

EATING DISORDER VIGNETTES *by Ann Gerhardt, MD*

Rather than lecture to you about eating disorders, I thought a few vignettes might help to understand more about them (and why they can be difficult to treat.)

A woman with a good job calls to make an appointment for her son with an anxiety disorder who is losing weight because he can't make himself eat. He's unusual for eating disorder patients in that he wants help. I tell her that I don't bill insurance, but she can bill her own insurance and that her insurance reimburses fairly well. She calls before the appointment to cancel because she doesn't want to spend the money. Her out-of-pocket cost might have been \$50 after reimbursement. If her priorities are such that \$50 is worth more than her son's health, I'm guessing I know the source of some of his psychological problems.

Sigh.

A teen has bulimia and somatization, a disorder in which she experiences emotional feelings as physical symptoms. She responds to treatment because she is open to change, her father switches his job hours so he can attend family therapy, and the mother learns to parent with clear rules and boundaries.

Smile.

A daughter of a well-to-do community figure becomes depressed and anorexic, so much so that she requires hospitalization for irregular heart beats and suicide attempts. She wants to row for a crew team, while Dad expects her to swim competitively. She wants to do music, while the parents push for the sciences and college. Her sister is very thin and has no menstrual periods, but has never been diagnosed officially with an eating disorder. The father blames his daughter for creating problems in his otherwise perfect family. Absolutely essential to her recovery is effective family therapy, but 'perfect' Dad won't participate. The daughter attempts suicide again, the parents fire the doctors and Mom and Dad divorce. So much for the perfect family.

Double sigh.

A 34 year-old woman with low self-esteem and an inability to be assertive has practiced bulimia since she was a teen. She decides it's time to work on the problem. She struggles through therapy and doctor appointments for 3 years. Gradually, so much so that she doesn't know why it's happening, she sheds the need to binge and purge and learns to advocate for her own needs and be less of a co-dependent. She now accepts her curvy shape as natural and healthy. Her husband likes her even more now.

Double smile. ¶