



Series Germany's Next Topmodel can foster eating disorders

What role do television series play for eating disorders? A study looked at this question from the perspective of those affected. The sample of 241 people currently being in treatment for an eating disorder revealed: Especially *Germany's Next Topmodel* can foster the psychosomatic illness. For almost one-third of those affected, the series had a "very strong influence" on the development of their illness.

Munich, 23 April 2015 – In Western industrialized countries, eating disorders are one of the most common psychosomatic illnesses in girls and young women. The International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI) in cooperation with the German Association for Eating Disorders (BFE) asked 241 people with eating disorders about the role of television formats in the development of their illness.¹ The vast majority of the respondents were women with anorexia and bulimia; the youngest was 11 years old and well over half were under 21.

In some cases, series like *Extremely Beautiful (Extrem Schön)*, *Extremely Heavy (Extrem Schwer)* or *The Perfect Dinner (Das perfekte Dinner)* also played a role

When asked about television series that were important for the illness, in a few individual cases series like *Extremely Heavy* or *The Biggest Loser* were named as shows that give ideas for how to lose weight and also made participants feel that at least there were people uglier than them. *Extremely Beautiful* played a similar role, as it gave the feeling, "that at least you were more beautiful than those poor people on the show" (19-year-old, with anorexia). In intensive phases of anorexia, cooking shows such as *The Perfect Dinner* served to be able to "fill yourself up by watching." In two cases, young women imitated the action of a person afflicted with bulimia on the German version of the daily soap *Good Times, Bad Times*, whereby they also developed bulimia. Besides these individual cases, there was one show that far exceeded the others both quantitatively and qualitatively in its importance for the illness: *Germany's Next Topmodel (GNTM)* by Heidi Klum.

Two-thirds believed their illness had been influenced by *Germany's Next Topmodel*

Usually the respondents started watching the show before puberty, and some had been watching since primary school. Almost one-third of the informants, especially the younger girls, stated that *GNTM* had had "a very strong influence" on their own eating disorder. Another third believed the show had had at least "a small influence" on their illness. A majority of those responding (85%) agreed with the statement that *GNTM* can make eating disorders worse. The reason for this becomes quite understandable by the qualitative statements.

***GNTM* sets unachievable norms**

GNTM focuses on appearance and the body. The usually very thin candidates with a minimum height of 1.72 meters (5ft 7in) and a maximum size of 36 (UK: 10; US: 8) are not only held up as the ideal of beauty and success, they also seem to be normal for how a girl should look today. The viewers get

¹ The questionnaire with many open and some standardized questions was filled out between November 2014 and February 2015 in clinics and therapeutically living communities.

“the feeling that there are so many amazing, thin, disciplined girls who can achieve something and look fantastic!” (17-year-old, with anorexia). Comparisons are then made, whereby it is completely overlooked that these women are absolute exceptions in terms of body stature and facial features. If the candidates on *GNTM* receive criticism about their bodies, then the girls watching television feel justified in their over-critical attitude about their own bodies and try to further reduce their weight. Some girls explicitly described how they continually compared themselves with these bodies – which are the exceptions – “and that’s how part of my illness started” (14-year-old, with anorexia).

What part of *GNTM*’s logic makes girls sick: Adaptation without conditions and repression of real feelings

The particular effectiveness of the series for girls with a predisposition for eating disorders lies on a much deeper level, as the background for the illness is extremely complex. Usually deep crises of identity that those affected feel they are unable to handle are part of what starts the illness. To maintain the feeling of being in control, the sufferers project their perceptions of their internal turmoil onto their body and the “table.” A vicious cycle arises out of which the affected can no longer free themselves.

GNTM follows a very similar basic principle: the separation of feelings, perceptions of the body, and action. Each new “challenge,” each re-designing of the body by others, is to be met with enthusiasm. The candidates must give everything “for the client” or Heidi Klum. Feelings such as exhaustion and cold or emotions like shame, disgust, anger, or fear must be repressed.

