

# The Effect of the Holidays on Eating Disorders

Kaitlin Dannibale  
Rowan University

The holiday season, the time from Thanksgiving to New Year's Day, is a period filled with many joyous occasions, including family, friends and food. However, one must also consider the negatives that come along with these moments. Family feuds, financial difficulties and personal issues tend to heighten during the holiday season. For the average person, this provides an abnormal amount of stress. However, for someone suffering from an eating disorder, the holiday season is more difficult than one can imagine. With about thirty million people battling an eating disorder in their lifetime, it is important to remember the ongoing fight these people deal with, especially during Thanksgiving and Christmas. While the holidays prove to be difficult for many people, it can be concluded that the holiday season tends to have a more considerable effect on those suffering from eating disorders, due to the significant emphasis on food and elevated levels of stress.

There is no denying the fact that one massive part of the holiday season is the food. Considering the Thanksgiving Feasts many Americans prepare, the endless amount of Christmas treats, and the countless alcoholic beverages consumed on New Year's Eve, it becomes clear that food is everywhere. To some people, it would simply not be the holiday season without the constant supply of delicious foods and sweets. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics on any given day in November or December of 2011, at least 95% of Americans spent over an hour eating or drinking (US Bureau of Labor). Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve and Christmas are only three days out of the two month span, but still a majority of Americans focus on food during this time period. In fact, Thanksgiving and Christmas are two of the "eating holidays" during which the average American will consume up to 14% more food (O'Callaghan). Compared to other holiday groupings, such as civic holidays, like Martin Luther King Jr. Day, and mixed holidays, like the Fourth of July or Labor Day, eating

holidays are known as the point of highest caloric consumption in the United States.

Thanksgiving may be the holiday most widely known for its correlation to a large feast. From children being taught in elementary school about the First Thanksgiving to the holiday movies adults watch every year, it is drilled into the minds of all that Thanksgiving is all about the food. Today a typical American Thanksgiving Day feast includes turkey, stuffing, potatoes, yams and a variety of vegetables and desserts. The History Channel Online cites that, "close to 46 million turkeys are eaten at Thanksgiving" and "nearly 88% of Americans eat turkey at Thanksgiving" (History). With Thanksgiving rating as American's second favorite holiday, it is easy to conclude that one of the reasons for this is the meal that comes with it.

In comparison, food is just as relevant to Christmas as it is to Thanksgiving. The Indiana Business Research Center released statistics relating to Christmas and the prominence of sweets during this holiday. According to the IBRC, during the Christmas season, "In 2007, eggnog consumption nationwide was 122 million pounds," while, "more than 1.8 billion candy canes will be made for the winter holiday season" (Indiana Business Research Center). And what would Christmas be without the chocolate? It is reported that, "70 percent of adults give or receive a box of chocolates [during the winter holidays]," and there will be approximately, "150 million chocolate Santas mass produced for Christmas" (Christmas by the Numbers). While Thanksgiving may focus on one single feast that occurs on one specific day, Christmas brings an indulgence in sweets and treats that lasts an entire month. Regardless of which people prefer, it is clear that the holiday season is defined for many by the amount of meals, beverages and treats they will consume during this time.

For people who view Christmas as a time for family and faith, they may find it hard to believe that so many place food at a higher value than these two traditional elements. However, according to the *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*, published by The University of California Press, "Food and drink have always starred in Christmas celebrations" (Kaufman 17). From Anglo Saxon times, "[when] wassail and lambs' wool flowed at boisterous December outings," there has always been a major focus on food during the Christmas

season (Kaufman 17). By 1796, holiday recipes began to be published in America and emphasis on the ideal Christmas dinner became even more prominent. When Christmas was declared a legal holiday in 1860, "Christmas observances were gaining momentum," and choices for holiday feasts continued to transform into something new. No longer was mince pie a popular favorite. Instead, the focus moved on to things that represented holiday totems, such as, "pears cut like Christmas trees" (Kaufman 22). Regardless of the time period, it is clear that food has always been placed on a pedestal during Christmastime. Without the ideal Christmas dinner, it is hard to predict what the holiday would become. It is safe to say Americans will never know a Christmas without the feast.

