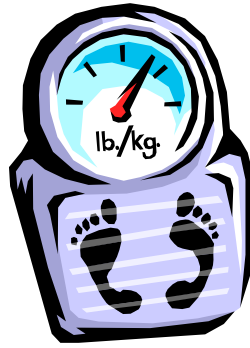


Eating Disorders During the Middle School Years



An eating disorder is a psychiatric illness with specific criteria that are outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, published by the American Psychiatric Association. Eating disorders have both mental and physical components that have serious medical consequences that can disrupt both growth and development. Illnesses such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, or binge eating are among the key health issues affecting adolescents and young adults. Nine out of every ten cases are found amongst girls and young women. All socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural groups are affected.

ANOREXIA NERVOSA-

Approximately 1 out of every 100 adolescent girls develops anorexia nervosa. People with this disorder can literally starve themselves to death. They eat very little even though most times they are already thin. They have an intense fear of weight gain.

BULIMIA NERVOSA-

Another 2 to 5 out of every 100 young women develop bulimia nervosa. This disorder is characterized as a pattern of eating followed by behaviors such as vomiting, taking laxatives or diuretics or over exercising to rid the body of food or calories consumed. People with bulimia nervosa have a fear of body fat even though their size and weight may be normal.

BINGE EATING DISORDER-

Binge eating disorder includes frequent episodes of uncontrolled eating. This is probably the most common of all the eating disorders. It occurs in 10-15% of mildly obese people. The overeating or bingeing is often accompanied by feeling out of control followed by guilt, depression, or disgust.

Many studies show that disordered eating behaviors begin as early as 8 years of age with complaints of body size or shape. The middle school years are opportune times to recognize and discourage disordered eating behaviors. Disordered eating behaviors are usually the precursor to a full-blown eating disorder. Disordered eating behaviors include:

1. Skipping Meals
2. Restricting food choices to a few “acceptable items”
3. Focusing excessively on avoiding certain foods, particularly foods that contain fat
4. Binge eating, particularly snack foods and sweets
5. Self induced vomiting
6. Taking laxatives, diuretics, or diet pills

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO PREVENT EATING DISORDERS?

- Learn all you can about anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating disorders. Genuine awareness will help you to avoid judgmental or mistaken attitudes about food, weight, body shape, and eating disorders.
- Discourage the idea that a particular diet, weight, or body size will automatically lead to happiness or fulfillment.
- Choose to challenge the false belief that thinness and weight loss are great, while body fat and weight gain are horrible or indicate laziness, worthlessness.
- Avoid categorizing foods as good/safe vs. bad/dangerous. Remember the key is moderation. We all need to eat a balanced variety of foods.
- Decide to avoid judging others and yourself on the basis of body weight or shape. Turn off the voices in your head that tell you that a person's weight says anything about their character, personality, or value as a person.
- Become a critical viewer of the media and its messages about self-esteem and body image.
- If you think someone has an eating disorder, express your concerns in a forthright, caring manner. Gently but firmly encourage the person to seek trained professional help.
- Be a model of healthy self-esteem and body image. Recognize that others pay attention and learn from the way that you talk about yourself and your body.

SEVEN HELPFUL TIPS FOR PARENTS/FAMILIES WITH KIDS WITH DIAGNOSED EATING DISORDERS

1. Do not become involved in power struggles surrounding food. Let your child make his/her own food choices. Remember that your job is not to be the food police. Your job is to be a parent. A nutritionist and/or a therapist can help your child learn to make healthy food choices.
2. Don't purchase special food for the person with the eating disorder. Serve the same healthy food that you serve the rest of the family.
3. Don't let mealtimes become a family battleground.
4. Don't play therapist. Your job is to be the Mom, Dad, or any other loving member of the family.
5. Do not make comments about his/her weight or looks. She/he is constantly criticizing herself/himself.
6. Do tell them that you love them very much. They can't be told how terrible they are for doing this to themselves. They feel so much shame and guilt to begin with, the family does not need to compound this.

RESOURCES FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

1. Eating Disorders: A Parents' Guide, by Rachel Bryant-Waugh, Bryan Lask
2. Help Your Teenager Beat an Eating Disorder, by James Lock
3. If Your Adolescent Has an Eating Disorder, by B. Timothy Walsh, V.L. Cameron
4. I'm Like So Fat! Helping Your Teen Make Healthy Choices about Eating, by Dianne Neumark-Sztainer
5. Body Outlaws: Rewriting the Rules of Beauty and Body Image, by Ophira Edult