

Study reveals the heavy toll anorexia takes on families

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While the primary focus of media attention and medical treatment is the individual's battle with anorexia nervosa, research from University of Western Sydney reveals that anorexia can have a long term impact on the physical, social, and psychological well-being of the entire family.

Professor Christine Halse is chief researcher of the four year ARC funded 'Multiple Perspectives of Eating Disorders in Girls Project,' with UWS colleagues Dr Anne Honey and Dr Desiree Boughtwood. Their research has examined the many different forms that anorexia takes and the ways in which anorexia impacts on families.

Professor Halse says the study found that the impact of anorexia on the family unit is considerable and often long-term.

"Families can find it difficult to live with a loved one who has anorexia, as their behaviour is often distressing and incomprehensible," says Professor Halse.

"It places a constant strain on the entire family unit and parents and siblings often struggle with feelings of guilt, helplessness, anger, frustration and isolation."

According to Professor Halse, it is common for parents to become consumed with feelings of guilt and helplessness as they devote all of their time and energy to caring for the child with anorexia, often at the expense of their own needs and the needs of the rest of the family.

For siblings, the interruption of their everyday routine as well as the ongoing conflict and tension within the family home can lead to feelings of isolation and abandonment and have an unsettling impact on their emotional well-being, behaviour and academic performance.

The study's findings are published in a new book, 'Inside Anorexia: The experiences of girls and their families', which combines the latest factual information and research about anorexia with the stories of eight families who each live with and cope with the disorder in different ways.

Professor Halse says it is easy for parents and families to lose sight of their own needs as they struggle to care for a child or sibling with anorexia.

"By publishing this research and sharing these experiences, families can learn that they are not alone and that it is possible to get through this difficult time," she says.

Source: UWS

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