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PARENTS BATTLING THEIR CHILD’S ANOREXIA:

What is it like for a Parent to Care for a Child with an Eating Disorder?

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Ashley Bellingham

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Abstract

Anorexia nervosa is a serious and life-threatening mental health issue which needs to be given more attention. Qualitative research on parents’ experience in caring for a child with an eating disorder is lacking around the world, and is almost non-existent in New Zealand. Parents of a child with an eating disorder have a huge and difficult role in caring for their child. Resources and facilities for treating eating disorders around the world are limited, and support for carers is minimal, which means the distressing experience of caring for a child with an eating disorder can become more difficult to manage. By giving parents in New Zealand an opportunity to voice their experiences, others may be educated about anorexia nervosa and the experiences of parents. A qualitative approach was employed in this project to explore the experiences of parents in caring for a child with an eating disorder. Twelve parents of nine daughters suffering from anorexia nervosa consented to participate in this research and were interviewed. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using phenomenological approaches. Descriptive, interpretative and hermeneutic phenomenological methods were drawn on to provide a detailed and in-depth explanation of what it is like for a parent to care for a child with an eating disorder. Analysis revealed that the parents experienced three stages during the struggle for the salvation of their child, which I have labeled the insidious stage, the tenacious stage and the recovery stage. Across the stages it was apparent that the battle against the eating disorder was never-ending, and full of uncertainty, contradiction and emotion. So coping was essential for the physically, emotionally and psychologically exhausted parents. The findings from this research can help raise awareness in society, assist in nationwide education around eating disorders and contribute to improving parents’ experiences of caring for a child with an eating disorder. This research has established a good foundation for understanding the experiences of New Zealand parents, regarding what it is like to care for a child with an eating disorder.
Preface and Acknowledgements

The purpose of this research was to explore what it is like for a parent to care for a child with an eating disorder in New Zealand, and fill the gaps in current research. This research gave parents the opportunity to voice their very own experiences.

Firstly, I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor Kerry Chamberlain for all his support and guidance in helping me complete this research project, using an approach which was rather unfamiliar to me initially.

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Finally, thank you to Massey University for giving me the opportunity to carry out this research project and for providing some financial assistance. This research was approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (MUHEC).
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