To fully understand the effect of the holiday season on eating disorders, one must have basic background knowledge on the topic of eating disorders in general. In the United States alone, twenty million women and ten million men suffer from an eating disorder at one point during their lives. Included in this category are anorexia, bulimia, binge eating disorder and EDNOS, eating disorder not otherwise specified. For the purposes of this paper, anorexia, bulimia and binge eating will be the three eating disorders examined.

The Lancet, which is cited as the world's leading general medical journal, focuses on the various symptoms that one experiences while suffering from an eating disorder. It states, "Briefly, anorexia nervosa is characterized by extremely low bodyweight and a fear of its increase; bulimia nervosa comprises repeated binge eating, followed by behaviors to counteract it..." (Treasure 583). While there are some significant differences between anorexia and bulimia, the goal is the same amongst most eating disorder patients. The need to be in control and find comfort within destructive behaviors pushes sufferers to continue forward in these harmful disorders.

According to the National Eating Disorder Association, anorexia nervosa is defined as, "a serious, potentially life-threatening eating disorder characterized by self-starvation and excessive weight loss" (National Eating Disorder Association). Some of the symptoms that may manifest are a resistance to maintain a normal body weight, an intense fear of gaining weight or being "fat," disturbance in the experience of body weight

and the loss of menstrual cycles in females post-puberty (National Eating Disorder Association). People suffering from anorexia normally obtain control of their disorder in one of two ways: caloric restriction or over-exercising. Either one of these options allows the person to feel "empty" and in control. Janet Treasure, author of Eating disorders in The Lancet, adds additional symptoms and categorizes them by types of behavior. For example, in the restrictive behavior category, she includes, "strict rules about eating, little variety in foods, avoidance of social eating and secret eating" (Treasure 584). All three of these behaviors will play a role in the difficulties those suffering from anorexia experience during the holiday season. Bulimia is on the opposite end of the eating disorder spectrum. The National Eating Disorder Association cites bulimia as, "a serious, potentially life-threatening eating disorder characterized by a cycle of bingeing and compensatory behaviors such as self-induced vomiting designed to undo or compensate for the effects of binge eating" (National Eating Disorder Association). Symptoms included within bulimia are a regular intake of large amounts of food combined with a feeling of losing control, extreme concern with body weight or shape and regular use of inappropriate compensatory behaviors, such as purging or use of laxatives (National Eating Disorder Association). Those suffering from bulimia also have the risk of becoming compulsive exercisers in order to compensate for the binges in which they participate. To add to these symptoms, Eating disorders' author, Janet Treasure, says, "eating more rapidly than normal, eating until uncomfortably full, eating alone because of embarrassment and feeling disgusted, depressed or very guilty because of eating," are also likely signs of bulimia (Treasure 584).

While there are specific symptoms for each type of eating disorder, there are also general behaviors which most eating disorder sufferers embody. For example, almost all people living with an eating disorder will engage in body checking behaviors such as, "repeated weighing, checking that specific clothes fit and [comparing themselves] with others' bodies," as well as body image disturbance behaviors like, "overvaluation of shape and weight in determination of self-worth and minimization or denial of symptom severity" (Treasure 584). Some of these behaviors are

obvious to those on the outside but denial is a common response from the eating disorder patient. To live inside an eating disorder is to escape from reality and most people suffering from eating disorders will do whatever it takes to avoid facing the truth.

Binge eating, which is similar to bulimia without the constant inappropriate compensatory behaviors, is another eating disorder that rears its head during times of stress and unhappiness. An article published by Todd Heatherton in the *Psychological Bulletin* in July of 1991 discusses the idea that binge eating may be used as an escape from reality and self-awareness. Prior to introducing the thesis, Heatherton explains, "binge eating is a paradoxical, self-defeating pattern of behavior," because, "it contradicts the presumed rationality of human behavior" (Heatherton 88). In relation to binge eating, the actual action of bingeing is a paradox because those suffering from eating disorders have the desire to control their weight and become anxious of the thought of gaining. However, binge eating, also known as eating large amounts of food in a short amount of time without purging, goes against this ideal. But, Heatherton insists, there is a valid reason behind this. According to the escape theory, he believes that those suffering from binge eating do this to lose touch with reality.

