

# Eating disorder consumes mother

## A complex health issue that afflicts all walks of life

By DENISE PIKE  
The Compass

Christine from Trinity Bay says she expects this is going to be the worst summer of her life. She will be spending it trying to persuade her 24-year-old daughter to get help for an eating disorder. However first she has to convince her daughter she actually has a problem.

"She denies it and for the most part won't even discuss it with me much less admit she has a problem," said Christine. "She gets very angry, it is hell on earth."

Christine says her daughter Angie (not her real name) is 5 ft. 7 in. and always about 100 pounds.

"She has always been slim, but now she's basically skin over bones, yet she still sees herself as fat," said Christine. "It's hard to understand how someone so malnourished and thin can still see themselves as being obese, but she does. An eating disorder doesn't only affect the body, it affects the mind and that's the worse part. It's mental illness, a horrible monster that takes over who you are."

### Blames herself

Around 11 years ago Christine started to notice something was not right with Amy.

"She had just turned 13 and was always looking at herself in the mirror," said Christine. "She would occasionally ask me if I thought she had put on weight. However I never really thought that anything was wrong. I took it as just being a normal teenage thing, that she was just being a little self-conscious. I didn't see it as being anything serious. I remember myself during my teenage years worrying about my looks and going on diets and silly stuff like that. I thought it was just a normal part of growing up."

Christine says she blames herself for Angie's eating disorder. "I feel really guilty, as a mom I was there for my children for everything and I should have seen this. I should have been able to see

the signs," she said. "If I had picked up on how she was abusing herself by not eating or throwing up everything she ate, if I had watched her closer maybe she wouldn't be as sick as she is today. I could have saved her from her own."

Christine also fears her own eating habits and exercise regimes may have led to Angie's eating disorder.

"I've always worked out regularly and watched what I was eating," she said. "I also hated gaining weight and when I did, worked very hard to get it off."

Christine says she taught Angie how to count calories at an early age.

"When she was seven and eight years old I would take her grocery shopping and taught her how to read the labels on food and determine what was healthy and what was not," said Christine. "But I also taught her the importance of good nutrition, of eating well. There was never any junk food in our house. In fact the very first time Angie had pop was when she went to school. I wanted my kids to eat healthy but looking back now I can't help but wonder if maybe I went overboard. If it was the cause of this eating disorder, it's hard to explain, but I often wonder if not letting her have chips or bars or candy led to this? I know it doesn't make sense, but it's how I feel. I am consumed by so much guilt."

### Pieces starting too fit

Angie's former boyfriend and her friends were the first people to pick up on her eating disorder. When they brought it to Christine's attention, in February, she didn't believe them.

"I just couldn't believe it. I mean this was my daughter and things like this didn't happen to a good-bad family like ours. But at the same time it was like everything they were saying made sense. The scrappiness, buggy clothes, not eating and when she did eat immediately sneaking off to the bathroom... she pieces were

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starting to fit."

When questioned Angie always had a good excuse for not eating.

"She would just play with her food at the dinner table, shift it around her plate or eat very little," said Christine. "When I would talk to her about it, she would say she had to eat at work, or at a friend's place, or some other excuse, and I would fall for it. I believed her because after all how could this intelligent and sensible young woman have an eating disorder?" At the same time alarm bells were starting to go off in my head because she was starting to look really emaciated. She looked like one of those photos you see of people in the concentration camps, all skin and bone."

In April Angie's boyfriend broke up with her.

"They had been together for nearly six years, but he couldn't handle seeing her starve herself to death anymore," said Christine. "She wouldn't listen to him and would get upset when he tried to talk to her about it. He basically gave her an ultimatum - get help or the relationship was over, she chose the latter. He just couldn't handle it anymore."

Three weeks ago Christine and her husband finally confronted Angie about her eating disorder.

"She exploded," said Christine. "I thought I was talking to someone else. It wasn't our sweet kid Angie. She started yelling at us as though her life was being taken to go on a diet, she would. When I told her she had no fat to lose, that she was just skin and bones, she pointed to her shoulders and said I was I was blind, to look at all the fat! Then she told us to leave

her alone, went into her bedroom and slammed the door in our face. We just stood there in absolute shock."

