

**Leave Me Alone:
I'm Disappearing**
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(Bodycage)

Through prayer, fasting and meditation I will drop below 100 pounds, the dreaded three digits. I want to be 99 or nothing. want. did I say want? I shouldn't say want. I shouldn't say shouldn't. you're confused?... I'm trying to eliminate my ego but that action is ego itself. all action is ego. are you following me? I'm not here with my mirror and scale for the good of my health. – Frank McCourt

Anorexia. Bulimia. It is estimated that between five and ten percent of adolescents are affected by these self-destructive disorders. They are the “new” diseases of youth, and the stuff of parents’ nightmares. And why shouldn’t they be? Even in our society that is admittedly obsessed with thinness—or perhaps *especially*, in the face of our quickly rising obesity levels—the concepts of self-starvation and voluntary emaciation are

amazingly difficult to fathom. We don't know the real cause of these diseases. We don't know why they hit certain groups of people more than others. And, we are often too afraid, or unable, to ask the afflicted, who are often just as unable to answer, the looming question of why. Marya Hornbacher, in the introduction to her book, Wasted, addresses the most prevalent expectation along these lines:

I am not going to repeat, at length, how eating disorders are “about control,” because we've all heard it. It's a buzzword, reductive, categorical, a tidy way of herding people into a mental quarantine and saying: There. That's that. Eating disorders are “about”: yes, control, and history, philosophy, society, personal strangeness, family fuck-ups, autoerotics, myth, mirrors, love and death and S&M, magazines and religion, the individual's blindfolded stumble-walk through an ever-stranger world. The question is really not if eating disorders are “neurotic” and indicate a glitch in the mind... but rather why. (Hornbacher 4)

Why people decide to stop eating. Why they idolize an obviously unhealthy lifestyle.

Why they go through so much to achieve such a markedly negative effect. And why they won't stop, for anyone, even themselves.

Out of the many, many different social groups that exist in the adolescent world, there are several that have a notable prevalence of eating disorders, but one in particular seems to be seldom addressed. The Gothic sub-culture has what appears to be an extremely high percentage of eating-disordered individuals, with more joining the numbers daily. This issue should greatly concern people, and yet, there is very little written about it. This paper is an attempt to find some sort of correlation between the Goth subculture and eating disorders, and pose some questions concerning that relationship.

In order to properly understand anorexia and bulimia, it is helpful to clarify exactly what is meant by the two, as there is a definite distinction, at least at first.

Anorexia, according to Encyclopedia Britannica Online, is defined as:

Extreme body emaciation caused by emotional or psychological aversion to foods and to eating. The condition occurs predominantly in young women. Emotional manifestations may range from a neurotic overreaction to a weight-reduction diet to full-blown schizophrenic delusions resulting in the abhorrence of food.

Bulimia, on the other hand, is defined as a “mental disorder characterized by periods of bingeing (extreme overindulgence in food) followed by purging, including induced vomiting.” These two disorders are distinct in their natures, but ultimately have the same results.

The most obvious result of these two eating disorders is malnutrition. The first, most obvious is weight-loss. With anorexia, the loss is extreme, especially at first. At later stages, the body has less available weight to lose, so anorexics find their plight increasingly difficult. With bulimics, the weight loss might not be so sudden. Since bulimia is characterized by mass consumption and then purging, there is sometimes something of a balance reached. The body may start processing the food, and thus gain some nutrients and calories from its ingestion, an opportunity the anorexic body never sees. With time, however, the bulimic will also lose weight, eventually reaching roughly the same status as the anorexic, especially in the incidence that mass quantities of food are not being consumed. At this point, the body starts to undergo certain changes. Beyond the weight-loss, the skin loses pigment, causing a distinctive paleness. Also, with malnutrition and decreased body fat, the eating-disordered find themselves perpetually cold. These physical changes generally take longer to occur in the bulimic

than the anorexic due to the nature of the disease itself. Bulimics at least have the chance to gain some of the benefits of the food they ingest, even if it is only for a short period of time. Thus, they have calories and nutrients that anorexics never see as anorexics do not at any point come into contact with these vital elements.