The article dissects the concept that, "people sometimes find it burdensome and aversive to be aware of themselves, so they seek to escape" (Heatherton 88). It goes on to explain that those who binge have a very high level of self-awareness. High levels of self-awareness lead people to, "evaluate themselves according to demanding criteria [and] they will tend to fall short periodically" (Heatherton 89). This then leads to feelings of inadequacy and a low self-worth. Because of these feelings, the person wants to escape. To do this, one must focus on low levels of meaning involving only concrete or narrow awareness. In contrast to high levels of meaning, which lead to, "comparison of events (and the self) against broad standards such as norms and expectations," it is clear why a person who is struggling with an eating disorder would desire low levels instead. Rather than compare themselves to society or the image that the media portrays as "ideal," they push themselves away from reality and

revert back to a place of ignorance. By escaping their thoughts and self-awareness, they are able to find a sense of comfort in the bingeing behavior.

With the prevalence of eating disorders at an all-time high, it is not uncommon for everyone to have someone in their life who may be suffering. Although this person may not choose to reveal their struggles, there is still a great chance that everyone knows someone. I personally have two friends who have experience with eating disorders. They have agreed to allow me to interview them for this paper and to provide support and valuable information. The first interview I chose to conduct was with my friend, MK. MK is still in the process of battling her eating disorder, anorexia nervosa. She identifies as "being in recovery," and says it has been part of her life for a little over two years. Every day is a constant struggle for her but she continues to fight. The second interview I chose to conduct was with my friend K. K, "battled mostly bulimia and excessive workout disorder on and off for about 12 years," and was classified as having EDNOS (Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified) because her BMI never fell below the average for her height (MK). She has been recovered for almost seven years now although she never received actual treatment. Instead of going to treatment, she chose to surround herself with positive mentors, friends and family who helped her see the potential of a life without an eating disorder. While recovering fully from any kind of eating disorder without professional help is highly unusual, K is proof that it can be done. Both of these women are an incredible source of hope and inspiration for those suffering from eating disorders and have lent their voices to help my research reach a new high.

With the significance of food during the holiday season and the high prevalence of eating disorders in the United States, it is clear that those suffering from eating disorders will find it difficult to make it through Thanksgiving and Christmas. Over the years, there has been a massive amount of research done to examine the correlation between the holidays and their effect on eating disorders. From newspaper articles to interviews to case studies, the relationship between the two must be known and deeply considered when celebrating the holidays.

The most obvious reason behind the difficulty of the holidays for those suffering from an

eating disorder is the extreme emphasis put on food. In the article "Holiday food is not fun for everyone," published by The Deseret News, in November of 1998, Sharon Haddock takes the time to interview many women who have eating disorders. They share their thoughts and very real fears about spending time around family and food from Thanksgiving to Christmas. Randy Hardman, a doctor at a regional Center for Change explains, "This is the time of year that sort of amplifies the anxieties for these women. The emotional intensity and the food is a double whammy for them...most family members think it is about food and weight, but it is about self-rejection" (Haddock 1). Doctor Hardman goes on to add, "Anorexics dislike having anyone watch them eat anyway. Added on to the guilt they already feel about any kind of food indulgence, the emotional weight becomes too great" (Haddock 1). Those with anorexia and those with bulimia may handle food in a different way, but the stressors are often the same.

While the average person may view the holidays as a positive time spent with family, a majority of eating disorder patients have unresolved familial issues that can resurface. Being surrounded by family, "brings up all the issues, fears, conflicts and worries that feed the eating disorder that causes everyone so much pain" (Haddock 1). As one can imagine, it is a vicious cycle in which the eating disorder, food and stress feed off one another, all three only becoming more and more painful. To show just how painful it is to eat around other people during the holidays, some eating disorder patients declare they, "would rather jump off a cliff without a parachute than to have somebody watch them eat food" (Haddock 1). With the large quantities of food consumed from November to December, it is now more obvious as to how this could be a serious issue for many.

