

Are Eating Disorders A Problem?



Internet photo

Preoccupation with body size and food (counting calories, excessive dieting and scale weighing) can be warning signs of the beginning of a major problem. Anytime someone starts throwing up on purpose can constitute the suggestion of beginning of an eating disorder. Binging (that's pigging out) and purging (that's getting rid of the consumed calories via excessive exercise, throwing up, using laxatives or abusive dieting) spells big trouble in the long run. This is known as bulimia and it is a syndrome that can be very dangerous to a person's health.

Bulimia can become all consuming for a person suffering from it. The person with bulimia can experience a persistent concern with weight and shape, although they are actually most often average weight. Anyone of any age can develop bulimia and it affects both males and females. This syndrome can be as serious as its sister syndrome anorexia nervosa (which is an obsession or compulsion to restrict food and to vigorously try to decrease body weight) because constant purging can cause the body to be deprived of essential nutrients, minerals, vitamins and electrolytes.

Laxatives and diuretics (pills that cause you to urinate frequently) can cause serious damage to many organs including the heart and kidneys. Vomiting can lead to tooth decay/erosion/discoloration, damage to the stomach, esophagus and other organs. Exercising to excess, particularly without an adequate intake of calories can lead to added strain on the heart and an increased risk of passing out. In fact bulimia can be deadly.

The best way for maintaining a healthy weight is to follow Canada's Food Guide and do moderate exercise as part of her regular activity. This will enable the maintenance of health for years to come.

The causes documented for anorexia / bulimia are varied. Media, TV, Radio, Fashion, and Social pressures have an important effect on eating disorders. When one has low self-esteem and confidence, there is always the "need" to fit in, to try to identify ourselves, which is really hard, especially when we don't know ourselves as a person to start with.

Helping can be difficult, depending on the person acknowledges there is a problem. Your best bet is to **be patient**- an eating disorder may be a long term illness. Encourage the person to seek both professional help and support from family and friends. Try not to get upset if the person

denies there is a problem or shows a lot of anger. You, the supporter have done the most important thing, “Approaching”. The first step is communication. It may not look like that in the beginning, but it will be worth it to break the ice.

When and if the person is in denial, there is very little talk. Time is important and there is no need to the person away. The individual may start to withdraw and feel pressured. Just let the person know that you are there for them and that they can approach you anytime. This will allow for less pressure, and the doors are always left open this way. If the person is unable to get help themselves, becoming better educated is important for family and friends. Offer support and tell them your concerns directly.

Remember, the first and most important step is approaching the person. Do not focus on their appearance, do not force them to eat, but do encourage seeking professional help. Showing you care and are concerned may enable that person to get help for their illness.

Did you know?

Warning signs of Anorexia / Bulimia:

- Preoccupation with body size and food
- Guilt and shame, with angry feeling with food and eating
- Trying “ways” to vomit after eating food
- Uncontrollable binge eating
- Hiding food or hoarding food
- Vomiting food - leaving for the bathroom immediately after a meal
- Mood changes - especially after eating
- Low self-esteem/confidence
- Need for perfection, e.g. a set time for everything
- Amenorrhea-loss of period

Printed with permission from:

1. Self-Help Connection, 63 King Street, Dartmouth, N.S., (a project of the Community Health Promotion Fund on the NS Dept of Health) “It Is OK To Talk About It Anorexia/ Bulimia”(1994)

2. Eating Disorders Clinic at the IWK-Grace Health Centre for Women, Children, and Families, Halifax NS, “Eating disorders in Children and Teens-concerned? What can you do” (1996).

For more information, contact the Student Health Centre at 364-2163 or Personal Counsellors at 364-2255 . Your call will be kept confidential.