

## Psychology: Abnormality - Notes for 19/09/03

### **Anorexia Nervosa**

'Anorexia nervosa' means 'loss of appetite for nervous reasons' but this is misleading because the person has, in fact, lost the ability to allow themselves to satisfy their appetite. They restrict the amount they eat and drink, sometimes to a dangerous level. They focus on food in an attempt to cope with life, rather than to starve to death. It is a way of demonstrating that they are in control of their body weight and shape. Ultimately, however, the illness itself takes control and the chemical changes in the body affect the brain and distort thinking, making it impossible for the person to make rational decisions about food. As the illness progresses, many people will suffer from the exhaustion of starvation. It is very rare, but occasionally people die from the effects of anorexia.

### **Physical Signs of Anorexia**

- In adults, extreme weight loss; in children and teenagers, poor or inadequate weight gain in relation to their growth
- Constipation and abdominal pains
- Dizzy spells and fainting
- Swollen stomach, face and ankles
- Downy hair on the body; loss of hair on the head when recovering
- Poor blood circulation and feeling cold
- Dry, rough, discoloured skin
- Disrupted menstrual cycles
- In men, loss of libido
- Loss of bone mass and, eventually osteoporosis (brittle bones)

### **Psychological Signs of Anorexia**

- Intense fear of gaining weight, even within the normal weight range according to height
- Distorted perception of body shape or weight
- Denial of the existence of a problem
- Changes in personality and mood swings

### **Behavioural signs in anorexia**

- Rituals attached to eating, such as cutting food into tiny pieces
- Secrecy
- Restlessness and hyperactivity
- Wearing big baggy clothes
- Vomiting; taking laxatives

### **In the context of the Cognitive Model of Abnormality**

- Cognitive structure – refers to the internal organisation of information. Normal people see food as enjoyable. Those with eating disorders fear becoming overweight and see food as evil and wrong.
- Cognitive content – the actual material the person is processing, either positive or negative. Thoughts such as "I'm useless, I don't deserve food, it's enjoyable and I don't deserve enjoyment" are common.
- Cognitive processes – the ways in which we process the information. Constant negative thoughts and assumptions of abandonment are common with eating disorders.
- Cognitive products – the conclusions reached. "I am worthless".