Bulimics will often undergo an additional change in the nature of their diseases after a long enough period of time has elapsed. As bulimia progresses, there is a definite trend towards anorexia. It seems that in many cases eating tends to become, in and of itself, too big of a “sin” to commit, and it is cut out. Actually, bulimia shares this strange transitioning aspect with anorexia, but for altogether different reasons. After anorexics are discovered to be such, they often convert to bulimia for the purpose of hiding their disorder. In some cases, this ruse is sufficient for them to achieve their goals of continued weight loss, if only on a slightly decelerated course. Thus, in the more extreme cases, starving persons are often found to function using a combination of the two diseases. In the end, the two diseases usually wind up being treated as a single disease, anorexia-bulimia, and will be treated as such for the rest of this paper as well, except when otherwise specified.

Generally speaking, eating disorders are usually hidden with great care, in order to avoid the meddling of those who might disrupt the process, including parents, teachers and friends. There is a certain stigma attached to eating disorders, and there is almost nothing worse for eating-disordered persons than having to make exceptions in their routines. In the Gothic world however, this stigma does not appear to be present. In fact, the too thin, too pale look that goes along with eating disorders is celebrated. While it is true that thinness is already a staple of popular culture, and paleness is on the rise, it is

generally not allowed for the public at large to have the signs of eating disorders that would result in these physical symptoms. People will begin to comment negatively after a certain line is crossed in the mainstream world, an “annoyance” that appears to be less prevalent in Goth culture. One need only look at the covers of magazines such as Gothic Beauty to gain some idea as to what the self-imposed idea of “in” pertains to. The models on the front cover (implying the highest level of desirability) share some definite characteristics. While they are attractive, they are definitely very pale, and in most cases, very thin. Their faces are angular, their facial bone structures pronounced, their limbs extending away from their thin torsos in a spindly, almost insect-like fashion. Gothic Beauty is not alone in its representation of the thin, pale Goth as the supreme. Other Gothic magazines, including Meltdown portray the same type of sickly beauty. Gothic magazines, however are not alone in their portrayal of the Gothic ideal of beauty. The most recent issue of Pop, a “popular” magazine, features Christina Ricci on the cover, done up in Goth, and anorexic-thin.

Magazines do not have sole ownership of the portrayal of the Gothic ideal. In fact, they take a back seat to the new American truth, the Movies. Recent movies are showing a higher and higher number of Gothic influences, if not Goths themselves. In movies such as Blade, Goth is chic. The vampires in the movie are predominantly young, pale, attractive, and excessively thin. The list of movies that contain this ideal of Gothic beauty continues on and on, and includes The Matrix, Underworld, and Queen of the Damned. While these may not be officially sanctioned films in the Goth community, it is undeniable that they are reflections of a certain existing reality, as is generally the case with any media meant for mass consumption. And, that reflection, in and of itself is

troubling, if looked at only from a larger sociological viewpoint. It shows a sub-group of people who are starving themselves quite stylishly to large audiences, and setting a standard for the more impressionable, and more eating-disorder prone to follow.

When looking at the relationship between eating disorders and Goth subculture, one must look at the roots of the subculture in order to gain a clearer perspective on its “actual” nature. One of the most historically prevalent elements of Gothic is melancholy. Melancholy remains a staple of those things deemed Goth, even today, as can be evidenced by the typical Goth stereotype of the moody, depressed (melancholy) teenager. Another commonality of the Gothic world is the emphasis places on thinness and paleness, as evidenced in Keats’ “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”:

I.

O WHAT can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
Alone and palely loitering?
The sedge has wither'd from the lake,
And no birds sing.

II.

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms!
So haggard and so woe-begone?
The squirrel's granary is full,
And the harvest's done.

III.

I see a lily on thy brow
With anguish moist and fever dew,
And on thy cheeks a fading rose
Fast withereth too.

This poem gives a vivid description of a knight who would very much fit the current ideal of gothic beauty. Keats wasn't alone in writing the images of pale, thin beauty into Gothic literature, but rather was following a long tradition of pale, ghostly maidens and

other assorted characters. Early, pale, thin beauties were especially prominent in vampire lore, as evidenced in Bram Stoker's Dracula. Stoker's description of a young woman, pale, emaciated, with a strange fierceness in her eyes could easily be describing an anorexic. After all, it takes a very strong, fierce determination to deprive yourself of food...

