

Starving in silence

Often overlooked, many boys suffer from anorexia nervosa and other eating disorders

By CARA NISSMAN

Being thin meant everything to Matt.

Last year, the Middlesex County high school junior, who had been overweight as a child, started exercising to lose a few pounds.

He quickly became addicted to losing weight.

In just a few months, Matt began eating only salad and bread, and drinking 25 glasses of water a day. He joined the cross-country team and ran 15 miles a day. As his weight plummeted to less than 110 pounds on his 5-foot-7-inch frame, he donned multiple layers of clothing to conceal his protruding bones.

"I felt small and weak inside, so I wanted to look small and weak," Matt said about his struggles trying to fit in at school. "I felt out of place."

His parents noticed his increased interest in exercising and cooking, and his frequent glances in the mirror, but he denied he had a problem.

Matt withdrew from his friends, skipping dances and movies to run

and to do aerobics. He spent lunch in the library so his pals wouldn't comment on his peculiar eating habits.

He said that even if he had told his friends what was wrong, they wouldn't have known how to handle it.

"I could tell my friends were concerned, but when you're male, you're not supposed to be sympathetic," said Matt, 17, a bespectacled A-student who plays guitar and loves foreign languages. "When girlfriends hang out, they do their hair and they talk about this stuff. I'm not a girl, but I want people to know boys can get this."

"This" is anorexia nervosa, a mental disorder that causes a person to fear becoming fat, and to starve himself or herself. It affects about 30,000 men and boys in the United States, according to Dr. Roberto Olivardia, co-author of "The Adonis Complex: How to Identify, Treat and Prevent Body Obsession in Men and Boys" (Touchstone, 2002).

Although 3 million to 5 million men and boys nationwide suffer from eating

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Quotes of the week

"It was like my mind and body became two separate things. Bulimia was a way of controlling the other. My parents would catch me being sick and I'd just make an excuse. I was too embarrassed to talk about it and things just got worse. . . . (I)t's nothing to be ashamed of. The advice I'd give to someone who is going through it right now is talk to someone. Don't let it take over your life. It's hard and painful, but the only way to feel happy again is to work through it."

— BRITISH ACTOR ADAM RICKITT, 23.



From preceding page

disorders, and more than 90 percent of these cases begin in adolescence, Olivardia said male sufferers often go undiagnosed for years because they are ashamed to admit they need help.

Why? Because 90 percent of eating disorder sufferers are women and girls, most people think of eating disorders as a "girl's disease."

"Boys not only feel guilty for having this secret, but, because it's so equated with women, they feel less manly, especially boys who are coming into puberty and are trying to make sense of themselves," Olivardia said. "It's a myth that only girls deal with these problems."

Many males with eating disorders also fear being perceived as gay, said

Dr. Jeanne Dolan, a psychiatrist at Boston Children's Hospital Eating Disorders Program. In fact, "a big majority of males with eating disorders are straight," she said.

Dolan, who has worked with kids as young as 6, said families' reactions, often fueled by these stigmas, can interfere with treatment.

"It's very difficult for families to appreciate what a severe illness it really is," she said. "They often think it's just a stage their son is going through."

Matt's mom, who withheld her name, said his dad thought Matt's problem "would go away on its own." But she took him to Children's Hospital for treatment.

"There were times when I thought he wasn't going to make it," she said. "He said he didn't care and he wanted to die. But he survived."

People often develop eating disorders because they're yearning to express their feelings, said Dr. Eve Eliot, author of "Insatiable" (HCI, 2001) and "Ravenous" (HCI, 2002). Society expects men to suppress their fears, she said.

"We usually find out that there is a fear of losing one's control of emotions," she said. "They become either emotional eaters or emotional starvers."

"I used to be really introverted," said Matt, who had experienced depression and now takes anti-depressants. "Now, I'm the opposite. I'm doing plays, speaking up in class. I have friends."

The media also contributes to boys' concerns about their body image, said Lynn Luciano, author of "Looking Good: Male Body Im-

Ravaging the mind and body

Left untreated, eating disorders can cause serious damage to the body and mind, including kidney damage or kidney failure, impaired bowel function, impaired brain function and depression. Here are some other long-term effects of specific eating disorders:

ANOREXIA NERVOSA: Starving oneself because of a fear of being fat.

