

## Adolescent Update

## Pro-Anorexia/Pro-Bulimia Websites: A Dangerous Influence

Jamie Spurrier, Pediatric Resident, Washington University School of Medicine

In keeping with our commitment to involve young adults, our guest author for this issue is a pediatric resident from Washington University School of Medicine. Adults who work with teens must be aware of what is available to teens on the web. This issue deals with very troubling sites that encourages teens to practice and be proud of disordered eating.

Another training opportunity is being offered at the Clay County Public Health Center in Liberty, Missouri on Wednesday, September 17, 2008. Adolescent Health Care: Issues and Trends - 2008 will include: Achieving Quality Health Services for Adolescents, Teen Immunizations, Eating Disorders, Overweight/Obesity, Over the Counter (OTC) and Prescription Drug Abuse (pharming), Alcohol Use Trends that Target Adolescents, the Choking Game, and Cutting. Co-sponsors include the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services Adolescent Health Program, Children's Mercy Hospitals and Clinics, Clay County Public Health Center, Missouri Chapter American Academy of Pediatrics and Tri-County Mental Health Services. The training is targeted to health and mental health professionals who care for adolescents. In addition, the training will be offered at other locations this year.

The training brochure will be posted on the Adolescent Health webpage at <http://www.dhss.mo.gov/AdolescentHealth/Conferences.htm> and will include a link to the online registration site. For more information, contact the Adolescent Health Program at 573-751-6210.

Please make Dr. Lynch or Patti Van Tuinen aware of any requests for topics or questions.

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The Internet can be a helpful tool for adolescents with eating disorders in recovery. Many recovery/support sites exist which help give adolescents a support system consisting of individuals who understand their disease. Unfortunately, the Internet has also become a forum for adolescents who consider themselves "Pro-Ana" (anorexia) or "Pro-Mia" (bulimia) and who consider anorexia and bulimia a valid lifestyle choice, which should be celebrated and enjoyed. These websites first began appearing around 1994, and there are now over 400 pro-ana/mia websites, but the exact number is hard to estimate since websites are occasionally shut down by servers and reopen at other locations (3, 4). This shifting mass of websites is now referred to as the "Pro-Ana" community. The sites contain such information as the "Ana Pledge" the "Thin Commandments" of the "Ana Religion," and Ana quotes such as "Nothing tastes as good as thin feels!" and even prayers to a fictional goddess "Anamadim," the goddess of anorexia and bulimia. These sites also include "letters from Ana" encouraging those with eating disorders to continue the lifestyle and tips for becoming a better anorexic. Most sites actually do not contain tips on hiding eating disorders from family and friends, because they feel that eating disorders should be embraced and celebrated, but they do encourage anorexics/bulimics not to confide too much in family/friends/doctors because those people won't truly understand. (Quotes include "unless you have a friend with ana, outsiders are not going to understand.") The Pro-Ana movement considers anorexia/bulimia to be an alternative lifestyle, comparing it to homosexuality, and many sites draw a correlation between the fact that homosexuality used to be a Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) diagnosis, and promise devotees that eventually eating disorders will also be stricken from the DSM (1, 6, and various pro-ana websites).

As disturbing as it may be to peruse these websites, a more disturbing fact is that many parents and healthcare providers are unaware of these websites, or do not realize the impact that the sites have on adolescents with eating disorders. The first major study of pro-ana websites showed that, of 182 families with adolescents recovering from eating disorders, only 27% of parents had discussed pro-ana sites with their children, and only 52% were aware that they even existed. In contrast, 35% of patients reported using these sites, with a mean usage of 2.8 hours/week and some using the sites up to 20 hours per week (7). Another study from the University of Missouri, randomly assigned 235 female undergraduates to view one of three websites: a pro-ana website, a female fashion website using average-sized models, or a home decor website. Those females who viewed the pro-ana website subsequently had greater negative affect, lower social self-esteem, lower appearance self-efficacy, perceived themselves as heavier, and reported a greater likelihood of exercising and watching what they eat in the future (2).

According to research done by Mulveen and Hepworth as well as other studies, pro-ana websites provide a venue for adolescents who desire social support, need for anorexia, and tips and tricks (5). The pro-ana websites are careful to post a disclaimer, "This is a Pro-Ana site. If you are recovering from an eating disorder or hate the fact that eating disorders exist, I suggest you leave! Now!!" And they also distinguish "Ana" from "Anorexia nervosa" which they consider a psychological condition that can be treated, rather than a lifestyle choice that should be celebrated.

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Fortunately, pro-Ana sites are beginning to receive more attention from the media. Founded in 1976, the oldest eating disorder organization in the nation, the Association for Anorexia Nervosa Disorders (ANAD), has taken a strong stand against pro-Ana websites, and devotes a large portion of their website, [www.anad.org](http://www.anad.org) to educating visitors about these websites and their dangers. ANAD warns against specific pro-Ana sites such as Hard Core Anorexic but also gives general information about sites and encourages parents to become familiar with these sites and the content that adolescents are accessing. ANAD has been battling pro-ana/pro-mia web sites since 2001 trying to remove these deadly purveyors of information from the Internet and raise the awareness of parents that their children may be obtaining information that can jeopardize their health or eventually kill them. In addition, the current Miss America 2008, Kirsten Haglund, has made eating disorder awareness her platform, and a large portion of this platform is focused on Pro-Ana site awareness. Haglund and ANAD are encouraging Internet providers such as Google and Yahoo to block Pro-Ana websites and encourage parents to block these sites on home computers.

### Tips For Healthcare Providers:

- Parents of adolescents and pediatricians need to be aware of pro-ana/mia websites and the contents of these sites. Providers for adolescents may find it helpful to visit these sites and read the propaganda to which their patients are exposed.
- Providers should encourage parents to disable Pro-Ana websites from their home computers, and closely monitor which sites their children visit.
- Many beneficial sites for adolescents recovering from eating disorders do exist, and providers should also become familiar with these sites and direct patients to them.
- Providers should work to dispel the myths that pro ana/mia websites perpetrate, and understand that these are very real threats to patient recovery!

### Helpful Websites

- National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) - [www.nationaleatingdisorders.org](http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org)
- Eating Disorder Recovery - [www.eatingdisorderrecovery.com](http://www.eatingdisorderrecovery.com)
- About.com: Eating Disorders - [www.eatingdisorders.about.com](http://www.eatingdisorders.about.com)
- Eating-Disorder.com - [www.eating-disorder.com](http://www.eating-disorder.com)
- Association for Anorexia Nervosa Disorders (ANAD) - [www.anad.org](http://www.anad.org)

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7. Wilson JL, Peebles R, Hardy KK, Litt IF. Surfing for thinness: a pilot study of pro-eating disorder Web site usage in adolescents with eating disorders. Pediatrics. 2006 Dec; 118(6): 1635-43. [www.ANAD.org](http://www.ANAD.org)

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Articles in Adolescent "SHORTS" refer to boys and girls. For simplicity, the pronouns "he" and "she" are used interchangeably unless otherwise noted.