

Feasting on Flesh: A Case Report and Literature Review of Cannibalistic Ideation in Children & Adolescents

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Background: Human cannibalism is a rare and violent act that is poorly understood in the modern era. Cannibalism often engenders significant negative countertransference, posing treatment challenges. Due to a lack of data, guidance and treatment recommendations are minimal.

Objective: We detail an adolescent case of cannibalistic ideation (CI) and a review of 4 other pediatric cannibalism cases for a combined analysis of 5 cases total. This 14-year-old male presented to the ED due to ego-syntonic CI, prompting inpatient psychiatric hospitalization. Here, we provide historical background, medico-legal context, and discuss psychological underpinnings for pediatric CI to improve clinicians' topical understanding.

Methods: A literature review was performed to analyze pediatric case reports of cannibalism and CI. The databases included PubMed, Google Scholar, MEDLINE, and Embase. Keywords used were: Cannibal, Auto-Cannibal, Anthropophagy, Vorarephilia, Vampire, Suicidal, Homicidal, Adolescent, Child, Boy, Girl, Teen, and Teenager.

Results: We found only 4 other cannibalism or CI case reports within the pediatric population. Most cases were male (4 male, 1 female) with a median age of 14 years old (range 7 to 15 years old). 4 found the CI to be ego-syntonic, 1 ego-dystonic. One case acted on the CI. Two cases had a prior psychiatric diagnosis, 2 were intellectually disabled, 3 histories of self-injurious behavior, 3 histories of suicidal ideation, 2 histories of homicidal ideation, 1 history of physical assault towards others, 2 reported victims of sexual assault, and 1 history of sexual assault towards others.

Conclusion: This literature review summarizes the background, history, and challenges of encountering cannibalistic urges in the pediatric clinical arena. Our findings contribute to the limited understanding behind cannibalism, including how early adverse childhood events and psychiatric disorders affect CI development. More research is needed to better address the interrelated factors leading to this rare psychiatric phenomenon, especially regarding pediatric cases.

Keywords: Cannibalism, Cannibalistic Ideation, Pediatric Psychiatry

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