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Anorexia Nervosa: Escape From Pre-Defined Roles

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Table of Contents

[Abstract](#)
[Dream Analysis](#)
[Archetypes and the Female Role](#)
[Starvation and Ritual Fasting](#)
[Treatment](#)
[Conclusion](#)
[References](#)

Abstract

Anorexia Nervosa is a disorder suffered by primarily women throughout the world. Exploring the causes and treatment methods has been the focus of research of many therapists and psychologists. The traditional perspective surrounding causal factors and treatment options is presented with a new perspective regarding both areas. This is the view point that anorexia may have more to do with women's roles in society and archetypes presenting in their dreaming and waking lives. Looking at the dream content of patients with anorexia, and exploring ideas around women's roles in society may be helpful to the treatment of the disorder.

In the search for solutions to the many problems that human beings suffer, disorders like anorexia nervosa are said to be difficult to treat by many health care professionals (Franko, 1998). This may be because, like many problems, it is complex and comprises many factors in the life of the anorexic person. Although men have been known to suffer from this disease it shows itself primarily in women, and becomes an all-consuming life-threatening illness currently viewed in the health care world as a mental health problem. Experts in the field state that anorexia stems from a strong desire to control one's environment and often is accompanied by a past history of some form of abuse (sexual, emotional, physical or mental) (Franko, 1998).

Although these things may be true, another perspective is available for consideration. This perspective says that anorexia stems from the need/desire to escape from traditional gender roles and the role/archetype of Mother in today's society. Evidence for this theory is based in symptoms of anorexia, both physical and emotional, as well as archetypal images in dreams of anorexic patients. This paper explores this alternative way to view anorexia, and discusses the idea of dream analysis as a method of understanding the woman with anorexia.

Dream Analysis

The world of dreams has been explored and suggested to be a link to our internal world (Woodman, 1997). Dreams hold unconscious knowledge of our past, present and future, and are perhaps the unconscious world given to us by the Self (inner god, guiding self, or intuition). Signell (1990) suggest that most dreams come from a layer of our consciousness called the personal collective unconscious and are comprised of childhood and personal experiences. Jung believed that the purpose of a dream is to bring to light any unconscious issues that a person may need to become aware of through a process he termed "active imagination". This term describes the process our psyche goes through as it moves through dream-related images and uses the symbolic meanings behind those images to bring to light unconscious issues

(Schaverien, 2005). Studies suggest that images in dreams are exaggerated for the purpose of ensuring we see them (ex. Killing someone may really mean you're angry, or want to get rid of some aspect of yourself-"kill" it). Experts in this area report that understanding our dreams can lead to a deeper understanding of our lives (Brink, 1992).

In one study done of the dreams of women with anorexia, some common themes emerged (Brink, 1992). These themes were: the presence of a sense of impending doom, a feeling of not being able to succeed at anything, being attacked by someone or something, fears of being watched and feeling guilty, feeling inadequate, images of being imprisoned and gaining large amounts of weight, images of being exposed and vulnerable and images of very thin people. During the analysis of these dreams, some specific psychological traits emerged as well. These were senses of ineffectiveness and self-hate, the presence of negative emotions, inability to self-nourish/nurture, an obsession with weight, and senses of anger (image of dreamer attacking someone else, images of violent event). The researchers conducting this study have suggested that these psychological traits are secondary to the repression of rage, which is a common emotion experienced by women with anorexia (Brink, 1992).

Among the many themes and images studied in the dreams of women dealing with anorexia, researchers found that there is overwhelming thematic content relating to death and fears around death, reiterated by other research studies done in this area (Touyz, 1996). Based on what Jung theorize about the meaning of dream content, this preoccupation with death may mean that anorexic women are in fact dealing with issues around death, but not in the literal sense of dying. To look at death from a symbolic perspective, anorexic women may be unconsciously trying to die/escape from the traditional gender role of female and the archetypal influence of Mother (Spignesi, 1983).

Archetypes and the Female Role

Being born a woman brings an automatic role women everywhere are molded into, both by society as a whole and by individuals, including themselves. This role includes the archetype of experiences and sexual objectification. As she starves herself, and anorexic's body becomes emaciated, and unwomanly. In this way she defies conventional gender, becoming neither male nor female (Spignesi, 1983). Her body both internally and externally is removed of sexual characteristics (breasts, fat on hips and abdomen symbolizing fertility, menses and reproductive capabilities) making her no longer female, and yet she is not male. Where does this woman belong? No where, in terms of gender and gender roles. She cannot be sexually objectified because she is no longer a sexual being. In this sense she has escaped what other women are trapped in-the sexual body (Calogero, 2005; Spignesi, 1983).