To further examine the negative effect of the holidays on eating disorders, it is important to compare the thoughts and behaviors of an eating disorder patient to an average person. An average person may look forward to a large meal on Thanksgiving or Christmas, focusing not only on time with their family and friends, but also the enjoyment of eating the holiday feast. However, for those suffering from eating disorders, it is a completely different story. For someone who suffers from anorexia or bulimia, "holidays can be

perceived as a dangerous threat to their need to control their bodies," and for those who binge, "festive meals are an excuse to indulge" (Young 1). But the real challenge comes after the holiday meal is complete. The behaviors that take place at the completion of festivities vary drastically from a normal eater.

After a holiday meal, a normal eater will be able to leave the table, content and relaxed. They may, "feel a little guilt when they push back from a table after eating a very large meal...but that guilt feeling should dissipate by morning" (Young 1). However, this is not the case for an eating disorder patient. Dr. Timothy Walsh, who is a psychiatrist at the New York State Psychiatric Institute says, "For people with eating disorders, guilt feelings become so distorted they lose all perspective" (Young 1). The destructive thoughts consume every inch of their brain and the meal becomes the only thing they can obsess over for a fixed period of time. This is when the compensatory behaviors will most likely begin. For those with anorexia, they may restrict dramatically over the next day, week or month. Those who over-exercise will try to compensate by participating in vigorous physical activity. People with bulimia will attempt to purge their meals immediately after completion. While each eating disorder is unique and the compensatory measures are different, they are all serious and harmful. Because of the excessive amount of food and quantity of meals during the holiday season, there is an immense pressure on those suffering from eating disorders. With the additional stress, it is not uncommon that their eating disorders may become more vicious and they may fall deeper into them.

Another valid way in learning about the effect of the holiday season on eating disorders is by interviewing those who have first hand experience with them. Interviews are a valuable technique that can be used to gain personal insight and provide a new way of looking at the situation. While case studies and newspaper articles provide important information, sometimes it is more powerful to talk to those who have dealt with the issue. To provide more support and information, there have been three personal interviews conducted on the topic.

Ginean Crawford, a Licensed Professional Counselor and a National Certified Counselor, is a

therapist who specializes in eating disorders. She graduated from Rider University with a degree in psychology and has been counseling in her own practice for many years. Crawford offers a unique outlook on this topic not only because she is a therapist who focuses on helping those that suffer from eating disorders, but because she has been recovered from her own eating disorder for years. Because of her experience, Crawford offers a look into eating disorders that many other professionals may not have. She can give the professional standpoint of the disease, but also has personal experience to back up her claims.

When asked what the hardest part of the holiday season for those suffering from eating disorders is, Crawford explains, “Not only are there food triggers everywhere (i.e. Halloween candy to Christmas dinner), but the company of family can bring up painful emotional baggage” (Crawford). For some people, the holiday season can be extremely lonely. Furthermore, many people who have eating disorders use them as mechanisms in an attempt to forget about trauma. Trauma is, “anything that changes the trajectory of one's life,” and for some people this takes the form of familial abuse. For most people the holiday season means being around family and those who have history of familial trauma will then turn to the copious amounts of food to cope. The cycle only continues from there. Crawford stresses how unbelievably difficult it is during the holidays by stating that having an eating disorder, “is not the same as recovering from other addictive-like disorders in that one cannot simply abstain completely from food. One has to battle the eating disorder monster three or more times per day” (Crawford).

Crawford was also asked what types of unhealthy coping mechanisms people may use during the holiday season. As many sources have stated before, she listed restriction, bingeing, laxative use, over exercising and abuse of dieting pills. She also mentions another dangerous way to deal with the feelings that are brought up during the holidays. She states, “People with eating disorders also use other defense mechanisms that are unhealthy to deal with anxiety or other emotions...people pleasing, numbing, shutting down, blaming others, or performing other compulsive rituals such as cleaning” (Crawford). Because of the fact that underneath the eating disorder lays anxiety and

shame, people will often find other ways to soothe their feelings of instability. The anxiety will manifest itself in many different, unexpected ways, and many average people may not know to look for these signs. Crawford brings up the important point that not all coping mechanisms may be typical or “normal” for those suffering from eating disorders.