That kind of determination lies at the heart of these eating disorders, if the research, discussions, and introspection of several years mean anything at all. Starving yourself, while exceedingly difficult, becomes, after some time, extremely rewarding. Eventually, you become completely and totally addicted to the practice of starvation. Various physical factors come into play, which make it psychologically pleasurable to be wasting away in the physical sense. Marya Hornbacher, in her memoirs, makes a reference to that very feeling:

The glass-eyed grin that spread across my face each morning, isn't life exciting, what shall we play today, isn't everything just so traumatic, so dramatic, just so high and shrill, the sound of this blurred whir of the cogs and wheels inside my head.... (Hornbacher 74)

This is very much the feeling you have when you haven't seen above 500 calories a day for as long as you can remember. The world is fleeting, surreal, nothing more than a game at which you play, and you can play unabated, because in the end, there is nothing that can Really Happen to you. Self-starvation is fulfilling, empowering, and incredibly addictive. Once your mind is wired to thrive on wasting away, it is hardwired that way, and you can easily find yourself backsliding into the same old patterns of addiction, without really having to think about it at all. Still though, feeding that addiction is only a reason to continue on course with the disease. It still fails to address the end goal of eating disorders, and the original causes.

Many psychologists will tell you that eating disorders are, in many cases, coping mechanisms. When people feel that their lives are beyond their control, they will turn to “self-improvement” as a way to find some sort of handle on their own lives. The disordered come from all walks of life, all races, and both sexes. The prevalence varies from group to group, but there are no clearly defined variables as to why. Males seem to have a lesser portion of the eating disorder pie in most groups, but in the Goth community that I know of personally, the number of eating-disordered males equals that of the eating-disordered females. These afflicted members of this “strange” subculture share not only their hunger/anti-hunger, but a variety of other endearing little habits as well.

When polled, most anorexic-bulimics will admit that not eating is not their only self-destructive habit. Drugs, self-inflicted violence, and depression tend to walk hand in hand with eating disorders. Depression is especially high in the Gothic subculture, and why shouldn't it be? One of the most prominent elements of Gothic is Melancholy, after all. It's a misconception that the only thing that the eating-disordered want is to be 'beautiful.' In many cases, this isn't even really a consideration. Many people turn to baggy or dark clothing, trying to hide themselves from the world. Beyond showing the desire to disappear from the sight of the world, often times the disordered wish to disappear entirely. Watching the pounds drop, one at a time, is like watching one's self magically disappear, one little bit at a time. The ultimate goal is not to be 99 pounds. The ultimate goal is not to be the supermodels in the magazines. Anorexics/bulimics, when left to their own devices very rarely just 'quit.' That's losing the game against one's self, and the only real victory against one's body is for it to give up, and die. This

may not be a universal truth of the eating-disordered, but for the highly depressed, these words of self-elimination seem to be come as no surprise at all. This tie-in of extreme melancholy (depression), self-obsession, and suicide is where I believe that the connection between Goth and eating disorders lies. The wish is to be completely immersed in one's own person, and then, ultimately, to disappear.

Taken in this light, certain elements of the Gothic world take on more drastic, disturbing connotations. Black is no longer a garb of merely mourning, but perhaps a sign of having no substance. The pale, almost translucent skin may be indicative of wanting to be invisible, or of having no coloration and fewer ties to the world of the living. The eating-disordered, especially in the Gothic world, have an aura of death. Those who have progressed into the later stages of the diseases are literally little more than skeletons. They barely give off an impression of life, and look, clothed in black and unsmiling, wholly the part of corpses.

One especially disturbing facet of eating disorders in Goth culture is the percentage of the afflicted who are male. Typically, about one tenth of the eating-disordered are male, but in the Gothic community, the number seems to be closer to one half. This could perhaps be linked to the fact that the community as a whole seems to be somewhat more introspective by nature. That self-focus, coupled with a smattering of neo-anorexic imagery, gives young gothic males an equal chance of coming up with the idea for an eating disorder. Perhaps in more mainstream culture, males are encouraged not to think about themselves as much, and are more often in group situations, two conditions that impede the development/continuance of an eating disorder.

