



Eating Disorders

According to the National Eating Disorder Association (NEDA), "Eating Disorders are complex conditions that arise from a combination of long-standing behavioral, emotional, psychological, interpersonal, and social factors."

On the surface, eating disorders (e.g. anorexia, bulimia and compulsive overeating) are about obsession with food/weight but the roots go much deeper. Some causal factors include: feeling a lack of control in life, depression, loneliness, anger, anxiety, troubled relationships, physical and/or sexual abuse, and cultural norms that value beauty rather than inner qualities.¹

Clearly, young women with eating disorders share similar characteristics with those who are at-risk in other ways. If you work with at-risk young women, chances are you work with someone who has an eating disorder.

The Brain

Research shows that the causes of eating disorders likely extend beyond culture and personal influences into the brain, especially during puberty when the brain is preparing the body for the possibility of childbirth. "As a girl enters puberty, her hypothalamus, a part of the brain that controls basic functions like sex and eating, starts churning out high levels of a neurochemical that stimulates appetite."

The brain can also contribute to keeping the eating disorder cycle going once it begins. Walter Kaye, director of the Eating Disorders Clinic at the University of Pittsburgh found girls with eating disorders had higher than average levels of serotonin. "People with high levels," says Kaye, "tend to be obsessive, anxious perfectionists." Kaye suspects young women find starving themselves makes them feel better. This is because food has a protein necessary for the body to make serotonin and starving themselves may ease anxiety by lowering serotonin levels in the brain.²

Relational Aspects

Dina Zeckhausen, Ph.D., founder of Atlanta's Eating Disorders Information Network (EDIN), says she is seeing more groups of friends developing dangerous eating patterns together. "The girls who are the most focused on unhealthy ideas about thinness are increasingly recruiting their friends to join them in

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extreme eating rituals..." she says. Young women who are leaders within their peer group "can instigate a new eating trend," just as she can determine whether the group will follow new fashion trends. "It can become the way the 'cool people' eat."³

Obesity

In March 2005, the *New England Journal of Medicine* presented a "Special Report" by S. Jay Olshansky and David B. Allison on the "obesity epidemic." This sparked an already growing interest in the increasing waistline of Americans. The prevalence of obesity has roughly doubled in the U.S. since 1980 among adults and has tripled among children and the number of Bariatric surgeries have risen from 36,700 in 2000 to roughly 140,000 in 2004.⁴

Other research indicates that this "special report" and those like it are alarmist in nature and oversimplify the causes of health problems like heart disease and stroke by attributing them solely to a person's weight. They point to the fact that genetic differences account for "50 to 80 percent of the variation in fatness within a population" as well as the fact that there are many causal possibilities when it comes to health problems.

Baby Steps to Health

1. Sit down to a meal. In a University of Minnesota study of 4,746 middle and high school students ... "girls whose families rarely ate together were 75% more likely to use extreme dieting techniques compared with girls from families who often sat down together."⁵

2. A little help from her friends. Just as unhealthy behaviors can be cultivated in relationships, so too can healthy eating habits spread among friends.

3. Set an example. Research shows that what you do often counts for more than what you say. Dr. Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, Ph.D., a teen health expert at the University of Minnesota, explains that creation of an environment where young women feel accepted and secure, where physical activity is the norm, and healthy food choices are available is an important place to start.

4. "Feel" fat? Dr. Neumark-Sztainer also suggests when girls say they feel fat, to remind them that fat isn't a feeling. Check to see if there might be "loneliness, low self-confidence, or sadness" instead.⁶

The National Eating Disorders Association has extensive information on eating disorders. Below is a list of just a few of the free downloads available on their website: www.nationaleatingdisorders.org

What Causes Eating Disorders?

Eating Disorders in Women of Color: Explanations and Implications

What Should I Say? Tips for Talking to a Friend Who May Be Struggling with an Eating Disorder

What Can You Do to Help Prevent Eating Disorders?

Ten Steps to Positive Body Image

Another excellent source for information online - particularly for school personnel: The National Women's Health Information Center: www.4woman.gov/BodyImage/bodywise.cfm

References

¹The National Eating Disorders Association: www.nationaleatingdisorders.org.

²"Inside the Teen Brain" by Shannon Brownlee, U.S. News & World Report; 08/09/99, Vol. 127 Issue 6, p44.

³"Starving for Friendship" by Audrey D. Brashich; Teen People; Oct2004, Vol. 7 Issue 8, p126.

⁴"Obesity: An Overblown Epidemic?" by W. Wayt Gibbs; Scientific American, Jun2005, Vol. 292 Issue 6, p70.

⁵"The Real Happy Meal"; Prevention; May2005, Vol. 57 Issue 5, p61.

⁶"Teenagers at Risk for Range of Health-Threatening Weight Problems, From Obesity to Anorexia: Can Parents Help Them Avoid One Without Encouraging the Other?" Ascribe Newswire: Health, 6/14/2005, p1.

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