

Eating Disorders

Eating disorders affect between 1% and 3% of the population, 90% are mostly young females. A specific type of eating disorder is *Anorexia Nervosa* which is a disorder in which the person restricts their eating due to an intense fear of gaining weight, refuses to maintain an appropriate weight, and has a negative and distorted outlook of their own body. The person with this condition truly believes they are “fat,” when in fact they are dangerously low in body weight. They become convinced that all food, even healthy food, will make them fat. This may result in the loss of menstrual cycles, the use of drugs to stop hunger, nutrition deficiencies, low heart rate, and eventually death.

Starvation is not a normal part of living and cannot continue due to the brain which tells a person to eat. This is the reason that up to 50% of people with anorexia become bulimic. *Bulimia Nervosa* is a severe mental health disorder in which the person “gives in” to their brains urges and goes on eating binges. After their stomach is full, they feel awful, sometimes extreme guilt for eating. So in order to compensate, they purge, or throw up the food left in their stomach.

Why would a person submit to this lifestyle? Of course there are many explanations, but many therapists believe that the person with an eating disorder has a deeper issue(s) and is incapable at the current time to express their concerns in a healthy way. They attempt to control their emotional pain through their eating disorder. Unfortunately for them it seems to work (albeit temporarily). They actually trick themselves into believing that they are in control of their emotional pain by restricting their eating. And for many, purging their food is another way of feeling in control. Throwing up may take away anxiety, and replace it with a sense of mastery over their body or emotional pain. As one may expect, there are emotional traumas that many times come before the eating disorder. For example, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, love rejection, peer and media influences are just a few initiators.

Ironically, the person with an eating disorder actually desires to eat; they think about eating and may dream about it. They develop elaborate “rules” around the consumption of food and may take a lot of time around food as if to “prove” that they can master it. But while they desire food, they also fear it due to the belief that food can overpower them and take control, which terrifies them. Control is the name of the game to a person with an eating disorder. Their emotional pain is not tangible; it cannot be seen. But food can be real and hopefully, controlled. Additionally, their body is tangible too and will reflect their mastery over food if they can accomplish their unrealistic weight goals.

People with eating disorders do not have to be psychotic to develop the condition. Eating disorders are not a new phenomenon, nor are they restricted only to females. The number of males diagnosed is on the rise, probably due to the intense pressure by the media and the public to look good by maintaining weight. Fortunately, due to the media and the public, eating disorders are no longer secretive, and females, while sometimes reluctant, can get effective help. Individual counseling, group therapy, medications, and/or behavioral treatment clinics have been proven very effective. The earlier treatment begins, the more likely it will be successful. Unfortunately for men, eating disorders are not easy to talk about, male treatment groups are rare, and the top clinics still only treat females.