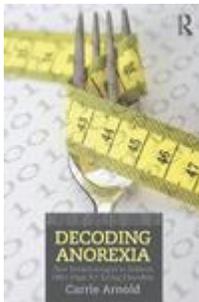# Shedding Light on the Enigma of Anorexia Nervosa

A review of

Decoding Anorexia: How Breakthroughs in Science Offer Hope for Eating Disorders

by Carrie Arnold

New York, NY: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2013. 204 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-89867-6 (paperback). $35.95, paperback

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Reviewed by
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Anorexia nervosa (AN) is a disorder that clinicians, researchers, families, and sufferers have spent years trying to understand, explain, and treat. The history of AN is long (with the earliest reported case occurring over 300 years ago) and storied. Hypothesized etiologies of AN have ranged from purely biological to purely psychological; more recently the impact of the media on the body image of young girls has received a great deal of attention in both the popular and scientific literature. Treatment of AN has also evolved—from blaming parents and removing them from the care of their child to empowering parents and loved ones to play an active role in the care and nourishment of their child or loved one. Despite the changes that have occurred since AN was first recognized, it remains very much an enigma.

What we know today is that AN is the result of a number of biopsychosocial factors that are difficult to identify. The recognition of AN as a biologically based mental illness

(Klump, Bulik, Kaye, Treasure, & Tyson, 2009) was a step forward in potentially reducing the stigma and blame of the disorder. It provides sound reasons why someone with AN cannot "just eat." However, the nascent body of research literature on the biological and genetic underpinnings of AN is wide and occasionally contradictory. For clinicians, researchers, and lay people not well versed in the genetic or brain research, synthesizing the findings can be overwhelming. Carrie Arnold's *Decoding Anorexia: How Breakthroughs in Science Offer Hope for Eating Disorders* provides exactly what the title suggests—a written "decoder ring" for the current state of the literature on AN.

Decoding Anorexia is the first (if not the only) book that comprehensively explores the disorder from a biological perspective and translates a myriad of research findings into an easily accessible format. The 11 chapters in *Decoding Anorexia* need to be read in order, as Carrie Arnold weaves an increasingly complex picture of AN. Beginning with a chapter that debunks many of the more common myths of AN, she moves on to describing underlying biology, comorbidity, disease onset, recovery, and relapse.

The combination of her skills and personal perspective, the products of her background as a scientist, science writer, and as someone who has struggled with AN, is what make this book an easy and enjoyable read. Arnold breaks down research into the neurochemistry, genetics, and neurocircuitry of eating disorders in a very approachable way. She complements her distillation of research findings with her own personal stories or those of others who have struggled with AN.

These narratives often highlight the role of biology in AN and provide concrete examples of how the underlying biology and the current state of starvation express themselves behaviorally, cognitively, and emotionally for sufferers. In addition, these first-person accounts provide a unique level of insight into the experience of individuals suffering from AN. As a result, Arnold's work fosters an enhanced empathy for and understanding of how difficult and frightening struggling with this disorder can be.

In addition to personal anecdotes, Arnold weaves in commentary from leading professionals in the field. The information provided in these interviews is strikingly easy to understand. At times, speaking with physicians can require an in-depth knowledge of medicine and an ability to translate medical jargon for the layperson. Arnold's interview style eliminates the need for such translation. The result is a vivid tapestry of research findings against the backdrop of personal accounts and professional commentary that highlights the gravity of the disorder.

Perhaps most powerful in *Decoding Anorexia* is Arnold's specific discussion of some of the most frustrating aspects of AN for clinicians and family members—namely, the sufferer's lack of insight into how ill he or she is (anosognosia), a lack of a desire to "want" to get better, and the difficulty for individuals with AN to "just eat." Arnold deftly links these well-known behaviors to underlying biological/neural processes that often trigger "Aha" moments in the reader. Understanding that these behaviors are a key piece of AN and not a hallmark of a "difficult" person is key to facilitating recovery.

Arnold does not sugarcoat the impact of AN. She is clear that relapse is possible—but her honest and no-holds-barred account of her own relapse also serves to highlight the role of biology, even during recovery. She points out how anxiety, dieting, and excessive exercise can all reopen the door to AN; yet, throughout the book is a thread of hope and the sense that light has been shed on a complicated and scary disorder.

It is important to remember that Arnold writes from the perspective of an adult about AN in adults. AN in adolescents presumably has the same biological and genetic underpinnings, but we are only just beginning to understand these factors in adolescents. This is primarily because adolescence is a time of brain development and growth. How starvation during this critical period affects development and how much of what we observe in adults is a cause of AN or a consequence of illness during this critical developmental period are still unknown.

This caveat does not detract from the relevance or widespread appropriateness of *Decoding Anorexia* for sufferers, families, clinicians, and researchers who are not familiar with the biology of AN. This book should be on every clinician's recommended reading list.

Reference

Klump, K. L., Bulik, C. M., Kaye, W. H., Treasure, J., & Tyson, E. (2009). Academy for eating disorders position paper: Eating disorders are serious mental illnesses. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, *42*, 97–103. doi:10.1002/eat.20589

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