

# "PRO-ANA" AS A LIFESTYLE-SHAPING ENVIRONMENT AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

## PRO-ANA JAKO ŚRODOWISKO KSZTAŁTUJĄCE STYL ŻYCIA MŁODYCH LUDZI

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction.** Pro-Ana is a philosophy, which treats anorexia as a consciously adopted lifestyle rather than a mental disorder with a high mortality rate.

**Aim.** The aim of this study was to present the characteristics of the pro-ana philosophy as a lifestyle.

**Material and methods.** A research tool used in this study was an author-made questionnaire, which was distributed to the authors of pro-ana internet blogs. 194 people, aged 12-30, participated in the study, including 190 women and 4 men.

**Results.** The vast majority of the respondents (85,54%) admit that they reduce the amount of meals, and 17% never have breakfast or dinner. Nearly 40% of the participants count the calories of the eaten products every day. Almost all of the participants do intense exercise in order to lose weight (96,4%), and feel proud when they lose weight (97,94%). More than a half of the respondents (51,55%) induce vomiting after eating. Almost every third participant of the study (30,35%) is distressed at the thought that they are soon going to eat.

**Conclusions.** Pro-ana philosophy strongly affects young people. It promotes an irrational and not healthy lifestyle. It leads to a formation of bad eating habits, which result in the excessive weight loss and health deterioration.

KEYWORDS: pro-ana, lifestyle, anorexia nervosa.

### STRESZCZENIE

**Wstęp.** Pro-ana jest filozofią, która traktuje anoreksję jako świadomie wybrany styl życia, a nie jako zaburzenie psychiczne o wysokim współczynniku śmiertelności.

**Cel.** Celem pracy jest charakterystyka filozofii pro-ana jako stylu życia.

**Materiał i metody.** Narzędziem badawczym wykorzystanym w pracy był autorski kwestionariusz ankiety, który został rozesłany osobom prowadzącym blogi typu pro-ana. Badaniem objęto 194 osoby w wieku od 12 do 30 lat, wśród których było 190 kobiet oraz 4 mężczyzn.

**Wyniki.** Zdecydowana większość ankietowanych (84,54%) deklaruje, że redukuje ilość zjadanych posiłków, przy czym ponad 17% nigdy nie jada śniadań lub obiadów. Blisko 40% badanych zawsze liczy kalorie spożywanych produktów w ciągu każdego dnia. Niemal wszyscy badani wykonują intensywne ćwiczenia w celu obniżenia masy ciała (96,4%) oraz odczuwają dumę, gdy schudną (97,94%). Ponad połowa respondentów (51,55%) wywołuje wymioty po jedzeniu. Blisko co 3 ankietowany (30,35%) zawsze niepokoi się na myśl, że zaraz będzie musiał coś zjeść.

**Wnioski.** Filozofia pro-ana silnie oddziałuje na młodych ludzi. Promuje nieracjonalny i antyzdrowotny styl życia. Kształtuje u młodych ludzi nieprawidłowe nawyki żywieniowe, które prowadzą do nadmiernego obniżenia masy ciała i pogorszenia stanu zdrowia.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: pro-ana, styl życia, jadłowstręt psychiczny.

### Introduction

The name *anorexia nervosa* comes from the Greek language and is a combination of two morphemes, *an* – a lack of, deprivation, and *orexis* – appetite, and commonly refers to a loss of appetite [1]. The characteristic of this disorder is a conscious and intentional loss of weight, not connected with a loss of appetite, doing intense and exhausting exercise, and using laxatives and dehydrating substances [2]. Other consequences of the disorder are distorted perception of one's body, obsessive concentration on one's appearance, and intense fear of putting on weight [3]. This, in turn, leads to serious somatic changes and mental disorders [4, 5].

90–95% cases of anorexia concerns women, mostly adolescent girls and young women [6]. According to Józefik, the peak of the disorder activation is between the age of 15 and 19 [3]. However, Włodarczyk-Bisaga distinguishes between two periods of high incidence of anorexia, i.e. between the age of 13 and 15, and between the age of 17 and 25 [7].

Anorexia nervosa is not always considered to be a damaging and mortal disorder. Pro-ana is a philosophy which treats anorexia as a consciously adopted lifestyle, a way to reach perfection, or a method of losing weight. The name "pro-ana" itself denotes support for anorexia (*pro* – for, *ana* – a shortening for anorexia) [8].

