



KEEP HEALTH IN MIND

An overview of EATING DISORDERS

Eating disorders are a group of mental disorders that are very complex and often misunderstood. A preoccupation with food and weight can move beyond a person's control and lead to severe emotional and physical problems. Eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of all mental illnesses because of the serious impact they can have on the body.

How Does an Eating Disorder Develop?

Many factors can influence the development of an eating disorder. A person's body image, the picture one has of her or his own body, can become distorted. Often, a person who has a poor body image can become preoccupied with negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviours that relate to controlling food and weight. The media can further encourage the development of a negative body image by glamorizing unrealistic body shapes and sizes and reinforcing the view that dieting is normal. Genetic predisposition, certain mental illnesses including depression and anxiety, and certain personality traits including obsessive compulsiveness and addiction can also be strongly linked to eating disorders.

Individuals who struggle with their identity and self-image may be at risk for an eating disorder, as well as those who have experienced a traumatic event. Often, an eating disorder is a symptom of an underlying emotional issue with which the person has difficulty coping. However, there is no single cause and the condition is typically the result of a combination of factors.

According to the 2002 Report on Mental Illnesses in Canada:

- Approximately 3% of women will be affected by an eating disorder during their lifetime.
- Eating disorders affect females more than males.



Types of Eating Disorders

Eating disorders are diagnosed by health professionals who specialize in their treatment. Types include:

Anorexia Nervosa

This disorder is characterized by failure to maintain body weight at or above a minimally normal weight for age and height (i.e., at least 85% of what is expected). Other symptoms include dieting to extremes, excessive exercise, loss of menstrual periods, and a distorted body image.

Bulimia Nervosa

The key characteristics of this disorder include binge eating (the intake of large quantities of food) and purging (elimination of the food through forced vomiting, excessive use of laxatives, periods of fasting, or excessive exercise). A preoccupation with body image and eating beyond the point of fullness are also symptoms.

Binge-Eating Disorder

Also called compulsive eating, this disorder is characterized by eating so much food that one becomes physically uncomfortable. Eating is often carried out for comfort and is often done in secret. This disorder typically involves a lot of shame or guilt related to eating.

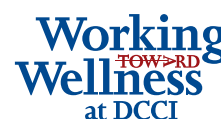
Muscle Dysmorphia or Reverse Anorexia

This disorder is characterized by a fear of being too small and weak, and occurs more often in male athletes such as body builders and wrestlers. This disorder may occur even if the individual is large and muscular.

Warning Signs

Eating disorders can be difficult to detect. Here are some warning signs:

- low self esteem
- social withdrawal
- preoccupation with food, weight, counting calories, and with other people's perceptions
- wanting to be perfect
- intolerance of others
- inability to concentrate
- claims of feeling fat when weight is normal or low
- denial of a problem



EATING AND BODY IMAGE CONTINUUM

Feelings about eating and body image cover a broad range or continuum. Professional assistance is recommended if a person begins to have distressing feelings about food and their body to prevent the development of a more serious condition like an eating disorder.

Healthy and flexible eating Confident about body size and shape	Preoccupation or obsession about food, preoccupation or obsession about body	Disruptive eating pattern and distorted body image	Disordered eating pattern and disassociation from or hatred of body
<p>Food is an important part of my life, but only occupies a small part of my time.</p> <p>My feelings about my body are not influenced by society's concept of an ideal body shape.</p>	<p>I feel ashamed when I eat more than others or more than what I feel I should be eating.</p> <p>I spend a significant time comparing my body to others.</p>	<p>Eating more than I want to makes me feel out of control.</p> <p>My body shape and size keeps me from dating or finding someone who will treat me the way I want to be treated.</p>	<p>I regularly stuff myself and then exercise, vomit, or use laxatives to get rid of the food.</p> <p>I often feel separated and distant from my body – as if it belongs to someone else.</p>

Source: University of Arizona, 1997.

Prevention of Eating Disorders

To help prevent eating disorders in family members and friends, efforts can be made to minimize common individual, familial, and social factors that can affect self-esteem and body image.

Individual Factors

Factors such as low self-esteem and perfectionism, which may develop out of family or cultural values, may influence the development of an eating disorder. Individuals can actively counter-balance the development of low self-esteem by practicing some of the following healthy habits:

- Practicing basic self-care (i.e., adequate sleep, healthy eating, regular physical activity);
- Planning fun and relaxing things for yourself (i.e., planting a garden);
- Rewarding yourself for your accomplishments;
- Remind yourself of your strengths and achievements and forgive yourself when you don't reach your goals.

Although you can do things to assist in preventing low self-esteem, sometimes it can be so difficult to overcome that the professional help of a counsellor may be needed.

Family Issues

Lines of communication should be open among family members. Parents should also be aware of changing attitudes about food, weight, and body shapes. Discussions about the dangers of trying to alter one's body through dieting, the value of moderate exercise for health, and the importance of eating a variety of foods in well-balanced meals are recommended.

Social Pressures

Everyone can contribute to a positive body image culture by not focusing on body size, appearance, unhealthy weight loss, as well as by not encouraging unhealthy dieting. Make an effort to maintain positive attitudes and healthy behaviours when it comes to food habits and physical activity. Also, try to be a model of healthy self-esteem and body image to help encourage the same in others.

Keep in Mind...

If food and weight issues affect a person's ability to live their daily life, then professional help should still be sought to address these mental health issues.

Where to Go for More Information:

National Eating Disorder Information Centre

www.nedic.ca

Tel.: Toll-Free (866)-NEDIC-20 or (866) 633-4220

Canadian Mental Health Association

www.cmha.ca

Tel.: (416) 484-7750



Key References:

Canadian Mental Health Association. (2006). *Eating disorders*. Retrieved June 19, 2006, from http://www.cmha.ca/bins/content_page.asp?cid=3-98&lang=1

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