

## WHEN FOOD BECOMES A PROBLEM

*By Shirley Goodman, director of Behavioral Health and Care Management*

**I**n a society that focuses on looks and rewards weight loss, yet constantly advertises faster, bigger and more convenient meals, it's not surprising how confusing food consumption can be. While food is meant to supply our bodies with nutrients and energy, messages that distort this fact are everywhere.

An eating disorder can occur when a person is no longer able to control or manage food consumption, but instead feels that food has control over him or her. The problem is quite widespread. According to the South Carolina Department of Mental Health, it affects an estimated seven million women and one million men. How this develops is complex and stems from a variety of influences. While many societal forces and messages can trigger disordered eating behavior, it is important to understand that eating disorders are often a symptom of an

### HELPFUL WEB SITES

National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders  
[www.anad.org](http://www.anad.org)

National Eating Disorders Association  
[www.nationaleatingdisorders.org](http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org)

National Mental Health Information Center  
<http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov>

underlying issue. The disorder is similar to drug or alcohol abuse in which the substance becomes a coping mechanism. Whether behavior includes food restriction, indulgence or a combination of unhealthy eating patterns, food acts as a means of dealing with challenges in life. Disordered eating may seem less harmful than drug or alcohol abuse, however, treatment for eating disorders can be more challenging than substance abuse because alcohol and drugs can be completely avoided: food cannot. Patients must learn to manage their behavior and attitudes toward food and continue to do so throughout their lifetimes.

Three types of eating disorders exist as psychiatric diagnoses, and most sufferers exhibit a combination of behaviors. Anorexia nervosa includes a fear of gaining weight and refusal to maintain a normal weight by means of food restriction. Bulimia nervosa includes bingeing followed by compensatory behavior, such as vomiting, misusing laxatives, fasting or exercising excessively. The third, binge-eating, is characterized by frequent binges without compensatory behavior. Many patients do not recognize or admit that they have an illness and might resist treatment. Also while some people can recover from an eating disorder without further issues, many others experience a lifelong battle to maintain healthy attitudes and behaviors.

As mentioned before, people with eating disorders do not fit a certain profile. We do know that most eating disorders develop in adolescent girls, and women are more likely than men to suffer from the illness. Studies have also suggested that anorexia and bulimia run in families.

Eating disorders often occur with other mental disorders, including depression, substance abuse and anxiety. Also, those with eating disorders are not always underweight. In fact, bulimics often maintain a normal weight and binge-eaters may be overweight.

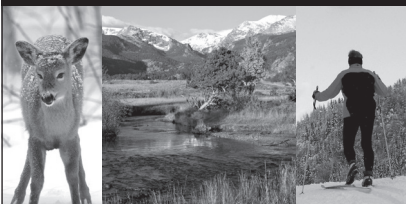
If left untreated, eating disorders may lead to a number of medical and mental complications. Both anorexia and bulimia can cause malnourishment, which can lead to heart problems and osteoporosis. Sufferers may slip into depression, experience damaged self-esteem, shame, mood swings, perfectionism or develop weakened relationships with family and friends. Vomiting can ruin teeth and damage the esophagus. If disordered eating habits cause electrolytes or potassium to become severely imbalanced, the result may be death.

Parents should stay involved in their children's lives in order to catch early signs of an eating disorder. Any drastic change in weight, diet or exercise habits may signal a problem. A child may become preoccupied with how they look and unrealistically focus on acceptance and conformity. Sometimes a decrease in social time or decreased participation in normal activities can hint at a dangerous change in behavior.

Try to spend mealtimes together as a family. It will be easier to notice if eating behaviors become unhealthy. Pay attention to skipped meals, food restriction beyond normal food preferences, frequent visits to the restroom immediately after a meal or even a switch to looser clothing, as they all may be signs of an eating disorder. Most important, supply your child with support and structure and provide the love and understanding he or she needs.

Eating disorders should not be taken lightly. They are not simply bad behaviors, but complex illnesses. If you think someone close to you may be suffering from an eating disorder, get involved and seek advice. Most likely you will need the help of professionals as the illness often does not just cure itself, and therapy or other support can be required to uncover the real root of the disorder.

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