But, Crawford assures, there are ways people battling this disease can prepare themselves for the holidays. The most crucial step they can take is to, “go into the holidays with ‘eyes wide open’ and to expect the eating disorder to be triggered” (Crawford). By creating a preventative plan and understanding that these things will happen and anxiety will rear its head, those suffering from eating disorders can ready themselves before it occurs. Crawford also stresses the importance in a strong support system, which should include family, friends, a therapist, and other people in the recovery team. While the support system can hold their loved one accountable during the holidays, they can also, “provide support and [validation] for how hard it really is in recovery” (Crawford). While the holidays will not be easy for those suffering, Crawford gives a certain sense of hope that it is possible and the holidays can be a safe, enjoyable time.

Personal interviews with those in recovery from eating disorders are another critical resource. Research and studies can only show so much, and it is important to learn from people who have truly lived it. The average person may never fully understand what it feels like to experience the holidays with an eating disorder, but they are one step closer when they can talk to someone that does. The two interviews conducted with MK and K can truly open the eyes of many to what it feels like to battle a disease and try to focus on the family, food and festivities.

When asked what the most difficult part of the holiday season is for them, both girls give very different answers. MK explains that what makes it hard for her is the specific time at which her family eats. She says, “We eat around four. To me, four is not a time to eat a large meal because it throws me off for the entire day. I like to eat dinner and be done for the day and go to bed two hours later so that I do not think about food. If I eat too early that leaves a lot more time to think about food and think about if I'm hungry or not” (MK). She also

expresses anxiety over how healthy the food actually is, the amount of carbohydrates she consumes and the sugar she eats. Conversely, K decides that the ignorance of others is actually the most difficult challenge. Because many people are not educated on the topic and do not fully understand, she says, “people can be so judgmental if they don't know what you're going through” (K). Being surrounded by people all holiday season who cannot even grasp the stress and pressure of an eating disorder is very exhausting and stressful. Many eating disorder sufferers do not tell their families and friends about their struggle and must deal with this ignorance all year round. The holidays only magnify their issues. K also adds that when dealing with holiday food, “There's never a right answer and no matter what you choose, you feel guilty about the decision later on...Decisions are skewed, guilt is always inflicted and everything made ten times more difficult than it needs to be” (K). While many normal people feel their stress levels rise during the time between Thanksgiving and Christmas, it is only magnified for sufferers of eating disorders.

Both girls also provide very truthful answers about their own unhealthy coping mechanisms during the holiday season. Since MK suffers from anorexia nervosa and K is recovered from bulimia, it is interesting to see how their answers differ but ultimately accomplish the same thing. MK admits to saying “I'm not very hungry,” or “That's not healthy so I'm only going to have a little.” She also claims, “I have asked my dad to cook separate/extra food for me, too” (MK). This goes back to the idea of restriction and only eating foods which are viewed as “healthy” in the eyes of the eating disorder patient. K, on the other hand, says she used to, “binge and purge, but there were times where [she] would eat minimally and workout extra hard in hopes of burning all of the extra calories” (K). K would purge everything she had eaten in hopes of losing those calories and not gaining any weight during the holiday season. Both girls have their own unhealthy coping mechanisms, but they are unique to their individual eating disorder. While the holiday season can be difficult for those with eating disorders, it is very important to focus on the healthy, safe ways these people can deal with their feelings and anxiety. MK and K end their

interviews by explaining the strategies they use to get through the holiday season. MK focuses solely on being present with her family because she does not see them very often. By distracting her thoughts and being present in the moment, she is hopeful that she can enjoy this holiday season more than those in the past. She also declares, “Maybe I'll share the truth with more of my family that way they can support me through this!” (MK). K agrees with MK and also adds to focus on portion sizes and, “consuming healthy foods when available” may help clear out the negative, self-loathing thoughts (K). Both girls are inspirational and have been fighting to get their lives back for years. By using their healthy coping mechanisms and staying present in the moment with their families, they both seem to think this will be the best holiday season yet.

