

A Starving Madness **Reader's Guide**

"The world breaks everyone, and afterwards some are strong in the broken places. - Ernest Hemingway

Unless someone close to you has an eating disorder, you may feel that you know enough about how the perils of teenage dieting can spiral into lifetime emotional problems. *Starving Madness: Tales of Hunger, Hope and Healing* will dispel many myths about anorexia and bulimia, their underlying causes, and the type of people who struggle with food, weight and dieting. This book paints a vivid picture of how psychotherapy can shed light on the unfulfilled hungers that lay beneath a twisted obsession with food and weight loss. In this unique collection of true stories from her New York psychotherapy practice, Judith Ruskay Rabinor, Ph.D. documents the journeys of eight clients—seven women and one man—as they uncover the emotional pain they have mislabeled with the simple words, "I feel fat." Through these fascinating case studies you will learn about the intricate interplay of familial, cultural, biological and psychological factors that contribute to eating problems, and how these disorders affect all segments of society--young and old, rich and poor, male and female and minorities. You will meet

- Nina: A 20-year old anorexic who was sexually abused as a child.
- Mia: A 19-year old bulimic who also mutilates herself.
- Estelle: A 58-year old woman who suffered secretly from bulimia for 15 years.
- Elinor: A 32-year old mother who has had uncontrollable food binges.
- Eric: A 20-year old college student who compulsively exercises and purges.
- Julia: A 31-year old mother of twins who remains trapped in a starving madness.
- Becky: A 15 year old anorexic who struggles with Obsessive - Compulsive Disorder.

- Amelia: A 65-year old compulsive eater who was neglected as a child.

The questions that follow are designed to provide you with new ways to think about the obsession with food, body and weight and appreciate the power of psychotherapy to heal.

Questions

Chapter 1

We first meet Nina through a revealing autobiographical story, "Once Upon a Time" (p.21). How does her story help you understand her eating disorder?

Nina was betrayed by her brother Alvin. Have you ever felt betrayed by a loved one? How did you handle it?

In describing her brother's abuse, Nina says, "First he silenced me, and then I silenced myself." Has someone's poor treatment of you ever impacted you? How?

Nina's parents were furious when she confronted them with Alvin's abuse. Despite the immediate results, what were some of the positive consequences of this confrontation? Have you ever worked up to a healthy confrontation and had it go badly?

Chapter 2

When 19 year old Mia refused to go to therapy, Marilyn, her mother, sought help on her daughter's behalf. Have you ever been frustrated by someone who refused therapy even though you thought they needed it? How did you respond to that person?

When Mia's eating disorder began to recede, we learn that she burned herself. Why do you think she did this? The therapist seemed particularly upset by Mia's burning herself. How did you react to it?

The therapist helps Mia break a "bad habit" by signing a contract. All of us have "bad habits." Think about a "bad habit" of yours you have tried to break. What techniques and/or strategies have you found helpful?

The therapist mentions being touched when she is "truly present in her work." When are you in a "truly present" state?

The therapist refers to a saying, "There are only two gifts a parent gives her child, "Roots and Wings" (p.44). What do you believe are the most important ways parents give their children roots? Wings?

Chapter 3

Estelle grew up in a home that discouraged talking about problems. How does your family of origin view emotional problems? How has that view impacted you?

The author validates Estelle's dilemma that "starving often leads to binging." Can you explain the biology and psychology beneath this mechanism?

The therapist says, "Bulimia always develops for a reason" (p. 77). How does she help Estelle uncover her underlying needs?

Estelle put the saying "Joy Shared, Twice the Gain, Sorrow Shared, Half the Pain" on her refrigerator. Do you have any personal associations to this saying? Do you have any sayings on your refrigerator/mirror/walls? What is the meaning of your saying?

Estelle takes a risk by opening up to her co-worker, Rose, and then later by joining a therapy group. Do you have a relationship or 'place' where you feel you can freely share pain? What helps you or keeps you from sharing your feelings more openly with someone?

