

Orthorexia Nervosa

‘If any clinician, scientist or simply an interested person is looking for a comprehensive text regarding orthorexia nervosa, this recent book by Anna Brytek-Matera may be your answer. Professor Brytek-Matera offers a comprehensive review of this important topic with significant clinical insights. She follows the thread of this pattern of behaviour from normative efforts to attain healthy eating all the way to comparisons to anorexia nervosa and a variety of other psychiatric conditions. Of particular interest, she invited a handful of experts in behavioural health and eating disorders to offer commentary on the topic, which adds perspective. In general, I think this is an excellent contribution to the literature about eating disorders, and mental health, regarding this often misunderstood behavioural construct.’

Stephen Wonderlich, Ph.D.

Vice President, Chief of Behavioral Health Research – Sanford Fargo;
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Orthorexia Nervosa

Current Understanding and Perspectives

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**To Mikołaj and Leon
with love**

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Foreword

In the early 2000s there was a ‘mad cow’ epidemic in Europe. Citizens, especially in Italy, were particularly affected and an attitude of fear developed when comparing certain foods, and beef in particular.

A collective orthorexic attitude manifested itself in the search for ‘healthy’ food that could not be a vehicle for substances or microorganisms dangerous to human health.

In our research unit we decided to study this phenomenon, which had already been described by Steve Bratman a few years earlier but had not received adequate attention or stimulated significant research.

We proposed a diagnostic tool (the ORTO-15) that was validated considering a definition of orthorexia nervosa based on the concept that this is a disorder characterised by a combination of eating behaviours (assessed using a questionnaire on eating habits, with special emphasis on the choices between food normally considered ‘healthy’ and ‘unhealthy’) and obsessive-phobic personality traits (evaluated administering the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory).

Despite the changes over time in the definition of the concept of orthorexia and some limitations from the point of view of the psychometric properties of this diagnostic tool, ORTO-15 kicked off important research in this field including the proposal of other diagnostic tools, the analysis of the clinical, psychological and functional characteristics of individuals who exhibited orthorexia, and finally the establishment of a consensus network to agree upon the definition and the diagnostic criteria for orthorexia nervosa.

Professor Brytek-Matera was immediately one of the principal researchers who contributed to the development of the concept of orthorexia by validating a version of the ORTO-15 for the Polish population. She addressed some specific aspects such as the relationship between disordered eating attitudes or vegetarian/vegan diet and orthorexia, and the interaction between orthorexia and the psychological phenotype (personality traits, self-esteem, obsessive-compulsive disorders, alexithymia and emotional dysregulation).

The book *Orthorexia Nervosa: Current Understanding and Perspectives* written by Professor Anna Brytek-Matera exhaustively explains the results of research in the field of orthorexia conducted by the scientific community and by Professor Brytek-Matera in particular. It represents an extremely interesting up-to-date document focusing on many aspects of research in this field.

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It addresses general aspects (healthy and sustainable diets and behaviours, and dietary patterns) introducing the clinical description of orthorexia nervosa (diagnostic overview, comparison between orthorexia nervosa and eating disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder or avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder). Another important topic developed in the book is the assessment and prevalence of orthorexia nervosa by evaluating the strengths and the limits of the diagnostic tools that have been proposed in the literature over the years. The multidimensional characteristics of orthorexia nervosa are also tackled, with particular attention to psychological (self-esteem, personality traits, body image and emotion regulation) and nutritional (dietary patterns and dieting trends) characteristics.

Finally, there is a comprehensive updated analysis of two decades of research on orthorexia nervosa focusing on the results in different populations (Western societies, clinical and non-clinical samples, and health professionals) and leading to a look at future directions for this newly proposed diagnosis belonging to eating disorders that may have severe mental and physical consequences.

Thus, it is a book that was missing and can definitely be a reference for those who deal with, from a clinical and research point of view, orthorexia nervosa.

Professor Lorenzo Maria Donini
Sapienza University

Preface

Since the late 1990s, when Steven Bratman described ‘the obsession with healthful eating’ for the first time, scientific interest in orthorexia nervosa has grown from a handful of papers being published every year from 2004 to more than 70 in 2023 (PubMed search). For two decades, academics, researchers and clinicians across the globe have been wondering about the status of orthorexia nervosa. Is orthorexia nervosa a distinct clinical disorder, a variant of other conditions sharing traits with anorexia nervosa and/or obsessive-compulsive disorder? Should orthorexia nervosa likely be clinically categorised as an avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder? Or finally, perhaps it should be perceived as a healthy lifestyle?