In terms of that neo-anorexic imagery, music seems to only make things worse. Bands such as Stabbing Westward and Nine Inch Nails seem to be among the more 'Popular Gothic' groups that are enjoyed, or at least listened to by those afflicted with these disorders. If the connection between these eating disorders and Gothic Melancholy is indeed self-loathing, this comes as no surprise. The first track of Stabbing Westward's most popular album, Wither, Blister, Burn and Peel, sends no mixed messages about just what is going on in the mind of the singer, Chris Hall, and in those of sympathetic listeners:

I'm such an asshole
 I'm such a stain
 I just keep fucking up again and again
 You crawled inside my mind...
 ...Used me up and left me here for dead
 I crave it desperately, a cancer eating me
 An addiction too intense to be denied
 Worthless, I'm a whore, crawling back for more
 Pathetic (sic) how I feed off this abuse. ("I Don't Believe")

The rest of the album continues to chronicle tales of pain, fear and anger, all emotions prevalent in a disease-ravaged mind. Another Stabbing Westward song puts the matter into even more piercing terms,

When I'm Dead

I know the tears you're crying in your bed at night alone
 I've cried those tears a thousand times
 But those shallow empty songs about suicide are patronizing
 You've got to learn to face your fears
 Or do you think I'll be less lonely when I'm dead
 It can't silence all the voices in my head
 I close my eyes but I can't make it go away
 Do you think I'll be less lonely
 God I pray that I'm not lonely

When I'm dead

When I'm dead
When I'm dead

When I'm dead I won't feel any pain
And when I'm dead I won't feel anything

When I'm dead
When I'm dead
When I'm dead
When I'm dead

I know the songs you're singing, saying nothing loud and clear
I've heard that song a thousand times
But your shallow empty lies about suicide are patronizing
You can never understand what I feel

Or do you think I'll be less lonely when I'm dead
It can't silence all the voices in my head
I close my eyes but I can't make it go away
Do you think I'll be less lonely
God I pray that I'm not lonely

When I'm dead
When I'm dead
When I'm dead
When I'm dead

Nine Inch Nails is considered Gothic by a larger group of people, and possibly with good reason. The lyrics are on the whole darker, angrier, and more scattered. Their most popular album, The Downward Spiral, has more than one direct allusion to suicide. Most notably, the CD booklet itself is graced by a dark depiction of a razor, a familiar thing to cutters and contemplatives alike. A little further under the surface is the title track, "The Downward Spiral" which could easily be interpreted as an endorsement of suicide:

he couldn't believe how easy it was
he put the gun into his face
bang!
(so much blood for such a tiny little hole)
problems do have solutions you know
a lifetime of fucking things up fixed
in one determined flash

Of course, anorexia doesn't have to be suicide in every instance. In fact, there is an identifiable portion of society that has pulled out of it more or less on their own, with an even larger portion that has recovered with help and pressure from all sides.

Unfortunately, this kind of anti-eating-disorder attention isn't always present. In the Gothic subculture, there is little in the way of negative reinforcement for this lifestyle, but rather more of an encouragement for it, taken from various existing social cues. One especially disturbing trend is the growing presence of pro-anorexia websites. They give the afflicted support networks, help them destroy all impulses to quit, and give "Tips and Tricks" for pulling off an eating disorder. The presence of such a thing is like a void lacking anything resembling hope. Depression and anorexia/bulimia are formidable enemies, and often the afflicted among the Gothic subculture need attention in some positive regard, or at least a general awareness of this growing problem needs to come into existence. Eating disorders are not going to go away on their own. In fact, it's generally agreed among the 'formerly' afflicted that they never really go away at all, but are rather pushed away with free will and self control. To a healthy population, it's almost unthinkable to see the obviously tortured, malnourished, pale bodies of those affected with eating disorders, and think of that as a state of 'perfection' strived for by unnumbered masses, but it's a growing reality. Unfortunately for the affected, it's a reality that is often ignored, and at best, sometimes receives treatment. A treatment, though, is not enough. Eating disorders are a societal malady, and a cure needs to be found, before it's too late for yet another generation that is showing the symptoms, even if they are only visible in the shadows.

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