Anorexia Nervosa in Adolescent Males: A Review and Case Study

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ABSTRACT: The clinical presentation of anorexia nervosa among males is quite rare. This paper examines the personality and developmental issues of anorexia nervosa in adolescent males through a comprehensive review of the literature and a case presentation. In addition, this paper will demonstrate the application of the empirical literature in the development of a conceptual model to identify critical diagnostic and psychotherapeutic issues within the assessment of a clinically rare case, a male adolescent with anorexia nervosa.

KEY WORDS: anorexia nervosa; males

While the existence of anorexia nervosa as a disorder in males was long debated because of psychodynamic formulations dependent upon dynamics involving fear of impregnation, reliance upon amenorrhea as a diagnostic criterion, and the popular view of anorexia nervosa as a disorder of affluent adolescent females, its presence in males dates back to the first medical description of the syndrome by Morton in 1689. A number of well documented series of male patients with anorexia nervosa have been described in the medical and psychological literature. One of the earliest series was provided by Crisp and Toms, describing 13 males seen over a ten year period in comparison to 160 females seen over the same period. More recently, Crisp and his associates have reported on the continuing consecutive series of 36 male anorexic patients seen at St. George’s Hospital in London.
Hilde Bruch provided a report describing her clinical work with nine male anorexics, with six diagnosed as exhibiting primary anorexia nervosa. Andersen and Mickalide have reported on a series of 16 males seen at Johns Hopkins Eating and Weight Disorders Clinic who met the DSM-III criteria for anorexia nervosa. Additional series have been described by Hasan and Tibbetts, and Hogan, Huerta, and Lucas. Beaumont, Beardwood, and Russell reviewed 250 cases presented in 84 articles and presented 25 of these cases which met the diagnostic criteria for anorexia nervosa, along with the case histories of six additional patients. Together, these well-documented clinical reports provide support for Andersen’s contention that the question of the presence of anorexia nervosa in the male has been a point of unnecessary debate.

In recognizing the existence of this disorder in males, the exceedingly rare incidence in the male population must also be noted. Crisp, Burns, and Bhat state that less than 100 cases have been described in the medical literature. Males are estimated to represent no more than 5 per cent of all cases of anorexia nervosa by DSM-III-R. Based on their experience, Fichter, Daser, and Postisch estimate the ratio of male to female cases to be 1:12.5. A strong argument is also made that it is difficult to establish a “true” prevalence rate because of the small number of reported cases.

Because of the rarity of anorexia nervosa among males, our clinical and empirical understanding of male anorexic patients is still incomplete, with a number of complex issues still needing careful examination. At one point, the male with anorexia was thought to demonstrate more severe psychopathology than the female with the same diagnosis. Males with this disorder have been described as more resistant to treatment than female patients, and as having a poorer prognosis than females. Burns and Crisp aptly point out that the insufficient size of samples of male anorexics does not allow for adequate comparisons with females to address definitively the questions of poorer prognosis or greater psychopathology in males. Sterling and Segal have argued that case presentations would benefit from the examination of psychodiagnostic tests in order to provide a more integrated understanding of the psychopathology of males with anorexia nervosa.

Clinical Presentation of Anorexic Males

The present view of anorexia nervosa in males reflects a growing consensus that this condition in males closely coincides with the fe-