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Professor Bradford

Introduction to College Writing

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Beauty to the Bone

"Splish! Splash! SPLAT!" I take a deep breath. Then, again. "Splish! Splash! SPLAT!" I take a step away from the shiny, white toilet, stand up straight, and quickly circle my mouth with a paper towel to make sure I'm not wearing my dinner all over my face. I move over to the mirror, feeling a sense of self-accomplishment, but when I look in the mirror, my victorious smile fades. I'm pathetic. "Why do you keep doing this?," I mumble to myself. "Don't you know that you're only hurting yourself?" My eyes lose all connection from the thought of this question. I can't even get my own reflection to look at me. What caused me to be this way? What causes *anyone* to be this way? If young adults are aware of all of the negative consequences, why do they feel the need to continue this terrible habit?

Remembering back to one specific night in July, I was at a friend's house and I overheard her throwing her dinner up in the bathroom. She had the water from the sink running, so I knew that I wasn't supposed to hear. She came back to her room. She knew that I'd overheard. She explained that nothing was wrong, that she just, sometimes, got too full and it helped to ease her stomach. She knew that I'd always been extremely self-conscious about my weight, so she gave my stomach a poke and said, "You could do it, too, you know?" I knew I was much smarter than that, but I thought to myself, "One time won't hurt anything." Three months ago, that night, marked the birth of my bad habit. Not long after she fell asleep, I was staring down at the toilet, which was now in possession of my soft beef taco that I'd had from Taco Bell earlier that

night. Ever since that night, the toilet has become my new best friend. I spend more time hovering over this white piece of porcelain than I do with my own best friends. Bulimia. It's always been around, but is becoming more apparent in our generation. It's a shame that I can't sit down to watch my favorite television show at night without seeing Jenny Craig's weight loss program on every commercial break. I know I can't be sailing in this ship alone. I can't help but wonder, what causes people to become bulimic? I wake up every morning with an even bigger problem than I started out with. Why can't I just stop? Why can't *anyone* just - stop?

I started my journey by typing in my question of, "What are the different causes of bulimia?" into the search box of one of the most popular search engines, Google. Just like any other performed Google search, there were about 877, 000 different results for this particular topic. I chose one of the first results, "Bulimia Nervosa << Frequently Asked Questions," which looked rather reliable. After clicking on the result, I found that it was a website posted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services from Washington, D.C., but had no particular author. Not only does this particular department offer online help, but I also found two numbers posted in the top right hand corner of the webpage. I found that each number connects to an automatic machine that asks specific questions to narrow a search, in order to direct the caller further.

After investigating the publishers of my first source, I decided to move on to the actual research part. Under the "Frequently Asked Questions" column, I found the exact question I was looking for. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "There is no single known cause of bulimia" (qtd. para 2). After scrolling down the page, I found that, although it is believed that bulimia is not caused by one certain thing, there are many factors that are believed to play a part. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services states:

Culture. Women in the U.S. are under constant pressure to fit a certain ideal of beauty. Seeing images of flawless, thin females everywhere makes it hard for women to feel good about their bodies. Families. If you have a mother or sister with bulimia, you are more likely to also have bulimia. Parents who think looks are important, diet themselves, or criticize their children's bodies are more likely to have a child with bulimia. Life changes or stressful events. Traumatic events (like rape), as well as stressful things (like starting a new job), can lead to bulimia. Personality traits. A person with bulimia may not like herself, hate the way she looks, or feel hopeless. She may be very moody, have problems expressing anger, or have a hard time controlling impulsive behaviors.

The factors presented by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services above bring good points to the table. When thinking in terms of these factors as the cause of bulimia, I can relate to each of these causes in the following scenarios. I'm a healthy-weight girl. I walk into a fitness class, wearing a plain, white t-shirt and a Nike sports bra underneath. I observe all of the other women around me in sports bras, showing off their cut abdominals. After seeing these thin women, I have no desire to take my t-shirt off and end up turning to bulimia in order to look just like them. This would be a result of the culture factor. I'm sitting at the table, eating a Hostess cupcake. My mother walks through the door, looks at me, and says, "Through the lips, to the hips." I throw up the cupcake in response to my mother's joke. This would be a result of the families factor. I just moved to Conway to attend college at UCA from small town, Newport. I am completely overwhelmed by all of the people, homework assignments, and tests. I turn to bulimia as a way of releasing my stress and emotions. This would be an example of the stressful events factor. I have recently stopped working out, due to all of my upcoming papers and homework. I have become extremely unhappy with my weight and don't see what anyone

else does when glancing in the mirror, so I take up bulimia in order to get back down to my desired digits on the scale.

