Several theorists have tried to model anorexia on Wasser and Barash's (1983) "reproductive suppression model" (RSM). According to the RSM, individual females adaptively suppress their reproductive functioning under conditions of social or physiological stress. From this perspective, mild anorexia is viewed as an adaptive response to modern conditions; more severe anorexia is viewed as an adaptation gone awry. Previous models have not, however, examined the full richness of the RSM. Specifically, Wasser and Barash documented not only self-imposed reproductive suppression, but also manipulative reproductive suppression of subordinate females by dominants. I propose that the modern "epidemic" of anorexia is explained neither by adaptive self-suppression nor by environmental mismatch (an adaptation gone awry); I propose that the "epidemic" levels of anorexia seen in modern western society are a direct consequence of intrasexual competition, the scope of which has been enhanced by the power and reach of modern communications media. According to this perspective, anorexia, even in its mild forms, is a manipulative strategy imposed on subordinates by dominants. Anorexia is, in both senses, a "losing" strategy.

KEY WORDS: Anorexia; Evolutionary psychiatry; Female competition; Intrasexual selection; Reproductive suppression.

Even as people are starving in third world nations, millions of U.S. dollars are spent annually on artificial sweeteners, fake fats, liposuction, and diet fads. Not only are we psychologically obsessed with fat, as a nation we are
physically unsound, with a record number of people “topping the scales” at weight levels that are unhealthy to the point of being life threatening: we are a nation of clogged arteries, cardiac arrest, and adult-onset diabetes. Today, with fats and sugars readily available (and even appearing routinely in foods where we would not expect them), our ability to store fat is getting the better of us (Nesse and Williams 1991, 1994). What was once (and still is, for many people) a life-saving feature of our biology is now contributing to early loss of life.

On the other hand, at least equal attention is being given to the less costly, but also fairly recent and severe “epidemic” of anorexia (Feingold and Mazzella 1998). Although slimness is admired only in societies with ample food—and even then only in a handful of those—ours is one of them (Anderson et al. 1992). In western cultures the current fashion directive seems to be “the skinnier the better.” In contemporary America a large minority of women report being on a weight-control diet, and girls as young as 8 or 9 report being concerned with their body image and possibly being perceived as fat (Hill et al. 1992; Veron-Guidry and Williamson 1996).

Not surprising from an evolutionary point of view—but in direct contrast to common perceptions and lay reports—Anderson and colleagues found no evidence that this “slimness standard” of contemporary North America is something imposed upon women by men. Since fertility is related to weight in a curvilinear fashion (Anderson 1988; Caro and Sellen 1990; Frisch 1984), an evolutionary perspective should lead us to expect men to exhibit preferences for women of intermediate weight—and they do (Connolly, Mealey, and Slaughter n.d.; Singh 1993a, 1993b). The fact is that men express preferences for plumper female figures than do women themselves (Cohn et al. 1987; Fallon and Rozin 1985; Furnham and Radley 1989).

Of what relevance are these facts for our understanding of anorexia? I propose that anorexia is one end-product of female intrasexual competition: that “self-imposed” starvation is a subordinate behavior performed in deference to, or more accurately, in response to manipulation by, a more socially dominant woman or women. I propose that anorexia is adaptive—but not for those who exhibit it; rather, it is adaptive for dominant women whose “extended phenotype” (Dawkins 1982) includes manipulation of the phenotype of subordinate, would-be competitors.

ADAPTIVE REPRODUCTIVE SELF-SUPPRESSION

Like other female mammals, women seem to have evolved a variety of physiological mechanisms for “deciding” not to reproduce; these include suppression of ovulation, embryo resorption, and fetal miscarriage (Baker