

## DOCTOR, PATIENT, FAMILY, AND EATING DISORDERS

**SUMMARY:** “Hunger Point” is an excerpt from a novel of the same title written by Jillian Medoff, a graduate of Barnard College and the writing program at NYU. It portrays a therapy session with the family of an anorectic daughter, as seen from the sister’s point of view. The focus is the daughter Shelly’s decision to hospitalize herself. The scene illustrates Shelly’s immaturity and inarticulateness in her family system (although she is a young lawyer), the father’s passivity, and the mother’s angry and controlling nature. It also shows the sister Frannie’s distancing and self-protectiveness through her reliance on sarcasm, as well as her sincere efforts to support Shelly and be her voice. Finally, the excerpt includes a sympathetic therapist who attempts to support Shelly’s autonomy while enlisting the family’s support for her decision.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What are the family dynamics like?
2. What is the mother’s perspective? The father’s? Shelly’s? The narrator’s? The therapist’s?
3. What is the “problem” in this family? (anorexia, acceptable societal images for women, control)
4. How might this therapist become “triangulated” with the family? (become “the enemy,”; become “the expert”; become “the parent”; become Shelly’s voice)
5. How does this story end? (Shelly expresses her rage at mother) Where might the story go from here? What can the therapist do to help the family construct a happy ending for this story?

### TRIANGULATION ISSUES:

1. Failed PPP – family members only half-heartedly compete for therapist’s attention because of her perceived shortcomings and their own defenses
2. Failed therapeutic alliance – therapist attempts to enlist family in support of patient but is unsuccessful

**SUMMARY:** “Eve’s Apple” – This excerpt is from a novel of the same title written by Jonathan Rosen, a graduate of Yale University who is a widely published essayist and cultural editor of *The Forward*. The story, told from a male lover’s point of view, recounts the struggles of a young woman with anorexia. In this excerpt, a therapy session is used to emphasize the family roots of the daughter’s illness. The psychiatrist, Dr. Ranji, confronts the parents to admit their relationship has been a contributory factor in Ruth’s anorexia.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What is Dr. Ranji’s analysis of Ruth’s eating disorder? Do you think his confrontation of her parents is effective? How would you describe the role he assumes vis-à-vis the

family? (prosecutor; agent provocateur) How would you contrast his role with that of the therapist in Hunger Point? (unbalances everyone, rather than form a protective alliance with patient)

3. What do we learn about the dynamics in the Simon family? (parental conflict detoured to child; child expected to be perfect; parents too absorbed in their own lives to pay attention to child; illness as form of blackmail)

#### TRIANGULATION ISSUES:

1. Illicit coalition of patient and overtly confrontational doctor against family members