Eating Disorders
Media Conference: An Overview of Pro-Eating Disorder Websites
Trainee's Guide

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Overview

The pro-eating disorder movement (often referred to as "pro-ana" [anorexia] or "pro-mia" [bulimia]) consists of blogs, websites, and chat forums in which people with anorexia, bulimia, or other eating disorders support practices involved with their eating disorder or weight loss. These sites are viewed as support groups for people struggling with eating disorders. Rather than focusing on recovery, they often praise weight loss and discourage healthy body weight/shape and eating behaviors. Many sites feature photographs of extremely thin people which is often referred to as "thinspiration" or "thinspo" and provide tips on deception or how to conceal one's eating disorder from others.

Pro-eating disorder (Pro-ED) websites are easily accessible via a simple online search, and they are also available on social media platforms. Popular sites include, "Starving for Perfection," "2b-Thin," and "Anorexic Nation." Typically, these websites do not intend to recruit people into the world of eating disorders, but to provide individuals with existing eating disorders with information on how to maintain the disorder or lose more weight. Indeed, sites often proclaim they are intended for individuals who have decided to make anorexia and/or bulimia their "way of life" and are not for individuals with the goal of recovery.

The session should last approximately 50-60 minutes with the following suggested time allotments: 15 minutes to view media clip and then skim website pages, 15 minutes for discussion questions as a group, 15 minutes to read the brief meta-analysis and summarize findings, 5-10 minutes to review the key points "what a clinician should know" article.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this module, participants will:
1) Be familiar with the concept and accessibility of pro-ED websites and the content portrayed on such websites
2) Be aware that exposure to such websites have a negative influence on body image dissatisfaction, dieting, and discourage recovery
3) Recognize that most "tips" on pro-eating disorder websites focus on strategies to diet or restrict more calories. Providers should be cognizant that many also offer ways to conceal one's symptoms from loved ones and providers

Structure of the Session

1) Watch a media portrayal of Pro-ED websites (ABC news clip) then view a Pro-ana website and evaluating the content

2) Review and discuss the literature on the impact of comparable websites on eating disorder symptoms

3) Summarize with a brief article of key take away points for clinicians evaluating eating disorder patients

Resources Required

1) A faculty moderator
2) Media samples
3) Laptop with internet access and projector
4) Printed copies of relevant articles for all attendees

Presentation of Media Items

1) ABC news article clip: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=re1WFNqKGI8&app=desktop
2) Starving for Perfection link to "tips and tricks" page: http://starve4perfect.blogspot.com/p/tips-tricks.html?m=0

Also briefly view the "ana religion/lifestyle" and "thinspo" page of website

Critique of Media Coverage

1) What are some of the concerning facts presented in the news clip?

2) How do you feel this news clip might help provide education to general population about concerns for pro-ana website? How effective do you think it is?

3) What did you notice about the language used in this news clip, both positive and negative?

4) What are some of the highly concerning aspects of the tips and tricks page on the pro-ana website?

5) The internet has increasingly become a common medium through which individuals struggling with various physical and mental disorders can share experiences and illness-related information. What are unique concerns to this movement in eating disorder patients?

Review Scientific Literature:

A) A meta-analysis examining the influence of pro-eating disorder websites on body image and eating pathology (Rodgers et al., 2016)

Summary of key points:
- Methods:
  - Systematic review and meta-analysis
  - Included correlational studies exploring the association between pro-eating disorder website use and body image concerns/eating pathology OR experimental studies that compared exposure to a pro-eating disorder website to a comparison condition
  - Exclusion criteria: studies that exclusively recruited from pro-eating disorder websites
  - 237 articles identified, 9 included in meta-analysis; 4 correlational studies, 5 randomized controlled experimental designs
- Four outcomes evaluated:
  - Body dissatisfaction = pro-ana website use associated with increase in symptoms, small effect size
  - Dieting = increase in symptoms, moderate effect
  - Bulimic symptoms = small but non-significant increase in symptoms (mixed)
  - Negative affect = increase in symptoms, large effect size
- Viewing pro-eating disorder websites may increase individuals' pre-existing body image and eating concerns, or lead to the development of these concerns among vulnerable individuals
  - Unclear how enduring these effects are, how sustained these changes are, and which groups are most vulnerable
- Mixed findings re: bulimic symptoms may be related to study designs; also viewing pro-anorexia websites might increase restriction and subsequently decrease bulimic-type behaviors

- Viewing pro-ana content associated with a higher likelihood to exercise and a lower likelihood to overeat → participants might feel more successful in controlling their eating behaviors, leading to feelings of efficacy and self-improvement
- Potential need for public policy and internet platform-specific regulations targeting pro-eating disorder content
- Limitations: some studies are excluded; no distinction of pro-anorexia vs pro-bulimia; different designs combined together
- Future directions: potential dose-response effect? Effect on recovering individuals vs those actively ill? Variations across ethnic groups (websites often portray Caucasian women)? Possible effect of these websites on supportive recovery? Concerns re: online relationships with others who share pro-eating disorder identity?

B) Pro-anorexia websites: what a clinician should know (Harshbarger et al., 2009)

Summary of key points:
- Anorexia is a lonely isolating disease, making the internet an ideal venue for individuals to seek support. Most of the information on pro-eating disorder websites view eating disorders as a lifestyle choice and are designed to continue eating disorder behaviors, despite the information often being inaccurate and potentially dangerous. Clinicians should be aware of the existence of pro-ED websites as well as some of the specific information they provide and tips they promote to help in the earlier identification, treatment, and support for individuals struggling with eating disorders and their families.
- The most common theme on pro-eating disorder websites was dieting and caloric restriction. This was often extreme, such as, recommending one food per day or three bites of a meal.
- The second most common theme was distraction. The third most common theme was focused on deception about eating and other behaviors. Deception tips were aimed at both friends and family members as well as health care providers. For example, making it appear that the individual ate by leaving dirty dishes in the sink at home, techniques to weigh more at doctor's appointments, and painting fingernails to hide evidence of nutrient deficiencies.
- Clinicians should assess for the use of pro-ED websites with their patients, knowledge, or tips they may have learned from these sites and take the opportunity to provide psychoeducation about eating disorders as well as correct any misinformation.

Additional Resources

Academy for Eating disorders. Pro-anorexia websites policy statement: https://www.aedweb.org/advocate/press-releases/position-statements/pro-anorexia-websites

American Addiction Centers. *Pro-Ana Websites: What You Need to Know* https://americanaddictioncenters.org/anorexia-treatment/pro-ana

Harshbarger JL, Ahlers-Schmidt CR, Mayans L, Mayans D & Hawkins JH. (2009). Pro-anorexia websites: what a clinician should know. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*; 42:367-370.

Rodgers RF, Lowy AS, Halperin DM & Franko DL (2016). A meta-analysis examining the influence of pro-eating disorder websites on body image and eating pathology. *European Eating Disorders Review*; 24:3-8.

Rouleau CR & von Ranson KM (2011). Potential risks of pro-eating disorder websites. *Clinical Psychology Review; 31:525-531.*

The National Eating Disorder Information Centre. Pro-eating disorder websites: http://nedic.ca/know-facts/pro-eating-disorder-websites