Being on a strict diet is supposed to result not only in a slim figure, but also lead to a feeling of having control over one's body and life. The philosophy holds that low body weight is a symptom of perfection. It is evidence of strong will and of resistance to food temptation. Pro-ana is supposed to offer a recipe for a happy life and for achievement of one's goals, regardless of the consequences.

This ideology is appealing mostly to adolescents girls and young women who are on a diet. They frequently communicate on the Internet. They are authors of blogs and are active in the forum devoted to eating disorders. Pro-ana websites offer the room for opinion and information exchange, as well as for sharing one's experiences. They are a place where people look for acceptance, and understanding, as well as togetherness, which is often missing in real life [9].

There are some recurring elements which can be observed on the pro-ana websites. Girls call themselves "butterflies" or "porcelain butterflies". They associate the disorder with someone close or important to them, someone who has some control over them, a friend, queen, goddess, or call it diminutively Ana. This philosophy offers "Ana's Decalogue", "40 reasons why you should be thin", "thinspirations", "butterfly alphabet". Their anthem is the "Courage" song by Superhick, and their motto is Ch. Marlow's quote "Quod me nutrit me destruit". Browsing through the pro-ana websites one can get a full instruction how to get rid of food from the organism, and how to cope with a feeling of hunger. Girls make use of a variety of diets, and act in accordance with "the food guide pyramid by pro-ana". Frustrated with constant binge eating, they describe hatred towards their bodies. They promote dieting supplements and recommend medicine which is frequently of no medical value [10].

In order to stress out the importance of the problem we are dealing with, it seems justifiable to refer to the available data concerning the approximate scale of the phenomenon on the Internet.

A 2006 internet search performed on google.com brought 1,300,000 entries. An analogical research performed four years later brought 4,560,000 entries. The phrase "pro-ana blog", which in 2006 yielded 58,000 entries, resulted in 3,640,000 entries in 2010, which entails an increase by 60 times [11]. A year later the phrase "pro-ana" brought 9,550,000 entries, and "pro-ana blog" 3,450,000 entries (hence a slight decrease) [8]. On the basis of no current information concerning the phenomenon, we repeated the Internet search three times, with monthly intervals. In February 2014, the phrase "pro-ana" brought 41,200,000 entries, a month later 47,000,000, and two months later, 63,700,000 entries. In comparison to 2011 it entails an increase in the number of websites concerning pro-ana by 6 times. The phrase "pro-ana blog" brought 13,000,000 in February 2014, in March 24,500,000, whereas in April a decrease to 20,500,000.

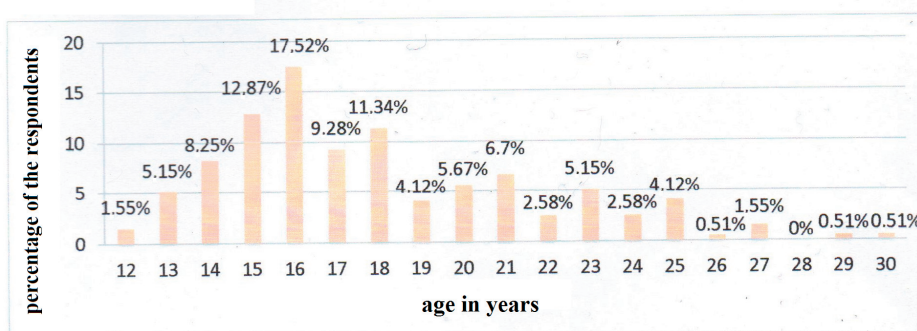
## Aim

The aim of this study is to offer characteristics of the pro-ana philosophy and to attempt to find elements of this specific lifestyle among the authors of pro-ana blogs.

## Materials and methods

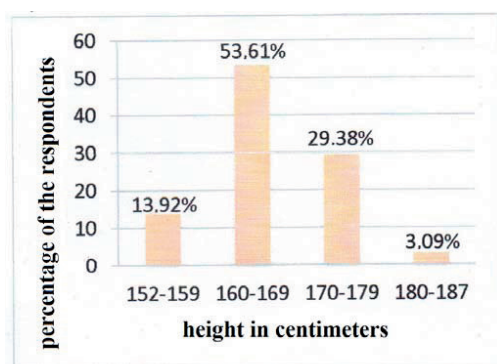
The research was performed between January and April 2014 in the form of an online questionnaire. The research tool was an author-made questionnaire, which was distributed to the authors of pro-ana blogs. Before filling in the questionnaire, the respondents were informed about its aims. The participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. A research material of 194 appropriately filled-in questionnaires was subject to analysis.

