

Pre-reading discussion points

- What do you know about the symptoms, the severity and the causes of anorexia?
- Do you know anything about any other eating disorders?
- Do you any stories of fashion models or other people in the limelight with eating disorders?

Reading

Anorexia on the Catwalk

1. Ana Carolina Reston, a 21-year-old fashion model from Brazil, died of multiple organ failure in hospital on 14 November 2006. Her family hadn't realized how serious the situation was. They had known that she wasn't eating well and was losing weight, but they didn't realize that Ana could no longer bear to eat the apples and tomatoes that had been her only source of nutrition. They also didn't know that she was taking very potent pain killers and slimming pills which were aggravating the situation. Most seriously of all, perhaps, they simply didn't realize that Ana's anorexia could prove fatal.
2. The Brazilian psychologist Dr Marco Tommaso, who has given consultations to over 2,000 models, regards Ana's experience as typical even though few models thankfully suffer Ana's tragic outcome. Tommaso points out that like lots of other models Ana was catapulted into the most demanding of adult worlds when they were still unable to cope.
3. Ana had entered the world of modelling at the age of 13, when she won a beauty contest. For four years she had work with a local agency and everything seemed fine but then she signed a contract with Elite, one of the biggest agencies in Brazil, which shot her into the high-pressure world of international modelling. Unaccompanied by a friend or relative, she was sent to Hong Kong for three months when she was 18 and had to cope alone with the harsh business of casting. She was told she was fat and she took this very personally. Her unhappiness was evident in the letters she sent home. In one to her mother, Reston describes arriving in "that big place". She goes on: "I felt so small, the city was so big. I didn't understand anything... It didn't go right. I failed."
4. In Tommaso's experience, "If someone is just a tiny bit bigger than the industry demands, they are treated as if they were horribly obese." Such pressures, he continues, lead many such women to develop eating disorders: dieting in an extreme way, starving themselves or taking harmful medication. He remembers one young model even using pills for fighting intestinal worms in order to lose weight. Journalist Laura Ancona has also seen the signs: "I've lost count of how many times I've seen models vomiting in the toilets at fashion events, or fainting because they're not eating properly."
5. There is another feature of Ana's story that is typical. As Tommaso points out: 'Often, a low-income family will begin to see their offspring as the chicken that lays gold eggs and there is the expectation that she will make the whole family wealthy. The models, in turn, begin to push themselves harder and harder, placing greater demands on their bodies in the hope that they will earn more money.' Although Ana's family was quite well off when she started her career, her father became terminally ill and lost his job, and then the family's life savings were stolen in a burglary. By 2004, Ana was supporting her entire family, and despite the setbacks she desperately wanted to succeed so that she could earn enough to help her mother build a new house. Because of the family's financial difficulties, her mother admits, "She was my crutch."
6. Ana's story also illustrates the way in which anorexics can get lost in their own private hell. Towards the end her agency was telling her that she was too thin, other models were trying to encourage her to eat and her mother, shocked by her daughter's emaciated appearance, urged her repeatedly to seek medical help, but by that time Ana wasn't listening to anyone. She continually denied she had a problem.
7. A couple of months before her death Ana could no longer find work as a model and was handing out advertising leaflets for nightclubs in her local city for 15 euros a day. At that time she wrote a letter to her mother that was only discovered after her death. In curly, teenage writing it says: "If I could, I'd like to go back to being four, clinging on to you as if I were still in your womb, so that nobody could harm me, but God wanted my life to change."
8. Since Ana's death her aunt has launched a campaign to persuade the government to impose stricter regulations on the modelling industry. "These girls are treated like slaves," she says. "We want models to have rights. At the moment they are given no pension, no support... The agencies just take the person away from their family and then abandon them."

Questions

1. In your own words as much as possible, say what the final cause of Ana's death was.
2. The article highlights three respects in which Ana's story is typical of what young women can go through when they enter the world of modelling. What are the three aspects?
3. When did things start to go downhill for Ana?
4. If you are a witch, you cast spells. If you cast models, what do you do?
5. According to Dr Tomasso, what is the most bizarre medication that some models have been taking to lose weight?
6. What indication is there that Ana used to have a close relationship with her mother?
7. In paragraph seven, why might the writer have drawn attention to the appearance of Ana's handwriting?
8. After Ana's death, what did her aunt begin campaigning for?

Vocabulary search

Look for the following words in the paragraph with the number given in brackets.