- Hair loss
- Easily broken bones and paper-thin skin
- Decreased testosterone level
- Stunted growth
- Heart palpitations

BULIMIA NERVOSA: Overeating, then throwing it up or exercising it off

- Heart failure (because throwing up can deplete potassium levels)
- Damage to hands, teeth and tongue

BINGE-EATING: Overeating, usually secretly, and not throwing it up

- Heart disease

MUSCLE DYSMORPHIA: Overexercising and restricting diet because of a fear of being too small or weak

With steroid use:

- Extreme mood swings
- Acne
- Enlarged breasts
- Shrunken testicles
- Liver, heart disease

With or without steroid use:

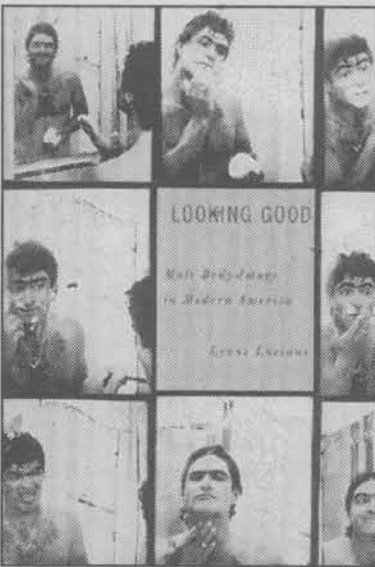
- Hernias
- Strained muscles
- Extreme exhaustion

— CARA NISSMAN

The Adonis Complex

THE SECRET CRISIS OF MALE BODY OBSESSION

HARRISON G. POPE, JR., M.D., KATHARINE A. PHILLIPS, M.B., ROBERTO OLIVARDIA, Ph.D.



Web sites feed obsession

Yahoo recently dropped pro-eating disorder Web sites, also called "Pro-Ana" or "Pro-Mia" sites, that suggest ways to starve, binge and purge. But a quick search shows many of these sites still exist in cyberspace, making it hard for kids to tell which ones offer tips on recovery and which offer tips for self-destruction.

"When I was looking at the pages, I was astounded by what I saw," said Kerry Glennon, 17, of Braintree, who searched online after watching a recent episode of Boston Public that dealt with "Pro-Ana" Web sites. "They say anorexia is an 'art form' because it takes discipline and 'it's not a disorder, it's a lifestyle.' I don't have a disorder, but looking at these pages made me think. They can just trigger thoughts in your mind like, 'Hey, if I do this before the prom, I'll look even better.' I definitely think they are dangerous."

Many kids seek out these sites because they're extremely lonely,

said author Dr. Eve Eliot.

"They've isolated themselves from their friends and family, so they don't have anybody else to talk to," she said. "These sites help kids feel not so alone."

Many Web sites with chat rooms and message boards for people with eating disorders are monitored by professionals and don't promote destructive behaviors. For starters, check out:

■ **Support, Concern and Resources for Eating Disorders** at www.eating-disorder.org/help_for_teens.htm

■ **Anorexic Web** at www.anorexic-web.com

■ **The Something Fishy Web Site on Eating Disorders** at www.something-fishy.org.

■ **The National Eating Disorders Association** at www.nationaleatingdisorders.org or 800-931-2237. This association can help you find a support group.

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"I got to the point where I was eating just so I wouldn't collapse. (My doctor) sat me down and told me the facts: If I didn't do something, I was going to die."
 — SILVERCHAIR LEAD SINGER DANIEL JOHNS, 21, ON HIS BATTLE WITH ANOREXIA, WHICH BEGAN IN HIGH SCHOOL. JOHNS WROTE "ANA'S SONG," WHICH APPEARED ON THE 1999 ALBUM "NEON BALLROOM," ABOUT HIS STRUGGLES WITH THE DISORDER.



"You never really get over an eating disorder. It's always going to be a struggle. But at the end of the day, it's not so much about eating as it is about yourself. . . . Now I realize that everyone's different and you need to accept what God gives you."
 — "THE SOPRANOS" STAR JAMIE-LYNN SIGLER, 21, WHO SUFFERED FROM EXERCISE BULIMIA IN HIGH SCHOOL.



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anorexia's silent victims

age in Modern America" (Hill & Wang, 2002).

"We are becoming an increasingly image-oriented society, and men and boys are reading *GQ*, *Men's Health* and *Details* magazines," she said. "The media images are telling them how they should look."

"I wanted to look like Leonardo DiCaprio," said Matt. "I looked like a P.O.W."

Males are increasingly seeking sleek, sinewy bodies to build up their self-esteem, said Dr. Seda Ebrahimi, director of the Cambridge Eating Disorder Center. Boys as young as 12 are using steroids to stand out from the crowd.