The research group was made up of 190 women (97.94%) and 4 men (2.06%). The age of the participants ranged from 12 to 30 (**Figure 1**). The age of more than a half (51.03%) of the participants was between 15 and 18. The body weight of the respondents ranged from 37 to 76 kg. The average body weight was between 41 and 50 kg (37.11%), as well as 51–60 kg (30,41%). The rest

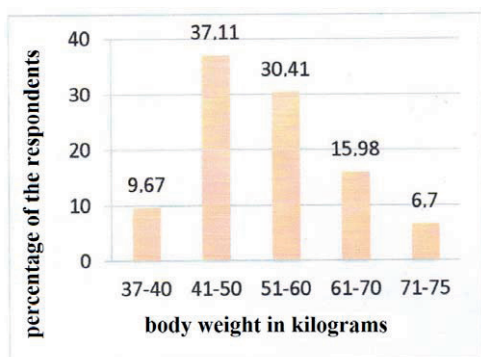


**Figure 1.** Age of the respondents  
Source: authors' study

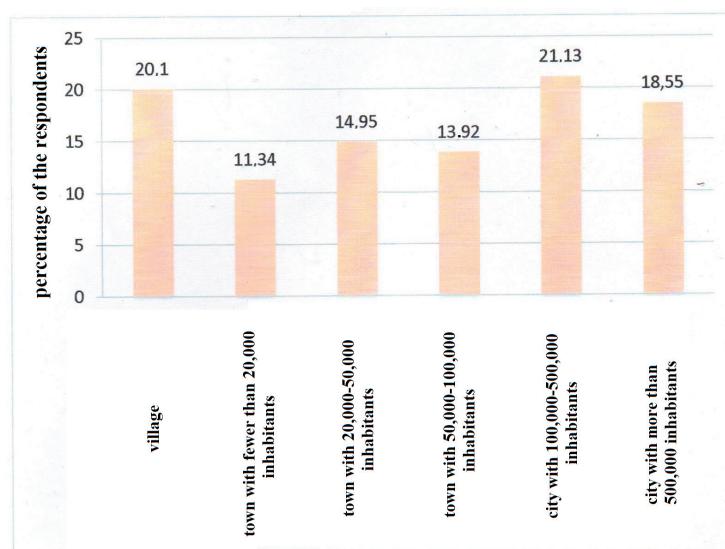
of the respondents had their body weight in the range of 61–70 kg (15.98%), 37–40 kg (9.79%), and 71–76 kg (6.7%). The respondents' height ranged from 152 to 187 cm. More than a half respondents (53.61%) were between 160 and 169 cm tall. Another major group were of 170 and 179 cm tall (29.38%). The height of the rest of the respondents ranged from 152 to 159 cm (13.92%), and 180 to 187 cm (3.09%).



**Figure 2.** Height of the respondents  
Source: authors' study



**Figure 3.** Body weight of the respondents  
Source: authors' study



**Figure 4.** Respondents' place of living  
Source: authors' study

Nearly 80% of the respondents live in the city. These were mostly cities having over 100,000 citizens. Most respondents came from the Mazovia (17.53%), Silesia (12.89%), and Pomerania (11.86%) Provinces.

## Results and discussion

The analysed group is characterized by an exaggerated interest in calorific value the content of fat in meals, as well as in particular food products. Almost all (96.4%) respondents know the calorific value of consumed products. This value is known by nearly every second respondent (43.81%). Almost the same number of the participants (40.72%) state that they are aware of it, 21.13% and 19.59 % correspondingly. A complete lack of knowledge on this topic is shown by only 3.6% of the respondents.

Not only do the questioned people know the calorific value of products, but they also carefully count the number of calories consumed during the day – this is done by almost 95% of the participants. Over 40% of the respondents always count the number of calories consumed during the day, while almost every fifth participant (19.59) does it often. Only 5.15% of them do not count the number of the consumed calories. An obsessive counting of calories consumed with meals, as well as the knowledge of calorific value of the eaten products, which are characteristic features of the group analyzed, are the behaviour typical for the so-called Anorexia Readiness Syndrome [12]. Being too interested in calorific value can affect not only bad eating habits and, consequently, result in an unhealthy lifestyle, but most of all, it can lead to eating disorders.