For at least 70 of the 241 girls and young women of this study, this combination of norms that were unreachable for them, processes of comparison, the propagated idealizing of the absolute adaptation and necessary distancing from your own feelings led to anorexia or bulimia.

Consequences are called for: Minimum BMI, more diversity, and more sensitivity in dealing with the topic

As a result, those affected call for the media to show more diverse views of the body, for the introduction of a minimum BMI for models and actresses, and the elimination of “Size Zero.” The most important point was clearly stated by an 18-year-old with anorexia:

“Stop saying that how models look is ‘normal’, that anyone who is heavier doesn’t represent the social norms because it should be the other way around.”

Sigrid Borse and Andreas Schnebel from the German Association for Eating Disorders call for more awareness-raising about the illness. The head of the study, Dr. Maya Götz, emphasizes the importance of sensitizing those who create the media programs: “We urgently need an expansion of the types of images shown in the media and more care in dealing with young women in front of the camera. If they are reduced to their body and criticized in this highly sensitive area, it can have fatal consequences not only for the actresses but also for young women viewers.”

The study will be presented for the first time at the annual meeting of the Bundesfachverbands Essstörungen e.V. (BFE) on 8 May 2015 in Munich.

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General Information on the Illness

Eating disorders are a behavior disorder with serious and far-reaching consequences for health. Approximately 700,000 people in Germany suffer from these disorders. The dark figure of this illness is much higher. The highest number of deaths caused by mental illness in young people results from eating disorders. Often this illness is paired with additional mental illnesses such as depression, obsessive-compulsive disorders, borderline disorders, and personality disorders. According to information from a study by the Robert-Koch Institute on the health of children and youth in Germany that began in 2003, one in every five children between the ages of 11 and 17 suffers from symptoms of an eating disorder.¹ According to a statement from the Federal Centre for Health Education (*Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung*), all types of eating disorders have been increasing in number in recent years. One reason for this increase seems to be social influences, for example the Western ideal of beauty.² In the case of anorexia, the largest group of affected people is between the age of 12 and 23, and for bulimia it is the age group between 20 and 30.

// Symptoms of an eating disorder

The most significant symptom of all kinds of eating disorders is that the sufferer's thoughts constantly revolve around the topic of food. There is a strong emotional attachment to the topic and the effects of food on the sufferer's own body.

// Examples for results of eating disorders

Hormone levels decrease, and the consequences are that women have no functioning cycle and men will likely have problems with potency. The entire body is on "energy-saving mode," and cold hands and feet are often accompanied by dry, brittle skin, hair loss, and brittle nails. On various parts of the body (arms, back, face), a fine layer of hair (lanugo) builds up. With the reduction of the subcutaneous layer of fat, the skin often appears glassy, and feet and hands have a bluish color. Especially in young years, malnutrition leads to a halt in growth and development. The existing muscle mass rapidly declines, and the lack of phosphate, calcium, and vitamin D leads to brittle bones – that means osteoporosis, heart arrhythmia, and kidney failure – there is a risk of death!

// The different types of eating disorders

/ **Anorexia** drastic and purposeful loss of weight. Some sufferers also use appetite suppressants, laxatives, or diuretic medications.

/ **Bulimia** is characterized by frequent binge eating in which large amounts of food are ingested in a short period of time. In order to "reverse" the calories and not gain weight, the sufferers make themselves vomit or fast, or they abuse laxatives.

/ **Binge Eating** is a type of disorder marked by frequent or periodic binge-eating phases with a loss of control. This eating behavior is a very common eating disorder and can be found in men and women. Obesity and a high degree of dissatisfaction with the body are accompanying symptoms.

/ **Obesity** (Adipositas) is widespread in the population. Around one in three adult Germans is very overweight and should lose weight for medical reasons.

// FOOTNOTES

¹ Hölling/Schlack 2007, p. 795. ² <http://www.bzga-essstoerungen.de/index.php?id=57>.