But normal, everyday people are not the only ones who deal with eating disorders and the stress of the holiday season. Many celebrities have revealed their struggles to the public in hopes of raising awareness and promoting recovery and health. One of these celebrities is Demi Lovato. Demi Lovato is best known for her start as an actress on the Disney Channel as well as her musical career. Lovato entered treatment for many mental health issues, including self-harm, drug use and an eating disorder, in the fall of 2010. By January of 2011, Lovato was released from Timberline Knolls, completing her treatment and continuing recovery for many of her mental health issues. Lovato has continued to be vocal about her many struggles, is an advocate against bullying and is always proving her strength to the world. In 2012, Lovato released a documentary titled “Stay Strong,” in which she shares her personal life and continued struggles while on the road to health and happiness. Part of this documentary broadcasted her first Thanksgiving post-rehab and shows Lovato engaging in a large feast.

At the beginning of the segment, Lovato is in the car and explains, “Sometimes it's hard to be back in Dallas because the entire time I was there I used to be unhappy” (Lovato). This statement alone relates to what Ginean Crawford mentions in her interview about the holidays bringing up negative feelings of the past. As she is driving to her family's home in Dallas, Lovato receives a call from a friend and she informs the friend she, “is going to tackle

food today,” but she is, “kind of scared” (Lovato). The segment continues to show Lovato spending time with her family, joining in a group prayer and making her way towards the large spread of Thanksgiving food. She is visibly uncomfortable and anxious as she tries to avoid taking a plate for as long as possible, instead leaving the kitchen, filling up her glass with ice water and taking a call from a friend who is also in recovery. As she talks to her friend, she tells her, “Okay, you call me, too, if you need me, don’t hesitate. I love you, too. Stick together today” (Lovato). This models one of the healthy coping mechanisms therapists have encouraged as Lovato attempts to stay in touch with her support system. She is not only receiving support, but giving it, too.

In the last moments of the clip, Lovato finally fills her plate with food and sits down to dinner. She is silent throughout most of the meal and, about halfway through becomes visibly anxious again. She begins to play with her hair and a look of discomfort appears on her face as she slows her eating. Lovato truthfully announces, “I’m uncomfortably full” (Lovato). Once again, Lovato engages in another healthy coping mechanism which is being honest about her feelings and talking about her anxiety with her family. Rather than keeping the negativity inside, she is able to hold herself accountable by telling her family and realizing she is not alone.

In another one of the segments, which takes place a few days after Thanksgiving, Lovato makes her most groundbreaking statement yet. She reveals that although she was able to conquer Thanksgiving and make it through without purging, the night after was rough. Lovato states, “Right before I went on stage, I was, like, crying in my dressing room and I just didn’t feel good enough. I know it’s silly to the average person, like you don’t think you can gain ten pounds from eating a lot of food one day. But, to me, it, like, really messed with my head...and I’m thinking ‘People are going to see everything I ate’” (Lovato). This is not an uncommon thinking pattern for people with eating disorders. Those suffering believe others will base their self-worth on how much they have eaten, purged or exercised that given day. They believe others will only like them if they weigh a certain weight or look a certain way. They fear being rejected or unwanted because of what they eat or the control they have. Demi Lovato

took a brave step when she decided to broadcast this documentary but there is no doubt she has helped thousands of people who struggle with the same things she does. This is the same for other celebrities who reveal their personal struggles to the public in hopes of helping others become healthier and happier.

Perhaps the most important to remember during the holiday season is the risk for those suffering from eating disorders. Food is not the only battle that is to be fought. Holidays also provide elevated stress levels for most people, as this paper has proven. However, the average person can deal with this stress in a healthy way. For those who are battling an eating disorder, they are more likely to revert back to unhealthy coping mechanisms, falling deeper into their eating disorder or, those who are in recovery may relapse.