Olivardia said he predicts muscle dysmorphia, a term he and his co-authors coined in 1997 to describe those who exercise and diet excessively to build muscle, will soon become the most prevalent eating disorder in males. "Boys are going to be striving for that muscular V-shape body," he said. "Boys are very aware of that muscular ideal."

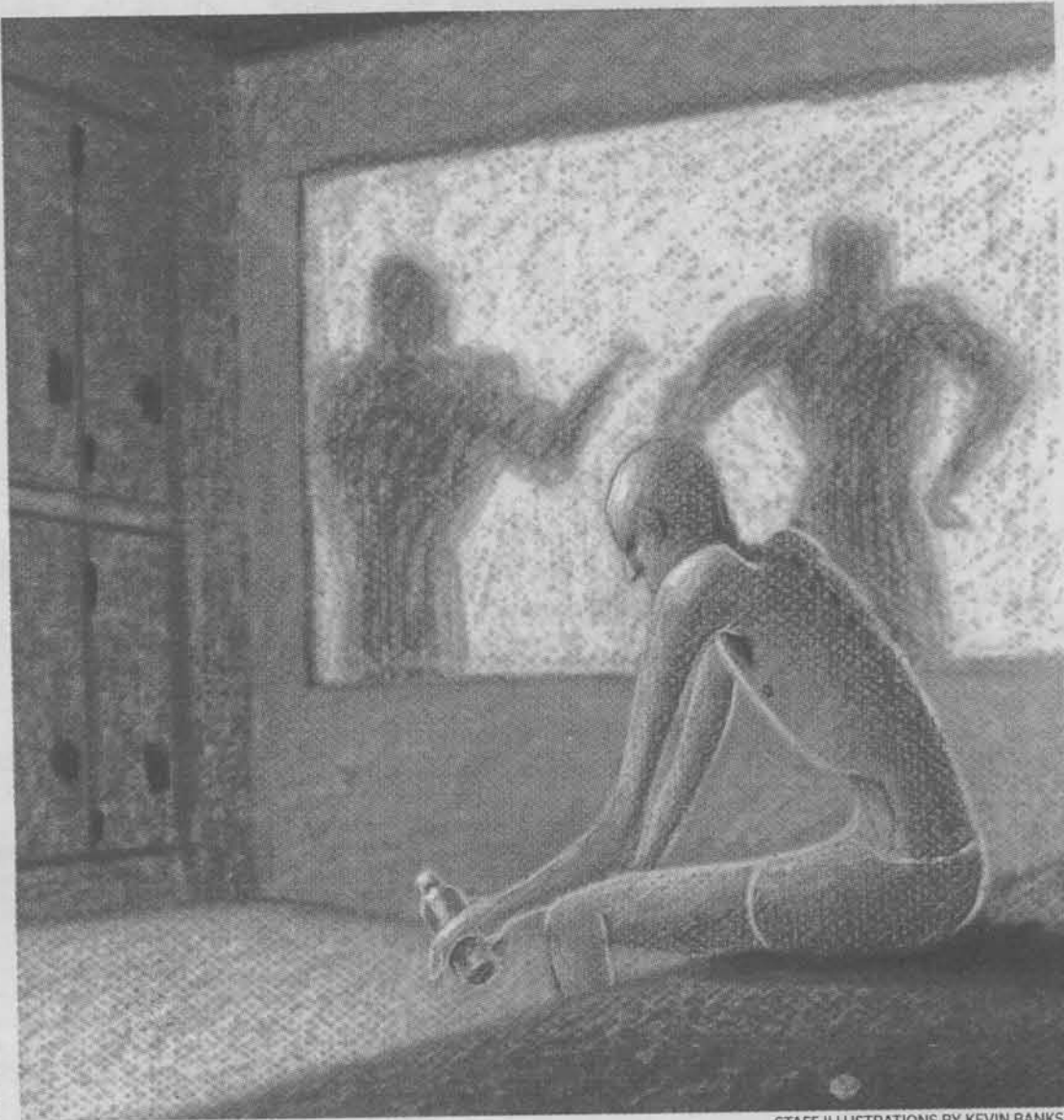
Despite media coverage of eating disorders in wrestlers, runners and, most recently, ski jumpers, Olivardia said the pressure to achieve in these activities is not always to blame for boys and men's problems.

"Sports don't necessarily cause eating disorders," he said. "Males' desire to keep up their strength or fear of gaining weight sometimes leads them to having eating disorders and to engaging in these activities."

