

Eating Disorders and Body Image Concerns

Body Image

Body image is defined as one's comprehensive attitude toward their body. This includes how you see yourself in the mirror, what you tell yourself about your appearance, how you feel about your body shape, height, and weight, and how you actually feel in your body. Everyone experiences some degree of body dissatisfaction. However, when your perceptions are distorted or your discomfort is so great that you feel ashamed, embarrassed, and self-conscious, your negative body image can cause you to develop other problems such as obsessing over weight loss and exercise, depression, low self-esteem, and Eating Disorders.

What are Eating Disorders?

People with Eating Disorders have extreme concerns about weight, body shape, and food/eating habits that result in serious emotional and physical consequences. The teen years and young adulthood are periods when Eating Disorders most often occur because these are usually the times when an individual is most concerned about their appearance and fitting in with peers. Although the majority of people suffering from Eating Disorders are female, 10-15% with these problems are males. The most common Eating Disorders are Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa.

Anorexia Nervosa is characterized by a persistent over-concern with body shape and weight, and by self-starvation and excessive weight loss. **Bulimia Nervosa** is characterized by a persistent over-concern with body shape and weight, and by cycles of binge eating followed by purging (e.g., vomiting, laxative use, fasting).

Eating Disorders cause a great deal of suffering, both physically and emotionally. People with Eating Disorders have a higher likelihood of developing other mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse.

Getting Help

The devastating consequences of an Eating Disorder highlight the importance of getting professional help. If you are worried about your own eating patterns or someone else's, don't put things off. Seek help as soon as possible to get yourself (or your loved one) on the road to recovery.

If you are concerned about your eating behavior, talk to a professional to determine if you may be having a problem and whether treatment would be helpful. The first step of getting help is to be honest with yourself and acknowledge that your eating behavior is destructive and in need of change.

Depending on the severity of the problem, treatment may involve any or all of the following:

- A therapist to help change destructive thoughts and behaviors, and improve personal relationships
- A nutritionist to assess and improve nutritional intake
- A physician to assess and monitor medical health and treat any medical illnesses
- A psychiatrist to prescribe any medications
- Group therapy to get support from others struggling with Eating Disorders
- Inpatient or partial hospitalization if the person's life is in danger due to poor health



How to Help Someone With an Eating Disorder:

Helping someone you know with an Eating Disorder can be very difficult. Your friend may refuse to acknowledge having a problem and they even may become angry at your efforts to reach out to them. Some suggestions on how you can help someone you know with an Eating Disorder are listed below:

- Don't give up! Although people may become defensive and angry at your efforts to help them, remain supportive and keep trying to get through to them.
- Don't ignore or avoid the problem. Talk openly about your concerns in a non-judgmental and supportive way.
- Tell the person that your reason for talking to them is because you care about them.
- Expect the person to feel shame and embarrassment about their problem and spend some time in advance thinking about how to best talk to them about your concerns that will minimize their discomfort.
- Learn as much as you can about Eating Disorders so that you can be supportive, understanding, and informative.
- Avoid making accusational statements ("You are out of control"), and entering into arguments and debates.
- Don't monitor their eating patterns or nag them about eating/not eating.
- Get emotional support yourself and consult with a professional if needed.
- Encourage the person to seek professional help.

Other Resources

Dying to Be Thin: Understanding and Defeating Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia- A Practical, Lifesaving Guide (1987) by Ira M. Sacker and Marc A, Zimmer. New York: Warner.

Healing the Hungry Self: The Diet-Free Solution to Lifelong Weight Management (1998) by Deirdre Price. New York: Plume.

Overcoming Binge Eating (1995) by Christopher Fairburn. New York: Guilford Press.

National Eating Disorders Association <http://www.NationalEatingDisorders.org>