1. (p1) Which verb means: "make the situation worse"?
2. (p1) Which adjective means "powerful"? (Note: generally this is not used for talking about people, except when it is used in the negative, when it means: unable to have kids.)
3. (p2) What could we call a meeting with an expert in which you are given advice?
4. (p2) Which verb is derived from the name for a device used to fire small stones?
5. (p3) Which adjective means: "obvious" or "clear"?
6. (p4) Which verb means: "bringing the contents of the stomach up through the mouth"?
7. (p5) Which noun refers to things that delay your progress or put you in a less favourable position?
8. (p5) Which noun, when used literally, refers to the device used under the arm to support the weight of people who have a damaged leg?
9. (p6) You know the adjective "skinny". If someone is even more skinny, what adjective can we use?
10. (p7) What is the name of the part of the mother's body in which a baby grows?
11. (p7) Which verb means "hold on tight (perhaps out of fear or a sense of insecurity)"?
12. (p8) Which verb can we use when we talk about beginning a campaign to change the law or raise people's awareness of an issue?

Over to you

1. Do you think pressures from the fashion industry played a major role in Ana's demise or do you think that the basic factor was that she had her own psychological problems?
2. Do you think the most attractive models are the very thin ones?
3. Have you any idea why people have expected models to be so unnaturally thin?
4. Apart from the pressure to be thin, is there anything else mentioned in the passage that you think is a valid criticism of the fashion industry and the way it treats models?
5. What sort of influence, if any, do you think images of models in the media have on the rest of society?
6. What changes, if any, do you think should be made?
7. The deaths of two models in 2006 (the second being Luisel Ramos) were directly attributed to anorexia. Following those some organizations did try to make some changes. Read the paragraph below and say whether you think these are steps in the right direction.

The Spanish authorities decided to ban models with a body mass index (BMI) of less than 18 - classified as underweight by the World Health Organisation (between 18.5 and 25 is considered healthy). In Brazil models are now required to have medical certificates in order to take part in catwalk events. The Italian fashion organisation Camera Della Moda Italiana is also considering similar measures, and the British Fashion Council, which organises London Fashion Week, has drawn up guidelines to exclude dangerously underweight models from fashion events in the UK.

Are you too thin?

If you are wondering what your BMI is, here's how to work it out. First you have to know your weight in kilos and your height in metres. To find your BMI, square your height (i.e. if your height is 1.5 metres, multiply 1.5 by 1.5) then divide your weight in kilos by the square of your height.

Let's imagine you are 2m tall and you weigh 100kg. 2 squared is 4, and 100 divided by 4 is 25, so your BMI is 25. What does that mean? If your BMI is between 25 and 30 you are overweight, and if it is over 30 your doctor will say you are obese.

Language extra

Look for the sentence in paragraph 3 beginning with the word "unaccompanied". This is an example of a sentence that begins with what might be called a **participle phrase**. Let's look at three different participle phrases that are used in similar ways. As with the example in paragraph three we might use the **past participle** (that's the form of the verb we use in the present and past perfect tenses):

Rejected by all his former friends, he decided to become a monk.

We could use the **perfect participle** (e.g. having done):

Having lost all his money, he stopped gambling.

We could use the **present participle** (e.g. swimming, boring):

Wanting desperately to get into the Guinness Book of Records, she spent all her free time collecting pencil erasers.

Not wanting to disappoint him, she accepted his proposal.

In all these sentences the second half is the main part, and the part beginning with the participle phrase adds some extra information about how or why the action described in the main part occurred. So, how did Ana go to Hong Kong? Answer: she went alone, i.e. she was unaccompanied.

Note: the past participle tends to be used when a longer description would require the passive voice.

Hence: why did he decide to become a monk? Answer: because he had been rejected by all his friends.

The perfect participle is used when a longer description would use the present or past perfect tenses in the active voice.

To practise, rewrite the following sentences beginning with participle phrases like these.

1. Because she hadn't eaten for so long, she fainted.
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2. He was wounded and dying, which was why he started to pray.
.....

3. Because she didn't realize she had a problem she didn't seek expert help.
.....

4. Because she had been told she was fat, she decided to starve herself.
.....

5. Because she believed that no one could really appreciate how she felt, she ignored their advice.
.....

Writing topic

A disturbing number of girls and young women suffer from eating disorders. How would you account for this phenomenon, and what do you think ought to be done to improve the situation?