

Practitioners' Toolkit

This edition of Practitioners' Toolkit focuses on an important technological issue in Child and Adolescent Mental Health – the proliferation of so-called 'pro-anorexia' or 'pro-ana' websites. Martin Grunwald and colleagues take a look at the issue from a European perspective, arguing for more research into the pro-ana movement on the Internet and the implications for clinical practice. An example of recent empirical research reported in the International Journal of Eating Disorders shows that female undergraduates exposed to a pro-anorexia website had greater negative affect, lower social self-esteem, and lower appearance self-efficacy post-website than those who viewed a comparison website.

However, research in this area is going to be complex; as Harper et al. (2008) point out, asking high risk individuals to view pro-ana websites for the first time poses ethical and iatrogenic dilemmas. Jennifer Davis from a specialist eating disorder hospital in Edinburgh argues that although the content of these sites might be shocking, patient feedback suggests that they do not by themselves *cause* eating disorders.

Susan Ringwood, Chief Executive of the UK-based charity BEAT (providing information, help and support for people affected by eating disorders), argues against a ban in the context of the proliferation of social networking sites that are in any case impossible to regulate. She argues for increased support, understanding and acceptance as a way of preventing such sites becoming the only refuge for young people with eating disorders. The role of such social networking sites in helping young people to explore their social identity, and the potential for innovative clinical practice, is explored by Elysia Clemens and her colleagues, who suggest some creative ideas for working with young people using these media.

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Reference

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Pro-anorexia websites: An underestimated and uncharted danger!

Nowadays it is easy for anyone to create a webpage and, as a result, numerous private and professional sites dealing with eating disorders can now be found online. Alongside topic related information, nearly all of these portals provide the affected and those close to them a platform for the exchange of information. Many aspects of this form of self-help are of course positive, such as the ability to communicate with each other independent of time and location; a forum to exchange the addresses of helpful organisations; and the opportunity to find ways to deal with the illness. This is, however, only one side – the positive side – of internet communication with regard to eating disorders.

The other side is the number of websites glorifying anorexia nervosa as a way of life. They call for anorexic behaviour to be understood not as a disease but rather as a special lifestyle, and an outstanding achievement. Along with photos of extremely slim models, which serve as 'thinspiration', tips and instructions are published that, among other things, help one to stick to and disguise extreme diets from friends and family. The operators of such websites consider themselves to be 'pro-ana-activists', whose philosophy has been documented in the so-called 'Letter to Ana'. This letter has been spread throughout the internet in nearly all languages.

As early as 2001, attention was focused on these pro-ana websites in a report that stated that around 400 English language websites of this kind exist. According to our research there are currently nearly 40 German language websites with pro-anorexic content and forums/chat rooms. It is undoubtedly clear that the number of such internet portals is growing and will continue to do so.

In 2001, as a result of public campaigns and pressure from a number of American health organisations, Yahoo closed down several pro-ana activist

websites. This had, however, only one result – that the operators of these pages pulled back into the niches of the internet. In this way, a pro-ana mythology has been allowed to develop, reinforced by a lack of publication from the research sector and undifferentiated observations in the mass media. This experience has taught us that a strict ban on the internet is not a realistic option and that such measures are bound to fail.

Keeping in mind that practitioners as well as researchers in the eating disorder field know very little about the specific effects of this internet communication, one must ask if this phenomenon should continue to be ignored. We believe that it is vital to analyse this phenomenon with all available methods of modern research.

We suggest that practitioners and scientists should examine the psychodynamic and socio-economic components of the pro-ana movement on the internet as soon as possible, and draw conclusions for therapeutic practice. In our opinion, one conclusion may be drawn already – we should, as part of the therapeutic practice, explore the online experiences of the affected as intensively as all other social areas of their lives. This is necessary before the beginning of, as well as, during therapy as many patients maintain contact with other internet forum members during in- or out-patient therapies.

In general, clinicians and the professional university-linked providers of eating disorder-related internet sites should examine how the many positive aspects in the areas of prevention and counselling concepts can be taken advantage of, so that a substantial counter-balance to the existing pro-ana websites can be created.

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