

Eating Disorders: Why Me?

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My battle with food began when I started college. Dorm food and late night study/snack sessions left me with the “Freshman 15” within two months. I decided to lose the weight, and I did. Then I gained it back. By my sophomore year of college it became my mission to lose the weight again and keep it off. This quickly became an obsession, and soon dominated every thought almost every minute of each day.

Looking back, I can see that there were many things about my personality that set me up to have an eating disorder. I often wondered what made me so obsessed when so many of my friends could watch their weight in a healthy way. Over the years, I have found a few things that women with eating disorders have in common. Interaction with American culture, comparison, perfectionism, fear of intimacy, and the need to control often join together to create the perfect storm for eating disorder development.

Many of you may notice these same traits in yourself or a loved one who struggles with how they relate to food. As a parent, it may also be important for you to identify these characteristics in your teenagers and address them as individual issues before they unite together in a destructive behavior. What follows is a brief overview of eating disorder predisposition.

Culture

Simply by living in America, young women are set up to hold an unrealistic standard of beauty. We cannot escape the fact that during the past five years, pornography became the media category Americans viewed the most, and thirty-three

thousand American women told researchers that they would rather lose ten to fifteen pounds than achieve any other goal.

Young women are bombarded by images of what they should look like on a daily basis, and because of this I often meet with young women who do not want to recover from an eating disorder. In their minds, getting well equals gaining weight; gaining weight equals being unattractive, and being unattractive is unacceptable. But we all live in America, and many women engage the same media, the same advertisements, and the same messages every day without developing an eating disorder. Obviously, media engagement is only one piece of the puzzle.

Comparison

Women with eating disorders are constant comparers; by contrast, women with a healthy self-esteem and sense of purpose do not engage in constant evaluation of their body against everyone else's. To a woman with an eating disorder, however, this comparison is an obsession. It has been proven that passive girls, and girls raised in appearance-oriented families, are more vulnerable to the eating disorder trap. These girls are taught to compare themselves, and learn at a young age the ways in which they do not measure up.

In her book, Hunger Pains: The American Woman's Tragic Quest for Thinness, Mary Pipher shows that individuals who compare and also spend significant time surrounding themselves with the dangerous messages of the mass media are more at risk of developing an eating disorder than girls who spend their time developing their own

talents. At some point, constant comparison to perfection is going to raise questions of adequacy in many young women.

Perfectionism

Perfectionism is tied closely with comparison. Surprisingly, eating disorders are often present in the individuals one would least expect. They may excel in classes, athletics, or extracurricular activities. They may appear confident and controlled, and they may not look overly thin. They are often people-pleasers and a parent's or teacher's dream child.

Perfectionism often rules all areas of life, however, and as mentioned earlier, American culture daily bombards these perfectionists with a physical standard of beauty. The average person sees between 400 and 600 ads per day. Of the ads where attractive women are present, almost all are altered in some way. This means that the physical standard these perfectionists are trying to obtain is not even real. Nonetheless, the standard of beauty has been set, and to the perfectionist, nothing short of attaining this standard is acceptable.

Control and Fear of Intimacy

Finally, two traits found in perfectionists and women who struggle with eating disorders are their fear of intimacy and their need to control. Individuals with eating disorders spend a lot of time hiding. They believe lies about themselves and lies about what they think will make them happy. Afraid to face who they are on the inside, or

afraid to let others see what is on the inside, they spend a lot of time controlling the outside.

As individuals face pain and rejection, they often wear masks to keep others a safe distance away. As former model and eating disorder survivor Nancy Stafford said: “Maybe we’ve worn our masks for so many years and they’ve so conformed to our faces that we don’t really know where the masks end and we begin.” In this way, we control and protect our hearts. These masks come in many shapes and sizes: rage, arrogance, defensiveness, or most often with eating disorders—perfectionism and an attempt to gain a perfect body. No one is going to ask questions if you appear to have it all together. In addition, maintaining an eating disorder can be so mentally and physically time consuming that there is little time left to be close to people. Therefore, people are kept safely outside, and their hearts are protected safely on the inside.

Culture, comparison, perfectionism, fear of intimacy, and control are all areas we address in therapy as an individual with an eating disorder moves toward healing and hope. The road to recovery can be difficult and challenging, but the freedom found on the other side is worth the vulnerability it takes to explore these issues.