed and extreme over time.



You might hold beliefs that emphasize the importance of controlling your eating, weight, and shape. For example, being thin and controlling your eating might be linked to feeling safe, successful, or more acceptable to other people.

Unfortunately, this can prevent you from focusing on other areas that are important to you – life becomes smaller as food restriction and weight loss become your main focus.

If you have anorexia, it is likely that your sense of self-worth is at least partly based on your ability to control your eating, shape, and weight. Judging yourself on your ability to control your shape, weight, and eating can lead to anxiety, guilt, and self-criticism. Recovering from anorexia often involves finding new ways to recognize your self-worth.

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