

# Pro-eating Disorder Websites



A research paper, Pro-Eating Disorder Websites: Users' Opinions, written by SANE researchers was published in the European Eating Disorders Review.

The survey of 151 individuals, the first of its kind in the UK, aimed to discover who visits these sites and why, as well as examining the impact the sites have on those using them and whether they are perceived as helpful or damaging. Over a period of several months in 2005, 151 individuals took part in an online survey.

## Key research findings

- Almost 70 per cent of respondents were aged 22 or younger
- More than half of those surveyed visited pro-eating disorder websites at least once a day
- 24 per cent reported some kind of social difficulty
- 43 per cent said the sites were a source of emotional support

## 'Concern'

With the growth of the internet over the last decade this relatively new phenomenon has attracted much critical attention in the media. Concern has been expressed for the vulnerable people who may visit these websites in order to 'learn how to be anorexic' or to sustain disordered eating behaviour.

Most commonly these sites are hosted by people who themselves have an eating disorder. On the 'pro-ana' sites, for anorexia, or 'pro-mia', for bulimia, visitors can access 'Thinspirations' comprising anti-food or anti-fat slogans and photographs of thin celebrities and others in various stages of emaciation. Alternatively there are 'Tips or Tricks' on how to maintain disordered eating behaviour and keep them hidden from family and friends.

## 'Some visitors were as young as 13'

According to our study the visitors are mostly young and female. Some were as young as 13 and the majority were 22 or younger. Many visited the sites frequently, 41 per cent several times a day.

It has been suggested in the media that a distinguishing feature of the pro-eating disorder community is viewing anorexia or bulimia as a lifestyle rather than a disorder. When asked to reflect on this, 54 per cent of participants state unequivocally that an eating disorder was just that, a disorder. Even those who did think eating disorders were a lifestyle did not tend to mean it in the ordinary sense. The majority described how their eating disorder affected how they experience the world, and themselves, influencing their every perception, action and thought. This concept of lifestyle does not imply choice and is compatible with thinking of eating disorders as the damaging psychological disorder we know them to be.

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### **'Many turn to the sites for friendship and support'**

By its nature an eating disorder can be very hard for others to understand and tends to put considerable distance between the sufferer and their family and friends. For nearly two-thirds of those surveyed visiting the sites made them feel less lonely and isolated. This was most prevalent amongst the more frequent users who tended to make use of chat rooms and message boards. They reported improved self-esteem, feeling better about themselves and feeling less lonely. For many the sites became a virtual community they could turn to for friendship and support.

### **'Harder to break away and seek recovery'**

However, negative effects were also present and participants reported weighing, measuring, fasting and purging more often after visiting the sites. For some there was evidence the sites reinforced their identity as an anorexic or bulimic, making it harder for them to break away and seek recovery. "There's a feeling one daren't recover, because then you'd no longer belong", said one.

Just as disturbing was the finding that passive browsers, those who visit the sites without utilising chat rooms or contacting others, were more likely to view the sites as somewhere to go to become a 'better anorexic', and missed out on the beneficial social effects.

### **'Vulnerable people'**

With 70 per cent of those who took part in the research reporting suicidal thoughts or feelings and 46 per cent also self-harming, visitors to these sites are clearly a very vulnerable group of people. Our concern is that the sites encourage visitors to hold on to their illness, supporting them in a pattern of damaging behaviour without encouraging them to seek treatment.

We have called for those publishing the sites to review their content and for ISPs to remove them, but in reality they are not simply going to go away. Indeed, removal of this form of social support, however loaded with dangers, could have unintended negative consequences.

At the heart of the pro-eating disorder community is the idea that an eating disorder can be of benefit to the person who has it. Constructive as it is, the current 'size zero' debate is in danger of reinforcing the belief that being thin is the only reason for clinging on to these illnesses. Other benefits, such as a feeling of safety or a sense of control are mentioned more frequently than any relating to appearance.

There can be no full understanding of the 'pro-ana' movement without further examination of this perception of benefit, a perception that from the 'normal' perspective seems irrational, but from that of an anorexic or bulimic can be fundamental.

The research paper Pro-Eating Disorder Websites: Users' Opinions by Emese Csipke and Outi Horne was published by the [European Eating Disorders Review](#) in spring 2007.