This is why it is crucial to examine the correlation between stressful like events, like the holiday season, and the chance of relapse for those in recovery. The International Journal of Eating Disorders published an article titled, “Stressful Life Events Predict Eating Disorder Relapse Following Remission: Six-Year Prospective Outcomes,” which reveals some truly startling statistics. Their findings, “suggest that the occurrences of negative stressful life events, most notably higher work stress and higher social stress, represent significant warning signs for relapse among women in remission,” which is why it is important for eating disorder patients to know and acknowledge when they feel stressed or anxious (Grilo 190). By keeping their anxieties inside, they are only heightening the chances of a relapse. The article goes on to say that while stressors have harmful effects on the average person, they are worse for those with eating disorders because of the chance for relapse. But, like most psychologists, the group who presents these findings does offer a way to lessen the chances. They decide that therapists can, “consider integrating relapse prevention and coping skills methods for dealing with stressful life events,” with their patients suffering from anorexia, bulimia, binge eating disorder or EDNOS (Grilo 190). By doing this, they have a preventative plan and know how to deal with what may come from the holiday season.

Anthropologists research with the goal of understanding humans. To do this, they focus on the

way people think and behave, as well as the way society works. In Catherine Bell's, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, the author focuses on the idea of ritual. She looks at ritual in-depth, focusing on what makes a ritual what it is. In Chapter Five of the book, Bell explores the certain elements that make up a successful ritual. One of these elements is invariance. Invariance also plays a large role in the topic of this paper.

Invariance is one of the most common characteristics of a ritual and described as, "precise repetition and physical control" (Bell 150). In simpler terms, to be invariant means to do the same things over and over again, day after day, year after year. When a person is invariant, they feel the sense of control and are more content within their lives. Invariance is used in many positive ways, such as Alcoholics Anonymous and meditation, but it can also be used in negative ways as well. One of these ways is in an eating disorder.

For those who suffer from eating disorders, it is very clear they focus on invariance. To easily understand the idea, anorexia and bulimia can both be focused on specifically. When someone battles anorexia, they feel the need to either restrict or over-exercise. Restriction day after day, week after week, is invariance. By repeating this action over and over and having physical control over their actions, it gives them a sense of peace within themselves. If they choose to over-exercise they must exercise for excessive amounts of time each day. In most cases, the person cannot skip their exercise or a sense of failure, disgust or self-hate will rear its head. If they disrupt this cycle, they will become overly anxious and be unable to deal with it.

When someone suffers from bulimia, their invariance comes with either the behavior of purging or laxative use. After every meal, someone who has bulimia must purge and get rid of the food. Most people do this after every single meal, every day of every week of every year. Sometimes they feel the need to purge even if they have not eaten directly beforehand. Once again, this is invariance. It becomes part of their life and they must repeat the actions over and over to find a sense of control. The same goes for laxative use. Once they eat, they must take a laxative to clear out their body of everything they have just consumed. If they do not compensate for the meal, they become highly agitated and

uncomfortable.

There is no doubt that the anthropological idea of invariance fits perfectly within the topic of eating disorders and the holidays. During the holidays, especially, people who have eating disorders will use their behaviors over and over, possibly even more than usual. This provides them with a sense of peace during the stressful time filled with family and food. Invariance becomes a coping mechanism within the disorder and the longer it is practiced, the harder it becomes to stop.

There are many things that could be done to further research this ritual. If time and money were no problem, there are two things I would focus on to help myself and others better understand this topic. The first thing I would do is conduct more interviews. I believe that interviews are one of the most crucial pieces of research a person can do when wanting to understand something like eating disorders and the holidays. Everyone has personal experience with the holidays and there are millions of people who are suffering from eating disorders daily. A lot of these people want their voices to be heard and want to help the best they can. By interviewing them and learning about their feelings, thoughts and beliefs, it can open many doors that have not been explored before. For example, in my interview with K, she talks about the hardest part of the holidays being ignorance. There is no piece of information from any of my secondary sources that talk about ignorance as a trigger. I may have never known that if it was not for my interview with K. By talking with people who suffer from eating disorders, doctors and average people can understand more deeply the struggles and fears of the holidays.