After reviewing the stated paragraph above, I noticed that the author doesn't have a particular point of view for the cause of bulimia, but many different suggestions that *could* be the cause, rather. For the entire three months that I've been struggling with bulimia, I have been a confused mess. The question, "Why me?", continuously goes unanswered after each passing day. Out of all of the factors presented above, I can more than likely be thrown into the "families" factor. My mother has been the Weight Watchers queen for the past three straight years and according to this study, "parents that diet themselves are more likely to have a child with bulimia" (qtd. para 3).

Moving on from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, I shifted back to Google and scrolled down the page until my cursor found an article published by Ezine Articles, called "Main Causes of Bulimia." At the end of the article, I found an "Article Source" button, which lead me to my author, Thomas Morva. I clicked on the link, but found nothing more than his name being mentioned, along with at least 920 other article written by him. He also had tons of feedback from each article, so his articles have to be well-known to somebody. Morva believes the main cause of bulimia to be a "genetic component." However, his explanation is slightly different than my previous source. He states that, as far as families being the cause goes, "Developing bulimia may have more to do with family influences and role models than genetics," where as the Department of Health and Human Services believes bulimia to be caused mainly by genetics (Morva). Morva also suggests that other factors such as brain chemistry, social pressures, and emotional stress contribute in the development of bulimia, which agrees with the previous findings.

With all of this in mind, I carried my exploration on further to get a teenage opinion on the topic, rather than an expert one. I made my way downtown to Jennifer Lewis's house, where I found her practicing with her band, wearing her Dear and the Headlights band tee, skinny jeans, and white Vans. After sitting her down, I noticed that she sat with her arms folded up across her stomach. My initial question was, "Have you or are you currently facing problems with bulimia?" She had voluntarily raised her hand in my Sociology class a few weeks ago to speak about her experience with her own case of bulimia, but I wasn't sure if she had said she still suffered from it or not. She looked at me and said, "I am going through therapy right now, but yes, I still suffer everyday." With this being said, I was interested in knowing what caused her bulimia, so that became my next question. She replied, "It all happened so fast. I've always been insecure about my weight. I started throwing up one day after I ate a whole batch of cookies and it just took over from there. I went from throwing up once or twice a week to every single day." This is also how my disorder began. That first night that I found myself staring into the toilet water, I told myself that it would only be "just this once." However, "just this once" turned into three or four times a day.

With this answer in mind, I wondered how bulimia had affected her social life, so I pinpointed that as my next question. She stood up and began pacing, "That's actually the worst part of it all. My friends were all nagging on me, telling me they were worried about me and everything. After I kept turning down all of their offers to help, they quit talking to me." I responded to this with, "Is this what drove you to the point of getting help?" She shook her head from side-to-side and said, "Definitely not. I completely rebelled against them and fully convinced myself that they were being insensitive to my problem. What drove me to get help was the fact that I never had energy. I was constantly dizzy and always passing out. One night,

I fell to the floor because I was super dehydrated. That's when I realized that things were going to have to change." After I heard her say this, I thought back to a few weeks ago when I had just stepped out of the shower and was so dizzy that I could barely stand. If it wasn't for that countertop, my face would have slam-dunked onto those cold, blue, square-shaped tiles on the bathroom floor. I wish my friends could have helped me with my problem, but I was too stubborn to admit to myself that I needed help. Day after day, I have to make up excuses as to why I can't go play Mario Kart on the Nintendo 64 with Lilly or catch the latest episode of House with Gina, all because I have an addiction. I turned back to her and asked just one last question, "What have these consequences made you realize about the whole thing?" She smiled and said, "Well, I'm able to look at myself in the mirror now and not be completely disgusted. This was really hard for me to do when I first started gaining my weight back. I now realize that I was never overweight. I think I will always have a slight insecurity, but nothing too insecure that I won't be able to brush off." So, why is it that teenagers feel the need to vomit in order to be beautiful? *I - just - don't - know.*