Estelle was terrified to gain weight. On a scale of 1 to 10 how would you rate your level of fear of gaining 10 pounds? What do you think this says about you?

Chapter 4

When we first meet Elinor she is considering quitting therapy. She experiences a breakthrough that day that changed her life. Have you ever experienced this 'night seeming darkest before the dawn' phenomenon?

Elinor was very upset by binging in public. How does your private eating life differ from your public one?

Elinor turned to food when she felt neglected. Do you recall ever feeling neglected as a child? How did you handle it?

The therapist introduced Elinor to the concept of "Mindful Eating" with the questions (1) Am I hungry? And (2) what am I hungry for? (p.95). these questions help people take stock of their eating and their lives. Take a minute and try answering these questions now.

Elinor learns that having a "Safe Place" helps her cope with unsettling and disruptive feelings. Can you create a safe place for yourself right now? What effect does focusing on it have?

Chapter 5

Eric learns that "Habits cover Wounds." Can you think of any habits you may have developed to cover your wounds?

Eric's eating disorder was triggered when he was rejected and teased. We all have experienced rejection in one form or another. How have you dealt with being rejected?

Discuss what you think the author means when she says, "Boys are cheated, just like girls." How can gender stereotypes be overcome for future generations?

Have you ever lost someone close to you or significant in your life? How did you grieve?

Shame and fear of being teased kept Eric from being honest about his bulimia for some time. In what ways have you allowed shame to keep you from being truthful?

Chapter 6

In Julia's story the therapist wondered if she had "rescue fantasies." Have you ever tried to rescue a friend or relative? What was the result?

Read the poem "The air was thick with promise" again (p.146). Have you ever felt vulnerable because of your maturing figure? What could the poet have done to feel more powerful instead of "slipping through the cracks in the sidewalk?"

In this chapter, the therapist is haunted by Julia's resistance to treatment. In what way did this change your view of the relationships psychotherapists develop with their patients?

At the end of this story, we learn that the therapist let Julia wear her shawl. How did this make you feel about the therapist? What meaning would this act have had for you?

Chapter 7

In a journal entry Becky writes, "It hurts when I eat." By writing in her journal and discussing her life, she learned that her "hurt" was deeper. Has writing down thoughts and feelings ever allowed you to get in touch with your deeper issues?

Rituals help us negotiate life's transitions. Becky had many rituals that helped her feel safe and cope when her world turned "upside down." Has your world ever turned upside down? How did you cope?

What rituals do you have in your current life? Are there any new ones you would like to incorporate?

Have you ever felt that your parents were acting selfishly? How did you deal with your feelings?

All of us talk to ourselves at different times. Have you ever experienced the good voice/bad voice phenomenon Becky writes about on page 169? Which voice holds more sway over your actions?

Chapter 8

Amelia realizes her poor self-esteem has its roots in childhood. Can you trace back any of your feelings about yourself to specific incidences in your childhood?

Amelia begins therapy deeply ashamed by her weight. Have you ever felt apologetic about your weight or other aspects of yourself?

Eventually Amelia realized that she was attributing her mother's characteristics to herself. How does your self-image relate to your mother?

The therapist mentions trusting her intuitions, not relying on mere formula in treating her patients. In what ways have you followed your intuition? In what ways have you ignored your intuition?

General Questions

Which story impacted you the most? Why?

With what assumptions about eating disorders did you begin this book? With what assumptions about psychotherapy did you begin this book? Were your assumptions supported or challenged?

Imagine you are thinking of seeking a therapist. Does this book offer you any guidelines or principles in making your decision? What are they?

Despite being a renowned expert in the field, the therapist reveals her own doubts and vulnerabilities in treating patients with eating disorders. How did this make you feel about the therapist?

Each chapter begins with a quote. Do you personally relate to any of the quotes?