

I had anorexia – but not because I wanted to look like a fashion model | Hadley Freeman



Nobody ever asks me what it felt like. They never ask what it was like to spend [three of my teenage years in secure psychiatric units](#) for severe anorexia nervosa; how it felt to be so undernourished I could hardly walk; how it feels now to be able to picture the doctors' and nurses' faces more clearly than I can those of my late grandparents; how it feels to have spent my formative years with young women who are now, in so many cases, dead; how this experience changed my personality for ever. No, no one asks that. Instead they ask why: "Why were you anorexic? Why?"

[Eating disorders](#) are the only mental illness that people still assume is caused by something identifiable and external. No sensible person would ask anyone why they became schizophrenic, why they suffer from clinical depression. But eating disorders are different, and this is partly because of the behaviour of those who suffer from them. In the grip of the disorder, your world shrinks to the size of a pinhole: your brain fixates entirely on weight, calories; and, if you're underweight, being so cold it feels like you have icicles for bones.

Asking a person with an eating disorder why they are behaving like that is not going to elicit a sensible answer, any more than asking an alcoholic why he or she drinks. There will be talk of wanting to be thin like this model, pretty like that friend, slim enough to wear nice clothes. But none of these reasons are why the person developed an eating disorder.

This, however, has yet to be understood by an extraordinary number of people. It was announced this week that France will probably pass a bill [banning models under a certain body mass index from appearing in fashion shows and shoots](#). News stories like this – and they crop up almost annually – always get an enormous amount of coverage because they allow newspapers to run photos of fashion models, an opportunity no media outlet ever passes up.

Yesterday [the Times kept this story](#) – with accompanying requisite photo of a pretty, thin model – on the front of its website all day, which is quite some play for a story about a law that may happen in a foreign country, and has yet to be shown to have any efficacy. Truly, it's only the fashion industry that promotes images of skinny women, right?

Laws similar to the French one have already been passed in a handful countries, including [Italy, which announced its ban on skinny models back in 2006](#). Speaking as someone who covered the fashion shows in Milan for this paper between 2002 and 2008, some of the most painfully thin models I ever saw were on Milan's catwalks, and that did not change after 2006.

The fashion world's expectations about how models should look is completely sick, and [laws like this, if they were ever actually enforced](#), are long overdue for the sake of models themselves. But to suggest that this will have any impact on the rates of eating disorders is tantamount to saying that eating disorders are essentially about silly women wanting to look like models, which is precisely the kind of condescension I long ago learned to expect from people when they talk about a mental illness that largely affects women and girls.

That looking at photos of skinny models makes a lot of girls and women feel bad about themselves is not in doubt; and for that reason, again, these well-intended laws are perfectly welcome. But can we please make the overdue distinction between women suffering from body image issues and [actual eating disorders, which are a specific mental illness](#)?

Social issues do come into play with eating disorders: when, as a young woman, you realise how much value society places on your body, it makes sense to use that as the instrument with which to express your unhappiness. But believe me, it's not just fashion that sends women this message, and it's not even about thinness. It's about the way women are still valued primarily by their physical appearance. Which brings me to my next point.

At the far more stupid end of the spectrum, a certain Dr Aric Sigman – whom readers of a certain vintage will remember as [the agony uncle](#) on the kids' TV show [Live & Kicking](#) – gave a speech at a teachers' conference in London this week, in which he suggested that [the real key to fighting eating disorders among women](#) is – can you guess? Can you? – men. “Men are an untapped army ... Knowing what men think can serve as an antidote to the prevailing assumptions that feed body dissatisfaction,”

Dr Sigman claimed, sounding thrillingly as though he was reading Alan Partridge's take on eating disorders.

It turns out, Dr Sigman exclusively revealed, that men *like* female curves. *This changes everything, ladies*. “Men are an untapped army who need to become aggressively vocal,” he concluded. Because if there's one thing women around the world have been lacking, it's men telling them exactly what they find attractive in a lady.

Dr Sigman ignores the obvious possibility that behind eating disorders in women is a fear of being sexualised

Dr Sigman – who is, amazingly, described as “a leading educational psychologist” – seems not to have considered the perfectly obvious possibility that one potential factor behind eating disorders in women, especially anorexia, is a fear of being sexualised, which is just one reason why it tends to take root during puberty. If men had told me when I was starting to get ill at the age of 13 that they really dug womanly hips, I would have begged to be locked up in a psychiatric ward for life out of sheer terror.

So why did I stop eating? Because I was unhappy. Because I didn't know how to express it vocally. Because I didn't understand I was allowed to respond to my own needs. Because I was scared of growing up. The specific causes of eating disorders are varied, but those factors are pretty common.

If experts really want to help those with eating disorders, they should look at why so many people are so unhappy; they should teach schoolkids how to talk about their feelings without resorting to masochism; they should look at why so many girls and women feel they ought to put themselves last; and, most of all, they should look at the causes of self-loathing as opposed to the manifestations of it.

But as even those without eating disorders know, it's hard to deal with complicated issues – far easier just to obsess about fashion models.