

Mary thought her kids said 'ice green'



Are you too HEALTHY?

Can healthy eating be taken too far? For a growing number of Australian women, it's become an obsession

AS MARKETING MANAGER

Kate nervously awaited her turn at the psychologist's office, she wondered how it had come to this. Exactly one year ago, the 29-year-old was 10kg overweight and jokingly described herself as a "chocolate addict". Now she was about to find out if she had an eating disorder.

"It all started as a health kick," says Kate. "I just wanted to lose a few kilos and get in shape. So I started going to the gym five days a week and I cleaned up my diet – no more chocolate or junk food. I gradually started eliminating more foods I thought were bad for me, such as dairy and gluten. Then I met this girl at my gym

who got me into the raw food diet. It was tough at first to give up meat and spend so much time preparing my meals, but I loved the idea that eating foods in their most natural form was the healthiest way to live." After a few months of eating only raw plant foods, Kate had lost 12kg. At 170cm and 53kg, her body mass index (BMI) was

creeping into the danger zone. Her loved ones were worried about her weight and the fact that she refused to eat with them, but Kate didn't understand what they were going on about. She wasn't trying to lose weight – it had just happened.

ORTHO-WHAT?

Like a growing number of health-conscious Australians, Kate was suffering from a disorder known as orthorexia nervosa. Coined in 1997 by American physician Dr Steven Bratman, the term refers to an unhealthy obsession with eating healthy or 'pure' foods. Since then, a debate has been raging in the medical community as to whether orthorexia should be classified as a mental disorder. But despite all the talk, orthorexia failed to make it into the list.

"I don't think it should be classified as a mental disorder and I definitely don't think it's an eating disorder like anorexia," says clinical psychologist and eating disorder expert Dr Stuart Murray. "If anything, orthorexia might have some elements of obsessive-compulsive disorder. Like a person who washes their hands all the time, someone who refuses to eat chocolate because it's not pure and healthy presents a sort of compulsive behaviour."

Because it's not officially recognised as a mental disorder, there aren't any statistics on the prevalence of orthorexia in Australia – or any standard treatment methods. But that hasn't stopped many health care professionals from treating patients, like Kate, whose lives are significantly affected by their health-food obsession.

"I see lots of clients like Kate," says dietitian Tania Ferraretto from the Dietitians Association of Australia. "So I work with a team that includes a GP or a psychologist to help them."

CHASING PERFECTION

As orthorexics become more preoccupied with following a diet that makes them feel healthy and pure, they start to avoid food they consider detrimental to their health. Commonly banned foods include those containing added fat, sugar or salt, artificial flavours, colours or preservatives, and pesticides or genetic modification.

"Fresh, organic whole foods are in, while processed, fried, sugary foods are out," says Kate. "Anything that's made with white flour or comes in a box is considered evil."

Many orthorexics shun entire food groups – including dairy, grains and meat

– until they're only consuming a handful of foods. While some justify their choices by falsely claiming they suffer from food allergies, others cite obscure studies and other questionable sources as evidence that the harmful fare should be avoided.

"I came to believe dairy and meat would rot my insides," says Kate. "I read all this bogus literature online and I totally bought into it. When I look back now, it's like I was brainwashed. I was just so preoccupied with achieving the perfect diet that I lost sight of the fact that eating only chopped-up vegetables can't be that good for you."

RISKY CHEWING

According to Ferraretto, orthorexia poses several health risks. "First of all, there are serious nutritional issues," she says. "When people start to become so obsessed that they cut out important nutrients, their health is much more at risk than if they ate something they deemed unhealthy."

While weight loss isn't usually the main objective, many orthorexics become very thin because their food restrictions end up cutting a large number of kilojoules from their diet. In certain cases, orthorexia can result in severe weight loss, cardiac complications and even death.

"Once you start losing a lot of weight, your brain stops functioning properly, your appetite drops off and you start using muscle for energy," says Ferraretto. And just like other eating disorders, orthorexia can be extremely socially isolating. "It gets to the point where some orthorexics won't go out and eat with friends because they don't know what they're going to get and they're critical of how their friends eat."

GETTING HELP

If you think you might be suffering from orthorexia, Ferraretto suggests talking to an expert to get an accurate diagnosis. "If there's been a significant change in your energy levels or your weight, then it's really started to affect your nutritional status, so you'll need a dietitian to correct that."

What happens if you're diagnosed with orthorexia? "We're not going to make you gain a bunch of weight and feel really uncomfortable," says Ferraretto. "It's about working out your diet again and making sure you're healthy. I do a lot of work around patients' nutritional intake, dispelling myths and talking to them about why they need to reintroduce foods into their diet. I build up their relationship with food again."

ARE YOU ORTHOREXIC?

Take our quick questionnaire to determine whether you might be suffering from orthorexia.

Do you plan all of tomorrow's food today?

Is the virtue you feel about what you consume more important than the pleasure you receive from eating it?

Has the quality of your life decreased as the quality of your diet has increased?

Do you keep getting stricter with yourself?

Do you tend to skip foods you once enjoyed in order to eat the 'right' foods?

Do you feel an increased sense of self-esteem when you're eating healthy food, and look down on others who don't?

Does your diet make it difficult for you to eat anywhere but at home, distancing you from friends and family?

Do you feel guilt or self-loathing when you stray from your diet?

When you eat the way you feel you're supposed to, do you get a peaceful sense of control?

Do you spend more than three hours a day thinking about healthy food?

If you answered yes to two or three of these questions, you might have a mild case of orthorexia. A score of four or more means that you're entering the danger zone. Answered yes to all the questions? Consider seeking help from a psychologist or a dietitian.

WORDS: SABRINA ROGERS-ANDERSON PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES



A fact to impress your friends with: The term orthorexia comes from the Greek words 'ortho' (correct) and 'orexis' (appetite). In other words, correct diet.

