Family interaction of a child with bulimia nervosa: System level analysis

Shuchu CHAO, Professor, Department of Guidance & Counseling,
National Changhua Univ. of Ed.

Yu-Ching LIU, School Counselor, Taichung Home Economics and
Commercial High School

Background:

The purpose of this study was to investigate family interaction of child with bulimia nervosa. While eating disorder is a wild concern issue in Taiwan, most research focus on anorexia nervosa rather than bulimia nervosa. There are four major themes in current research area in Taiwan. First theme is to explore risk factors for eating disorder. Second one is to investigate the process of psychological recovery. The next one is to evaluate the effects of intervention and treatment. Final one is to discuss social influence on women's body image.

However, regardless the importance of family relationship for child of eating disorder has been documented in family therapy literature, data were often collected from single family member. Without multiple family members' perspectives, it is difficult to understand eating disorder within relational context. Therefore, this study interviewed siblings, one of them was suffered from bulimia nervosa.

Method:

This study employed a narrative inquiry and interviewed two pairs of sisters from two families. Individual participants were interviewed separately, but data were analyzed at both individual level and dyadic level.

Participants:

Family A: Angela and Maple, with Angela was the IP.

Family B: Kaori and Joy, with Kaori was the IP

Parents from two families were in their mid-fifties, and children were in mid-thirties.

Results:

The major results are as follows:

1. Characteristics of family with bulimia nervosa children:

- 1) Inconsistency family relationships between within and outside of the family: presenting intimacy images outside of the family but among family members, stress and conflict were avoided.
- 2) The bulimia nervosa child suffered from dilemma between being independent and being intimated with parents. When the IPs were close to parents, especially with mother, they would suffer from being triangulated between fathers and mothers.
- 3) Two sisters from this study were the first one to find out and recognize the bulimia symptoms. They also developed allied relationships with their younger sisters and helped them to set clear boundaries among fathers, mothers and themselves.

2. The impact of bulimia nervosa on family interaction at different family levels:

- 1) Couple subsystem: Spouse relationships were transformed from being distant to being close. For the purpose to help the IP children, husbands and wives developed new ways to cooperate, and accordingly marital relationships were changed.
- 2) Parental subsystem: Parents were more tolerant the bulimia nervosa daughter, and allied with the child who functioned better.
- 3) Parent-child subsystem: Children were close to their mother and took care of father's emotions;
- 4) Siblings subsystem: The sister relationships were changed from competing for family resources to being understanding and supportive for each other.

Discussions: Although there maybe sufficient resources for family to understand eating disorder, the first thing, but not easy to do, is to admit that one of family members are suffering from it. This is especially important when working with Chinese/Taiwanese parents. The results of this study also indicated that it was necessary to work at different family systems rather than only work with the IPs.