Matt said he began dieting and exercising to prove he could slim down. "I had always dreamed of being thin," he said. "I didn't want to lose that. I had been teased for being fat when I was younger, so it was like revenge. I became bitter. It became an obsession."

But today, he has a healthier attitude.

"I'd like to think I'm over it now, but it's an eating disorder, you know?" he said. "But I care about my health now, and I'd like to see a happy future."



STAFF ILLUSTRATIONS BY KEVIN BANKS

Resources

Eating disorders have the highest fatality rates of all mental illnesses. Here are additional resources for those who need help:

■ **Massachusetts Eating Disorder Association:** 617-558-1881 or www.medainc.org.

■ **Boston Children's Hospital Eating Disorders Program:** 617-355-7178 or www.childrenshospital.org.

■ **Cambridge Eating Disorder Center:** 617-547-2255.

■ **McLean Hospital Eating Disorders Center:** 617-855-3410 or www.mcleanhospital.org.

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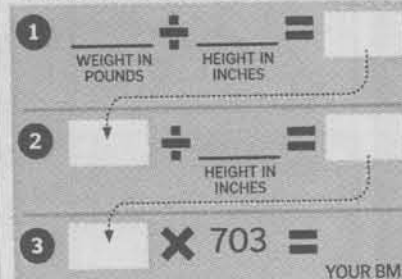
■ **"Over It: A Teen's Guide to Getting Beyond Obsession With Food and Weight,"** by Carol Emery Normandi and Laurelee Roark (New World Library, 2001).

— CARA NISSMAN

What should I weigh?

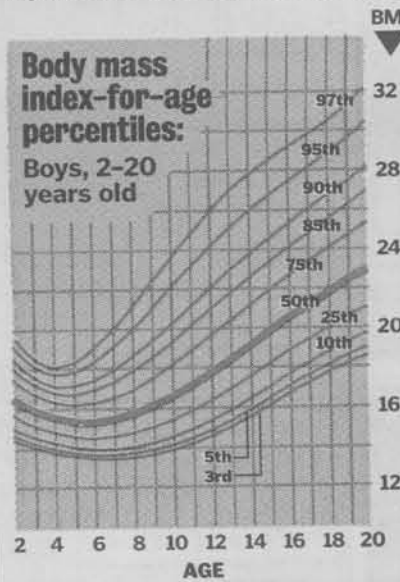
Most health professionals use the **Body Mass Index**, a relationship between height and weight, to determine whether an individual has a healthy level of body fat.

3 steps to determine your BMI:



The chart below can help determine how a boy's BMI compares with that of other boys in his age range. A BMI in the 85th percentile or higher indicates a guy is at risk of becoming overweight. A BMI between the fifth and 85th percentile means a boy is at an appropriate weight. To interpret a BMI in the fifth percentile you *must* consult a doctor: It could mean a guy is underweight, or it can mean his body is still developing.

Indeed, you always should work with a physician if you want to lose or gain weight. A doctor can objectively monitor any changes in mental or physical health.



Source: Centers for Disease Control STAFF GRAPHIC

How to help a friend

Most people who suffer from eating disorders are in deep denial, so if you think someone you know has this problem, experts recommend you approach the subject delicately.

"Say, 'I'm only going to say this once, I promise,' because you don't want to give them an excuse to avoid you or to feel judged," said Dr. Eve Eliot. "Then gently let them know you've noticed they've been eating a

great deal or eating less than usual, and that you feel very uncomfortable when they do that behavior. And tell them that you care about them."

The faster a person seeks treatment, the better chance he has of recovery. Here are some signs that might indicate a guy needs help:

■ He looks in the mirror or weighs himself multiple times a day, always critical of what he sees.

■ He picks at or moves his food around on his plate, eating little. Or he eats excessively, then disappears, possibly to the bathroom to throw up or to exercise it off.

■ He engages in ritualized eating, such as chomping on an exact number of lettuce leaves.

■ He continually loses weight, but never thinks he's lost enough and continues to change his target weight. Or

he gains a lot of weight and exercises a lot, but always wants more muscle. If his body seems disproportionate, he might be taking anabolic steroids.

■ He complains about dizziness, fatigue or heart palpitations. He falls down frequently. He can't concentrate. He talks constantly about food and cooking and monitors his calorie or fat intake.

■ He isolates himself from friends

and family, making excuses for why he doesn't want to go to a restaurant or miss a workout.

■ He pins up pictures of body-builders and fit celebs on his wall or buys lots of body-building and health books and often compares himself with them, asking if so-and-so is "bigger" than he is or thinner than he is.

— CARA NISSMAN