Starvation and Ritual Fasting

Spignesi discusses a final possibility regarding self-starvation: the use of self-starvation in terms of fasting. Using starvation in much the same way traditional groups have used ritual fasting, to cleanse the body of something unwanted, women with anorexia may attempt to cleanse themselves as well (Spignesi, 1983). For the anorexic woman, she may be cleansing herself of the Mother role and the sexual body. Starvation becomes a way to attain purification, and food becomes "sinfulness", the return to sexuality via weight gain. The anorexic woman seeks nourishment from other sources, like her own image. Her image appears full and fat to her eyes, reassuring her that she is physically healthy although unconsciously she is driven to continue to starve herself in the escape from Mother (Spignesi, 1983).

Treatment

A disorder such as anorexia which is so resistant to treatment leaves practitioners stumbling in the dark for possible ways to help patients (Franko, 1998). Traditional methods of counseling, like behavioral therapies, have seen little success (Franko, 1998). Patients often report that they are able to control the starvation behavior as they force themselves to eat, but are still plagued with the thoughts of starvation, purging, dreams of death and a general dislike for their bodies (Spignesi, 1983; Brink et al, 1992). This leads researchers to believe that the root cause of this problem is not being properly dealt with, although it does depend on how one defines the treatment success of the anorexic patient. If it is simply enough to stop the behaviors then success has happened many times in present day treatment therapies. Researchers and therapists alike now argue that perhaps behavioral control might not be enough as relapse is so common and patients struggle with the inner battle surrounding this issue for years, if not forever (Woodman, 1980; Bell, 2006).

Perhaps treatment needs to go in a different direction. If women engage in these behaviors and develop anorexia for reasons pertaining to gender role and the role of Mother, treatment may need to focus on these constraints within our society and how a woman sees herself in the world. Jungian psychologists do not claim to have the ultimate answer to this complicated issue, but perhaps have developed an insight into through considering the dreams and internal processes of women they treat (Brink et al. 1992).

In his work with men, Bly (1990) suggests that these types of struggles around archetypes and roles in our society lead to many devastating conclusions within the male psyche, and acknowledges that women undergo a similar process. Anorexia is only one way that women attempt to escape from and defy the societal constraints of gender and Mother (Calogero, 2005). Women everywhere encounter these roles and understand the effects of being viewed as a sexual object, as well as feeling as though there is no choice in the acceptance of the role of Mother. Often, women who choose to reject mothering, nurturing and caregiver roles are labeled as cold, strange and unwomanly (Woodman, 1980, 1982).

Because of the amount of information the dream analysis has revealed to psychologists about the anorexic woman's desire for symbolic death, Jungian researchers have drawn conclusions around working more with dreams in treatment (Signell, 1990). They suggest that this link to our internal world may be an invaluable tool when working with women as it has given much insight and revelation to women and men alike (Signell, 1990).

Conclusion

Anorexia nervosa is a complex and confusing problem suffered by many women around the world (Franko, 1998). Traditional practice has viewed anorexia as a mental health and behavioral problem stemming from a need to control one's body and environment, as well as a symptom of past abuse (Franko, 1998; Bell, 2006). Jungian psychologists theorize that

anorexia may encompass all these things but perhaps involves a greater root issue (Woodman, 1980, 1982. Spignesi, 1983).

This issue revolves around the desire to escape from traditional gender roles, female sexual-objectification and the role of Mother as one that every female should take on. Women struggle to understand their desire to reject these roles and their frustration at being helpless to stop the sexual objectification of their bodies (Calogero, 2005). The unconscious has revealed through dream analysis of anorexic patients that self-starvation may be an attempt to escape these constraints by becoming emaciated and therefore no longer sexual or fertile (Brink et al. 1992. Woodman, 1980, 1982).

Using dream analysis and treatment methods exploring women's roles in the world may be a more effective way to treat patients with anorexia (Knox, 2004). Behavioral therapies have not been entirely effective in helping anorexic women, as we still see a large number of women dealing with this after therapy (Franko, 1998). Many anorexic women have reported feeling hopeless around this issue even when they manage to stop starving themselves because they are still plagued with thoughts and feelings related to starvation and sexual objectification (Calogero, 2005). Bringing Jungian forms of treatment into the mainstream through greater education and knowledge might assist many anorexic women in their healing journeys, as well as provide researchers with a greater window into the internal world of anorexic women. As researchers work together to find effective ways to treat anorexia, perhaps taking these things into account will be helpful, providing another tool for anorexic patients to use in their recovery journeys.

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