The participants give up eating meals. Over 80% of the respondents maintain that sometimes they do not have breakfast or dinner. While nearly 16% of the par-

ticipants have completely gave up these meals, almost every third participant (28.35%) misses them. Only 17% of the respondents state that they have them regularly. Eating meals regularly is a basis for shaping good eating habits, especially among children. It is also important in terms of a healthy lifestyle in later stages of life.

There is a belief in the Polish society that one should not eat after 6 pm due to the fact that it is harmful for the body. The participants of the analysis maintain this belief. Every fourth (27.83%) participant never eats after 6 pm, and nearly every third (32.47%) respondent often keeps the resolution. The hour of having the last meal during the day does not matter for only 10% of the participants.

Almost all respondents (94.85%) consume low-calorie products, e.g. light, fit or slim ones. These products are always eaten by every fourth (26.29%) participant, and often by almost every third (36.6%) one. Sometimes it happens to 20.1% of the respondents, and rarely to 11.86% of the participants. Low-calorie products are not eaten by only 5.15% of the participants.

Almost half of the number of the participants (41.24%) never eat high-calorie products such as sweets or carbohydrates not getting upset before. It rarely happens to nearly every third participant (30.41%). Only 2% of the respondents state that eating high-calorie products is not a problem for them.

Fruits and vegetables are elementary in diet for most participants. Fruits and vegetables always form the basis for their diet for nearly 30% respondents, often for 27.84%, and sometimes for every fourth participant (25.77%). Fruits and vegetables rarely form the basis for their daily diet for 14% of the participants, and never for 2% of the respondents. Rigorous starvation diets result in a strong feeling of hunger, which the respondents try to fight against. Due to a relatively low content of calories in fruits and vegetables, they are eaten by almost all respondents (94.33%) in order to suppress the feeling of hunger. For this reason fruits and vegetables are always eaten by every third participant (32.47%), often eaten by 30%, sometimes by every fourth respondent (22.68%), rarely by 8% and never by 5.67%. Drinking a large amount of water is another way used by the participants in order not to feel hunger. It is always done by 36.08% of the respondents, often by 28.86% and sometimes by 22.16%. This method is rarely used by 7% of the participants, and never used by 5.15% of them. According to the pro-ana philosophy, water is the basis of the food guide pyramid. Fruits and vegetables are on the next level; this is the reason why the participants willingly consume them. However, the promotion of such bad eating guidelines is detrimental to health and life of all people involved in the pro-ana movement.

Eating low-calorie products, avoiding high-calorie products, as well as eating fruits and vegetables more

frequently than other products is a characteristic of not only teenagers who are on a diet, but most of all of people with eating disorders, especially when it becomes obsessively unhealthy, which can be observed among the participants. Almost half of the respondents claim that they always or often eat little and unwillingly, 24.74% correspondingly. Sometimes it happens to 27% of the respondents, and rarely to nearly 15% of them. Only 8.25% of the participants state that they do not have any problems with eating.

The participants claim that they are afraid of the thought that they will have to eat something soon. This thought always worries 28.83% of the respondents. Every fourth respondent is often worried (25.26%), and every fifth one is worried sometimes (19.07%). Only about 13% of the respondents declare that eating does not evoke any negative emotions. For every third participant (34.02%) eating has never been a way of easing the stress, but it has rarely been so for 20% of them. 12.88% of the participants have always, and almost 15% of them have often eased negative emotions by eating.

Almost all participants (94.85%) have confessed that they are afraid of gaining weight. Over 60% of them always feel this fear, and nearly 20% of them feel it frequently. Only over 5% of the respondents believe that the thought of gaining weight does not evoke any fear among them. Over half of the respondents state that they use dietary supplements which aid dieting (56.7%) or such ones which induce vomiting (51.55%) due to the fear of gaining weight. Emotions are one of the most important signals causing that one pursues or avoids something. The participants confess that while eating they are accompanied with a fear of gaining weight. Since this feeling is negative, it is obvious that they avoid situations in which they feel uncomfortable. However, they are not aware of the fact that this way they avoid what keeps them alive. Negative emotions accompanying eating are also characteristic of people struggling with eating disorders.

The respondents, in fear of gaining weight, have used not only restrictive diets, but almost all of them (96.3%) have done intense exercise. It has been always done by every fourth of the participants (24.74%), often by 38%, and sometimes by 20.1% of them. Almost all respondents (90.72%) have confessed that they feel anxiety if they do not exercise every day.

