

RAGMAG

MAGAZINE

MARCH 2013

FLASHING LIGHTS

NICOLAS SEHNAOUI
WANTS TO TELL YOU
THE TRUTH

LIGHT BRIGHT

JANLEONARDO WÖLLERT
WANTS YOU TO SEE IT
HIS WAY

ENLIGHTENING
THE MASSES

**SALVATORE
FERRAGAMO**

BACKSTAGE PASS

SPOTLIGHT

**MARILYN
MONROE**

BY PHOTOGRAPHER
BERT STERN

THE LUMINANCE
ISSUE

STARRING

**ZEINA
DACCACHE**





SHEDDING LIGHT ON EATING DISORDERS



Dr. Jeremy Alford talks about the pitfalls + challenges facing mental health in the Middle East

BY SABINA LLEWELLYN-DAVIES

Despite the increased awareness of eating disorders there are still strong social stigmas attached to them. Bulimia and anorexia nervosa are a serious problem for a number of women, as well as an increasing number of men. And yet, the stigma, isolation and confusion around suffering from what is often perceived as a vanity problem can make women and men reluctant to come forward to get treatment.



Dr. Jeremy Alford, a British clinical psychologist, clinical hypnotherapist and neurofeedback therapist at CHOICES, a psychology and nutrition service, and founder and president of MEEDA, Middle East Eating Disorder Association, has been working in Lebanon for 10 years, specializing in eating disorders. He is also a consultant in collaboration with the Soor Center in Kuwait since 2003. His clients typically suffer from anorexia nervosa, characterized by the fear of food and restricting the intake of food, and bulimia nervosa, binging on large amounts of food and then purging or vomiting. According to Dr. Alford, such disorders can be triggered by a stressful event or undiagnosed psychiatric conditions, sexual

or physical abuse, trouble in school or at work. An eating disorder becomes a coping mechanism, a desperate grasp for control. In the case of anorexia and bulimia nervosa it can also be a strong cultural component as we are under constant pressure to conform to the "ideal" body type, and media images often make us feel vulnerable about our bodies. Dr. Alford's clients are 75 percent female and the average age of his patients ranges from 20 to 50; it's shocking to hear that his youngest client was an 8 year-old suffering from anorexia. "Usually if a child refuses food it is suffering from high levels of anxiety. An eating disorder is basically a costume, a disguise to cover emotions of anger or fear."

LEFT + BELOW:
FRENCH MODEL **ISABELLE CARO**,
WHO BECAME A SYMBOL OF THE
FIGHT AGAINST ANOREXIA WHEN
SHE WAS PHOTOGRAPHED NUDE FOR
A CONTROVERSIAL AD CAMPAIGN
(OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM). SHE DIED
IN 2010 AT THE AGE OF 28.

So what exactly triggers the disorders? According to Dr. Alford a series of factors can lead to this. "It's not like it's a conscious decision, it happens gradually. Diets are one of the factors, which can lead to eating disorders, especially in teenagers. The media portrayal of slim people leads teenagers from an early age to diet." On the other hand, overeating is also a rising issue. "The way people eat in the Middle East is very much a social thing, eating is at the heart of their social life and this is

"IT IS THE MOST DEADLY AS ONE IN FIVE ANOREXIA SUFFERERS DIE [...] THE PERSON CANNOT EVALUATE THEMSELVES, THEY CAN NEVER BE THIN ENOUGH AND SADLY AT SOME STAGE WE JUST CANNOT HELP THEM ANYMORE"

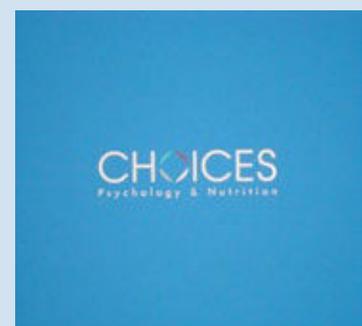
bound to affect a person's weight. The mushrooming of junk food style restaurants has also affected eating habits in this region," says Dr. Alford. There are no official statistics but obesity is definitely on the rise, according to a study done around three years ago in Kuwait, a country that actually has the highest rate of obesity in the Middle East, comparable with the US. "Unfortunately, there are no current statistics, so MEEDA has started a study to raise the level of awareness especially among young students. Around 200 participants will be involved all around the Middle East."

Despite the increased awareness of eating disorders there are still strong social stigmas attached to them. "It is a mental health illness and it is the most deadly as one in five anorexia sufferers die. There comes a point when the sufferer loses a vision of what is healthy for them and this has a profound effect on them... the person cannot evaluate themselves, they can never be thin enough and sadly at some stage we just cannot help them anymore."

Riham Al Reshaid from Kuwait suffered from acute anorexia nervosa for many

years, starting from the age of 10, until she decided to go to the United States for treatment, as there are no residential treatment facilities in the region. To help others she set up a Facebook page, Kuwait Eating Disorder Awareness and Prevention, to help sufferers go public. Social media can help as do support groups, says Dr. Alford, such as the OA (Overeaters Anonymous) where people can meet once a week to share experiences. "Unfortunately, many sufferers are reluctant to speak about this illness. Mental illnesses are not widely accepted in society and the fear of judgment usually keeps many from sharing their struggles."

Today, Al Reshaid is healthy, and has mastered a survival skill most of us tend to take for granted: the skill of eating normally. "I will, however, always have to work on my recovery in order to avoid a relapse. Fortunately, I do not deal with urges as often as I used to. This is because I have learned to love myself regardless of my body shape or size, and to also apply correct coping skills when faced with thoughts about my eating disorder." ■



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