### Common reaction

Although Christine feels helplessness alone, there are hundreds of other families in the province in the same situation. According to Vince Withers, founder and chairman of the Newfoundland and Labrador Eating Disorders Foundation, there are around 7,000 people over the age of 15 with eating disorders living in New Brunswick and Labrador. The majority of them have parents who, like Christine, are consumed with guilt.

"Self-blame by a parent, particularly a mother, is a common reaction," says Withers. "It's one of the reasons our foundation deals with all the time. Parents often ask, 'where did I go wrong?' However neither Christine nor her husband or other parents of a child with an eating disorder caused that disorder. It wasn't caused by something they did or didn't do. An eating disorder is a very serious and complex health issue that takes all segments of society and people from all walks of life and it takes some time for it to be treated, but recovery does happen. We (Eating Disorder Foundation) are making great strides in helping families cope and find the proper treatment."

"We're having tremendous success in the clinics," said Christine.

The chairman says changes in personality and behaviour by the person who has the eating disorder is also common.

"They will go to great lengths to hide the fact they are not eating, purging or over exercising so they usually distance themselves from their family and friends," says Withers. "Meal times become very stressful so they try to avoid anything that has to do with eating and will often become defensive and angry when the issue of eating is raised. Family and friends shouldn't take their reactions personally. They need to recognize this is a deep-rooted mental disorder and the person who has it needs a lot of support and encouragement. They're in a lot of turmoil and the disease is changing them, not just how they look, but how they act as well."

# Mental illness cause of eating disorders

Advocate says supportive family best medicine

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No one knows how to spot the signs of an eating disorder any better than Vince Withers.

His daughter Renata passed away Aug. 30, 2005 from Anorexia Nervosa. At the time of her death, Renata, 27, weighed less than 70 pounds.

Since then Withers and his wife Delores have been helping other families across the province in similar situations.

In 2006 Withers founded the Eating Disorder Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador. The retired CEO of Newtel Communications and his board of directors are on a crusade to educate the public and support families who are dealing with eating disorders.

"An eating disorder is a coping strategy, something a person uses to deal with a deeper problem," says Withers. "It isn't simply about eating or vanity. There is no clear definition of what triggers it. However genetics, low self-esteem and poor body image, inability to cope, sexual and physical abuse and family issues are just some of the contributing factors."

Eating Disorders are also common among high achievers and people who tend to be perfectionists. Whatever the cause it's important that families and friends show compassion for the pain the person is experiencing."

### Mental illness

Withers says he often has to reassure parents that teaching their child to watch their calorie intake and to exercise, when they were kids, did not cause their eating disorder.

"There is nothing wrong with reading the labels on food products and looking at the calorie content, we all do that as a way of taking care of ourselves and it's a normal part of parenting," he says. "When parents find out their child has a full blown eating disorder they often look for ways to blame themselves. But once a treatment plan is in place they see just how complex the disorder is and that it isn't because of something they did or did not do."

One of the hardest things a parent of children with eating disorders has to come to terms with is realizing their child has a mental illness.

"It's a form of mental illness that is often misunderstood and there's a stigma attached to it," says Withers. "However the public is starting to see eating disorders as a serious health issue, but we still have a way to go to reduce the stigma. The word disorder is often interpreted in many different ways by many different people."

### Early treatment critical

Withers says it's important for parents to educate themselves about eating disorders.

"They can call the Centre of Hope (St. John's) and we will help, but first they need to get their child to a doctor for proper diagnosis and perhaps referred to our centre," said Withers. "Early diagnosis and treatment is critical and families need to work together. When a family receives support and becomes stronger the person with the eating disorder does better."

Treatment for an eating disorder at the Renata Withers Centre of Hope varies.

"There's individual counselling, group assistance and help for family and friends available," says Withers. "Our Families Supporting Families group has been extremely helpful. We had 20 families show up for our last meeting and share their circumstances. These meetings provide them with the opportunity to talk with other families with similar experiences. On times all these families have felt they are the only ones in the world dealing with an eating disorder, but they are definitely not alone."