



Michael J. Whelan: **Breaking the Silence of Male Bulimia** by Gabby Hyman

In the photograph at the Emmys, Michael Whelan wears an uneasy smile. It's hard to imagine anyone who wouldn't trade their life for the HBO boxing shows, NFL specials and dining with sports legends in New York restaurants. But on the inside, it's a different picture. Whelan would excuse himself from those restaurant tables and secret himself into a bathroom stall, where he vomited up his meal. In a world where TV producers and magazine editors champion the buff and svelte, this television producer had become its number-one casualty.

Men suffer from bulimia. The American Bulimic/Anorexic Association estimates there are nearly a million men out there suffering in silence while their fingernails grow brittle and snap, their hearts race and slow, their teeth rot and they vomit blood along with their food.

For Whelan, it began in 1988 after a severe bout with the flu left him 12 pounds lighter. "I went to the health club and got compliments from people who never gave me the time of day," he explains. "I got the message. I felt like I belonged for the first time in my life."

If he liked the compliments, Whelan simply loved that he could kill his fears — fear of inadequacy, fear of failure, fear that people would know he was bulimic — with mountains of food and then escape fat-free by purging. "People stick with what works," he said. "But it's absolutely repulsive and bulimia is not for the faint of heart. Eventually it becomes a habit, then an addiction, then an aggressor that turns the promised nirvana into a living hell."

He would consume calories by the thousands and purge eight to ten times a day with weight swings of ten to twenty pounds — and no one said a thing other than to compliment his ripped abs. And yet, "I still thought I was fat with a big ass and love handles," he says.

In the end, the disorder and depression cost Whelan his livelihood, and nearly his life. After attempting suicide in 1998, he went to Overeaters Anonymous, where some members tried to kick him out for appearing too svelte. But he stuck with OA, sought professional counseling, and has not binged and purged since that Thanksgiving Day.

"Women can relate to this," he explains, "but doctors and physicians have got to wake up. Male bulimia is an epidemic they are not educated about." Whelan says he saw an abundance of the disease at work in locker rooms where he toiled as a sports producer. The illness was alive in wrestlers, boxers, football players and jockeys who struggled daily to reach the weight limits of their professions.

His recent efforts to market a book about his experience have fallen on deaf ears. "They don't think straight men can get bulimia," he says of publishers. "I found 120 books on eating disorders and only one had anything to do with men."

If he can recover, Whelan knows others can, too. "I learned how to eat all over again, that small portions are nourishing," he says. "I learned what my buttons are, how to talk to people instead of buying food."

"I want to tell other bulimic men that going public is painful at first, but you don't have to die or suffer alone. It will get better and you will live a life like you never imagined. The pain will go away."