Anorexia Nervosa in the Context of Daily Experience

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This research employed the Experience Sampling Method to study the daily lives of two anorectic women. They and 24 women from a normative population filled out reports on their experience at random moments during an ordinary week in their lives. The sample of 40-to-45 reports per person suggests that the anorectics spent more of their time alone and experienced lower average affect than other young single women. In addition, the reports from Case 1 provide concrete quantitative demonstration of an abnormal preoccupation with food. The reports from Case 2 show how this woman’s moods are strongly tied to her fluctuating sense of control.

INTRODUCTION

Anorexia nervosa is a syndrome of self-starvation found predominantly in adolescent and young adult women. It is characterized by a relentless pursuit of thinness that results in life-threatening emaciation, an almost delusional preoccupation with food and body, and a general withdrawal from family and friends. Despite the seriously debilitating consequences of the disorder, it appears there has been an increase in the incidence of anorexia nervosa in the last 15 to 20 years (Bruch, 1978; Vigersky, 1977; Crisp et al., 1976).

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Longitudinal data have provided some information regarding the life adjustment of anorectics during the course of the disorder. They tend to live restricted social lives, even if their weight problems are corrected (Crisp, 1974). As a group, former anorectics work effectively, but generally have low rates of marriage, heterosexual relations, and sexual satisfaction (Schwartz and Thompson, 1981; Theander, 1970; Dally, 1969). Many continue to live at home and remain dependent on parents, both economically and socially (Dally, 1969). Overall, the outcome literature is pessimistic about the quality of lives led by anorectics—49% are cured of weight difficulties, 26% continue to have fluctuating weight or become obese, 18% remain chronically anorexic, 7% die of anorexia or suicide. Ninety percent work, but only 47% marry or maintain active heterosexual lives (Schwartz and Thompson, 1981).

Although the existing longitudinal data have allowed for a global assessment regarding the life adjustment of these women, they have not provided a specific assessment of the functioning of anorectics during the course of the disorder. The current study was undertaken to investigate the anorectic’s experience in daily living using a new sampling research technique. The Experience Sampling Method (Csikzentmihalyi et al., 1977) was utilized to profile the daily experience of two anorectic women. Of particular interest in the study was the severity of mood fluctuation, the degree of social isolation, and the extent of food-related behavior. The study also aimed to explore the viability of the experience sampling method for further investigation with eating-disordered populations.

METHOD

The Experience Sampling Method is a procedure for obtaining reports on a representative sample of moments in a person’s daily activity. An electronic pager, the kind doctors sometimes carry, was used to signal the participants to fill out self-reports according to a systematic schedule. The signals occurred at a random time, once within every two hours between 8:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m. Upon receipt of each signal, participants responded to a self-report questionnaire asking about their situation and their subjective state at that time. They carried a pager and filled out reports for one week, providing 40 to 50 self-reports per person.

The two anorectic women described in this paper were former psychiatric inpatients. Both women had been hospitalized within the last three years and were diagnosed with primary anorexia nervosa (Feighner et al., 1972). At the time of the study, Case 1 was one year posthospitalization and Case 2 was three years posthospitalization. During the study, both women’s weight