All respondents claim that appearance has an impact on good/bad luck. Nearly 79% of the participants state that it always has an impact, and nearly 16% state that it often does. Appearance is of the essence for the participants. Almost everyone claims that the way they look is always or often important to them, 84.5% and 9.28% correspondingly.

Over half of the respondents (56.19%) is never satisfied with the shape and weight of their bodies, and



nearly 40% is rarely satisfied. The majority of the participants (81.96%) always consider themselves obese despite the fact they are perceived to be slim by the society. Focusing on one's own appearance too much, as well as a distorted perception of oneself are a characteristic and fundamental feature of eating disorders.

To sum up, the analysis shows that the principles of the pro-ana philosophy are ill-advised, reckless and not healthy. They result in an excessive weight loss and worse health conditions. Any attempts of identification of the youth with this ideology should provoke anxiety, as it promotes a lifestyle which threatens the life and health of many young people.

## Conclusions

1. The pro-ana lifestyle is of a great interest among young people.
2. Despite suffering from malnutrition, the participants took up activities of the pro-ana philosophy, which were supposed to result in weight loss.
3. Improper behaviour among the participants is indicative of their anorectic behaviour, which, consequently, may lead to a symptomatic illness.
4. It should be considered appropriate to close the pro-ana websites promoting an unhealthy lifestyle.

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## Appendix

**Table 1.** Data concerning behaviour among the pro-ana society

No.	Statements:	Never	Seldom	Some times	Often	Always
1.	I know the calorific value of every meal that I eat.	7 3.6%	23 11.86%	38 19.59%	41 21.13%	85 43.81%
2.	I carefully count calories of meals eaten during the day.	10 5.15%	20 10.31%	36 18.56%	38 19.59%	80 41.24%
3.	I give up breakfast or I regularly do not have dinner.	33 17.01%	31 15.98%	45 23.2%	55 28.35%	30 15.46%
4.	I try not to eat after 6 pm.	19 9.79%	20 10.31%	38 19.59%	63 32.47%	54 27.83%
5.	I eat low-calorie products, e.g. light, fit, etc.	10 5.15%	23 11.86%	39 20.1%	71 36.6%	51 26.29%
6.	I eat sweets and carbohydrates not getting upset.	80 41.24%	59 30.41%	36 18.56%	15 7.73%	4 2.06%
7.	Fruits and vegetables are a basis of my diet.	4 2.06%	28 14.43%	50 25.77%	54 27.84%	58 29.9%
8.	I satisfy my hunger eating apples or other fruits and vegetables because I know that they are low-calorie products.	11 5.67%	16 8.25%	44 22.68%	60 30.39%	63 32.47%
9.	I drink a large amount of water in order not to feel hunger.	10 5.15%	15 7.73%	43 22.16%	56 28.86%	70 36.08%
10.	I eat little and unwillingly.	16 8.25%	29 14.9%	53 27.32%	48 24.74%	48 24.74%
11.	I am worried that I will have to eat something soon.	26 13.4%	27 13.9%	37 19.07%	49 25.26%	55 28.35%
12.	Eating is a way of easing the stress to me.	66 34.02%	39 20.1%	35 18.04%	29 14.9%	25 12.88%
13.	I am afraid that I will gain weight.	10 5.15%	11 5.67%	17 8.76%	38 19.59%	118 60.82%
14.	I use dietary supplements which aid dieting.	84 43.3%	43 22.16%	19 9.8%	33 17.01%	15 7.73%
15.	I induce vomiting after eating.	94 48.45%	29 14.95%	30 15.46%	30 15.46%	11 5.67%
16.	I do intense exercises to lose weight.	7 3.6%	26 13.4%	39 20.1%	74 38.14%	48 24.74%
17.	I feel anxious if I do not exercise every day.	18 9.28%	33 17.01%	37 19.07%	55 28.35%	51 26.29%
18.	Appearance influences good/bad luck.	0 0%	2 1.03%	8 4.12%	31 15.98%	153 78.86%
19.	Appearance is very important in my life.	0 0%	4 2.06%	8 4.12%	18 9.28%	164 84.53%
20.	I am satisfied with the shape and weight of my body.	109 56.19%	79 40.72%	3 1.55%	2 1.03%	1 0.51%
21.	I think that I am too fat despite the fact that other people consider me to look normally.	2 1.03%	7 3.6%	10 5.15%	16 8.25%	159 81.96%

Source: authors' study

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