

EATING DISORDERS

Over five million men and women in America suffer from some type of eating disorder. Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia and Binge Eating disorder are all serious psychiatric illnesses that without treatment can have life-threatening consequences.

The depression, shame and agonizing sense of isolation caused by eating disorders can disrupt families, interrupt schooling, and destroy relationships. Most men and women with an eating disorder are aware they have a problem, but are unlikely to seek treatment.

What is an Eating Disorder?

An eating disorder is an excessive preoccupation with weight and food issues which result in a loss of self-control, obsession, anxiety and guilt. Eating disorders can also cause alienation from self and others and physiological imbalances which are potentially life threatening. Eating disorders include Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa and Binge Eating disorder.

What Causes an Eating Disorder?

Eating disorders come from a combination of psychological, interpersonal, and social conditions as well as feelings of inadequacy, depression and loneliness. Difficult family issues and personal relationships may also contribute to the development of an eating disorder. The presence of low self-esteem is the common denominator that is inherently present in all eating disorder sufferers.

Warning Signs:

- » A dramatic increase or decrease in weight
- » Abnormal eating habits such as severe dieting, withdrawn behavior at mealtime, or secretive bingeing
- » An intense preoccupation with weight and body image
- » Excessive or compulsive exercising
- » Self-induced vomiting, periods of fasting or abuse of laxatives, diet pills or diuretics
- » Feelings of isolation, depression, or irritability

Anorexia Nervosa

Anorexia Nervosa is a disorder in which a preoccupation with dieting and thinness leads to excessive weight loss. A person suffering Anorexia can be abnormally sensitive about being fat or have a massive fear of losing control over the amount of food he/she eats. An estimated 1,000 women die each year of Anorexia Nervosa.

Symptoms:

- » Loss of a significant amount of weight
- » Continuous dieting (although thin)
- » Compulsive exercising
- » Intense fear of weight gain
- » Distorted body image

continued on next page

EATING DISORDERS *continued*

- » Dry skin, brittle hair and hair loss
- » Loss of three consecutive menstrual periods
- » Extreme concern with body weight and shape
- » Fast and/or irregular heart rate
- » Frequent headaches (due to lowered blood pressure and decreased oxygen supply to the brain)

Bulimia Nervosa

Bulimia Nervosa involves frequent episodes of uncontrollable binge eating followed by purging that includes self-induced vomiting, laxative use, or excessive exercise. These “binge-purge” episodes often occur in order to avoid and let out feelings of anger, depression, stress or unhappiness. These episodes are usually in relation to how an individual feels about themselves or an event in their life.

Symptoms of Bulimia:

- » Bingeing, or eating uncontrollably
- » Frequent use of the bathroom after meals
- » Preoccupation with body weight
- » Irregular periods
- » Strong mood swings or depression
- » The development of dental problems, swollen cheeks, heartburn and/or bloating
- » Experiencing personal problems concerning drugs and alcohol
- » Purging by extreme dieting, fasting, excessive exercise, vomiting or laxative use

There are many similarities between Anorexia and Bulimia Nervosa, the most common being the cause. There seems to be an underlying commonality of sexual and/or physical and emotional abuse in direct relation to eating disorders, but not all people suffering Anorexia or Bulimia have endured this kind of abuse.

Binge Eating Disorder

Binge Eating disorder, also known as Compulsive Overeating, is characterized by periods of impulsive gorging, often times kept secret. While there is no purging, there may be repetitive diets and occasional fasts. Body weight often varies from normal to moderate to severely obese.

Symptoms:

- » Episodes of uncontrollable binge eating
- » Eating when not physically hungry
- » Frequent dieting
- » Feeling unable to stop eating voluntarily
- » Weight fluctuations

EATING DISORDERS *continued*

- » Feelings of depression

How to help:

If you or someone you know is suffering from an eating disorder, it is extremely crucial to guide him/her to receive the appropriate professional help and treatment necessary. It may require making an appointment and accompanying the individual to the doctor. It may also mean monitoring the eating and personal habits of the sufferer on a regular basis.

The second most important thing is to offer emotional support. This involves understanding, patience, affection, and encouragement. Listen carefully to feelings expressed, point out realities and offer hope. If you notice the eating disorder symptoms are persisting, report them to a therapist.