

Adolescent Eating Disorders

For several years now, the term “eating disorders” has been commonly used. While many terms that get our attention are merely fads that go in and out of fashion, eating disorders are very real problems that can be serious, even life-threatening conditions for those who suffer from them. What are eating disorders and how do they develop in teenagers?

Dieting or, at least, watching what we eat, has become a way of life for many of us. Ask almost any woman you know whether she is trying to lose weight, and the chances are she will say, “Yes.” The majority of these dieters are not overweight by medically accepted standards. They are simply people who do not believe that they are “thin enough”.

For some, what appear to be “normal” concerns about weight and staying in shape can evolve into severe preoccupations with food, weight and body image. This preoccupation is what we call an “eating disorder.” Two common kinds of eating disorders are anorexia and bulimia nervosa.

Anorexia nervosa, or anorexia, is characterized by a refusal to eat which leads to extreme weight loss, often to the point of emaciation. Anorexics, as these sufferers are known, are so afraid of gaining weight that they will stop at nothing to stay slim. Regardless of how thin they appear to an objective observer, anorexics still perceive themselves as overweight.

Bulimia nervosa, or bulimia, is similar to anorexia in that bulimics, as they are called, are obsessed with food and weight. However, as opposed to not eating, bulimics often binge eat and then purge themselves to avoid gaining weight.

Both anorexia and bulimia commonly begin during early adolescence, coinciding with the onset of puberty. Eating disorders are up to twenty times more common in women than in men. Five to ten percent of adolescent girls and young women may be troubled by an eating disorder. Eating disorders seem to develop from a mix of related causes that are biological, psychological and social in nature.

Biologically, genetics may play a role in eating disorder development. Psychologically, a variety of factors can influence the development of an eating disorder. These can include: a perfectionist personality, low self-esteem, or unresolved sexual identity issues.

Social factors also play a role in the development of eating disorders. The excessive value that is placed on being thin in our society can lead women to believe that their self-worth depends on their body size or appearance. Staying thin becomes equivalent to achievement, intelligence, popularity and success. This can lead some women to a persistent struggle to create the “perfect body.” (continued)

There are several warning signs that indicate that a person's concern with food or weight has become severe enough to be considered an eating disorder. These signs include:

- Extreme weight loss
- Preoccupation with food, weight or calories. Bulimics and anorexics weigh themselves frequently, for example.
- Distorted eating patterns: skipping meals, eating in secret, frequent binges, overly strict dieting
- Quick disappearances after a meal and the suspected use of vomiting or laxatives

If left untreated, eating disorders can result in serious complications and even death.

What can you do if you suspect that a teenager has an eating disorder? The first step is to have the young person thoroughly evaluated by a mental health professional. Based on this evaluation, the most appropriate form of treatment can be recommended.

This public service has been brought to you by Foundations Behavioral Health.