

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



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## Introduction

Human cannibalism is a rare and violent act that is poorly understood in the modern era. This culturally unaccepted form of violence against others often engenders significant negative countertransference and poses challenges in the treatment setting. Recent movie portrayals of cannibalism also likely impacts society's perception of, and potentially romanticizes, this taboo practice. There is a lack of data from the sheer rarity of the act as well as bias in case analysis, thus guidance and treatment recommendations may be minimal.

We detail a case of an adolescent, Mr. X, with cannibalistic ideation, followed by a literature 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 cannibalistic ideation (CI) and was promptly admitted for an inpatient psychiatric hospitalization. Through this review and case report, we provide historical background, medico-legal context, and discuss psychological underpinnings for pediatric cannibalistic ideation to improve clinicians' understanding of the topic.

## Methods

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

## Case Report

A 14-year-old male presented to the emergency department in May 2024 after telling his school psychologist that he had been having thoughts of cannibalism and was promptly admitted at the Kobacker Center. Prior to this admission, he had a history of suicidal ideation, reactive attachment disorder, elevated depression scores, and no pertinent medical history.

Collateral information from his parents found no history of behavioral issues at school or substance abuse, high state testing scores, and a romantic interest in males and experimentation with wearing dresses and purses. His father described him as a "master manipulator". They denied animal cruelty but reported he was physically aggressive with his younger sister, choking her at one point and wishing her dead. They noted bizarre comments about death, Russian roulette, and setting the house on fire. They reported he frequently talks to himself when alone in his room, having both sides of the conversation. Parents stated Mr. X had endorsed suicidal ideation beginning at age 7. His mother stated he was previously sexually active with a 25-year-old man and there were previous allegations of sexual abuse by a family member.

At Kobacker, the patient reported CI with thoughts of wanting to bite, chew, and eat random people, but especially his school peers. These thoughts had been occurring for a few months but were becoming more intense and difficult to control. He reported an interest in tasting different skin textures and body parts, which made his mouth water. He said he never acted on the thoughts but wanted to hurt others. He never felt bad about having the thoughts in the moment but did come to regret them later. He denied any current suicidal or homicidal ideation, as well as a history of abuse, neglect, or trauma. The patient denied visual or auditory hallucinations but did report having two imaginary friends who helped him make life decisions. The patient stated that after beginning to experience CI, he watched a Jeffrey Dahmer documentary and felt he could relate with him. He became fascinated with the idea of being able to do what he wanted without having to suppress his thoughts. This admiration of Dahmer extended to other serial killers as well, including Ted Bundy.

Mr. X was formally diagnosed with episodic mood disorder and was started on Zoloft. He was found to exhibit signs of both narcissistic and antisocial personality disorders. His stay was complicated by an episode of hoarding Tylenol with the stated intention of collecting enough to kill himself. Upon discharge after four days, the patient felt ready to connect with his support system and expressed forward thinking.

## Review

Within the literature, we found only 4 other case reports of cannibalism or cannibalistic ideation within the pediatric population, thus making our case report the 5th known recorded case.

Male to Female Ratio	4:1
Median age	14 years old
Acted on Cannibalistic Ideation (CI)	1
CI is Ego-dystonic	1
CI is Ego-syntonic	4
Previous Psychiatric Diagnosis	2
Intellectual Disability	2
Self-harming behavior	3
Suicidal Ideation history	3
History of physical assault of others	1
Homicidal Ideation history	2
History of sexual assault (victim)	2
History of sexual assaulting others	1

**Figure 1)** In our review, which included our case report, we found that most cases were male (4 male, 1 female) with a median age of 14 years old (range 7 to 15 years old). Within these 5 cases, 4 found the cannibalistic ideation to be ego-syntonic, 1 ego-dystonic. One case acted on cannibalistic ideation (via autosarcophagy). Two cases had a psychiatric diagnosis prior to their presentation for cannibalistic ideation, 2 were intellectually disabled, 3 had a history of self-injurious behavior, 3 had a history of suicidal ideation, 2 had a history of homicidal ideation, 1 had a history of physical assault towards others, 2 were reported victims of sexual assault, and 1 had a history of sexual assault towards others.

## Conclusion

Our literature review summarizes the background, history, and challenges of encountering cannibalistic urges in the pediatric clinical arena as delineated in the case of Mr. X. Moreover, his case represents a unique combination of notable psychiatric history, ego-syntonic cannibalistic ideation, and fascination with criminals who had known cannibalistic behavior. While there were similarities between this case and other documented cases, Mr.X's lack of compulsion, history of physical assault, and sadistic motives were unique, emphasizing the idea that pathologic cannibalism develops differently from patient to patient. 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.

## References

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