

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Eating Disorders, Body Image and Self-Esteem

The average person sees 400 to 600 ads per day, and by the age of 17 has seen more than 250,000 commercial media images. Scenes, characters and products create an alternate world: A reality where the average woman is a size two (instead of the North American average of 10 or 12), where age 45 is the new 25 and 12 the new 16. Is it any wonder that eating disorders are on the rise?

Eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of all mental illnesses. Many people don't seek help for themselves, or know how to recognize signs of eating disorders in loved ones. By educating yourself, your children and loved ones, you can learn to dispel the “perfect” body image and replace it with a healthy one.

Common Eating Disorders

The following eating disorders are broken into distinct categories for clarity, however it's not uncommon for people to have symptoms from two or three of these categories. Also, like other disorders, they fall on a continuum from slightly unhealthy to deadly behaviors.

Anorexia Nervosa. People suffering from anorexia nervosa literally starve themselves to lose weight, despite the fact that most are significantly underweight. Anorexia sufferers deny themselves of food and are terrified of gaining weight. This fear is both powerful and uncontrollable. Anorexia leads to serious health problems including bone loss, shrinking of vital organs and heart problems, which can lead to death.

Signs and symptoms of this disorder include:

- Dieting to extremes, sometimes coupled with purging
- Loss of menstrual periods
- Fixation on control
- Preoccupation with body weight
- Restricting food or types of food, and secrecy around food
- Depression, irritability and low self-esteem
- Withdrawn and compulsive behavior related to food
- Wearing layers of clothing or baggy clothing
- Withdrawing from social network
- Increase in stimulant use, such as coffee, cigarettes or drugs

Bulimia Nervosa. A person with bulimia binges, eats large amounts of food in a short period of time, then purges. Forms of purging include: vomiting, over-exercising, and using laxatives or diuretics. People with bulimia feel a loss of control during a binge, followed by shame or guilt afterwards.

Some warning signs of bulimia are:

- Eating large amounts of food in a short period of time
- Feeling ashamed about overeating and fear of weight gain
- Secrecy around food or “missing food”
- Repeated episodes of bingeing and purging
- Depression, loneliness, low self-esteem and shame
- Frequent visits to the washroom after meals

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- Tooth yellowing/decay, scratches on hands
- Excessive exercising

Binge Eating Disorder. People with binge eating disorder eat large amounts of food over a short time period and can't stop eating. Unlike bulimia, no purging is involved. However, the same feelings of guilt, embarrassment and distress plague binge eaters. While women make up an estimated 90 per cent of anorexia and bulimia suffers, almost 50 per cent of binge eaters are men.

Signs to watch out for are:

- Steady weight gain
- Eating more quickly than normal
- Eating when there is no hunger
- Loss of control around food
- Depression and guilt
- Unexplained spending increase

Causes of Eating Disorders

No one factor causes an eating disorder: Typically layers of psychological, social and biological issues play a part in its emergence. Common factors that can increase the chances of developing an eating disorder include:

Biological. Studies suggest there may be a genetic link to anorexia, bulimia and binge eating. Recent research connects anorexia and bulimia to disturbances in the brain's level of dopamine and serotonin—chemicals related to mood, control of impulses and appetite. Other research found differences in the melanocortin 4 receptor gene, related to behavior, eating and obesity of binge eaters.

Psychological. Often a person with an eating disorder has trouble communicating and dealing with negative emotions such as anger, sadness and fear. Experts also point to low self-esteem and perfectionism—traits that ensure the person is never satisfied with him or herself. Depending on the eating disorder, the person may also display an overwhelming need to please others, a need for attention or a fear of self-sufficiency. Eating disorders are often correlated with obsessive-compulsive disorder, anxiety and depression.

Family. Guardians or relatives critical of a young person's weight or body shape can lead to low self-esteem and body image problems. Abuse survivors may also try to gain power over their environment by either controlling what they eat, or bingeing for comfort and weight gain.

Social. There are countless scenarios where the social pressure is on to achieve the physical ideal of the group. Young people in particular—who are still working to carve out an identity—often value what others think versus their own ideas and opinions. This is especially true of youth with poor self-esteem, who lack the confidence to reject the status quo.

Helping a Loved One

Discovering someone you love has an eating disorder can be harrowing. But while you don't have the power to single-handedly solve the issue, your response can positively impact recovery. Be sure to:

Take the problem seriously. Act quickly: Health and psychological complications from an eating disorder are dangerous and extreme. If the loved one is your child or teen, seek professional support for your family immediately. If he or she is an adult, research professionals, hotlines and support groups in your area, pass the list on and encourage your loved one to seek help immediately.

Offer encouragement and honesty. Avoiding discussion about the eating disorder isn't going to make it go away. Be open and honest about your feelings and concerns, reserve judgment and do a lot of listening. Your loved one needs support and encouragement every step of the way.

Get the facts. Learn as much as you can about the disorder: It not only shows you take the issue seriously, but can also help you understand the problem, treatment and relationship with your loved one better.

The road to recovery can be a challenging journey. If you or a loved one is suffering from an eating disorder, know that it's not something anyone should have to face alone: Skilled professional support is available.

For those who incessantly worry about that last ten pounds, it's time to transform self-doubt and criticism into self-acceptance. Maintain a realistic body image, stay aware of negative outside influences and try leading a healthy lifestyle free of diets and “forbidden foods.” Not only is it a more enjoyable way to live, it's also the best way to ensure you and impressionable loved ones stay focused on a healthy body and mind.