The other thing I would do to further research this topic is to look into different programs or seminars. I would like to use my resources to create seminars and programs for those suffering from eating disorders and their families and friends. Eating disorders are a very difficult thing to understand, even for those people who have them. In many cases, the support systems of eating disorder patients can never truly grasp what they are going through, as badly as they may want to. This puts a tension between the person suffering from the eating disorder and their family and friends. The feeling of being misunderstood puts a tension between the person suffering from the eating



disorder and their family and friends. By creating seminars or programs that eating disorder patients and their family and friends could attend, it would help spread awareness and provide them with helpful information. More specifically, there could be seminars around the holiday season which would provide healthy coping mechanisms and tips on how to deal with Thanksgiving and Christmas, avoid massive amounts of stress and anxiety and enjoy the time with family. I think education is the best way to diminish ignorance and the families, friends and support systems of those suffering from eating disorders need it the most.

The holiday season is a time that excites a majority of people because of the food, friends and festivities. But, there is another side to this story. And that is the experience of someone suffering from an eating disorder during the holiday season. Where average people see a delicious feast, an eating disorder patient sees thousands of calories and a large helping of anxiety. Where average people see a chance to spend time with family, an eating disorder patient sees the opportunity for painful trauma to be resurfaced. Where average people see the possibility of stress, an eating disorder patient sees the opportunity to use unhealthy coping mechanisms. Everything positive during the holiday season turns into a difficult battle for those suffering from eating disorders. The idea of having hot chocolate and Christmas cookies does not excite them. The chance they might engage in a typical family argument around the dinner table is something that awakens negativity within them. The mirror hanging on the wall at their parents' home is a reminder of everything they are not. The holidays are a very real, very hard challenge that millions of people in America must deal with every year. While there are thousands of sources, journals, interviews and documentaries that are used to explore the topic, there is a harsh truth. Unless a person is actually suffering from an eating disorder, they will never fully understand what it is like to have one. And they will never understand the struggles that are faced during the holiday season. Because of the emphasis on food and the elevated stress levels during the holidays, it can be concluded that the holiday season is considerably more challenging and has a more significant effect on those suffering from eating disorders.

## References

- Bell, Catherine. *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Crawford, Ginean. Personal Interview. Nov 2013.
- Grilo, Carlos. "Stressful Life Events Predict Eating Disorder Relapse Following Remission: Six-Year Prospective Outcomes." *International Journal of Eating Disorders*. no. 2 .
- Haddock, Sharon. "Holiday food is not fun for everyone." *The Deseret News*, November 23, 1998.
- Heatherton, Todd. "Binge eating as escape from self-awareness." *Psychological Bulletin*. no. 1 .
- History, "Thanksgiving By The Numbers." <http://www.history.com/interactives/thanksgiving-by-the-numbers>.
- Indiana Business Research Center, "Christmas by the Numbers." Last modified 2007. <http://www.ibrc.indiana.edu/studies/factoiddec09.pdf>.
- Kaufman, Cathy. "The Ideal Christmas Dinner." *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*. no. 4 .
- Lovato, Demi. "Stay Strong: The Documentary" Recorded 2012. MTV. DVD, <http://www.mtv.com/videos/news/746202/demi-lovato-stay-strong-first-thanksgiving-out-of-treatment.jhtml>
- MacMaster, Mary Katlyn. Personal Interview. Nov 2013.
- National Eating Disorder Association, <http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/>.
- O'Callaghan, Tiffany. Time, "Have another cookie, it's the holidays! Why our eating habits vary on weekends and special occasions Read more: Have another cookie, it's the holidays! Why our eating habits vary on weekends and special occasions." Last modified December 24, 2009. <http://healthland.time.com/2009/12/24/have-another-cookie-its-the-holidays-why-our-eating-habits-vary-on-weekends-and-special-occasions/>.
- Treasure, Janet. "Eating disorders." *The Lancet*. no.
- US Bureau of Labor, "Food for Thought." Last modified November 2010. <http://www.bls.gov/spotlight/2010/food/pdf/food.pdf>.

Weinstein, Kristin. Personal Interview. Nov 2013.

Young, Gayle. "HOLIDAYS CONFOUND  
EATING DISORDERS." Sun Sentinel,  
December 07, 1986