

Eating disorders

Eating disorders such as anorexia, bulimia and compulsive overeating are behaviors used by a large number of teenage girls (and boys as well) to cope with the stresses of growing up in our tumultuous world. These are ways in which kids hope to gain some control in their lives. The central feature of eating disorders is the distorted attitude toward weight and eating which permeates our culture.

“Normal eating is being able to eat when you are hungry and continue eating until you are satisfied... Normal eating is flexible. It varies in response to your emotions, your schedule, your hunger, and your proximity to food.” [Satter, 1987] Dieting, long considered “normal” behavior for teenage girls, is really not “normal” at all. It is not a rite of passage, but rather a behavior, which can cause serious psychological, physical and emotional consequences.

Research in the last fifteen years has shown that disordered eating and thinking about weight and appearance begins in early childhood. When still very young, kids get messages from TV, magazines, movies, and music, which tell them how their bodies should look, smell and feel. Teenagers in particular spend a great deal of time and energy trying to make their bodies fit the ideal. The only problem is that the ideal is actually unattainable and therefore the pursuit is doomed to fail, often with dire consequences.

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) estimated in 2003 that between 1 and 5 percent of adolescents and young adults were afflicted with an eating disorder, and of this number, 5-10% of all cases of eating disorders occurred in boys. Although the typical patient is a white, middle-to-upper-middle class young woman, some researchers report an increasing number of cases among males and women of other age and ethnic groups. Despite the complexities of treating eating disorders, sufferers have an excellent chance for complete recovery, especially if the illness is recognized and treated early.

Signs and symptoms of eating disorders

Anorexia: An obsession for thinness with self-imposed starvation.

- **Intense fear of becoming fat, regardless of weight**
- **Distorted body image (view of self as fat even when very thin)**
- **Signs of restricted eating, severe diets or fasting**
- **Rigid exercise regimen**
- **Social withdrawal, mood shifts, perfectionist attitude**
- **Lightheadedness, fainting**
- **Complaints of feeling cold**

- **Body weight 15% below normal**
- **In girls, loss of menses**
- **Depression, isolation**
- **Refusal to eat meals**

Bulimia: Repeated episodes of binge eating with feelings of lack of control that may be followed by purging (using vomiting, laxatives, or diuretics to avoid weight gain).

- **Binge eating followed by fasting or purging**
- **Vomiting, laxative abuse, over exercising or abuse of diet pills**
- **Intense fear of becoming fat**
- **Feeling uncomfortable eating in front of others**
- **Weight fluctuations**
- **Mood shifts, depression, severe self-criticism**
- **Complaints of sore throats, fatigue, and muscle aches**

Compulsive overeating: Sufferers may consume extraordinary amounts of food during a single binge. However, they do not compensate for the binge by purging.

- **Eating to escape from worry or anxiety**
- **Binging or eating when not hungry**
- **Restriction of activities because of embarrassment about weight**
- **Going from diet to diet**
- **Excessive thought devoted to food**
- **Eating little in public while maintaining a high weight**
- **Feeling of self-worth based on weight and control of eating**

Creating an atmosphere of self-acceptance, healthy eating habits, and positive body image at home can help strengthen teens against the pressures which cause many to develop eating disorders.

Tips (Adapted from Michael Levine, PhD)

- Examine how the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors about your own body and the bodies of others have been shaped by messages from our society. Be aware of negative comments that may be made about a person just because of how that person looks.
- Examine closely your goals for your children, being sure not to overemphasize beauty and body shape, particularly for girls. Avoid conveying an attitude which says, in essence, "I will like you only if you lose weight; don't eat so much; look more like the models in the magazines."
- Learn about and discuss with your sons and daughters the dangers of trying to alter one's body shape through dieting. Emphasize moderate exercising for good health and the importance of eating a variety of foods in well-balanced meals.
- Make a commitment to exercise for the joy of feeling good instead of trying to purge fat from your body.
- Make a commitment not to avoid activities such as swimming, dancing, etc. simply because they call attention to your weight and shape.
- Practice taking people in general and women in particular, seriously for what they say, feel and do, and not for how thin they appear.
- Make a commitment to help children (both male and female) appreciate and resist the ways in which TV, magazines, and other media distort the true diversity of human body types and imply that a slender body means power, excitement, and sexuality.
- Encourage your children to be active and to enjoy what their bodies can do and feel like. Do not limit their caloric intake unless your medical practitioner requests that you do so because of a medical problem.
- Do whatever you can to promote positive self-esteem and self-respect in your children and help them to accept themselves as special, important, and valuable human beings.