After leaving Jennifer's house, I decided to take my journey to a whole new perspective. Thinking back to my sophomore year in high school, I remember being friends with a boy named Jordan Sullivan. He fought bulimia the entire year that we had gone to school together. He moved back to his previous school, so we'd lost touch over the past few years, but I still had his number saved in my contacts. He answered on the third ring. After a few hours of catching up on everything, Jordan agreed to give me a quick interview about his disorder, or what he often referred to as "the devil." I began our interview off with, "How long have you been dealing with your disorder?" He asked me to hold on and came back with a few seconds later with, "To be honest, I've lost track of time with it, but if I had to guess, I'd say that I'm going on three and a

half years." I gasped at the thought of this. Three months has been way too long for me. I can't even begin to imagine waking up to this problem for three *years*. I turned to my next question, "What do you believe caused you to become bulimic?" He sighed in the phone and said, "I've had a lot of time to find other people to blame. However, it all began with my mom not accepting me for who I am. She kicked me out of the house and cut off all connections with me. All of this was just so overwhelming. I was always stressed out, so I really had no desire to keep anything down." Taking all of this in, I asked, "So, now that all of this time has passed, what do you believe to be the cause?" He responded, "I still blame my mother for most of it, but it's sort of a social thing now." I was pretty confused by his comment about it being a "social thing," but he tossed in the comment that he "couldn't really explain it." My sophomore year is extremely vague in my memory, but I seem to remember a weekend night that I went to a basketball game with Jordan at his previous high school to see some of old friends. I remember looking at his friends, thinking, "Geez, do these kids ever eat?" None of them looked like they were even in triple digits yet. Venturing away from that memory, I asked, "How does bulimia affect your everyday life?" He scoffed and said, "How does it *not* affect my everyday life? It takes up so much time out of my everyday. My 'pretty teeth' that everyone used to compliment me on are now clear as crystals. The glands in my throat are swollen every single day. It's like having mono everyday of your life." After he mentioned all of this, I looked in the mirror at myself. I smiled. He was right. Crystal clear. I'm embarrassed. I stick out my tongue and stare at the small, white bumps that cover it. Will I ever taste again?

Courtney Gansz, a freshman at ASU Searcy, was next in line for an interview. In her flared blue jeans, pink Hollister polo, and cowboy hat, her legs dangled from the bar stool, looking as if they were trying to brush the floor. I recently told my mother about my eating

disorder and she ended up confiding in Courtney's mother, which in turn, made me confide in Courtney. I asked Courtney what caused her to become bulimic. She rolled her eyes and said, "As much as my mom would like to think I'm doing it for attention, she's the one that forced me to be in all of these pageants that require me to be fit. These judges don't care what my dress looks like. They care about my body and how much my bones are showing." I really thought she brought up an interesting point. When I thought back to all of the pageants I'd ever went to, I can't remember ever seeing an average or overweight person receive the crown over a person weighing in double digits. Lastly, I asked, "How has being bulimic affected you personally and socially?" Without hesitation, she replied, "It hasn't, really. The only thing that gets irritating is having to find reasons to get away from my mom, so that I can do my thing." I was baffled by her comment. My bulimia has affected me in more ways than I can count. I continuously have to think of reasons to get away from my friends after lunch or dinner, just so I can spend thirty pathetic minutes in the bathroom.

Gathering the information from all of my interviews, I found that all of the things proposed by my above sources have been supported by my friends' comments. Jennifer developed bulimia because of her own personality traits, feeling a sense of being overweight when she never was. This cause is supported by the proposals of both the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and Morva. Jordan claims to have developed his bad habit from emotional distress and social pressure, which supports the proposal of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. After I read over my first source's proposal, I didn't agree with culture necessarily being a factor to the development of bulimia, but after interviewing Courtney, she showed me that it does play a contributing role in that girls feels that they have to be fit in order to win beauty pageants.

So, what is it that causes teenagers to become bulimic? After hearing the stories of three different people and the ideas of two different researchers, it seems that everyone has a different reason. While some researchers argue that bulimia is caused from genetics and brain chemistry, others argue that it is caused from personality traits, social pressure, and emotional distress. With all the stress and media that young adults of today are exposed to, it is hard not to fall to the expectations that society has set for them. Perhaps, if there was a great emphasis on a person's character instead of his or her appearance, disorders, such as bulimia, would become extinct. Why would anyone choose to suffer the consequences of such a disgusting habit? The long term effects of bulimia are extremely dangerous. I realize this now. It feels so great to be able to look in the mirror, smile, and walk away feeling healthy and happy.