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Anorexia Isn't Pretty

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The pictures are everywhere. Mary Kate Olson of Mary Kate and Ashley fame is the latest celebrity to admit to an eating disorder. Like so many in her crowd, she has been continuously photographed as she drifts toward the low end of our American nutritional continuum: super-size or no size. Among a flock of thin women, Mary Kate has won the prize: she can wear those size 0 jeans every teen clothing shop holds out like a gold medal to impressionable adolescent girls.

The downward descent of this young woman that led across the boundary of “acceptable” thinness and into anorexia has been portrayed with a tremendous amount of dazzle. Magazine covers and TV clips feature a Mary Kate who poses in an expensive evening gown almost calculated to reveal the skeletal outline of her spine and ribs. She is pictured well enough to go out for a stroll with her famous boyfriend or at the side of her sister, beautifully made up and jeweled. Anyone who has watched these girls since babyhood could almost believe that Mary Kate and her family, apparently immune to the usual childhood crises, will now weather this challenge with elegance, glamour, and grace.

The pictures we will not see are the ones of Mary Kate struggling to get out of bed because she is weak from lack of food. No one will document her brushing her hair and finding that it falls out in clumps as she eliminates calorie after calorie. The public will never know how many tears or angry words she or her family have exchanged over a disease that has the highest mortality rate of any mental illness.

According to reports, sister Ashley is putting on a brave face and continuing her appearances, but if she is like millions of other brothers and sisters of young women with eating disorders, she is merely carrying out her expected role. Secretly, she is likely to be confused, anxious, and grieving the loss of the sibling who has been part of her identity since birth. One girl in a situation similar to Ashley's described it this way: “It's like she's gone away somewhere and doesn't even exist anymore, that person who used to be my sister. I still worry everyday that she might die.”

In addition to the stricken individual, eating disorders devastate parents. The efforts of Mary Kate's father to get her help only hint at the desperation he probably felt as he watched her health decline. Other parents across the country become frantic too, doling out thousands of dollars a month to pay for care insurance companies won't cover—if they're lucky enough to afford it. It's not unusual for mothers to end up leaving their jobs to provide the kind of full-time emotional and physical support children with anorexia or bulimia require.

While we can apparently Atkins away obesity, the treatment for eating disorders is less clear, since both mental and physical function is so profoundly affected. The parallels to Alzheimer's Disease, which rendered Ronald Regan so cognitively incapacitated it was hard for him to relate to others, are striking. Girls and boys with severe eating disorders begin to function so poorly they lose jobs, relationships, and lives because of their disease. In most cases, all of this occurs while the family stands by as witness, helpless to halt the process.

This is not the side of eating disorders the public sees. The media images of gorgeous young woman in the throes of anorexia and bulimia might lead to a sympathetic sigh, but even in illness, our idols remain airbrushed and just a little less perfect than the women around them, who may weigh a few pounds more. The pictures we'll never see are the ones of ordinary girls who have wasted teeth, weakened bones, and an extra layer of body hair that develops as a consequence of the disease.

If there's any chance of helping girls avoid the hypnotic pull of anorexia, which my own daughter surrendered to at age fourteen, the serious and sick side of eating disorders needs to be highlighted. This is a disease that can and does kill. If it doesn't end a life, the long term effects can certainly destroy chances of normalcy. No one knows for sure what happens physically or mentally to young women with eating disorders when they are 30, 40, or 50.

As with the anti-smoking campaign of the last decade, there needs to be a different tactic in how we deal with eating disorders. Replace full body photos of thin celebs in costly but revealing clothes with in-your-face pictures of their decayed teeth, sparse hair, and dull eyes. Interview them about the dark despair they feel, and let families speak out about their terror as pound after pound drops from their loved one's body. Terry Schiavo, the young Florida woman at the center of the euthanasia debate, who had her feeding tube removed earlier this year, suffered cardiac arrest from hypokalemia (low potassium) secondary to an eating disorder.

She is a tragic but realistic poster child who shows exactly what anorexia and bulimia can lead to.