Eating behaviour can appear on a continuum that ranges from a normative eating behaviour at one pole to a pathological one at the other. I do believe that orthorexia nervosa is a pathological condition since focusing on extreme healthy eating norms and behaviours (and thereby reduced food intake) to achieve optimal health negatively affects psychosocial functioning. I do not share the opinion that orthorexia nervosa is a social phenomenon or a healthy lifestyle. In my view, the point at which an eating behaviour becomes disordered is when, in addition to dietary restriction, obsessive thoughts together with negative feelings (e.g. induced distress or guilt) result in disturbing everyday functioning in the family, social and professional areas of an individual’s life. Without a doubt, orthorexic behaviours, even if they eventuate from a healthy interest in nutrition, are not health-promoting. I do believe that individuals with extremely healthy eating patterns require support, help and treatment.

This book aims to systematise and present complex knowledge about orthorexia nervosa by characterising the various aspects of this unhealthy eating behaviour. Part I gives an overview of healthy dietary pattern recommendations to illustrate objective information on a healthy diet. Part II presents diagnostic criteria sets for orthorexia nervosa to depict key features of the condition, as well as the divergence and overlap of orthorexia nervosa and other mental disorders, namely anorexia nervosa, obsessive-compulsive disorder and avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder, to enable a differential diagnosis. Part III provides brief descriptions of the most frequently used self-reported questionnaires to outline those that seem suitable as self-assessment tools to measure orthorexia nervosa and are promising in research and clinical settings. Part IV emphasises the significance of psychological and nutritional characteristics

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of orthorexia nervosa to gain better insight into the construct of orthorexia nervosa. Part V focuses on research findings on orthorexia nervosa in both non-clinical and clinical samples to provide the current state of knowledge on orthorexia nervosa. Finally, Part VI outlines several future directions for orthorexia nervosa. This book also includes commentaries by invited international experts who provide valuable insights on orthorexia nervosa.



Acknowledgements

*Science and everyday life cannot and should not be separated.
Science, for me, gives a partial explanation of life.
In so far as it goes, it is based on fact, experience, and experiment ...
I agree that faith is essential to success in life
In my view, all that is necessary for faith is the belief that by doing our best,
we shall come nearer to success and that success in our aims
(the improvement of a lot of mankind, present and future) is worth attaining.*

Rosalind Franklin in a letter to Ellis Franklin (1940)

I want to extend a special note of appreciation to professors Marle Alvarenga, Phillipa Hay and Thom Dunn, and doctors Caterina Novara, Hana Zickgraf, Jinbo He and Adrian Meule for accepting my invitation and sharing their views and expertise.

I would not have been able to work on this book without the resources from my loving family. I want to thank my parents, who have encouraged me to pursue my aspirations and strive for my goals (in each step of my academic career). This book would not have been possible without the support of my husband, Marcin, whose understanding has been invaluable, especially throughout the process of writing this book. Special thanks go to my dear sons, Mikołaj and Leon, who taught me to appreciate the little moments and made me realise that even though being a mother is sometimes difficult, it is the most crucial role in my life.



About the Author

Anna Brytek-Matera, PhD is Professor of Medical and Health Sciences at the Institute of Psychology at the University of Wrocław, Poland, where she serves as Head of the Nutritional Psychology Unit, Eating Behavior Laboratory (EAT Lab) and Postgraduate Studies in Psychodietetics. She completed a Master of Cultural Studies and a Master of Psychology at the University of Silesia, Poland. She has been selected as the French Government Scholarship laureate (Cotutelle) and was awarded a doctoral degree in Psychology at Paul Verlaine University – Metz, France. Professor Anna Brytek-Matera is the author and co-author of more than 150 scientific publications on orthorexia nervosa, eating disorders and eating behaviour, including eight books (e.g. *Eating Disorders*, 2021; *Psychodietetics*, 2020). She has been named in the top 2% of the world's most influential scientists (World's top 2% scientists 2021 and 2022 – The Single Year Impact). She serves on the editorial board for *Eating and Weight Disorders* and *Nutrients*. Throughout her career, she has been involved with research around orthorexia nervosa, eating disorders and weight-related behaviour. Her research has been supported by grants from the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange, National Science Center, Ministry of Science and Higher Education, Foundation for Polish Science, and Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, France. She has given guest lectures at universities around the United States of America (Stanford University), Asia (The University of Tokyo), Australia (Western Sydney University) and Europe (University of Nantes, University of Bordeaux, University of Padova, University of Pavia, University of West London).

Professor Anna Brytek-Matera represents the scientist-practitioner model. Besides her scientific research activity, as a cognitive behavioural therapist she works with patients with eating disorders.