

Eating Disorders: Is Your Child at Risk?



Dr. Jenn

DR. JENN BERMAN

With the recent hospitalization of Mary-Kate Olsen for anorexia, the public is starting to examine the widespread phenomenon of eating disorders. Why would someone who seems to have the world at her fingertips stop eating? Why are eating disorders such a problem? And how can you tell if your child is at risk?

Gender and Personality

Females account for 90% of people with eating disorders. Psychological experts have found that particular personality traits make certain children more susceptible to eating disorders, the most common being perfectionism, the desire to please, the ability to ignore pain and exhaustion, obsessiveness, and a burning desire to attain goals.

Children who participate in activities where there is pressure to be thin, such as ballet, modeling, acting, gymnastics, wrestling, horse racing, and acting also are at a higher risk for eating disorders. Studies have shown that the rate of anorexia in these groups is ten times that of the general population, due largely to the fact that thinness is a prerequisite for success.

What is normal?

According to Eating Disorder Awareness and Prevention (EDAP), there are three red flags parents should look for that indicate the possibility of future eating disorders--body dissatisfaction, dieting behavior, and a drive for thinness. A girl who is dissatisfied with her body is very prone to try dieting. If she has a drive for thinness, she is very likely to participate in unhealthy behaviors that will lead to an eating disorder. When you put that trio together, the risk of developing an eating disorder becomes very high.

During the normal adolescent growth spurt, a young woman's body fat increases by 125%, compared to her lean body mass, which only increases by 42%. This kind of normal change in physiology can panic adolescents, as well as their parents.

Often, it is at this crucial age when girls are likely to try their first diet. Be aware that this is often a precursor to an eating disorder.

The Problems with Diets

Studies have shown that the risk of developing an eating disorder is 8 times higher in 15-year-old girls who diet than those who don't. Even though diets are estimated to have a 95% failure rate, half of all American women are dieting at any given time. So commonplace is restrictive eating in our society that one San Francisco study reported that 50% of 8-year-old girls are on diets.

There have been many theories explaining why dieting leads to a loss of control with food and binge eating. Many theorists believe that it is the dieter's inability to manage powerful surges of hunger which leave her vulnerable to erratic eating behavior and binges. Researchers have found the greater the degree of dietary restraint, the more severe the eating pathology.

In addition to lowering the dieter's metabolic level, or in other words slowing down her ability to burn calories, research has revealed that the metabolic changes have a profound impact on the brain. For the 4% of the population which have the biological pre-disposition to develop an eating disorder, this is the beginning of a serious problem.

Media Images

Today's teens are at a higher risk for developing eating disorders than those of previous generations. They are bombarded by images of unrealistic standards of beauty on television, the internet, in magazines, and in movies. The message that teens hear today is that beauty and thinness can change your life. Tune into any episode of a show like "The Swan" and you will start to believe it, too.

Studies have shown there is a direct correlation between how much exposure a woman has to contemporary media and the frequency of eating disordered symptoms she experiences. One study

in which women viewed slides of overweight, average, and thin models found exposure to thin models resulted in lower self-esteem and decreased weight satisfaction.

In other cultures, the rate of eating disorders has risen in direct correlation with the influx of American exports, such as television programs and feature films, which bring with them new concepts of beauty and femininity, as well as slimmer Western clothing.

For example, Fijian teens who had never before been exposed to Western culture experienced significant changes in their attitudes and behaviors towards food and body image after being exposed to American television for only three years. In Fijian culture, a comment like "you look fat today" was once considered a compliment, but the standard of attractiveness changed. As a result, 15% of Fijian high school girls started vomiting for weight control (a five fold increase), 74% said they felt "too big or too fat" at least some of the time, 62% said they had dieted in the past month, and the risk of eating disorders among Fijian teenagers doubled to 29%.

What You Can Do

There is a lot you can do as a parent. To begin with, every parent needs to look out for the warning signs, such as dramatic changes in weight, rituals surrounding eating, food avoidance, frequent trips to the bathroom after meals, wearing baggy clothes, a constant, low body temperature, and dramatic mood shifts. It is important that you encourage body acceptance and discourage dieting behavior. Teaching your child how to listen to her body's signs of hunger, thirst, and satiety are important lessons. It is especially important that you work through your own food and body image issues so that you can be a model of healthy behavior for your children, which is ultimately one of the greatest tools you can give them.

Dr. Jenn Berman is a psychotherapist and sports psychology consultant. She regularly appears on television and radio as an expert on psychological issues. For questions, comments, or advice to be used in one of her columns, she can be reached through her website at www.DoctorJenn.com.

Recommended Reading

1. Preventing Childhood Eating Problems: A Practical, Positive Approach to Raising Children Free of Food & Weight Concerns by Jane Hirschmann and Lela Zaphiropoulos
2. How to Get Your Kid to Eat... But Not Too Much: From Birth to Adolescence by Ellyn Satter
3. Nourishing Your Daughter: Help Your Child Develop a Healthy Relationship with Food and her Body by Carol Beck
4. 101 Ways to Help Your daughter Love Her Body by Brenda Lane Richardson and Elane Rehr
5. The Eating Disorder Sourcebook: A Comprehensive Guide to the Causes, Treatments, and Prevention of Eating Disorders by Carolyn Costin