

Signs and Symptoms of Anorexia Nervosa

Anorexia Nervosa by definition is the irrational fear that you are too fat and too thin is never thin enough. In psychological treatment with a patient who has Anorexia, it is virtually like banging your head against the wall trying to convince them that they are indeed “not fat.” The goal in therapy is to work through these irrational thoughts and beliefs while at the same time keeping the patient safe. Often times seen in treatment is by the time that family/friends have noticed the weight loss of the patient as well as trying to convince them to get treatment, they are already painfully thin. There are a number of warning signs that family/friends can look for in order to identify there is a problem before it progresses to a point where working through these irrational thoughts/beliefs is that much harder. The very first sign that someone may be anorexic is the loss of their period or menstruation. Individuals with anorexia often complain that they are tired, however they are unable to sleep at night. Physically, they also complain of not feeling well, having constant headaches, stomach aches, feeling weak, and often times have dizzy spells.

There are a number of signs to look for as far as what, how much, and what they think about food in general. Anorexics are constantly “on a diet” and strive to weigh themselves and become thinner and thinner. They have a very strict diet and eat very little or eat foods that are low in calories and fat content. I have heard patients say that they will go out to eat with friends and order the smallest thing on the menu and then push their food around the plate in an attempt that no one notices that they have only taken a few bites of food. They obsess over the contents of what is in their food and they read labels before they will eat anything.

Anorexic patients also have a grossly distorted body image. A sign to look for is when they have lost a lot of weight with no clear cut medical reason for the weight loss. They talk constantly about how much they weigh and what size of clothes they are currently wearing. In addition, anorexic patients perseverate over their physical appearance and are very critical of how they look and stare at themselves in the mirror, usually finding parts of their body that they feel are “fat” and will remark, “I need to lose weight here.”

Emotionally, patients with anorexia are very critical and measure their self-worth or value by their physical appearance. They feel guilty when they eat and usually these patients are irritable, experience mood swings, and are depressed. They are usually perfectionistic in nature and set standards for themselves that there is no hope of every achieving and then they feel shameful when they are unable to achieve that standard. The goal in psychotherapy is to treat the psychological issues that led the individual to the eating disorder in the first place. The process is usually multi-faceted and requires a multi-disciplinary approach in order to obtain long-lasting results.

Kara T. Tamanini, M.S., LMHC
Author and Therapist
Founder of Kids Awareness Series
www.KidsAwarenessSeries.com

Kara T. Tamanini is a licensed therapist that works with children/adolescents on a variety of childhood mental disorders.