

Case 11

Anorexia nervosa is an eating disorder that tends to affect adolescent girls and may continue into adulthood. It has long been associated with elevated mortality, both from suicide and from other causes, making it one of the most dangerous psychiatric disorders. It is characterized by an unrealistic fear of gaining weight. Anorectics will keep trying to reduce, even past the point of endangering their health. They may restrict the amount of food they eat or they may exercise excessively or abuse fat-burning drugs. They may also attempt to purge their bodies, by self-induced vomiting or by overuse of diuretics, laxatives, or enemas. By putting their bodies under such stress, they are prone to various life-threatening physical ailments, including congestive heart failure, stomach rupture, anemia, and loss of kidney function. About 95% of anorectics are women.

The World Health Organization (WHO) uses the Body Mass Index (BMI) as a measurement for specifying the concepts of underweight, overweight, and obese. BMI is height (in meters) divided by weight (in kilograms) squared. WHO considers people with a BMI between 18.5 and 25.9 to be within the normal range. A person who is 177 cm (5'10") must weigh roughly between 59 kg (130 lbs) and 77 kg (170 lbs) to be classified as normal. In the US, the average BMI of a woman in her twenties is 24.3.

The media and the fashion industry put forward images of beauty, some of which are unrealistic and idealized. One feature of these images, not just in the US, but also worldwide, is a slim figure. Accordingly, fashion models are often extremely thin. Critics of the fashion industry charge that promoting an ultra thin image for women has an unhealthy effect on the body image of young women. Such a distorted body image could push already susceptible girls or women toward anorexia or other eating disorders.

In 2006, under pressure from local Spanish governments, the organizers of Madrid Fashion Week banned models with a BMI under 18. The following year, the Italian fashion designers Prada, Versace, and Armani voluntarily banned very thin models from their catwalks.

Recently, Israel passed legislation prohibiting women with a BMI of less than 18.5 from walking the catwalk at fashion shows or appearing in commercials. The obvious point of such prohibitions is to protect the model herself. The legislation goes further, however, and requires advertisers to state explicitly whenever their photos have been photoshopped or otherwise manipulated to make the model appear thinner. The point of this part of the legislation is clearly to change the image put forth by the fashion industry, and thus to protect that portion of the audience who will define themselves in terms of such images and be propelled into anorexic behavior. Commentators agree that this sort of paternalistic legislation would be unlikely to succeed in the US, because of its infringement of the free speech of the fashion industry and the media.