

Not All the Same

Over the last few decades, health experts have worked to understand and combat an alarming trend among young people. Under the strain of unhealthy influences, cultural pressures, and mental states like depression and anxiety, many teens, college students, and even adults are cultivating incorrect, potentially dangerous views of their own bodies. Instead of addressing their concerns by improving diet and exercise habits, some people develop eating disorders—destructive cycles of unhealthy behavior that hurt the body rather than help it.

Definitions

Sometimes it is easy to identify that an eating disorder is at work. However, it can be more difficult to narrow down the specific disorder, because each disorder has a unique set of causes and effects on the mind and body.



LEARN MORE

Make smart decisions about your health and visit a physician or health specialist for advice and questions.

National Eating Disorders Association

www.nationaleatingdisorders.org

National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, Inc.

www.anad.org

EATING DISORDERS



Anorexia

Anorexia hinges on a skewed view of one's own body size. The victim believes that he or she is obese and takes drastic measures to lose weight. This behavior continues even when the body is dangerously underweight and needs more food to survive. Anorexia may be the most dangerous of the eating disorders, sometimes driving a person to starve themselves to death even as they believe that they need to lose weight.

Binge Eating

The binge eating cycle usually starts with an event or routine that creates a severe sense of hunger in the body, like extreme dieting. Neglecting normal eating habits can also send the body into starvation mode. Eventually, the person gives in and eats a very large quantity of food at once. Feelings of shame and disgust prompt the person to resume an unhealthy starvation diet, beginning the cycle over again. Usually, binge eating causes dramatic weight gain, but some people are able to maintain their weight, hiding their problem from others.



Bulimia

Often mistaken as an element of every eating disorder, the signature feature of bulimia, purging, frightens and confuses most people. Purging involves self-induced vomiting or misusing laxatives in an attempt to rid the body of food immediately after its been consumed. A bulimic person feels the same intense hunger as a binge eater, but will purge after bingeing to avoid gaining weight. The body feels hungry again very quickly, since it has not been nourished. This unnatural purging behavior damages the body in several ways; for example, continual exposure to stomach acid in vomit can permanently damage the digestive tract, vocal chords, and teeth over time.

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The onset of eating disorders occurs by age 20 in 86% of patients.

Influences

Most people don't understand what would drive a person to behave in destructive, irrational ways. It helps to consider the world we live in and all the cultural influences that emphasize idealized, specific body types. Society upholds this belief by celebrating the most slender, muscular, or athletic individuals in popular culture.

Of all psychiatric disorders, anorexia has the highest mortality rate.

Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to this influence. Sudden physical and mental changes bring sensitivity and uncertainty about oneself, and without strong guidance and healthy relationships, the mind can adopt misguided ways of thinking about the body. Without intervention, these behaviors and beliefs can affect people well into adulthood.

Root Causes

When researchers try to isolate the factors that directly cause eating disorders, they frequently focus on depression, stress, and anxiety. Many people are inexperienced in correctly responding to stress and negative influences in their lives, and when they choose an inappropriate behavior as an escape from their troubles, they risk falling into addiction and destructive cycles. People

who display symptoms of depression or constant dissatisfaction with themselves are at risk of either seeking satisfaction in overeating (binge eating) or using extreme means to reach an unrealistic physical goal (anorexia/bulimia).

Effects

The mental illnesses that contribute to eating disorders continue to plague a person even after the disorder is under control. A young person who becomes addicted to a disorder may suffer relapses or have to work hard to control urges long into the future.

People with eating disorders normally become experts at hiding their behavior from others. This makes it difficult to spot warning signs. A discomfort with the subject of food is a nearly universal trademark of binge eating, anorexia, and bulimia. The victim often prefers to eat alone, and might never seem to eat at all. It helps to be aware of unusual behavior around mealtimes, like disappearing to the bathroom consistently after meals or treating food in an abnormal manner.

Eating disorders take a serious physical toll on the

body, in both the short- and the long-term. The body is built to receive a steady, balanced diet, and disorders either give the body excess food frequently or deprive it of food through starvation or purging. Critical organs, including the heart and brain, suffer damage from malnutrition and may never recover completely, even if the destructive behavior stops.



Solutions

Prevention of eating disorders is extremely important. Young people can benefit from learning the truth about how eating disorders develop and how they hurt the body. Parents and other adult authorities should be alert to signs of depression and anxiety, and address them appropriately rather than ignore them. In the larger sense, those close to people who might be at risk need to make sure to encourage healthy thoughts, healthy behaviors, and self-confidence. Lifting up athletic, healthy people as examples should always be balanced by identifying characteristics unrelated to their body which make that person admirable.

30 million people suffer from eating disorders in the U.S.



Only 5% of females have the body type portrayed as ideal in popular culture.

Group and individual therapy are the most effective known methods of treating eating disorders. Successful therapy programs depend on reinforcement at home and school as well; so a supportive, committed network of family and friends is a must.

10-25% of anorexia cases are males.

While young adults, both females and males, are most susceptible to the risks of developing an



eating disorder, we should all be aware of the problem in our homes and communities. It is a difficult task to counter the impression popular culture gives us about weight, but when we strive to give others a sense of self-worth outside of their physical appearance, we can begin to stop the destruction that comes from eating disorders.