

# Young woman, family, battle eating disorders, seek support group

By KYLIE SHAFFERKOEPPER  
Post Staff

**JACKSON TWP.** - On this particular night, Heather Chvotzkin is angry at her parents. Not because they won't let her go out or borrow the car. She's angry because they won't let her get rid of the food she has just eaten for dinner.

"I don't enjoy food at all," said Heather, 22, who has suffered from both bulimia nervosa and anorexia nervosa for 10 years. "I'm really uncomfortable with food. I feel if I don't get rid of it I'll explode."

For dinner she forced down a tiny portion of pasta with one meatball. As she talks, she squirms in her chair. Her movements seem to express her constant awareness of the food.

Her fixation not only affects her state of mind, but also the condition of her body.

"Heather destroyed a valve in her stomach from all the vomiting. Her stomach doesn't process food without medicine," said Barbara Chvotzkin, her mother. Part of Heather's discomfort tonight is due to the fact that she forgot to take her medicine before dinner.

She has also destroyed much of the lining in her stomach. A few days earlier, Heather was rushed to the hospital because she was vomiting blood. "The doctor told me I'd be dead by 30 if I didn't stop this," she said.

Heather, who is also diagnosed with depression, has her good days and bad days. She is taking Prozac, but says it doesn't help much.

She describes her eating disorders as a voice in her head telling her to do things, like exercise incessantly and cut herself. "Anorexia is like having people in your head. It wakes me up in the middle of the night to exercise or vomit. It says if I don't do it, I'll get fat," said Heather.

This is a common way to describe eating disorders, said Joy Armillay, Ed.D., R.D., director of Wyoming Valley Health Care System's Health Awareness and Staff Enhancement departments. "It's a thought process. The drive for thinness is so strong that it denies the physical need for food. A person can almost hear themselves say that they cannot have food," she said.



POST PHOTO/KYLIE SHAFFERKOEPPER

**Heather Chvotzkin** of Jackson Township with her mother, Barbara. Both believe there could be more awareness about eating disorders in Luzerne County. Heather, 22, has had both bulimia and anorexia for 10 years.

Experts say eating disorders are usually expressions of other issues going on in people's lives. Problems can run the gamut from low self-esteem to family troubles, societal pressures or depression.

"Eating disorders are very very complex. They are not 100 percent about weight and thinness," Armillay said. "Many people focus on their weight to deal with other issues. It's not just about wanting to be thin. It is a mental illness and it's complex. That's why it sometimes takes years (to cure)."

The first signs of anorexia showed up in second grade. For a while Heather would only eat very little, if at all. The eating disorder then became dormant until Heather was faced with a stressful situation in seventh grade.

Heather, then a student in the Lake-Lehman district, was told she was going to start the new year at Dallas Middle School because Dallas had a full-time teacher who specialized in learning disabilities. The idea of starting school in a different building with new faces frightened her and the eating disorder came back with renewed strength.

"I almost didn't pass that year because I was in the hospital so much," said Heather, with a matter-of-fact tone. She remained at Dallas Middle School for four months before returning to Lake-

Lehman.

In the years since middle school, the eating disorders have varied in intensity, but have been a constant presence in Heather's life.

Her parents note that one common factor in the onslaught of the disorders is the threat of change. "She cannot take change," said her mother, co-owner of Pierce Bakery in Kingston and Chvotzkin Professional Cleaning. "When we decided to close the bakery, we started talking about the possibility of moving, and that's when the anorexia really came back," she said.

Recently Heather was again taken to the hospital. She is prone to cutting herself and this time cut her throat. Although not a life threatening wound, the implications run deep.

She said she's not afraid of

death and sometimes it seems like a better alternative to a life she feels is owned by anorexia and bulimia. "It's taken over my life," said Heather. "I want to know how I got two eating disorders."

Barbara said she does what she can. "I try to take razors and hide them. If she doesn't use razors, she'll use knives. I can't hide everything," she said.

Heather is not quite five feet tall and weighs about 115 pounds. Her lowest weight in recent years was 69 pounds. She never feels she's at a good weight and only sees "a fat person" when she looks in the mirror. She doesn't like anything about herself, but admits she's a good dancer and loves music.

But, like everything in Heather's life, even the most typically carefree activity revolves around her conditions. "I dance for exercise. Sometimes I'll dance for an hour or two," she said.

Her mom said she does have good days and Heather said she felt good when it was sunny out. Like most everyone, the clouds make her blue.

Heather has been through many treatments since second grade. Some helped and some did not. Some are covered by insurance and some are not.

She has been to both inpatient and outpatient care in hospitals in Philadelphia and Hershey. As a teenager she found some success with treatment provided by Child Services. But, after she was 18, she no longer qualified for the services. Her mother said an independent therapist is too expensive.

Since that time she has gone to community group counseling. This form of counseling does not specialize in eating disorders or

any one illness. It is open to people with a variety of different conditions.

The Chvotzkins are seeking other families who are affected by eating disorders to start a support group. Their goal is to help others and also push for a local inpatient treatment center.

Heather's father, Ronald, believes that while there is outpatient care available in Luzerne County, there needs to be community awareness to push for more. "It's like any (disease). People don't know about it unless it gets out," he said, citing AIDS as an example. "There are many more people with this problem than we know. People just have

to admit it."

Heather said a support group with other people with eating disorders would help everyone involved. "It would let people know there are others like them," she said. "I want more people like me so we can get together and talk."

Barbara said it is important to get the parents involved with their children's recovery. "I think parents have to get involved. They have to do something, otherwise their kids will die," she said.

The Chvotzkins urge anyone with an eating disorder or any parent of someone with an eating disorder, who is interested in starting a local support system, to call them at 696-3688.

*"It's taken over my life. I want to know how I got two eating disorders."*

**Heather Chvotzkin**  
22, Jackson Twp.

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