

# Depiction of eating disorders in the media



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When Hanna begins her binge eating habits, her friend teaches her how to be bulimic, and is one of the primary contributors to her eating disorder (King, Goldsmith, & Lagomarsino, 2011). After Hanna's binge eating episode, she was crying and looked ashamed, and her friend taught her how to purge so that she could lose weight (King, Goldsmith, & Lagomarsino, 2011). Her friend was encouraging her to engage in self-destructive behaviours in order to feel better about herself. Hanna looked up to this friend and wanted to idealize having a thin figure. According to the National Eating Disorders Association, there are several risk factors that can contribute to bulimia, including negative mood, fasting or dieting, societal drive for thinness, idealization of a thin-ideal, body dissatisfaction, and low self-esteem (NEDA, 2017b). Other factors include alcohol use, psychiatric symptoms, feelings of inadequacy, insufficient nutrition during childhood, and so on (NEDA, 2017b). Hanna's low self-esteem may have been another risk factor for her eating disorder (King, Goldsmith, & Lagomarsino, 2011).

One of the major downfalls of the *Pretty Little Liars* episode is the sudden disappearance of Hanna's eating disorder (King, Goldsmith, & Lagomarsino, 2011). When Hanna talks about her disorder, she acts as if it was a bad phase in her life and that the problem resolved itself (King, Goldsmith, & Lagomarsino, 2011). This portrayal of bulimia is contributing to stigma and may lead viewers of the show to deem treatment unnecessary for the serious eating disorders. Instead of displaying the dangers of bulimia, the show is implying to ignore the problem and move on with your life. Viewers of the show may believe that those with bulimia lack self-discipline and that there should be a fast recovery. According to le Grange and Loeb (2007),

50% with partially developed bulimia fully develop the eating disorder.

Bulimia in adolescence that is left untreated can continue into adulthood.

Recovery and mortality rates of the disorder can be improved through early treatment and intervention. Maintaining disordered eating patterns can increase the chances of developing chronicity. Chronic bulimia can lead to unfavourable outcomes. (le Grange & Loeb, 2007).

Hanna never displays any of the consequences of bulimia in the episode (King, Goldsmith, & Lagomarsino, 2011). She acts like her eating disorder is in the past, and seems unaffected by her eating disorder (King, Goldsmith, & Lagomarsino, 2011). The show does not cover the warning signs or importance of leaving the disorder untreated. Without the depiction of the consequences of bulimia, viewers of the show may not take the condition seriously. Nevertheless, bulimia can cause psychiatric disturbances, additional physical disorders, and declined social health (le Grange & Loeb, 2007). Other complications include dental, reproductive, gastrointestinal, electrolyte or fluid balance problems. Twenty five percent of bulimic patients may require hospitalization due to medical complications. The preferred treatment for bulimia is Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT), and it aims to alter the cycle of bulimia and attitudes of patients (Rushing, Jones, & Carney, 2003).

Bulimia is often inaccurately depicted in the media, and this can lead to the development of more mental health stigma. Stigma trivializes the reality of those who suffer from eating disorders, and people may not consider them as serious psychological disorders that require attention and medical care (National Eating Disorder Information Centre [NEDIC], 2017). Stereotypes will

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cause the general public to have improper beliefs about bulimia (NEDIC, 2017). When the public is misinformed, they may assume that people with eating disorders have only themselves to blame and they should be able to deal with their illness easily (NEDIC, 2017). The media needs to start illustrating eating disorders as an issue that can affect people of all ages and backgrounds. The media should also correctly convey the seriousness, consequences, and treatment of eating disorders.